Shisi's
Little Mushroom
BOOK ONE:
JUDGMENT DAY
translated by: Xiao

# LITTLE MUSHROOM

SHISI

TRANSLATED BY

XIAO

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Translation by Xiao Editing by Molly Rabbitt Proofing by D. Gareau

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# BOOK ONE: JUDGMENT DAY

# 1

## “YOU’RE JUST A TINY LITTLE MUSHROOM”

THE CAVE WAS dark and damp, with only weak fluorescence from the plants providing illumination.

Tangled vines clung to the cliff face. Deep green, purple, and inky black, they resembled snakes tied into large knots.

A black insect with six stiff wings and three proboscises barged into the cave, its flight path erratic.

In the next second, a massive dark purple bulge suddenly appeared amidst the tangled vines and swiftly split open, mouth-like, before snapping shut around the flying insect.

The vines gradually began to wriggle, and the part that had bulged out retreated bit by bit until it returned to its original state.

Within the cave was a sound like that of flapping wings. A drop of mucus, translucent strands trailing in its wake, fell from the ceiling and plopped onto the sticky moss below. The moss began to subtly squirm, and the drop of sparkling mucus vanished into the ground as it was rapidly absorbed.

In a corner lit up by the fluorescence of green fungi, a tide of white poured forth from the crevices in the rocks and soil, blanketing a large area. It was a snow-white mycelium. It grew, spread out, and extended hundreds of millions of tendrils, then crept towards the center of the cave, gathered together, merged, and elongated to form a figure. A single foot stepped upon the thick and delicately soft moss and sank down into it, leaving only a snow-white ankle visible.

An Zhe looked at his ankle. Though his human body was sustained by a

skeleton, muscles, blood vessels, and had mobile joints, it was not flexible due to the human skeleton's limitations.

Layers of keratin formed round and translucent fingernails; these were vestigial remnants originating from the sharp claws of beasts.

He lifted a leg and took a step forward. The damp, springy moss pressed down by his foot gathered together again after he left, looking like earthworms standing erect.

This time, he stepped on something different—a skeletal human arm.

In the darkness, An Zhe looked at the skeleton.

Fungi and vines had already taken root in the depths of its bones. Deep green vines wound around the hip and leg bones, while colorful small mushrooms resembling flowers in bloom grew upon the ribs.

Fluorescent mushrooms emerged from its empty eye sockets and sparse teeth. The green glow they gave off was like fine shifting sand, very blurry in the misty cave.

An Zhe looked at it for a long time. At last, he bent down and picked up a backpack made of animal skin that had been laying next to the skeleton. The contents of the backpack were unaffected by moisture. There were a few articles of clothing, human food and water, and a blue electronic chip half the size of a human palm that was engraved with a string of numbers: 3261170514.

Three days ago, this skeleton was still a live human.

"3261170514," the young human rasped brokenly as the weak green fluorescence illuminated the contours of his face. "My ID number. This is my ID card, and only by having it can I go back to the human base."

An Zhe asked, "Can I help you go back there?"

The human smiled, and the fingers of his right hand dropped to rest at his side. The chip tumbled from his hand and disappeared in the uneven moss. As he leaned back against the crags, he lifted his head and pressed his left hand to his chest, where a huge wound had opened up. Pale splinters of bone pierced through his chest, exiting from his back, and the surrounding skin had already

festered. Part of it was pale gray, with cottony flesh covering the surface of the bone splinters, while the rest exhibited a blackish green hue and released a continuous drip of dark liquid in time with the rhythm of his breathing.

After taking a few breaths, he said softly, "I can't go back anymore, little mushroom."

His shirt was dyed through, his skin looked pallid, his lips were chapped, and his body trembled at irregular intervals.

An Zhe looked at him, unsure what to say. In the end, he only murmured this young human's name. "An Ze?"

"You've just about learned the human language now." The human looked down at his own body.

Apart from pus and blood, he was also covered with snow-white hyphae, which were part of An Zhe's body. The hyphae meandered along, adhering securely to the wounds on An Ze's limbs and torso. The mushroom's original intent was to stanch the dying human's bleeding, but the hyphae also instinctively absorbed and digested the fresh blood that flowed out at the same time.

"You learned so many things just by eating my genes, huh? The pollution index here is indeed very high," the human said.

Fragmented scraps of knowledge unfolded within An Zhe's mind. After a five-second-long conversion, he understood that the pollution index referred to the speed at which genes transformed. Now, human genes were flowing into his body along with An Ze's blood.

"Perhaps... once I'm dead and you've completely eaten my body... you'll obtain a lot more things." An Ze looked at the cave ceiling, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Then it seems that I will have done something meaningful as well, although I don't know if it will be good or bad for you."

Without saying anything, An Zhe moved his entire body towards An Ze. He hugged An Ze's shoulders with his newly-grown human arm, and many hyphae flowed forth and piled up next to An Ze to support his sagging body.

The only sounds in the quiet cavern came from the dying human's gasping

breaths.

After a long time passed, An Ze finally spoke up again. "I'm someone whose life had no meaning.

"... I don't have any outstanding qualities whatsoever, so it's very normal that they abandoned me. In truth, I'm very happy to not go back to the human base. Just like the wilderness, they're both... places where only people with value can live on. I've wanted to die for a long time already. I just didn't think I'd encounter a gentle creature like you before I died, little mushroom."

An Zhe didn't really understand the meaning of those words such as 'value' or 'die'. He only caught that phrase once more: human base.

As he leaned against An Ze's shoulder, he said, "I wish to go to the human base."

"Why?" An Ze asked.

An Zhe lifted his left arm slightly and made a gesture with his fingers, seeming as though he wanted to grab a bit of the air, but he grabbed nothing at all.

It was just like his body.

His body was empty.

A massive void had formed in the innermost depths of his body, impossible to fill and impossible to heal, and in its wake was an infinite hollowness and panic that clung to him day in and day out.

Sorting out the words of the human language, he slowly said, "I lost... my spore."

"Spore?"

"My... seed." He didn't know how to explain.

Every mushroom would have spores in its lifetime. Some would have countless spores while others would have just one. A spore was a mushroom's seed. It would grow out of the lamella, be dispersed by the wind to any random place within the jungle, take root wherever it landed, and turn into a new mushroom. Then this mushroom would also grow up little by little and have its own spores. Raising its spores to maturity was a mushroom's sole lifelong

mission, but he had lost his only spore when it was far from maturing.

An Ze slowly turned his head, and An Zhe could hear his bones click like an old piece of human machinery when he did so.

"Don't go there." The human's raspy words sped up. "You'll die."

An Zhe recited that word once again. "... Die?"

"Only humans can enter the human base. You won't be able to escape the Judges' eyes." An Ze coughed a few times, then drew a labored breath. "Don't go... little mushroom."

Confused, An Zhe said, "I..."

The human abruptly grabbed An Zhe's hyphae with great force, and his harsh breathing became more hurried.

"Listen to me." After violently trembling and gasping for breath, An Ze slowly closed his eyes. In a very soft voice, he said, "You don't have any attack power or means of defending yourself. You're just... a tiny little mushroom."

Sometimes, An Zhe deeply regretted telling An Ze about wanting to go to the human base.

If he hadn't told An Ze, An Ze wouldn't have spent his final moments on deterring him. Perhaps he could have listened to An Ze tell a story, or perhaps he could have taken An Ze away from this dark cave for one last look at the fluctuating aurora in the sky. But An Ze's eyes would never open again.

The brief memory disappeared into the air, just like how An Ze's life suddenly disappeared from this world. In front of An Zhe, there remained only a snow-white skeleton.

But he had to go against An Ze's wishes regardless.

He slowly uncurled the fingers of one hand.

A brassy cylindrical bullet shell made of metal quietly lay upon the delicate skin and pale lines of his palm. It was very heavy, and there were some incomprehensible but definitely unusual grooves on its surface. He had found it

at the place where he lost his spore, and ever since then, he hadn’t let go of it.

Supposing there was still a one-in-ten-thousand chance that he could get his spore back, then this one-in-ten-thousand chance lay with the bullet shell, a human creation.

With a soft sigh, he put the bullet shell in the animal skin backpack An Ze left behind, then bent down and picked up the clothes that An Ze had once worn: a light gray long-sleeved shirt stained with blood, hardened black overalls, and black leather boots.

After doing all of those things, he walked towards the cave exit. As he walked, the slightly baggy clothes rubbed against his skin, and tiny electric currents traveled from the nerve endings hidden beneath the skin to his core. An Zhe, who taken human form for the first time, was unused to it, and he frowned as he rolled up the loose shirt's sleeves.

The vines that had accumulated along the long and winding cave's walls jostled each other, but when An Zhe passed through, they receded like the tide and settled on the cave ceiling.

Three turns later, a moisture-laden wind blew in. The mushroom pushed aside the withered vines dangling in front of the cave mouth, and vast swaths of mushrooms, his kindred, stretched out as far as the eye could see. They seemed to extend up to the sky, and everything was quiet, with not a sound to be heard. Dim daylight shone in from between the cover of the mushroom caps, and the gray sky twinkled, a lustrous volatile green. An Zhe smelled rainwater, fog, snake slough, and decaying plants.

It was still evening. He sat down beneath the cap of the light gray mushroom nearest to the cave entrance and took out a yellowed map from his backpack. The map was covered with blocks of color that varied in shade, which indicated the degree of danger in the different areas. An Ze had once pointed out to An Zhe the approximate location of the cave they were in. It was the darkest part of the entire map, which meant that it was a region that boasted six-star danger level and pollution levels, and it was named "Abyss". On the map, the area containing the Abyss had also been marked with many strange symbols, so An Zhe checked them one by one against the legend in the lower right corner. The

marks meant that within the Abyss were scattered dense growths of mushrooms, cannibal vines, cannibal shrubs, simple mammalian monsters, hybrid mammalian monsters, common reptilian monsters, poisonous reptilian monsters, winged monsters, amphibious monsters, hybrid polymorphic monsters, humanoid monsters... and so on. At the same time, within the Abyss, there were also geographic features such as canyons, hills, mountains, abandoned human cities, and the remnants of roads.

The top of the map corresponded to north, and his gaze traveled all the way up. On the upper right of this colorful map, there was a pure white area marked with a bright red star, and the area's name was written to the right of the star: Northern Base.

The green lights in the sky intensified, and the color behind it darkened little by little into pitch blackness. At midnight, An Zhe managed with difficulty to recognize the stars in the sky. He knew the brightest one was called Polaris and could be used to navigate by.

So he pointed the upwards-facing arrow on the map's upper left corner towards Polaris and walked out over decaying wood, fallen leaves, hyphae, and soil, one step at a time.

Although it was nighttime, it wasn't dark. In the sky, those shifting green lights —humans called them the aurora—illuminated everything up ahead, and all An Zhe could see was mushrooms.

Yellow ones, red ones, brown ones, all with massive caps. Small ones that clumped thickly together on the mountain rocks. Round puffballs that lay scattered on the ground and would, after maturing, release fog-like clouds of spores.

Upon landing, these spores would split open upon the damp fallen leaves and soil and grow into spherical puffballs just like their mother.

There were also mushrooms with no caps, consisting of only white or yellow stems that were either grouped together or radially separated. These swayed in the wind like seaweed.

But this was not a world of only mushrooms. Vines, mosses, shrubs, cannibal flowers, and twisted trees quietly concealed themselves in the night. In the

jungle of plants, dark shadows and strange shapes—either animals or fusions of humans and animals—ran, howled, and fought. Animals fought against animals, animals fought against plants, and plants fought against plants. High-and low-pitched howls beat against An Zhe's eardrums, and the rocks and soil were mixed with fresh bloodstains of various colors. He witnessed a pine tree bend down its trunk to devour a long snake with jet-black scales and two tails. He also saw a massive toad extend and curl its bright red tongue around a flying bat that had human arms growing out of its back. Five minutes after swallowing the bat, a pair of black wings grew out of the toad's bumpy and slimy back, soft and furled. This was only one out of ten thousand sights the mushroom had seen, and he had long ago become used to them.

Right at that moment, a gray animal with four eyes and a body covered with scales, feathers, and fur walked over. Its head resembled both a crocodile's and a massive wolf's, and seven teeth protruded from between its lips. It approached An Zhe and sniffed him with its blood-red nose.

Unmoving, An Zhe quietly stayed next to a mushroom and breathed evenly until he had been sniffed all over.

The huge monster, seeming to have gained nothing, turned around and lumbered off.

An Zhe realized that nothing would notice him even if he was using a human form—perhaps because mushrooms could be found all over the place here, lacked nutritional value, weren't aggressive, and sometimes even contained toxins. So he and they seemed to be creatures from two different worlds, peacefully coexisting.

Perhaps An Ze had been correct. He *was* a tiny little mushroom.

# 2

## “ARE YOU GOING BACK TO THE NORTHERN BASE?"

AN ZHE WALKED for a very long time.

Many nights and days later, the distance he had traversed on the map was merely the width of a human pinky nail, while the remaining distance to the Northern Base was the length of an entire finger. Since he had no human means of transportation, he didn’t know exactly how much longer it would take for him to get there.

At last, he noticed the damp and gloomy smell fade away and felt the soil beneath his feet firm up.

That evening, the sun sank down behind the distant unbroken chain of black mountains like a crimson eye blinking. The sunlight gradually disappeared, and as the dusk sky and aurora rose together, An Zhe tried hard to make out the writing and symbols on the map.

The dried-up river he had just walked across marked a border of the "Abyss", and after this border was a place named "Flatland 2". Flatland 2 had a three-star danger level and two-star pollution level, and it was home to large arthropod-class monsters and rodent-class animals. The land, no longer filled with mushrooms, was dominated by common low shrubbery instead.

Indeed, the Abyss's uneven terrain, the commonly-seen rifts, and the entangled shadows of towering trees that appeared late at night were all gone. One could take in the view of this place with a single glance—a flat and boundless twilight.

But An Zhe felt uneasy.

Flatland 2's dry air seemed unsuited for the survival of mushrooms and he

could not find any soil from which he could absorb nutrients, so he could only recover his strength via human methods such as sleeping.

Thus, he walked for another very long time before finally finding a shallow depression in the ground where short green and yellow grasses were sparsely growing. He sat down with his arms wrapped around his knees and curled up in a suitable posture.

A mushroom usually spends the vast majority of its life sleeping, but this was the first time An Zhe fell asleep in a human posture.

A mushroom's sleep usually consists of staying quietly in a single place and waiting for time to pass, but it seemed that human sleep was different. Not long after he closed his eyes, infinite darkness came flooding forth like the tide, and An Zhe’s body became light.

Or to put it another way, it seemed like he was losing his body bit by bit.

At some point, the whistling wind entered his ears. It was the sound of the wind in the wilderness, which used to be his favorite thing.

But those sounds were now meaningless, for he had lost its spore when it was rolling around in a patch of wilderness it liked. There were some human voices amongst the wind. He couldn't remember those syllables very well, only recall a tiny portion of them. Even when turned into human language, they were fragmented phrases that he couldn't put together—

"Very... strange, very..."

"... How is it?"

"Take... samples... this place."

In the following moment, an indescribable pain radiated to every part of his body. The feeling was very light, but also very deep. A void appeared in his consciousness, unable to be filled for ever and ever, and he knew he had lost his most important thing from then on.

Fear spread throughout his body in that instant. From then on, fearing the sound of the wind, he lived in the cave.

His heart pounded, and a wave of fear suddenly washed over him—the same

kind of fear as when he lost his spore.

An Zhe's eyes flew open, and he promptly realized that he was dreaming. Only humans could dream. In the following moment, he stopped breathing entirely.

He knew the source of that fear. A black creature stood in front of him.

Two blood-red compound eyes glowed faintly. An Zhe tensed up all over, and his gaze traveled down the huge creature. It had three pairs of slender and sharp sickle-like forelimbs, each as long as an adult human, that gleamed with a luster as cold as moonlight.

After realizing what it was, his body shuddered with a distant feeling that stemmed from the trembling of the first ancestor thousands of years back—the feeling that, as a mushroom, he would die from being bitten by termites.

Perhaps the predators in the "Abyss" would not spare a mushroom a single glance, but the arthropod-class monsters of Flatland 2 may view them as a rare delicacy.

Just as this thought occurred to An Zhe, he unconsciously rolled to one side!

With a dull sound that made even the earth tremble, the arthropod monster's sharp forelimb stabbed into the soil next to him—where he had just been lying.

An Zhe snatched up his backpack, turned over, and got to his feet before sprinting to the nearby shrubbery as the arthropod monster's rapid footsteps resounded in his ears. When the sound grew somewhat softer, An Zhe looked back. Beneath the aurora, he clearly saw the thing in its entirety at last. It was a massive black monster resembling an ant that had been magnified a few thousand times.

Luckily, its body looked overly cumbersome. The speed at which humans could run was superior, so as long as he could run into the shrubbery up ahead —

He stumbled.

In that instant, the monster’s shadow enveloped him. Amidst the keen whistling of the wind, its forelimb swung towards his arm.

An Zhe's shirt sleeve suddenly became empty, causing the fabric to droop and the monster to cut nothing at all.

It paused, seemingly surprised by that.

At the same time, hyphae stretched out and grew again inside An Zhe's sleeve to form a complete human arm once more.

He dropped to the ground and rolled, narrowly avoiding the monster's next attack, then pushed off the ground and threw himself into the low shrubbery where two hardy shrubs shielded his body.

But that wasn't enough for him to escape this monster's eyes. An Zhe took a few hurried breaths, and his body began to transform. The outlines of his arms, fingers, and all other extremities became undefined and something heaved below the surface, turning more hyphae-like as he prepared to escape via a more agile means.

Right at that moment—

"Bang!"

A streak of white light flew through the air and struck the joint connecting the monster's head and thorax like a shooting star.

After the dull sound of the impact rang out, the white light silently exploded with a flare of red mixed in.

An Zhe lay in the shrubbery and watched, eyes wide open, as the huge thing broke into two parts and crashed to the ground.

The impact sent leaves flying into the air, falling over An Zhe.

The monster's head landed not more than half a meter away from him, its blood-red compound eyes still looking in his direction.

In the past, An Zhe had seen creatures in the "Abyss" who could still move even after being cut into thirds. Just as he thought to get a little further away from it, he suddenly heard sounds nearby.

"That was the last uranium shell. After harvesting the carcass, we're going back to the base." The man’s voice was rich.

"Arthropod-type carapaces aren't cheap. I didn't think we'd end up snagging some." Another male voice, reedier than the previous one.

After a short exchange, they stopped talking, and the sounds of their footsteps traveled over. It was the sound of thick-soled leather boots treading on the sand mixed with the rustling sound of friction.

Humans.

After An Ze’s death, An Zhe had not seen any humans for a long time. He furtively raised his head from the shrubbery.

The shrubbery rustled. He heard the first speaker quietly urge, "On your guard!"

In the following second, three pitch-black gun muzzles were aimed in his direction.

An Zhe looked at the men.

His muddled recollection of the night he lost his spore inexorably came to mind, but An Ze's existence had shown him the kindness and goodwill of humans. He thought over his current predicament, then said, "He-... hello."

Beneath the aurora’s illumination, the scene before him could be taken in at a glance: three humans clad in dark gray clothes, all male. Wrapped around their waists were wide brown belts with magazines for their guns tied to them. The man standing in the middle towered over the other, shorter two.

He had been the one speaking just now about uranium. His voice was very calm as he asked, "You human?"

An Zhe hesitated briefly. Thinking of the weapon that blew up the monster at its midsection, he said, "Yes."

"What're you called? What's your ID number? What about your teammates?"

"An Zhe. 3261170514. We got separated."

The man looked down at him with a frown. He had thick and dark eyebrows, clear black eyes, a high nose bridge, and thick lips. Unlike the wild beasts of the Abyss, the combination of these facial features didn’t make An Zhe feel a sense of peril, so he pursed his lips and returned the gaze.

Three seconds later, one of the men at that man's side—a short and dark-skinned man—loaded the gun once more with a click, the action full of implied threat. He looked at An Zhe and said, his voice low and words fast, "Take off your clothes."

An Zhe stood up from the shrubbery and undid the first button on his gray shirt, then the second, revealing the skin at his neckline. His skin was a smooth, milky white that looked a bit like the color of his hyphae.

Then he heard the third man whistle. That man had pallid skin tinted with a red flush and blond hair as well as many wrinkles on his face, which were signs of human aging. The man's eyes, gray-blue and turned up at the corners, were looking straight at him.

An Zhe lowered his head, undid the rest of the buttons, and took off his shirt.

The blue-eyed man walked closer to him, whistled a second time, and began to examine him from top to bottom.

This man's gaze was very sticky, similar to the saliva of the animals in the Abyss. After examining An Zhe once, he looped around to An Zhe's side.

Then he seized An Zhe's wrist and swiped the skin there with his fingers. With his thumb rubbing against An Zhe's wrist bone, he asked in a slightly piercing voice, "What's this?"

An Zhe looked down at the back of his hand and wrist. There were some random and irregular red marks there, which were scratches he had gotten from the shrubbery when he was dodging the monster's attacks earlier. He turned his head, using his gaze to indicate the shrubbery behind himself. "Leaves."

A brief silence followed. After a while, that man clicked his tongue and said, "You taking off the rest yourself, or shall I take it off for you?"

An Zhe didn’t move.

He knew more or less what they were doing, for there were similar scenes in An Ze's memories.

Genetic contamination would occur between monsters and monsters or

between monsters and people. The method of tentatively verifying whether someone had been contaminated was to check for wounds.

However, the man behind him made him feel uncomfortable. When he was still a mushroom, the feeling he got when snakes slithered past his stem and cap was just like this.

He lifted his head and looked at the man in the middle. He had seen many ferocious beasts in the Abyss and was also able to roughly judge how much of a threat they posed. Right now, he intuited that this man was the least aggressive out of the three.

”Hosen." After a brief exchanged glance, that man spoke up again, his voice very grim. "Don't fall back into your old habits while we're out here."

Letting out a derisive laugh, Hosen examined An Zhe with an even more unrestrained gaze.

Three seconds later, that man said to An Zhe, "Come to the back with me."

An Zhe obediently followed him around the monster's head to the other side. Apart from the scratch marks left by the branches and leaves, he didn’t have any other wounds.

The man asked, "How long have you been separated from your teammates for?"

An Zhe thought for a while, then replied, "One day."

"You're very lucky."

"It seems that there aren't many monsters here."

"But there's no shortage of bugs." While the man's speech was always very curt, he seemed dependable.

An Zhe buttoned up his clothes, looked at the man, and asked in a soft voice, "Are you going back to the Northern Base?"

The man replied, "Yeah."

"Then... can you take me along?" An Zhe asked. "I have my own food and water."

"It's not up to me," the man said.

Just as the man finished speaking, he stepped out and looked at the other two men. "No wounds. Shall we take him along?"

Hosen smiled, looked at An Zhe with his arms crossed, and whistled a third time. Then he said, "Why not? It won't matter if we do."

Then he looked at the last man. "What do you think, scum?"

An Zhe looked over as well and directly met the dark-skinned man's dour gaze.

# 3

## “DARLING, DON’T VOMIT FROM DISGUST”

THE AURORA CAST down a pale green glow that shone upon the man's dark complexion, creating a strange deep green hue that made it seem reptilian.

At last, he spoke. "We aren't Judges, so we can't confirm that he's one hundred percent human."

"Although you say that," Hosen said in an exaggerated drawl, his arms crossed, "Flatland 2's pollution level is only two stars."

The dark-skinned man went silent for some time again. Then he said, "The average time taken for mutation to occur in Flatland 2 is four hours. I'll agree *after* four hours have passed."

"Fine," Hosen said. "If he still hasn't mutated by the time we finish gathering up the loot, we'll take him."

The dark-skinned man finally nodded. Then the three of them looked at each other, seeming to have reached an agreement.

"I'm Vance," the tall man in the middle said by way of self-introduction as he turned towards An Zhe.

"Hello," An Zhe said.

Hosen, who made him feel slightly repulsed, said, "Hosen."

The last man, the one who had been called "scum", was silent for a while before spitting out, "Anthony."

An Zhe greeted him as well, then added, "Thank you."

"No need for thanks," Vance said with a smile. "We're all fellow humans. Plus

we just lost a teammate, so we're short-handed."

With those words, he walked onto the nearby monster head and directed the others. "We're leaving as soon as we finish harvesting the carcass. Move quickly."

As he spoke, Vance took out a pair of gloves and a long dagger from his backpack and tossed them to An Zhe. "You go remove the legs."

An Zhe caught the items, obediently responded, and walked ten or so paces forward before stopping next to the monster's halved body, where he put the gloves on and began to examine it.

The arthropod's body was enormous, and its carapace was mostly smooth save for some places where long spines or protruding bulges stuck out. He looked down at the monster's legs. There were six altogether—slender and long, divided into three segments, and densely covered with shiny black fuzz.

On the other side, Vance and Anthony were taking care of the monster's head. They removed the carapace, allowing the brain and other fluids to flow out, then scraped the interior clean. Hosen was standing guard at the periphery.

So An Zhe also pulled out his dagger and attentively dug at the monster's joints. After approximately five minutes, he broke one of the joints, separating one leg from the monster's thorax. It fell to the ground, and viscous white brain-like fluid slowly leaked out from the opening and seeped into the yellow sand.

He heard Hosen say in a mocking voice, "Darling, don't vomit from disgust."

An Zhe didn't react, choosing instead to quietly continue digging at the next joint.

Not only did he feel nothing regarding this monster, he even felt that it was much cleaner than those animals that lived in the "Abyss".

But Hosen seemed to have no plans of letting him off the hook. Footsteps sounded behind him as Hosen walked over and pressed down on An Zhe's shoulder with his right hand, fingers sliding over it. "How old are you, sweetheart?"

An Zhe heard a sort of greed in his tone—the greed of animals in the face of food. But based on his limited understanding, humans wouldn't eat their own kind.

He calmly replied, "Nineteen."

An Ze was nineteen this year. He had consumed An Ze's genes, so he was probably nineteen or so as well.

"But you look to be only seventeen," Hosen said in a sharp voice with a raspy undertone, his snickers muffled in his chest.

An Zhe frowned, unsure how to answer.

"Hosen." Right at that moment, Vance's voice came from nearby. "Focus on standing guard."

Hosen made a contemptuous noise, then squeezed his shoulder a bit more before leaving.

An Zhe once again realized that among humans, each individual may have different characteristics. For example, An Ze was different from the humans who dug out his spore, and Vance was different from Hosen. He felt very grateful to Vance for stepping in when he did.

He lowered his head and continued to dig at the joints, dividing each leg into three segments. After he finished, he neatly stacked them up. The thing's carapace had a metallic sheen and was hard as stone, so they made crisp clacking sounds when they were stacked together.

By the time he removed all six legs, Vance and Anthony had also finished taking apart the head and came over to his half of the body. Vance took a look at the neatly stacked legs on the ground and smiled. "You're pretty diligent."

Then he said to Hosen, "Drive the car over here."

Without saying anything, Hosen turned and walked away.

An Zhe stood to one side and watched Vance and Anthony get started on the monster's thorax.

He asked, "Do you need my help?"

Vance, holding a black pincer-like tool the length of a human's lower leg in his gloved hands, asked, "You haven't come out here much, have you?"

"... Mm-hm," An Zhe replied.

"Then you can just wait over on the side." Vance pried away the piece of armor at the junction between the monster's thorax and abdomen with the pliers. The edges of the armor were irregular, forming a sharp black spine where it met the other pieces of armor, flashing with a chilly gray luster. Vance said, "This thing has a lot of spines. It's easy to get pricked if you don't have any experience handling them. Flatland 2's pollution level isn't high, but it is still possible to get infected that way."

An Zhe obediently took a few steps back and watched them circle around the carcass and dismantle it at various points. They lifted away one piece of black carapace after another, and white viscera and organs spilled all over the ground.

As he watched, a dull roar started up. An Zhe looked to his right and saw a rectangular black armored car driving in their direction, looking like a huge crustacean-class monster—An Zhe was very familiar with the sight of it, for the team An Ze used to be a part of had five such armored cars.

The car drew near, and Hosen jumped down from it. Without even lifting his head, Vance said, "First help him carry the goods onto the car."

An Zhe made a sound of acknowledgment and picked up the armor pieces from the ground, then carefully tied them with rope and handed them to Hosen, who put them in the armored car's storage space.

The enormous monster shrank as they took it apart, and the number of armor pieces An Zhe picked up increased.

Just as he was tying up a stack of armor pieces with rope, he abruptly stopped moving.

On the spiny black armor piece beneath his hand, a few tiny droplets of liquid were congealing at the tip of a spine, dark and very difficult to discover if one did not look carefully.

He looked at the splashes of viscera on the ground and confirmed that all of

the monster's internal fluids were white, yellow, or clear.

Then what were these dark droplets? He recalled the blood that flowed out of An Ze's body before he died.

An Zhe looked at Vance and Anthony. The two of them were thoroughly engrossed in dismantling the carcass, their expressions calm and everything seeming normal. As a result, An Zhe could only act as if nothing had happened. He bowed his head once more and tied up the armor pieces.

A long time later, they finally finished dismantling the carcass, and the three men seemed to also be convinced that An Zhe wouldn't suddenly turn into some deadly monster.

Vance said, "Get in the car, we're going back to the base. An Zhe, you come too."

A single armored car could hold seven or eight people, and there was also a space where people could rest. It was divided into three simple compartments, but each one was very cramped and had a low ceiling, so humans had to hunch over in order to walk around inside.

An Zhe was assigned the outermost space, the car door to his right, and he lay down with his head pillowed on his backpack. Anthony went up to the front to drive, Vance was next door to him, and Hosen occupied the innermost space.

The car door shut, and it went dark. There was only a faint light shining in from a small window on the side. After a jolt, the armored car slowly started up and drove forward, the ride mostly smooth but for the occasional small bump.

An Zhe looked into the darkness before him with eyes wide open, feeling like he was floating in a black tide. The tide was carrying him along as it flowed towards the Northern Base, a place he knew nothing of.

Enveloped by a slight sense of helplessness and confusion, he waited quietly in the darkness.

When the light coming through the small window gradually became stronger, the surroundings slightly brightened as well. The car stopped, and An Zhe heard Hosen get up, take a few steps inwards, open the door leading to the cabin, and walk in to take over from Anthony. Anthony returned to where Hosen used to

be and lay down. His breathing was very heavy, and his movements were very large—even the floor of the rest area shook. Soon afterwards, Vance asked what the matter was, and Anthony replied that he was a bit tired.

Another long span of time passed, and it was Vance's turn to take over from Hosen.

An Zhe instinctively curled up. He knew that with this, Hosen would be sleeping next door, and he felt ill at ease.

But no sounds of a human lying down came from next door.

An Zhe opened his eyes wide, waiting.

In the following moment, with the soft rustling of footsteps, a person directly threw himself upon An Zhe.

"Darling..." Hosen lowered his voice, sounding very hoarse. He forced his own legs between An Zhe's and wrapped an arm around An Zhe's shoulders. An Zhe struggled a little, almost on reflex, but he was pressed to the floor by a strength greater than his own. "That stupid Vance isn't here... I know what you do, I've been with more mercenary teams than he's laid eyes on."

The struggles just now took up no small amount of An Zhe's strength, and he panted for breath. "Please don't do this."

"Don't do what?" Hosen smiled. In the dark environment, his smile looked very malevolent.

An Zhe didn't reply. Hosen lifted the hand that he was pressing down on An Zhe's shoulder with and made to undo his belt. He could hold An Zhe down firmly with only one hand, which seemed to please him greatly. His smile grew, and his tone of voice was crude and mocking. "Darling, what can you do with such little strength? You don't know how to drive and can’t use heavy weapons. When you run into a monster, all you can do is wait to die. What did your teammates bring you out here for? Just to watch?"

As he spoke, he grabbed An Zhe's neck and leaned in close. His stubble-covered cheek pressed against the side of An Zhe's neck, and the acrid smell of smoke drifted from him. "I've seen plenty of little whores like you... But it is the first time I've seen one so beautiful. Which mercenary team were you a part of

before?"

As An Zhe violently gasped for breath, Hosen pressed him down tightly and ran a hot, wet tongue over An Zhe's skin. An Zhe turned his head, coughing from the smell of smoke, and continued groping around in the darkness with his right hand until he finally touched the dagger Vance had tossed to him earlier.

Right at that moment, two compartments away, a huge noise came from where Anthony was. It sounded like something had been knocked over onto the floor.

"Don't be impatient, scum." Hosen laughed out loud. "It'll be your turn soon enough."

But his words seemed to have no effect, because footsteps approached.

With a soft curse, Hosen pulled An Zhe up and pressed him against the wall of the car, then yanked at his shirt collar.

An Zhe no longer resisted. Clutching the dagger in his hand, he looked at the dark aisle in silence while his white hyphae quietly spread out on the floor beside him, seemingly preparing for something.

But in the following second, all of his movements stopped.

A monster with a human torso and three pairs of slender legs protruding from its back slowly walked through the aisle, dragging furled soft wings behind itself, and the two blood-red compound eyes atop its head glowed faintly.

The thing's skin was black—the color of Anthony's skin. But the shape of his human face had already become distorted. The place where his eyes used to be was covered with densely-packed brown scales, the nose extended down at a slant to form a massive cleft, and the mouth area protruded outwards with a long and curled black tube extending from the middle.

He stopped walking, and the edges of his wings scraped against the walls of the car, making ear-piercing noises.

"What are you doing, Anthony?" Hosen asked, his voice full of dissatisfaction. "I'm not fond of being watched."

After saying that, he lowered his head again and settled on top of An Zhe,

who felt a set of teeth bite down at the junction between his neck and shoulder. The teeth worried at his skin, suffusing it with a slight pain. But he was in no position to care about it. Tensed up all over, he faced the monster Anthony had transformed into.

One second, two seconds, three seconds.

The wings behind Anthony vibrated slightly, and his proboscis curled and uncurled in the air.

"Scared?" Hosen, who was lying on top of him, seemed to have felt him stiffen up, and he muttered an inarticulate curse. "What are you acting for?" Then he grabbed An Zhe's waist with an unyielding grip and bit down hard on his skin.

Right at that moment—

With the buzz of vibrating wings, Anthony placed his six thin long limbs on the floor, leaned forward, and gathered energy as he sank down into a crouch. Then, just like a sleek spider, he rushed towards them!

The wind whistled in the cramped space. An Zhe's eyes went unfocused in a split second, and his body instantly transformed into his soft and agile mushroom form. His hyphae fluttered about in the compartment, filling almost the entire space and momentarily blocking Anthony's line of sight.

Immediately afterwards, An Zhe felt the human on top of him first stiffen for a moment and cough a few times, then began to flail all of his limbs. "Fuck, what's th—?"

He looked down and saw that Hosen had snapped countless soft hyphae with a single bite, which had then choked his windpipe and esophagus. When he coughed, he looked panic-stricken and pained.

At the same time, countless more hyphae were cut apart by Anthony's forelimbs. They were soft and easy to break, lacking the slightest durability, so they could win no more than a five-or six-second-long window to make an escape.

An Zhe estimated the distance between himself and Anthony, then swiftly used his hyphae to roll up his clothes and flowed out from the chaotic space

beneath Hosen, regaining his freedom.

His snow-white hyphae surged towards the door like a snow-white tide. Once there, he changed back into human shape and pressed the switch near it.

With a dull sound, the car door sprang open. An Zhe instantly retracted all of his hyphae, then reached out with one hand to forcefully drag Hosen's collar before rolling out. The two of them fell out of the car together and made a solid landing on the sand.

At least it was safer here than in the cramped space of the car.

However, mere moments later, Anthony stuck his head out from the doorway as well, and a harsh buzzing started up. He first flapped his wings to fly four or five meters up into the air, then abruptly dove towards them—

Right when he flew up, An Zhe had swiftly gotten to his feet and run away.

But he saw Hosen simply lie on the sand, his gaze unfocused, and Anthony's sharp forelimbs pierced his chest in an instant.

In the Abyss, An Zhe had seen the ways by which many monsters hunted and escaped, so he knew how he should escape and thought Hosen knew as well. But it wasn't until the moment when blood spurted out that Hosen seemed to come alive suddenly. Yelling, he grabbed Anthony's front legs with both hands and madly kicked at Anthony's body, which had become a long black pupa, with both feet in an attempt to retreat.

The ground rumbled. An Zhe spun around and saw the armored car, which had already driven quite far away, make a sharp turn and head back towards them—Vance had finally noticed something was wrong.

He took a few breaths, then began running towards the armored car.

Vance's worried expression was visible through the car window. Before the armored car reached An Zhe, its door had already sprung open. When the armored car passed him, a pair of strong arms wrenched him up from the ground, and he scrambled into the driver's cabin in tandem with Vance's movements. Vance swiftly tossed him to the other side of the cabin, then slammed the door shut.

An Zhe said, "They..."

"There's no saving them!" Vance once again yanked the steering wheel hard, and the armored car turned back to its original direction. With the accelerator pressed to the floor, it sped northwards.

An Zhe leaned back against the front passenger seat, panting. After catching his breath a little, he looked in the rearview mirror. The mutated Anthony and the mortally-wounded Hosen were tangled up together and rolling on the ground. Anthony lifted his forelimbs, then brought them plummeting down to pierce through Hosen's torso and nail his body to the ground. Then it lifted its head and looked in their direction. Approximately five seconds later, it seemed to have given up on chasing the armored car. It lowered its head, and its long and slim proboscis pierced Hosen's head. After another fit of convulsions, Hosen's body went utterly slack.

The car drove very quickly. Before long, their figures had disappeared in the yellow sand and shrubs, never to be seen again.

Vance asked, "Anthony mutated?"

An Zhe turned his head to look at Vance and saw that the rims of his eyes were slightly red.

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

He was still alive, but Vance had lost two teammates.

"What are you sorry for?" Vance forced a smile. "When we come out here for work, people often die. I'm used to it. Maybe the next one to die will be me."

But An Zhe truly did feel guilty. Anthony had been infected. If An Zhe had told Vance about the drops of what he suspected to be human blood on the ant armor right after he discovered it, they may have been able to discover that Anthony had been infected in advance.

He lowered his head and told Vance about it.

Vance was silent for a while before he lowered his voice and said, "What Anthony changed into wasn't an ant. He may have been infected earlier. Before we ran into you, we encountered a swarm of mutated wild mosquitos."

"After that... was he also pricked by the armor?" An Zhe asked.

Vance looked out the car window and went silent for another long while before speaking again. "Flatland 2's pollution level is very low—two stars—so one might not be infected from getting pricked or slightly wounded. But if they speak up about it, they'll be abandoned by their team for sure, so many people won't do so until after they've been wounded."

His voice grew a bit softer. "... Because they want to go home."

"Then what about Hosen?" An Zhe asked.

If they had discovered that Anthony had been infected in advance, Hosen might not have died.

"Don't take it to heart. Hosen's death wasn't an unjust one." Vance lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. "He had done no small number of wicked things and had the blood of at least five people on his hands. This time, if it weren't for the fact that we were truly short of hands, Anthony and I wouldn't have worked with him. What was he doing at the time? Bullying you?"

An Zhe said nothing, and Vance turned his head to look at him.

In the twilight, the boy's contours seemed both quiet and peaceful, like a crystalline drop of water. For this sort of person to appear in the perilous wilds, perhaps he was dealing with unspeakable difficulties, but Vance didn't ask.

Likewise, An Zhe didn't know what to say to Vance. He was thinking of what happened prior to Hosen's death. At the very beginning, Hosen seemed to have briefly lost consciousness, only coming around once he had been stabbed.

What had Hosen done before that?

He had bitten a mouthful of hyphae.

An Zhe frowned. He actually didn’t know whether his mushroom self was poisonous or not.

Now he suspected that he was a poisonous mushroom.

As they continued forward, the vegetation became scarcer. In the boundless desert, there were no animals whatsoever, only their armored car traveling alone.

At night, when the aurora appeared in the sky again, Vance intended to stop the car and rest. He stubbed out his cigarette on the steering wheel, then opened the door connecting the driver's cabin and the rest area and jumped down. In the pitch-black rest area, his voice rang out. "Sleep first. We'll arrive at the base after driving for another day and a half."

An Zhe came to the door as well. To have a broader field of vision, the driver's cabin was very high up, whereas to save space for the storage compartment, the rest area was towards the bottom of the car and very low. The height difference between it and the driver's cabin was more than one meter, so he had to jump down.

He stood there, slightly hesitant. Merely three short seconds later, Vance seemed to have noticed his hesitation and said, "Sit there first."

An Zhe followed those instructions and sat down on the edge, his legs dangling. Then Vance reached out to hold his upper body and helped him down.

An Zhe landed steadily on the ground and said in a small voice, "Thank you."

"No problem." Vance smiled, and a slow affection came through in his voice. "My younger brother was afraid of heights, so he'd often be like this too. He was about your age."

An Zhe, doing his best to grasp the rules of human communication, asked tentatively, "Does he also come out into the wilds with you?"

"Mm-hm," Vance said. "We used to always be together."

"But not this time?"

"He's dead," Vance said. "It’s been two months since he was killed by a Judge at the entrance to the base."

Judge.

This was the third time An Zhe heard that word. The first time was from An Ze. He was trying to dissuade An Zhe from going to the human base, saying, "You can't escape the Judges’ eyes."

The second time was from Anthony. He hadn't wanted An Zhe to join their team, saying, "We aren't Judges, so we can't confirm that he's one hundred

percent human."

And in the memories he obtained from An Ze, it seemed to be a word that appeared very frequently.

So he repeated, "... Judge?"

"You don't know?" Vance's voice pitched up in surprise. "Where exactly did you pop up from?"

An Zhe said in a small voice, "I haven't interacted with others before."

"I can see that." Vance twisted a knob on the car's wall, and a faint white light lit up at the top of the walls, barely illuminating the cramped space. He took out field rations from a cubbyhole in the wall, and An Zhe took out food and water from his own backpack as well before sitting across from Vance.

He heard Vance say, "The base has a system called the 'Arbiter's Code', after which came an organization under the jurisdiction of the military. It has a very high rank, and it's called the Trial Court. The members of the Trial Court are Judges. They usually take shifts at the base's gates, and every one of them is licensed to kill, so it won't count as breaking the law when they kill people."

After listening to this sentence, An Zhe dimly recalled that he had found something related in the memories he obtained from An Ze.

He said, "... They determine whether the people entering the base are human or Infected Ones?"

"Mm-hm," Vance replied. "In addition to the kind of Infected Ones that can be distinguished on sight, there are also some that can't. The mutation process hasn't yet started, or the mutation level is too high, so there are no differences from humans on the surface. The base calls those kinds of people xenogenics."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

If that was the case, then he was a xenogenic.

Vance undid his jacket and put it aside, then twisted open the water flask's cap and continued speaking. "The base is too densely populated. After xenogenics enter the base, they will go on a killing spree, and following that will be large-scale infection. The Trial Court's responsibility is to determine if every

single person entering the city is human or xenogenic, and the determining process is called the 'Trial'."

"Then... what happens after they discover a xenogenic?" An Zhe asked.

"What else?" Vance raised his eyebrows. "They're shot on the spot."

Without saying anything, An Zhe bowed his head and took a bite of hardtack. He had just learned how to eat by human methods, but to him, human food was somewhat coarse. When he swallowed, his mouth and throat would get scratched. He ate very slowly, but his heart beat very quickly.

After a while, he asked, "Can they really identify all the xenogenics?"

Vance took a big gulp of water, leaned against the car wall, and closed his eyes. His voice carried a trace of despondency. "Who knows? The dead can't prove anything. Nobody knows whether the people killed were really xenogenics or not. That was the case with my younger brother."

An Zhe said nothing. Vance seemed to have answered a question he hadn’t asked, but he still listened quietly.

"That time... he came with me to Flatland 1, where the pollution level was lower than even Flatland 2’s. I kept an eye on him the entire time, and I could confirm that he hadn't been wounded." Vance smiled, but his voice was raspy. "When we returned to the entrance of the base, the one on duty that wasn't any ordinary Judge, but their boss. Everyone calls him 'the Arbiter'. Other Judges will give their justifications for killing someone, but he doesn't have to. He doesn't need justification to kill anyone, nor does he accept any pleas. Even if it's the base's top brass, if he killed them, then that's that. It was like that on that day. He so much as glanced at my brother before opening fire on him.

"I didn't believe it, but there was nothing I could do. This sort of thing happens often. He's killed many people, so there are many people in the base who despise him, myself included. For all I know, someday he’ll kill me too."

With those words, Vance looked at his own right hand in a daze for a while, then tossed the flask to one side. He lay down with his head pillowed upon his arm, but his eyes were still looking at the car ceiling. At last, he got back on track and answered the question An Zhe had asked at the very beginning.

"They'd rather mistakenly kill someone than let them pass. If a xenogenic really made its way into the base, it would be discovered for sure. In the entirety of this year, there has been only one xenogenic attack."

An Zhe felt uneasy. To conceal this uneasiness, he closed his eyes and rubbed them with his left hand.

Vance said, "Go to sleep, kid."

An Zhe lay down next to him. No matter how tomorrow turned out, at least he was safe tonight. There were no monsters and there was no Hosen. There was only Vance, who treated him very well.

Before sleeping, he held the bullet shell in his hand and looked at the car door at the end of the aisle.

Supposing—supposing he secretly opened the car door right now, got out, and returned to the monster-infested wilds, he could still live. He would not face the Trial, and he would not be killed on the spot. He didn’t know how long he could live, but it would definitely be for longer than tomorrow.

But was the spore something more important than his own life?

It was.

To the creatures in the Abyss, death was the most trivial thing. And in this short day outside of the Abyss, he had witnessed Anthony's mutation and Hosen's death. Human lives were by no means precious either.

An Zhe closed his eyes. He knew he had to go to the Northern Base.

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Early the next morning, they continued driving towards the base. Because only Vance was driving and he lacked energy, their rest times became irregular. They stopped to rest that afternoon and continued driving north at midnight on the third day. When the aurora began to dim and the sky was suffused with white, Vance said, "We're almost there."

An Zhe looked forward. In the morning's gray fog, a round city gradually appeared from the horizon.

City—he knew this word. Humans clustered in cities the same way mushrooms clustered in the rainy season.

The armored car continued moving forward, and bit by bit as the early morning fog gradually dissipated, more of the city's details appeared. The round city was enclosed by gray steel walls, their height like that of the tallest mushrooms. Even if twenty people stood atop one another, with each person's feet on someone else's shoulders, it still may not have been enough to climb over the wall. Steel tusks and spines protruded from the walls as well, their hues sharp and icy cold like rocks and soil in winter.

The city boundary was filled with surveillance equipment and laser devices, so anyone who sneaked in would be immediately discovered. The two city gates were the only ways of getting in and out of the city, and one was entry only while the other was exit only. The one they were at right now was the one that only allowed entry.

Then An Zhe saw many small teams similar to Vance's drive back from all directions. Some of them were traveling light, while others were wearing heavy gear and carrying weapons. There were four or five people per team, and they drove similar armored cars to designated areas before getting out of them and walking through the city gate. The cars and people were inspected separately.

Vance got out first, and An Zhe jumped down from the car while grabbing onto his arm. Feeling that Vance's arm was somewhat tense, he thought that perhaps this city gate evoked Vance's bad memories of his younger brother.

They walked towards the city gate, where a long line had formed. There was a slight disturbance at the head of the line, but they couldn't clearly see the situation. People were still entering in order.

An Zhe trailed after Vance, walking towards the line and looking around as he walked.

Soldiers clothed in black uniforms stood at both sides of the city gate, two guns at their waists. One was a thermal weapon, while the other was a laser gun. Behind them were colossal heavy weapons that directly faced the city gates. One could imagine that as soon as a monster tried to break in, it would be blown to pieces by these heavy weapons.

After looking around, his gaze was drawn to a black figure. At an open space beneath the distant city walls, that person, also clad in a black uniform, appeared to be a sloppy and undisciplined soldier who had abandoned his post. He wasn't standing guard in an orderly fashion like his colleagues, but rather leaning against the city wall and slowly wiping a black gun with his head lowered.

However, the silver-trimmed black uniform he wore seemed more beautiful and imposing than the others, perhaps because his physique was tall, slim, and well-proportioned.

Vance cast a glance in that direction and began walking much faster for some reason while pulling him straight forward. Just as they were about to join the end of the line—

An Zhe saw the man in the distance slowly raise his head.

A pair of ice-cold green eyes showed beneath the brim of the black uniform cap.

In an instant, An Zhe stopped dead in his tracks, feeling that the surroundings had turned as chilly as if they had frozen over.

Vance turned back and said, "What's the—"

His voice suddenly stopped.

A gunshot ran out.

Vance's tall body swayed on the spot, then toppled over with a thud. His eyes were wide open, his throat made gurgling noises, and blood gushed from his temple. After his body jerked a few times, there were no further movements.

But An Zhe could not even reach out to grab at the hem of his clothes, nor did he have any room whatsoever to think about what exactly had happened just then. He could only lift his head and meet the gaze of the uniformed soldier because, at that moment, the soldier was slowly turning the jet-black muzzle of the gun…

… towards him.

# 4

## “LU FENG, I HOPE YOU DIE A MISERABLE DEATH—!"

VANCE’S BLOOD spread out in An Zhe's peripheral vision, forming a pool of crimson. When the people in line heard the sound, they turned around one after another to look, but after glimpsing this scene, they indifferently turned back again, as if nothing had happened at all.

But Vance was dead. A human had been killed at the human base’s gates, and nobody raised any objection.

Thus, An Zhe suddenly realized that this person was the Arbiter, the person Vance had mentioned to him a day earlier.

He was the master of the Trial Court, determining whether each person entering the city was human or xenogenic. He could decide anyone's fate no matter who they were, needing no justification.

Now it was his own turn to stand trial.

An Zhe's heart thumped wildly at first. The instant that the barrel of the gun pointed at him, he realized that he was really going to die.

But as he looked at the Arbiter's icy green eyes, he gradually calmed down again.

Coming to the Northern Base was his unavoidable decision, so being judged was his fate, no matter the outcome.

He silently counted the seconds in his mind.

One, two, three.

A long time passed with no gunshot ringing out. The Arbiter, keeping the gun trained on him, slowly walked over.

The people in line, seeming to tacitly agree to speed up, spontaneously compressed forward. A moment later, this tiny area was deserted save for An Zhe alone.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen.

After An Zhe counted to the fourteenth second, the Arbiter stopped in front of him, ring finger resting on the gunstock, and lowered the muzzle. Then he put the weapon away.

"Come with me," An Zhe heard him say.

His voice was ice-cold and flat, just like his eyes.

An Zhe stood in place, waiting for him to go, but he didn’t move even after three seconds had gone by.

He lifted his head up uncertainly, then heard the Arbiter's voice turn even colder. "Hold out your hand."

An Zhe obediently held out his hand.

Click.

An ice-cold chill made him shiver.

One end of a silver handcuff was fastened around his wrist, while the other end was in the officer’s hand.

It was in this manner in which An Zhe was led away.

The strange thing was, when Vance got shot, the people in line didn't react at all. Now that he was being taken away by the Arbiter, though, they put their heads together and whispered amongst themselves.

An Zhe only had time to look back at Vance's body lying flat on the ground before he was pulled through the city gate.

Once inside, he discovered that the interior space wasn't a cramped passageway, but rather a vast area divided into several spaces. Bright white lights shone everywhere, the bounce of their glow off the steel walls looking like winter snowfall’s reflected shine cast upon light gray shale.

There were no fewer armed soldiers or heavy weapons compared to the

outside. Within the tight encirclement of the heavy weapons and soldiers was a long snow-white table. Three officers in black uniforms just like the Arbiter's—An Zhe guessed they were the Judges—sat behind it, and a human sat across from them. One of the Judges was asking him, "How is the relationship between you and your wife? When you left the city this time, was she not with you?"

From An Ze's memories, An Zhe learned that besides changes to appearance, bearing, and habits, the intelligence and memories of infected humans would be affected as well, so interrogation was also a method of identifying xenogenics.

The person who brought him inside glanced in that direction and said, "Hurry up."

After the Judge in the middle replied with a "yes sir", he looked at the person being tried. "You may go now."

As if he had survived a calamity, the man broke out into a smile, then got up and swiftly walked through the city gate's passageway.

Thus, An Zhe knew that this man who brought him here was indeed none other than the Arbiter, and his "hurry up" was not to hasten the Judges to speed up their interrogation, but rather to show that he had already determined in the span of a moment that the person being tried was human.

The next person to be tried walked from the line towards the long table. The distance between the line and the table was very long, with several door-shaped machines between them and a section that included turns as well as uphill and downhill slopes. An Zhe realized that this was to show the movement characteristics of the person being tried to the Judges to the fullest possible extent.

But he had no more time to see more because in the following second, he was led around a corner and into a long corridor.

That person took out a black communication device and said, "Trial Court, Lu Feng. Requesting genetic examination."

An Zhe guessed that the two words in the middle were his name.

A mechanical door promptly slid open in front of them and Lu Feng walked

straight in, the force of his pull making An Zhe stumble before he caught up.

The room was silvery-white. Mysterious mechanical devices were arrayed from floor to ceiling, and six soldiers standing guard were scattered all about. Behind the workbench at one end of the room sat a young male human with short blonde hair and blue eyes clad in a white lab coat.

"What a surprise it is for Colonel Lu to come here." He pushed up the glasses on his nose, the tone of his voice lifting up at the end in provocation. "Don't you always solve all your problems with bullets?"

Lu Feng said coldly, "Please cooperate, Doctor."

The doctor glanced at Lu Feng, a shadow of a smile on his face. Then he got up and said to An Zhe, "Come with me."

After following him, An Zhe was made to lie on a silvery-white platform, and rings around his hands and feet fixed his limbs in place. The doctor said, "Don't move."

Immediately afterwards, An Zhe felt a pain in his arm. He turned his head in that direction and saw the doctor slowly drawing a tube of bright red blood from his body.

The doctor said, "The color of your blood is very healthy."

"Thank you for the compliment," An Zhe replied.

The doctor was amused by his response.

"The blood will be sent for a genetic examination, which will take an hour. The full body enhanced scan is expected to take forty minutes. Don't move."

He finished speaking, and the silver platform began to glow with a blue light. The surroundings emitted a directionless low hum—the source of the sound was every single particle of air. The omnipresent noise made An Zhe recall those distant nights in the Abyss. The faraway ocean gave off the dull lapping sounds of waves, and in the darkest time of the night, the howls of unknown creatures came from that direction. Fluctuations that human language could not possibly describe swept away the entirety of the rain-drenched land.

The electric current was like countless ants crawling over and biting his body.

To a mushroom, forty minutes was by no means a long time. But An Zhe thought that these may be the last forty minutes of his life. Cherishing them, he studied the mechanical lines on the ceiling.

He was unsure how much time had passed when he heard Lu Feng say outside, "Seraing told me that your examination methods have been upgraded."

"You're very well-informed," the doctor said. "We've discovered that when the human body undergoes mutation, some special fragments of their DNA will be activated, and we've named them 'biological targets'. The biological targets of animal-type mutations and plant-type mutations are the two major categories. The improved gene detection has two processes that occur simultaneously. One is animal-type target detection while the other is plant-type target detection. The total time needed for both is an hour."

"Congratulations," Lu Feng said.

The doctor let out a laugh. "Colonel, if the time needed for genetic examinations is greatly shortened and the cost is reduced, won’t your Trial Court be put out of work?"

"I look forward to it with relish."

"You're seriously boring."

Their conversation ceased.

Meanwhile, An Zhe looked up at the silvery-white ceiling and began to ponder what his own species was.

He was a mushroom.

The doctor had said that mutations were divided into animal-type mutations and plant-type mutations.

He thought that firstly, mushrooms weren't a kind of animal.

Secondly, mushrooms didn't seem to be plants either. He didn't have leaves.

An Zhe fell into a state of confusion. He strove to categorize himself as a plant, yet didn't find sufficient proof.

He spent too much time contemplating this question. Before he arrived at a conclusion, the blue light disappeared from his side like an ebbing tide.

"All right." The doctor's voice rang out, and the mechanical rings automatically released.

Then he heard the doctor continue talking. "Colonel, may I ask why you brought him here for a genetic examination?"

"No."

The doctor was clearly rendered speechless.

He helped An Zhe up and had him sit down in a swivel chair on one side, then patted his head. "Good boy. Rest here for a bit while I go look at the results of the blood test."

An Zhe sat in place.

That Colonel, the Arbiter, sat on the other side, still watching him with icy green eyes. His was a young face with clear contours, and at the brim of his hat, a few locks of black hair hung down over his forehead to rest against the ends of his sloped eyebrows. His expression, which the room painted with a thin layer of cold light, serrated An Zhe’s eyes like a knife.

The stare from this pair of eyes made An Zhe feel very cold. Mushrooms were afraid of the cold. As a result, he rotated the swivel chair, turning his back to the Colonel.

He felt even colder.

A very long time later, the doctor’s footsteps finally came, thawing the room. "There are no abnormalities in the genetic report. You two can go."

After a few seconds of silence, Lu Feng said, "You're one hundred percent sure he's human?"

The doctor replied, "Although it may disappoint you otherwise, we truly haven't found any biological targets. Other infected ones and xenogenics have at least ten or more."

After that, he said, "Look, this little friend of ours doesn't even want to acknowledge you."

Then An Zhe heard the Colonel say, "Turn back around."

An Zhe silently turned back around.

Facing Lu Feng's gaze, he was a bit avoidant because he truly wasn't human.

But even this tiny avoidance of his somehow irritated the Colonel; his voice was like ice water when he spoke again. "What are you afraid of?"

An Zhe didn't say a word. He knew that in front of this man, the more he spoke, the more mistakes he'd make, and perhaps his weakness would be discovered.

At last, Lu Feng raised his eyebrows. "You still aren't leaving?"

So An Zhe obediently jumped down from the chair and left with him again—but this time he was free, without being led in handcuffs.

In the deserted corridor, they reached the halfway point when Lu Feng suddenly spoke up. "At first glance, I instinctively felt that you weren't human."

An Zhe nearly had a heart attack.

A full three seconds passed before he asked, "Then... what about the second glance?"

"This is the first time I've requested a genetic examination." The Colonel held out the genetic examination report to him. "You'd best be one."

An Zhe could only silently accept the report stating that everything about him was normal. For a short while, there were only the monotonous sounds of their footsteps in the silvery-white corridor.

Near the exit, there was a corner where they ran into a party of people. In the lead was a Judge clad in a black uniform, and behind the Judge were two heavily-armed soldiers restraining a man as they walked over. Next to them, there was also a tall woman with short hair and a distressed expression.

Spotting Lu Feng, the Judge said, "Colonel."

Lu Feng looked at the restrained man and received a look back. The man's throat spasmed a few times before exclaiming, "I haven't been infected!"

The Judge snapped to attention on the spot and said to Lu Feng, "Infection is

strongly suspected, but there is no conclusive evidence. The next of kin are demanding a genetic examination."

Lu Feng made a soft sound of acknowledgement, and the soldiers continued forward with the man in their custody. Just as they passed Lu Feng—

"Bang!"

Lu Feng put away his gun and walked off without looking back. "There's no need."

The man's body instantly pitched forward, held up only by the soldiers. The woman following them shrieked and collapsed to the floor.

An Zhe turned to look at Lu Feng's expression. His gaze was so cold— the mushroom had never seen such a look before. He knew An Ze was always gentle, Vance was easygoing and generous, Hosen was filled with greed, and Anthony was completely on guard. But Lu Feng was different. There was nothing in his eyes at all.

An Zhe thought that to the Arbiter, killing others may have been more normal than breathing. He wouldn't experience any change in emotion because he had already gotten accustomed to the sight long ago.

They soon came to the exit.

Near the exit, two soldiers in simple attire were waiting for him with a body covered by white cloth.

An Zhe knew it was Vance.

His eyesight went blurry. He took a step forward, wishing to lift away the white cloth and look at Vance's face once more, but one of the soldiers stopped him.

The soldier held out a blue chip to him and said in a steady voice, "Mercenary team AR1147 has been confirmed to have no survivors, and the equipment and materials have been reclaimed by the base. The loot has been converted into currency and combined with the consolation payment for disbursement to the next of kin. Please claim the remains."

"Where are you taking him?" An Zhe asked.

The soldier replied, "The incinerator."

His body trembled slightly, and for a long time, he didn't accept the ID card.

Lu Feng's voice rang out. "Do you not want it?"

An Zhe said nothing. After a long while, he lifted his head to look at Lu Feng. "He really... wasn't wounded."

Within that pair of icy green eyes, he saw his own reflection—eyes slightly widened and a quiet grief.

Lu Feng was still expressionless, as if none of this had anything to do with him. However, just as An Zhe thought he would turn and leave, he took a step forward instead.

The black gunstock lifted up the edge of the white fabric, and the part revealed was Vance's right hand.

An Zhe got down on one knee and saw that on the tip of his ring finger was a tiny red dot. It seemed like the most trivial puncture, but at the edges of that red dot, a drop of ominous dark gray liquid was slowly oozing out.

He was stunned. In an instant, those images came to mind.

There was human blood on the ant armor—on that very day, Vance told him that some people would hide the fact that they'd been wounded because in places with a low degree of pollution, there was still a chance that they wouldn't be infected after getting wounded, and that person wanted to go home.

Therefore, therefore—the person pricked by the piece of ant armor wasn't Anthony, but *Vance*.

An Zhe found it difficult to breathe. With trembling fingers, he accepted Vance's ID card and put it into the bag at his side. Then he turned to look at Lu Feng, but the space next to him was empty.

He stood up and looked out to see a sharp black figure beneath the gray skies at the city gate traveling further away little by little.

A moment later, there was a commotion behind him, and he turned back to see the woman, whose companion had just been killed, stumbling forward

before the soldiers restrained her.

"Lu Feng! Arbiter—!" She desperately struggled, throwing herself forward and flailing her arms in the air as she screeched, "I hope you die a miserable death—!"

The hoarse, shrill voice burst from her chest and echoed in the building, but she didn't even get so much as a backwards glance from the Arbiter.

The surroundings gradually quietened, and the two corpses were taken away one at a time. In the spacious corridor, there were only the woman's broken sobs.

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A long time passed before the woman by the wall stopped crying. With reddened eyes and disheveled hair, she leaned against the wall and looked at the distant sky, not saying a word. She was like a drop of water on a leaf, breaking with just a touch.

An Zhe carefully asked, "You aren't leaving?"

She shook her head, and her voice was raspy as she said, "The one who died, what relationship did he have with you?"

An Zhe spent a very long time finding the appropriate word from his memories. "My... friend. He saved me."

"My man also saved me before." After saying that, her head hung low, and her shoulders and back trembled as she occasionally let out one or two weepy sounds. She didn't speak again.

An Zhe held Vance's ID card in a tight grip. From his heart—that place belonging to the human heart—came a stifling feeling.

When he had been only and purely a mushroom, he had never experienced this sort of feeling before.

It was only after the feeling had finally dissipated a little that he found his strength. Following the direction of the distant stream of people, he walked towards the corridor exit.

At the end of the city gate passageway was a row of mechanical gates, and An Zhe selected the one the furthest to the left. When he walked over, a gentle robotic female voice said, "Please produce your ID card and look at the camera."

An Zhe put the card that had belonged to An Ze on the area of the platform to the right of the gate that glowed with white light, then lifted his gaze to look at the black camera in front.

"ID 3261170514. Name: An Ze. Home: Outer City, District 6. Time away from the city: twenty-seven days."

The camera made a slight noise, and the white light turned green.

"Facial recognition passed. Welcome home."

With a ding, the gate lifted, and An Zhe walked out.

The blinding morning sunlight made him squint, and he recovered only thirty seconds later. After the blurry world became clear again, a massive gray city appeared before his eyes.

Around him was a large open area, and the words "buffer zone" were written on the ground in blinding green paint. Up ahead, human creations sprung up from the ground. Tall concrete buildings were everywhere, even more massive than the tallest plants An Zhe had ever seen and seeming like they could topple over at any time. They stood upright, crowding together in overlapping arrangements, and blocked his line of sight. He looked up. Half of the orange sun was hidden behind the tallest building while the other half was exposed; it looked like a drop of diluted blood that was about to drip down the wall.

An Zhe turned back. The people who had come out from the city gate with him had been separated by the mechanical gates, but after passing through they spontaneously clustered together and traveled in the same direction. An Zhe moved forward with them, and after a few hundred steps he rounded a corner. On a sign were the words "Rail Transit", and a train was stopped on the rails. The body of the train read: Entrance - District 1 - Supply Depot 3 - District 5 - District 8 - City Affairs Office - Exit.

He followed the stream of people onto the train, then found a corner of the

slightly empty coach to sit down in. In the seats before him were two strapping men who were conversing in low voices.

"Back from Basin 3? You guys sure gambled with your lives out there."

"We lost six."

"Not bad. You break even?"

"The military is still conducting their appraisal. I think I won't ever have to go out and risk my life in the wilderness again."

"Wow."

"We entered a school in Ghost City 441. It was full of mutated plants, so nobody dared to go in." The man laughed. "We went in and pried out three hard drives from the library's reference room. They're priceless treasures. We'll just have to see how valuable the things saved on them are."

An Zhe silently listened. Although he didn't quite understand, he knew that this man in front of him was very happy, so he felt a little happier as well.

He knew that happy people often didn't mind helping others, so he called out, "Sir."

Without even turning back, that man said, "What is it?"

"How do I get to District 6?"

"Transfer to Line 2 at the supply depot."

"Thank you."

Five minutes later, the train began to move, and a robotic voice announced the name of each platform. An Zhe was very unfamiliar with everything. After several setbacks and requests for directions, he finally got onto the Line 2 train at the supply depot, then got off correctly to arrive at District 6.

An Ze's ID number was 3261170514. This string of numbers was not only the proof of his human identity, it also represented his address, which was the outer city's District 6, Building 117, doorplate number 0514.

But not long after he got off the train, while he was attempting to find someone who he could ask for directions, a young boy suddenly grabbed him.

"Hello, friend. Welcome. Would you mind getting to know us?"

Before An Zhe could say anything, a piece of white paper was stuffed into his hand. In large, blood-red words, it read: OPPOSE THE ARBITER'S TYRANNY.

He didn't understand the reason for it but didn't ask further either. He only said, "Excuse me, do you know how to get to Building 117?"

The boy said, "You don't mind coming along with us, right?"

"... I don't."

"Then we're comrades now." The boy lifted up the white paper in his own hands, which said in large, red words: ABOLISH THE "ARBITER'S CODE".

They weren't the only two carrying papers. Soon, An Zhe was pulled into a crowd. There were around forty-odd people, all of whom had very young faces. Each person was either holding up a similar piece of white paper individually or working in tandem with a partner to hold up a long banner. The sentences on the papers and banners were roughly the same.

"We volunteer to bear the cost of genetic examinations."

"Judges are sinners against humanity."

"Dissolve the Trial Court and bring justice for the innocent."

At the same time, the crowd was slowly moving forward, so An Zhe too could only move with it.

The city's roads were very narrow. Sunlight shone down upon the buildings, and the buildings cast irregular shadows upon the ground. On the road, apart from them, there were also quite a few adults walking with their heads down. They occasionally lifted their heads and glanced in the crowd’s direction, but then they very quickly looked away.

An Zhe asked, "What are we doing?"

"A silent demonstration," the boy said. "We'll march until the day that the Trial Court is dissolved."

"... Oh."

After walking for approximately half an hour, he once again asked the boy

next to him, "Where's Building 117?"

"Up ahead, we're almost there."

Another half an hour passed, and An Zhe asked again, "Where's Building 117?"

"Sorry!" The boy scratched his head. "I forgot about you. We've walked past it, it's back there."

As he spoke, he turned and pointed. "Over there, it's not far away. The building number is written on the side. You can see it right there."

"Thank you," An Zhe said.

"You're welcome."

An Zhe handed the piece of paper to the boy. "I'll return this to you."

"No need!" The boy stuffed the paper back into his arms. "Remember to come back next week! We'll be gathering at Building 1!"

Thus, An Zhe could only put the bloody "OPPOSE THE ARBITER'S TYRANNY" paper together with the gene report the Arbiter himself had shoved at An Zhe. Holding them in his arms, he left this group of strange young humans and walked in the direction that had been pointed out to him.

While walking, he felt that the surrounding environment was gradually becoming familiar as the memories in his mind that had originally belonged to An Ze were awakened. He intuitively made a few turns and arrived at the building labeled "117" without any issues. It was a rectangular building, ten stories high but very wide. He entered Unit 0, and after climbing the quiet and steep stairs to the fifth floor, he entered a dim corridor and found No. 14.

A white seal was stuck to the door. An Zhe gently tore it off, revealing a sensor area underneath. When he put the ID card up to it, the lock sprung open, and he walked in.

It was a very small room. It was even smaller than the cave he used to live in, but it was much brighter and more spacious than the rest area in the armored car. Near the wall was a wooden desk, more than ten old books piled up on it, and sheets of loose-leaf paper and notebooks were stacked together on the

other side. The desk faced a single-person bed. There was a nightstand at the head of the bed upon which a water cup, a mirror, and some odds and ends were placed, and a wardrobe slightly taller than the height of a human was shoved up against the foot of the bed.

The window was on the other side of the bed. Its gray curtains were half-open, sunlight shining in and lighting up the quilt that was the same color, and there was a dry fragrance that reminded him of An Ze's scent.

He walked over to the bed, then reached out and removed the palm-sized mirror. The mirror reflected his face.

He looked like An Ze, with soft black hair and eyes that were the same color. They were alike in many places, but there were also some details that weren't the same. In addition, he didn't have An Ze's gentle and calm expression.

Back then, An Ze had said to him, "It's like I've gained a younger brother. How about I give you a name, little mushroom?

"Is there anything you have a very deep recollection of, little mushroom?"

Only two things were deeply etched into his limited memory: one was the loss of his spore, and the other was something that happened when he was very small—around when he was only about as long as a human's pinky finger.

In the rainy season when the mushrooms were growing, a raindrop falling at an angle had struck his slender stem, snapping him at the waist.

Then, just like any other injured creature, he strove to grow back, to live.

Then after that, he gradually gained some vague consciousness. He had healed.

From then on, he seemed to have become different from his own kind. He could control his own hyphae, move between the jungle and open fields, and perceive the sounds and movements outside. He was a free mushroom.

"Poor little thing." At that time, An Ze had ruffled his hair. "Did it hurt a lot when you snapped in half?"

"I've forgotten."

An Ze had said, "Then I'll call you An Zhe, written with the Chinese character

for 'snap'."

He had said, "Okay."

At this point in his recollection, An Zhe smiled at the mirror.

When the person in the mirror smiled, he seemed to see a shadow of An Ze again.

"Thank you," he said to the mirror.

After putting down the mirror, An Zhe sat down at the desk.

What should he do next?

After some thinking, An Zhe held out his left hand and stared at his own fingertips beneath the light.

Snow-white hyphae quietly extended from his fingertips, then consolidated. He picked up the dagger and cut off a small, thin piece of it.

Then he picked it up with his right hand, put it up to his mouth, gently pushed it in, and bit down, for he had decided to investigate the matter of his toxicity.

A soft, sweet, and very tasty flavor—that was his first impression.

In the following second, the entire world began to sway before his eyes.

# 5

## “YOU’RE NOT AN ZE.”

THEN HE BECAME LIGHTER, bobbing up and down in the air. The sunlight shining in from the window turned into surging seawater, and the papers and notebooks on the table that were soaked in it became a mass of white.

An Zhe blinked. He didn't feel uncomfortable, only that all of his movements had become very, very slow and uncertain. He couldn't control his own body. It was like he had taken flight, yet also like he was on the verge of falling.

And after that—the world before his eyes gradually darkened, and he completely lost consciousness.

The cold woke him up. After awakening, he discovered that the unbroken backdrop of gray buildings outside the window was immersed in the red-gold glow of the setting sun. Since he had fallen asleep—or rather fainted—at least seven or eight hours had passed. It turned out that the poison in his hyphae made people lethargic.

Unlike the daytime, the temperature in the room was much lower in the evening. An Zhe lay back on the bed and wrapped himself in the quilt, only then recovering his warmth. But after the numbness brought on by the cold disappeared, he felt hungry.

An Zhe preferred to absorb nutrients the way mushrooms did, but on his way here, he didn't find even a single patch of damp soil in the entire base, so he could only eat food. Frowning, he thought that humans were a very troublesome sort of creature.

Fortunately, An Ze's residual memories told him where he should go to eat. The base was divided into eight districts, with Districts 6, 7, and 8 serving as the main residential districts. Here, every building was a community. The first floor was the main hall, where water and food would be provided every day at fixed times. Children sixteen years old and under received free allotments, while adults over sixteen years old needed to swipe their card to pay with the base's currency, the unit of which was the letter R.

The main hall didn’t have too many people, perhaps fifty-some visible at a glance. There were only two windows for selling food. One was an edible paste made from the tuber of a certain plant, while the other was... a soup made from the same tuber. Searching his memories, he vaguely recalled that this plant was called "potato".

An Zhe swiped his card to pay.

Mashed potatoes—price 0.5R, balance 9.5R.

Potato soup—price 0.3R, balance 9.2R.

As he stared at the number representing the balance on the card, An Zhe realized that he would be on the edge of starvation in a few days. The feeling was like that of a mushroom taking root in a patch of dry soil, facing death at any given moment.

When he returned to the fifth floor after his meal and spent 0.1R to get water at the communal water room, the feeling became even clearer.

Thus, he now had one more thing to do: find a source of income.

After screwing shut the standard stainless steel bottle's cap, An Zhe held the bottle in his hand and was about to turn around when a voice suddenly rang out behind him.

"An Ze?"

The loud voice, trembling somewhat, echoed in the cramped space.

An Zhe turned around.

Standing in the corridor was a young man with a tall build and handsome face. He looked straight at An Zhe with eyes wide open and lips quivering; it was

difficult to decide if his expression was actually joy or shock.

"An Ze?" he called out again. "You've... returned? Didn't you—?"

At those words, he abruptly lost his voice and his complexion turned blue. It was like he didn't know how to continue.

But An Zhe knew what he wanted to say because he knew this person. He was called Josh.

Josh was An Ze's neighbor and friend, and they had grown up together. Sometimes Josh would take care of An Ze, but more often, An Ze would take care of him—those spotty residual memories appeared before An Zhe's eyes.

But his knowledge of Josh didn't all come from An Ze's recollections. When he was a mushroom, he had seen this person before. The combination of what he had seen and An Ze's memories supplied the entire real cause of An Ze's death.

An Ze had been someone who lived off of writing. His work was to write novels, essays, and poems for the people's entertainment and submit them to the *Base Monthly* periodical, and the base would regularly publish these pamphlets. But just three months prior, to conserve the increasingly-stretched manpower and resources, the base abolished that department.

Back then—

"An Ze, what are you reading?" Josh asked.

"I want to prepare for the base supply depot's selection exam." An Ze doodled circles on the book with his pen. "I think I'll like the work there, and the pay is good."

But Josh frowned.

"You want to stop being a civilian?" he asked. "The exam is very difficult."

An Ze said, "That’s fine."

But Josh’s voice became harsher. "An Ze, you've clearly known all this time that I want to be able to go out into the wilderness with you."

An Ze smiled. The tone of his voice was very soft, both like he was indulging this headstrong friend and also like a resigned sigh. "I'm not suited to going

outside."

"I'll protect you." Josh held him by the shoulder, and the tone of his voice softened. "I can't leave you. Come with me into the wilderness. We won't go anywhere dangerous."

The fragments in his memories were more or less all like this. At last, in the face of Josh's relentless badgering, An Ze had agreed to go adventuring in the wilderness together with him. Josh was a member of a large mercenary team. Having previously performed some meritorious deeds, he very easily introduced An Ze to the team, where the latter was responsible for the allocation and record-keeping of their materials.

But anything could happen in the wilderness. That day, the team had gotten lost and driven into the fringes of the Abyss. By the time they noticed the unusual abundance of mushrooms there, it was already too late. The monsters of the Abyss wouldn't let slip any food that came to their mouths.

To humans, even the outermost fringes of the Abyss were mortally terrifying. Three of the five armored cars were damaged, and the people of those three cars transferred over to the intact armored cars in a panic. When they were fleeing, An Ze had pushed Josh, allowing him to narrowly escape the attacks from airborne winged monsters, but An Ze consequently tripped over the vines on the ground.

Josh had frozen up on the spot for a second. After that second passed, his survival instinct surpassed everything else. Between pulling An Ze up and fleeing with his own life, he chose the latter, gritting his teeth and sprinting forward before the captain pulled him into the armored car—whereas An Ze was watching their figures, having been stabbed through the chest by a monster's bony spur.

The mercenary team promptly began fighting with the monsters using their heaviest firepower, retreating as they fought. The sounds of their activity were so loud that they woke up An Zhe—he had come out to look for his spore, but he had always gone home empty-handed. This time was an exception. Taking advantage of the fierce fighting, he quietly brought An Ze back with him to the depths of the cave.

So now that he was facing Josh, An Zhe had nothing to say. When facing death, the first reaction of any living being was to flee. Josh didn't do anything wrong, but An Zhe didn't like him.

"You... kinda don't seem like yourself." Josh's Adam's apple bobbed hard. "Your wound healed? You escaped from the Abyss?"

An Zhe only looked calmly at him.

"No, you're not An Ze. You aren't human." Josh took an abrupt step backwards, his face chalk-white. "You're a xenogenic."

"My apologies." An Zhe walked out, brushing past him. "I accidentally ate a poisonous mushroom, so I don't remember who you are."

In a way, he hadn't lied.

With those words, An Zhe ceased paying attention to him and walked straight forward.

For a long time, there were no footsteps behind him. It was only when he swiped his ID card to open the door that Josh hurried over and grabbed his shoulder. "You're really An Ze? But you—"

An Zhe casually picked up the genetic examination report lying on the table and held it out to Josh.

Josh said, "This is..."

An Zhe looked down and discovered that the topmost page read "OPPOSE THE ARBITER'S TYRANNY".

He slowly pulled the paper away. Josh looked at the report.

"You..." He skimmed over it, then looked up at An Zhe. "You really escaped from the Abyss?"

"I was saved," An Zhe said. "I've forgotten the rest."

Josh's hand that was holding the gene report trembled. Then the corners of his mouth tugged upwards, revealing a smile as he looked at An Zhe. "I... I was too agitated. I didn't think that you could come back."

He put the gene report on the table and leaned towards An Zhe with a slightly

excited expression. Even the muscles at the ends of his eyebrows were twitching. "How much... have you forgotten?"

An Zhe took a step back.

"I've forgotten everything," he said. "Please don't bother me."

"You don't remember who I am either?" Josh lowered his voice a bit. "We grew up together."

"Thank you," An Zhe said. "Can you please get out now?"

"I—" Josh, obviously not expecting that An Zhe would treat him with this kind of attitude, was stunned. He said, "You weren't like this before."

But a moment later, his attitude softened again. "I won't bother you. Have a good rest, and I'll come to see you tomorrow. I'm overjoyed. An Ze, we're the people closest to each other in the world."

An Zhe remained silent up until when Josh turned around and left, softly shutting the door for him.

For Josh to let him off this easily and leave the room, An Zhe thought it was unrealistic, but it was also possible that Josh had fled due to his excessive sense of guilt.

Silence returned to the room. An Zhe slowly leaned against the bed and hugged the pillow, feeling a sadness that was like wispy smoke. This sadness wasn't for himself, but for An Ze.

The promises between humans were more or less this fragile; Josh would no longer be the person closest to An Ze. Once he found his spore, he would return to the Abyss, find that quiet cave, take root next to An Ze's snow-white bones, and spend the rest of his life as a mushroom.

... His spore.

Outside the window, the night was dark, and the aurora fluctuated in the

pitch-black skies as usual. An Zhe sat at the table and turned on the desk lamp.

First of all, he had to find a job so he wouldn't starve to death. At the same time, he had to search for information related to his spore, and his only lead was that brass bullet shell.

At that thought, An Zhe anxiously touched his pocket. He was in constant fear of losing it—good, it was still there. He could hide it within his body as a mushroom, but not as a human. It was so small that it seemed able to slip out from his pocket at any given moment.

In the end, An Zhe found a black leather cord from one of the drawers in the room and hung the bullet shell around his neck.

There was a small black device in the drawer as well. He examined its exterior details with great effort, then found some information from his memories at last. This was a communicator, and every person's ID number was their communicator number. Humans used them for long-distance communication, but it was limited to within the base only—because there was no signal outside.

He charged the communicator. Although he didn't need it, this "having power" thing seemed to be able to make humans feel great joy.

After doing so, he finally calmed down and began to examine the desk.

In the notebooks on the table were things An Ze had written. The handwriting was very beautiful. On the side next to the wall stood twenty-odd books, most likely all of which An Ze used to enjoy reading. An Zhe glanced over the titles on the book spines, then reached out and picked up a crudely-bound book with a gray cover named *Base Handbook*.

He flipped it open. There was only one sentence on the title page.

Humankind's interests take precedence over all else.

An Zhe unconsciously pursed his lips and continued flipping through it. The second page was the table of contents. The entire handbook was divided into four sections: the base's laws, the base's lifestyle regulations, summaries of the areas' functions, and maps.

An Zhe skipped over the laws section. He knew that he was a law-abiding

mushroom, and a law-abiding mushroom would not violate the laws of any species. The lifestyle regulations section explained the work and rest times of the residential areas in detail. Power, water, and food were supplied for an hour starting from 6 a.m. and noon every day. Dinner was supplied at 6 p.m., and power was supplied for a little longer, not getting cut off until 9 p.m. Every residential area was equipped with tall alarm towers, and the alarms were divided into three types: "assembly", "evacuation", and "take shelter". The assembly alarm was a brief high-pitched sound, the evacuation alarm was a wave-like signal, and the take shelter alarm was a shrill wail. The base's residents had to abide by the lifestyle regulations and alarm tower instructions, but they could manage the other aspects of their lives by themselves.

At that point, An Zhe felt slightly confused. He thought that under such regulations, every person only had to lie in their room and come out at fixed times to eat and drink—but he very quickly realized the base's intentions.

Although every person could live how they liked, paying the costs of living in the base was mandatory. To obtain the currency that circulated throughout the base, people had to either find a job or become mercenaries and hand over valuable materials they collected in the wilderness to the base in exchange for payment.

But... in that case, everyone could simply go to the places with the lowest danger levels, grab something at random, and have enough for food and water.

An Zhe kept flipping the pages. The next section was the summaries of the areas' functions.

The first area in this section was called "Supply Depots", and they were numbered 1, 2, and 3. The first two belonged to the military, were constructed at the entrance and exit of the base, and were responsible for the appraisal and exchange of currency and combat preparation materials. Whenever a mercenary team came back from the wilderness, the supply depot workers would calculate the money to be disbursed based on the materials they gathered, and the remaining lethal weaponry and armored cars would be taken into their custody, barred from entering the city. Only when the mercenary team set out again would they be able to apply for their usage once more. The mercenary teams exchanged the currency for the guns, bullets, armor, fuel, and

other necessities for exploring the wilderness, and they could even buy different types of armored cars.

Unlike the other two supply depots, Supply Depot 3 was located within the city. It was responsible for the exchange of civilian materials and used the base's currency. There, one could exchange for many goods such as daily necessities, food and ingredients, hard liquor, and electronics, or even carry out housing transactions.

Across from Supply Depot 3 was the "free market". Sometimes, what the mercenary teams obtained from human ruins were not materials the military needed, so they could then bring the goods confirmed to be safe into the city and trade them freely.

At that moment, An Zhe saw a small annotation below.

Note: The free market is not an authorized facility of the base. All actions are taken at your own risk.

Note: Employment and contractual relationships established through the free market are not subject to legal protection by the base. Proceed at your own risk.

There wasn't much else. An Zhe focused on the lone word "employment".

In other words, the free market was also a place where jobs could be provided.

Even further down were the summaries of each residential area. The crowded residential areas were Area 6 and Area 7. The other areas had vacant buildings and very few humans. Area 8 was a centralized shelter with perfect safety facilities.

Past even that was the summary of the Trial Court.

An Zhe recalled the Colonel with the cold green eyes, and his reading speed slowed down greatly as he began to read every single word.

The responsibilities of the Trial Court did not only include identifying xenogenics at the city gate. They also conducted daily patrols in the crowded parts of the city to carry out secondary screenings and eliminate hidden threats.

The main patrol points were the areas around the supply depots, but they would also check the residential buildings on occasion—especially the ones with humans exhibiting abnormal behavior or who have been reported.

Strangely, An Zhe once again recalled the words "you'd best be".

If he could, An Zhe hoped that Lu Feng would stay at the city gate forever and that the Arbiter would not need to stoop to coming to the residential buildings.

He continued flipping the pages. The other areas weren't of much relevance to him—such as the City Affairs Office, the City Defense Agency, the main city, and so on. The handbook stated that the base was composed of the outer city, otherwise called the Fortress, and the main city. The main city was where the base's important scientific research and arms facilities were located as well as its energy and political center. Entry was prohibited to all unless one held a special pass or residence permit.

Finally, after glancing over the map of the base, An Zhe closed the book. He realized once more that humans were a different sort of living thing from mushrooms.

The second book he opened was called *Supply Depot Assessment Guidebook*. As soon as he saw its cover, the relevant memories surged to the forefront of his mind, much clearer than his other memories. An Zhe thought that perhaps this meant that going to the supply depot was something very important to An Ze.

Since that was the case, why did he agree to go out into the wilderness with Josh?

He pondered it for a long time. In the end, he thought that An Ze was just that kind of human.

An Ze had missed the exam. This year's supply depot recruitment exam was held fifteen days ago. At that time, he was already a set of white bones.

But it was all right, An Zhe thought. A year from now, when the supply depot recruited people again, he would go give it a try if he was still living in the human base at that time. This way, after returning to the cave, he could tell An Ze what it was like there.

Reading for a long time used up much of his energy. After trying to read two pages of the *Assessment Guidebook*, An Zhe started getting drowsy. In the end, he got into bed and slept. The next morning, in order to avoid running into Josh, he left his room at 4 a.m., then went downstairs to the transportation stop and got onto the train heading towards the supply depot—he wanted to go to the free market across from it to find a job.

It was 7 a.m. when he got off the train, and wisps of white mist still suffused the air. The free market was a large round building with four entrances, and he entered through the closest one.

The smell of liquor invaded his nose.

Set up near the entrance were four long tables where people dressed as mercenaries were playing drinking games and talking loudly. Cups of alcohol sat in front of them, and every so often, someone would ask for a top-up. When that happened, the waiter would pour out a refill, then take out a small device and stick it onto the ID cards the guests held out to charge them.

A burly, dark-skinned mercenary was drinking alone. Upon seeing An Zhe, the mercenary wiggled his eyebrows, grinned, and waved the cup in his hand. "Whatcha looking at, kid? Wanna come over and learn how to drink?"

A short-haired woman next to him promptly elbowed him in the chest. Her voice was husky but brimming with good cheer. "Article 32, minors are not allowed to drink alcohol."

The man said, "If he drinks, then so be it. Or would he be taken away by the Arbiter?"

The woman laughed openly. "Children not yet of age don't know the power of the Arbiter."

"He'll know soon enough."

An Zhe stood nearby, wishing to tell them "I'm not a minor," but while he thought about how to word it, the two of them embraced each other, lips pressed against lips as they became entangled. He realized that nobody genuinely cared about him.

Thus, he shifted his gaze away from that spot and looked somewhere else.

The aroma of potato soup drifted over from the right side of the entrance, but it was much stronger compared to that of the potato soup provided at the main hall on the residential building's first floor and mixed with a pleasant meaty scent. A mercenary had his head in a white plastic soup bowl as he ate his breakfast.

This smell made An Zhe feel a little hungry, for he hadn't eaten breakfast.

Further inside were similar scenes, and a boisterous atmosphere permeated the hall. Apart from the long tables selling food and alcohol, there were also many booths selling clothes, backpacks, and gloves. Even further inside, the stalls selling regular goods decreased in number; a single stall would have many strange odds and ends that An Zhe couldn't recognize.

"Newly unearthed smartphone from Ghost City 511—you can turn it on once it has power." As An Zhe walked, a youth clothed in black and carrying a backpack jumped out in front of him like a monkey. He was short and scrawny, with narrow-set eyes that constantly darted about. The moment he stopped An Zhe, he whipped out a black, rectangular object from his bag and waved it in front of An Zhe. "Wanna take a look? I'll give you a ten percent discount and throw in a free charging cable. You can play games on it."

An Zhe said, "Thank you, but no."

The youth then whipped out a white one from his bag. "How about a different version? The color suits you. It's a new model, you know, the final Apple model from before the Era of Calamity. They sold for 10,000R back then, but now just 100R is enough."

An Zhe said, "Thank you, but I don't need it."

But that person continued by taking out something else. "You don't need it? You have a cell phone, huh? Do you need a portable charger? When power is out at the base, you can use this to charge. I've sold out of the large capacity ones. This one can only be charged twice, so I'll give you a discount, only 30R."

As An Zhe looked at him, he said honestly, "I don't have money."

The black-clad youth's expression froze. In an instant, he put everything back into his backpack, turned around, and got ready to leave, muttering, "What'd

you come to the black market for if you don't have money?"

"Wait," An Zhe called out, stopping him.

He turned his head, but his attitude was extremely negative. "What?"

"I... want to get a job," An Zhe said. "Do you know where I have to go?

The youth frowned, turned back around, and examined him carefully from head to toe. "... So you came to find work."

An Zhe truthfully replied, "Yes."

"Your natural assets are quite good," the youth said. "Once you have money, remember to come and buy a cell phone from me. I'll be staying at the black market this entire month."

After a moment's silence, An Zhe asked, "Where do I go?"

"Oh, that way." The youth pointed towards one of the corners. "Go down. Third underground floor, ask for the lady boss."

Feeling very grateful, An Zhe smiled at him. "Thank you."

The youth said, "You're good-looking, so find someone reliable. Once you're rich, remember to come find me and buy a cell phone!"

"... Okay," An Zhe replied.

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Third underground floor.

Humid—that was An Zhe's first impression of the place. Mushrooms ought to like this type of moisture-laden atmosphere, but the acrid odor that came with the humidity made him frown.

Looking around, An Zhe saw that beneath the dim lighting, it was a honeycomb-like space with a corridor that zigged and zagged. Countless narrow compartments were built into the walls with simple plastic boards. There was no air circulation, and the water vapor condensed into numerous droplets on the plastic boards. The entire space emitted a slight tide-like hum; upon listening carefully, An Zhe realized it was from the aggregation and

reverberation of many people speaking softly, mixed with occasional shrieks of laughter.

An Zhe hesitated briefly, then took a few steps forward.

He looked at the small compartments on both sides. The one on the left was empty, but there was a long-haired woman with her head bowed in the one on the right. After hearing his footsteps, she lifted her head to take a look, then bowed it again.

An Zhe continued forward. He heard the sound of dialogue, with the first speaker being female.

"How was the weather in Basin 2?"

"Not bad." This time, it was a low and soft male voice, a bit sticky and drawn out at the end. An Zhe suspected that his nose was clogged. "The weather was very comfortable, but there were too many earthquakes. We experienced three earthquakes in a month. The worst time, they were all outside while I was alone in the car. I had almost assumed that they couldn't make it back."

The female voice laughed. "If they couldn't make it back, then drive the car away."

"That team from the time before last, the captain said he'd teach me to drive, but it was all just sweet talk. He said next time he'd still bring me along, but that was sweet talk too. I accompanied them for a month for only 300R altogether. Is that still costly?"

"Don’t take the mercenaries' words seriously," a woman said. "You haven't gotten used to being tricked yet?"

An Zhe stopped walking.

—He recalled Hosen's face and greedy, covetous eyes and suddenly knew what was going on with the work on the third underground floor.

Along with the sentence in the *Base Handbook*: Employment and contractual relationships established through the free market are not subject to legal protection by the base. Proceed at your own risk.

He didn't want to bear these consequences.

An Zhe silently planned to leave, but just as he turned around, he unexpectedly collided into a soft body.

"Oh," a high-pitched female voice said. "Little darling, is this your first time here?"

The shadow that the words "little darling" cast over him was too dark. An Zhe reflexively took two steps back.

Before him was a tall woman with honey-colored skin, upturned blue eyes, and long brown hair that ended in ringlets. She was smiling at him.

"Are you buying someone? Or selling yourself?" the woman asked, smiling as she blew into his ear.

"Neither." An Zhe took another step back and bumped into plastic board. "I went the wrong way."

"Went the wrong way?" the woman asked. "The second floor is the gambling den. You wanted to go there?"

She was holding a cigarette between the fingers of her right hand. After putting it up to her red lips and taking a drag, she said with a smile, "Take care to not lose yourself."

An Zhe looked around, but the woman had forced him into a corner, so he couldn't get away. This gorgeous-looking human was even more difficult to deal with than the monsters of the Abyss.

"Don't be scared." She blew out a mouthful of snow-white smoke. "I'm not going to eat you."

An Zhe asked, "Then can you please let me leave?"

The woman smiled again.

"Leave?" She raised her eyebrows. "Only people who are driven into a corner come to the third floor. If you leave, where else can you go?"

As she spoke, she took him by the shoulder and pulled him forward. "Are you scared of this place? You don't need to be here. I'll give you a large room."

"Thank you," An Zhe said with his head down. "But I really did go the wrong

way."

"Hm?"

"I just want to find a regular job," he said. "Then someone told me to come to the third underground floor."

"Only the aboveground floor of the black market is presentable." After listening to his words, the woman blinked, the look in her eyes just like drifting smoke. "You don't even know that?"

An Zhe said, "I know now."

He also learned that the "free market" in the *Base Handbook* was known informally as the black market.

"The laws of the base don't protect the black market." The woman smoked as she leaned against the wall, no longer pressing An Zhe into the corner but rather leaving a space.

An Zhe assumed it was a signal that she was going to let him out, but just as he took a step forward, he saw two tall men dressed in black step out from behind her, one on the left and one on the right, sealing off all possible paths.

"Once they've come to the third floor, nobody can leave." The woman's voice was no longer syrupy-sweet and charming, but suffused with frost. "But you're rather lucky."

An Zhe lifted his head to look at her.

"I'll give you one chance," she said. "Mr. Shaw's workshop is lacking manpower. If he wants you, you'll go with him. If he doesn't want you—"

Her words stopped mid-sentence, and she turned to walk in a certain direction. "Come."

An Zhe stood in place and thought for three seconds, then walked deeper inside with her.

The compartments were so densely packed together that it was like he was walking in a maze built from honeycomb, with the lighting getting dimmer and dimmer.

Finally, at the end of this space, a door appeared on the gray wall.

The woman knocked on the door. "Mr. Shaw, I have business to discuss with you."

With a creak, the door opened.

Inside was an old man with a head of snow-white hair and dressed in black from head to toe, a bow tie around his neck. He examined the woman with narrowed eyes. "Doussay, how rare of you to visit."

With a smile, the woman finished smoking her cigarette and stubbed it out on the wall. "I was looking for you for something."

"How big is the business?" The man called "Mr. Shaw" looked at her, then turned to look at An Zhe.

The woman—Doussay—rested her elbow on An Zhe's shoulder. "Not big, just difficult. I feared you wouldn't agree, so I specially brought you a greeting gift—I heard your apprentice drank himself to death and that you're looking for the next one. If female, you think they're ugly. If male, they're usually clumsy. Take a look at this kid of mine."

Mr. Shaw's gray-blue eyes rolled, landing on An Zhe. "Looks obedient."

"He actually is obedient." Doussay tossed her hair. "I thought you'd like him as soon as I laid eyes on him, Mr. Shaw."

Mr. Shaw smiled.

Then he said to An Zhe, "Hold out your hand, let me take a look."

An Zhe held out a hand. His fingers were slim and white with a dusting of pink.

"Doussay, where'd you get him from?" Mr. Shaw asked. "How could this type of kid be willing to come to the third floor?"

"I tricked him here," Doussay replied.

An Zhe was speechless.

Then he heard Mr. Shaw say to him, "Make a fist, but slowly."

An Zhe slowly curled his fingers.

"Once more, even slower."

An Zhe slowed down.

"Even slower."

In the end, An Zhe had slowed down so much that his movements were difficult to detect with the naked eye. Although he didn't know why Mr. Shaw wanted this, it was no challenge for him. When he was in mushroom form, he had to control thousands upon thousands of minute hyphae at the same time, whereas now he only had five human fingers.

At last, even Doussay was drawn in.

"Mr. Shaw, you've picked up a treasure," she said, lighting up another cigarette. "His hands are even more steady than your last apprentice's."

As Mr. Shaw watched his hand, he let out a laugh and said, "Let me borrow him for a few days. If he's useful, I'll keep him."

Doussay said, "You have to give the kid a wage."

"Deal," Mr. Shaw replied.

An Zhe frowned. He did need a wage, but upon hearing the word "useful", he felt that he was in a bit of danger.

"Don't be scared. Although Mr. Shaw truly isn't a good person"—Doussay, seeming to have seen through his worries, patted him on the shoulder—"his crafts are very expensive."

"I'm not a good person?" Mr. Shaw let out a scornful laugh. "I'm the greatest person in the base."

With those words, he turned towards An Zhe. "You go ahead and look around the shop. I have something to discuss with this madwoman."

An Zhe was the best at being obedient. He turned his head to look at the nearest shelf and saw some strangely-shaped bottles, filled with liquids or solids, upon which naked human bodies were printed. Further inside were some books with similar-looking covers—these, he knew about. A large part of the reason why the department An Ze used to contribute to had collapsed was that nobody cared about the reading materials the base published, whereas the

pornographic reading materials that circulated out of the black market were in high demand.

Below the shelf was a transparent glass window filled with cigarettes, and the other drawer right next to it contained many USB drives.

At that moment, the sound of conversation drifted over from where Mr. Shaw was.

"The kid's good. For you to have given me such a large gift when you've always been so stingy, the business you wish to discuss with me must be extraordinary." The sound of a lighter came from around Mr. Shaw, and the concentration of the smoke in the room doubled.

"The kid was just picked up at random." Doussay giggled. "The thing I wanted to request you to make, Mr. Shaw, is indeed not simple."

"Anything's fine," Mr. Shaw said in a careless tone. "As long as you have enough money."

"You might not dare to make it," Doussay drawled.

"If you put up more money, I'll dare to," Mr. Shaw replied.

With a scoff of laughter, Doussay spoke two words.

"The Arbiter," she said. "Do you dare to make him, Mr. Shaw?"

An Zhe was stunned. He didn't know how the words 'the Arbiter' could be connected to these two people in the black market.

Mr. Shaw also went silent.

In the end, he said, "I only make dead people and not living ones lest I attract trouble, and you want to attract the biggest trouble to me."

"To tell you the truth, I have a friend who is crazy about the Colonel and has to have him," Doussay said. "You may also know that no living person dares to get within three meters of the Arbiter. There's no other choice besides buying a fake from you. It'll just be kept at home, so it definitely won't cause problems. As for the price, it's up to you."

Mr. Shaw smiled but didn't speak.

At the same time, An Zhe slowly moved deeper into the shop.

His feet came to a standstill, for he had kicked something.

He looked down and saw a white hand lying on the concrete floor all by itself. Based on its condition, it had just been severed, but the place where it had been severed was smooth and clean, with no blood in sight.

An Zhe crouched down and poked the hand's skin. It was very soft, like a human hand, but it wasn't actually one.

It was a fake hand.

He stopped exploring and stood up.

With that motion, he met the gaze of a person standing in the glass display window. In the dim lighting, a pair of black eyes stared straight at him. Half of the person's body was hidden in the darkness, which was a bit startling.

An Zhe looked at him for a while. Three minutes later, he still hadn't seen this person breathe at all.

Perhaps, just like that fake hand, this was a fake human, he thought.

"Startled?" Mr. Shaw's voice suddenly rang out from behind him.

"I'm okay," An Zhe said.

Mr. Shaw asked, "Does it look real?"

"It does," An Zhe said.

He heard Mr. Shaw laugh in that raspy voice of his before pressing a switch on one side. The lighting in the area became much brighter.

An Zhe finally saw the entirety of the man in the glass display window. He was dressed in black and had a tall and trim physique along with clean-cut and handsome facial features. The light shone upon his face, causing a thin layer of white shimmer to reflect off it and arbitrarily adding a slight chill.

"Have you heard of Hubbard, mercenary team AR137's leader?" Mr. Shaw asked.

An Zhe didn't speak. In the room, there was only the sound of Mr. Shaw's voice. "One of the most powerful mercenaries. When he brings his team to places with five-star danger levels, it's just like child's play. He has money, right?"

An Zhe made an affirmative sound in response.

He knew that the materials brought back from the outside could be exchanged for the base's currency at the military's supply depots, so those powerful mercenaries did not lack for money.

Mr. Shaw pointed to the person standing in the display window. "This is his vice-captain. They grew up together, then became mercenaries together after coming of age. For more than twenty years, they had a friendship where they'd give their lives for each other. Last time they went out into the wilderness, he died without leaving behind even a single body part. What a tragedy."

With those words, Mr. Shaw let out a snort of laughter. "Three months after this person died, Hubbard came to me. Even his spirit was gone. He spent more than half of his wealth to buy this person and asked me to not make a mistake with even a single hair on his head.

"As for me, I definitely don't dare to make mistakes. Apart from not being alive, everything else is the same." Mr. Shaw sighed. "After all, they'll have to live the rest of their lives while looking at this fake person."

"When I made these before, it was for people to use for pleasure, the inflatable kind. Later, everyone thought the ones I made looked like living people—the easier it is for people to die outside, the easier it is for people to go crazy, so my crafts became valuable." Mr. Shaw patted him on the shoulder. "Study hard under me, and in ten years, you'll have more money than any mercenary."

As An Zhe looked at Mr. Shaw, he recalled his previous conversation with Doussay and asked, "Then are you going to make the Arbiter?"

"Yes, why not?" Mr. Shaw smiled. "The mighty Arbiter is so busy killing people that he can't be bothered to care about this kind of crap."

# 6

## “FEAR OF YOU.”

"MR. HUBBARD, it's me, Scott Shaw."

When Mr. Shaw sent the message to Hubbard, An Zhe was holding a head and practicing how to implant eyebrows.

The heated needle pricked a tiny hole in the silicone rubber skin into which a fiber simulating human hair was then planted. Once the softened silicone rubber cooled again, the eyebrow hair would be securely rooted in the doll's skin. Mr. Shaw's eyes had gone bad, so it was very difficult for him to do this kind of work well again; An Zhe guessed that this was one of the reasons why he was anxious to find an apprentice.

After putting down the communicator, Scott Shaw took the mannequin out of the display and placed it on a chair in the middle of the room. All of the mannequin's joints could rotate easily. He crossed its legs, rested its hands on its elbows, and finally twisted its head so that it was slightly bowed. The light cast shadows as it passed through the eyelashes. It was a commanding, yet slightly melancholy posture.

An Zhe lifted his head to look in that direction. The dim lighting cast uneven shadows on the mannequin's face, neutralizing all the subtle differences between silicone rubber and human skin. It seemed entirely like a silent living person.

The excessive silence—the display window and containers—the things that may be considered obscene to humans also became strange in this atmosphere.

The sound of a door being pushed open broke the strange atmosphere. White light from outside shone in, lighting up half of the mannequin's body. Squinting, An Zhe looked at the man who appeared in the doorway.

Lit up from behind, he had a tall figure, shoulder-length curly black hair, brown eyes, and chilly facial features. An Zhe could imagine what he looked like walking around in the wilderness with a gun in his hand.

An Zhe waited for him to enter, but he only stood in the doorway. With his gaze resting on the mannequin in the middle of the room, he didn't move at all for a long time, as if he had become a mannequin himself.

It wasn't until Mr. Shaw coughed and said "please come in" that the man appeared to wake up from a dream and moved a bit. He strode into the room, but when he came close to the mannequin, he abruptly slowed down. An Zhe watched him move to touch the mannequin's face, but his fingers hung in the air without making contact for a long time. In the quiet room, there were only the sounds of this man's very soft, trembling breaths. Perhaps there was a butterfly perched on the mannequin's eyelashes that he was afraid to disturb.

In the end, he withdrew his right hand and said while looking steadily at the doll, "Thank you."

"Don’t thank me." Mr. Shaw walked over, looking at Hubbard with his gray-blue eyes. "I have to thank you, Mr. Hubbard, for giving me sufficient data."

Hubbard smiled, but his eyes were still downcast.

Mr. Shaw pointed to a human-sized case nearby. "Shall I?"

"I'll do it."

Hubbard's fingers finally landed on the mannequin's shoulder. He slowly leaned down, picked up the mannequin in his arms, and put it into the case.

Standing to one side, Mr. Shaw said, "I didn't know you were such a sentimental person, Captain Hubbard."

"There were some things I didn't get to say in time." As Hubbard knelt on one knee, he slowly closed the lid, and the knuckles of his fingers that were pressed against the lid turned white. A long time passed before he got back up.

Mr. Shaw crossed his arms. "The doll needs maintenance every two months. When the time comes, just deliver it here. If there are any new techniques, I'll use them."

Hubbard said, "You never run a losing business, Scott Shaw."

Mr. Shaw laughed happily.

"Captain Hubbard is infinitely resourceful. I’m no good," he said.

"What do you want?" Hubbard asked.

"I received a big order a few days ago. That person's data isn't easy to find, so I wanted to request your help."

"There's data that you can't get, Mr. Shaw?" Hubbard asked.

Mr. Shaw grinned, then lifted his arm and made a shooting gesture at Hubbard.

Hubbard's lips curled up in a smile, and he turned around and walked to the doorway while pulling the case's handle.

"Please wait," An Zhe blurted out.

Hubbard turned back.

An Zhe quickly walked over to him, undid the first button of his shirt, and took out the bullet case hanging from his neck.

"Mister," he said, "do you know where this is from?"

Without saying anything, Hubbard took the brass bullet shell, then turned it over to examine it beneath the light.

An Zhe's heart thumped hard.

"This model can’t be found in the supply depots or the black market." A minute later, Hubbard let go, and the bullet shell dropped back down to An Zhe's chest. Hubbard turned and left, leaving only one sentence behind.

"It's the military's."

His figure receded into the distance. An Zhe put a hand to his chest and held the bullet shell, slightly lost in thought.

In the quiet room, Mr. Shaw let out a laugh.

"Since Hubbard said it's military issue, it definitely is." He closed the door, and his eyes narrowed into a squint as he smiled. "What, did you get into bed with

someone from the military? The scope of Doussay's business is really broad."

An Zhe slowly shook his head.

If it was the military's, what should he do?

"Tsk," Mr. Shaw said. "Have you lost your spirit too?"

An Zhe said, "I want to find its owner."

"What, did this person not pay you?"

An Zhe felt that Mr. Shaw's way of thinking was very odd.

He explained, "That's not it."

"If it's the military's, people from the military will definitely be able to recognize its type. I'll teach you a way," Mr. Shaw said with sincerity.

"What way?" An Zhe asked.

Mr. Shaw said, "You can’t reach them in the main city or the wilderness. Within the outer city, the City Defense Agency and the Trial Court are both military territories. Go wander around there in the middle of the night and seduce one. Although the military is very strict, it's inevitable that there will be members with corrupt morals."

An Zhe was speechless.

He thought for a while, then asked, "Which people from the military will go out into the wilderness?"

Mr. Shaw flicked him on the forehead without warning. "Who do you think drew the map of the wilderness?"

Having been hurt, An Zhe bit his lip.

"You're actually feeling wronged?" Mr. Shaw said. "Even the Arbiter is gone from the base for almost half a year every year. What do you think? All members of the military go out there."

With nothing left to say, An Zhe lowered his head and continued to implant eyebrows. He realized that he may have to stay at the base for a very long time.

A day of implanting eyebrows ended. Very satisfied, Mr. Shaw let An Zhe off

work.

An Zhe wanted to drink the potato soup from the entrance of the black market's first floor. Today was his third day working for Mr. Shaw. Mr. Shaw paid him a month's worth of wages in advance, so his ID card now had 60R.

But right as he went to the aboveground floor, he suddenly felt that something was clearly amiss—the previous bustle was gone, everyone looked to be in a hurry, and there were few people near the exits.

He was a bit confused, but the temptation of the potato soup was even greater, so he still walked over.

Just as he got close to the potato soup, An Zhe's body suddenly froze up.

He stood motionless for a second, then turned around and retraced his steps.

"Get back here." A voice traveled over, as cold as the icy snow on a mountain peak.

Resigning himself to his misfortune, An Zhe turned around again, took a few steps forward, and met the Arbiter at the doorway.

The Arbiter did not come alone. Next to him were three young-looking Judges in simple clothes.

He had run right into the Trial Court's daily city patrol.

He heard Lu Feng say, "Stiffness in body movements, moving to evade. Mark one point."

The young Judges behind him were holding pens and paper. Following his voice, they carefully looked at An Zhe, then lowered their heads and scribbled something down on their papers.

An Zhe looked in their direction but ran straight into Lu Feng's gaze, and he promptly averted his eyes.

"Avoidant gaze. Mark one point." Lu Feng's voice didn't change whatsoever, and the young Judges behind him continued to take notes.

An Zhe felt that this scene was a little similar. After some thought, he confirmed that the mighty Arbiter was not simply performing his patrol

responsibilities. He was training newcomers, just like Mr. Shaw training his apprentice. But Lu Feng was obviously not as good at patient guidance as Mr. Shaw. With his brusque instructions, he did not count as a qualified supervisor.

He awaited the next point deduction.

But he discovered that although Lu Feng's instructions were very brusque, his attitude could not be considered half-hearted, for he began to quiz them. "The results?"

"Yes, Colonel," one of the young Judges said. "All biological signs indicate that the person being tried is human."

"The reason for the indications of abnormality?"

"Fear of you."

The corners of Lu Feng's lips curved up.

It was the first time An Zhe had seen Lu Feng smile, although they had only met once, and although the smile was nigh imperceptible.

But within this nigh imperceptible smile, An Zhe could still see that the Arbiter wanted something from him today.

After that tiny smile disappeared, Lu Feng went back to his expressionless self. Only his slender and cold white fingers played with the jet-black gun, the motions filled with danger.

An Zhe tentatively asked, "May I go now?"

Expressionless, Lu Feng asked, "What are you doing here?"

An Zhe replied honestly, "I work here."

"The first floor or second floor?"

"... The third floor."

"Oh."

Following that was another long silence until the scratching noises of the young Judges' note-taking stopped. Then he said, "There are no abnormalities in the verbal interrogation, proving the judgment that the person being tried is human."

An Zhe saw Lu Feng cast a flat look in the direction of that young Judge—but no matter how he looked at it, it didn't seem like an expression of approval.

He asked once again, "May—"

"You may go now."

"Thank you." An Zhe swiftly turned around and went deeper inside from the entrance to sit at the shop selling potato soup. He truly did want to drink it very much today.

The price of the potato soup the base supplied at the residential area was 0.3R, while the price here was 1R. The differences between the two were very clear. Here, the thickness of the soup was at least three times greater. Apart from the potatoes that had been nearly boiled until they fell apart, fine bits of ground pork had also been added into the soup, with perhaps a bit of milk as well. The fresh and sweet aroma of protein drifted through the air.

The spoon was white. An Zhe took it in hand, scooped up a mouthful of soup, blew away the white steam, then put it up to his mouth and swallowed.

Within the steam that wafted into his face, he squinted, feeling very satisfied—if the figure of the Arbiter was not in his peripheral vision, it would have been even better.

An Zhe ate very slowly but very earnestly and very quietly, making no noise at all. Approximately twenty minutes later, he finished eating and began to adjust his mentality, preparing to pass by the mighty Arbiter and leave this place.

At the moment he left his seat and turned towards the doorway, there came a harsh beeping sound—Lu Feng pressed down on his communicator.

When An Zhe passed by him, he only heard Lu Feng coldly say one word into the communicator.

"Trash."

An Zhe jumped out of fright, then increased his pace and left the black market.

It was currently evening. The sun had already set, the western sky was a boundless expanse of gray-blue, and the wind had begun turning cold. In two

hours, the base would cut off the power. The supply depot across from the black market had also reached closing time and was spitting out a continuous stream of people.

The buildings of the supply depot, the black market, and the train station formed a triangle, and in the middle was a spacious public square. At this moment, people coming from all directions were swarming the public square like migrating ants and flowing towards the train station.

The trains ran from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m., one per hour and always on time.

When the time on the timetable approached, a slight roaring sound traveled from afar and gradually became louder. After a short and violent shudder, the train stopped on the rails like a silvery-white snake. On one side, a dozen or so coach doors slid open, and some of the people inside poured out. Among them were those who had come from other parts of the city back to their own residential areas and those who had just returned from the wilderness.

At that very moment, the sound of a lovely, robotic female voice was broadcast from the arrival area. "To all passengers, a mechanical failure has occurred. Please immediately deboard and wait. Passengers waiting for the train, please do not board for the time being. Please spread out and wait."

As the robotic instructions played on repeat, the people who heard them were initially puzzled and began moving at a pace neither fast nor slow. However, some people’s expressions drastically changed, and they yanked at their peers to swiftly get up from their seats, squeeze their way off the coach, and sprint away. These movements affected the rest of them, and no more than three minutes had gone by before the frightened atmosphere spread throughout the entire train station and everyone started running towards the public square.

An Zhe, who had been waiting to get onto the train, was suddenly caught up in a tumultuous crowd. Although he didn't know what happened, he knew the rules of communal human life, and he turned around on the spot with the intent to spread out along with the rest of the crowd.

But the crowd pushed and shoved, causing him to stumble, and someone bumped into him from behind. The sound of high heels tapping on the ground

rang out. An Zhe turned his head, smelling a familiar scent, and discovered that it was Doussay, the Madam D. of the third underground floor. It looked like she had just gotten off the train. Their eyes met, and Doussay recognized him as well. In a move that seemed unconscious, she promptly seized his wrist and pulled him along as they ran.

In the public square, the sounds of people falling and the screams they let out when they were trampled mixed together. On the other hand, Doussay took him through the crowd as if she had experienced this thousands of times before until they had come to the forefront with the people who had run the fastest to the edge of the public square—where they stopped.

Black light armored cars were parked in a neat line at the edge of the public square, one car every ten to twenty meters, and there were silver shield emblems on the car bodies. After reading the *Base Handbook*, An Zhe knew that this represented the City Defense Agency, the full name of which was the Base Outer City Defense Agency. Soldiers carrying loaded guns were getting out of the cars and sealing off all the exits.

An Zhe still didn't know what had happened. He was a bit out of breath from having run too fast. Nearby, Doussay bent over and violently gasped for breath, coughing a few times.

An Zhe patted her on the shoulder, and Doussay seemed to manage to recover only after approximately half a minute passed. The public square was still a scene of chaos, for people running like they were fleeing for their lives came to the edge of the public square and were stopped by the human wall consisting of the City Defense Agency’s soldiers.

An Zhe helped Doussay over to a corner with slightly fewer people.

He asked, "What's the matter with them?"

"This sort of thing used to happen often." Doussay straightened up and looked at the crowd in the public square, saying, "A xenogenic sneaked in."

After taking a breath, she continued, "There must have been a xenogenic on the train. It'd take too much time to get onto the train and investigate. When the xenogenic attack starts, it'd be too late to kill it and several coaches of people will die. Spreading out makes investigation easier."

"This sort of thing hasn't happened in a long time," she said. "The Arbiter didn't recognize it?"

"He was on patrol today," An Zhe said.

Not only that, he heard Lu Feng receive a communication and coldly rebuke someone with the word "trash". Come to think of it, it must have been that he had received the news of a xenogenic sneaking into the base.

An Zhe felt the hand she was holding him with tremble slightly.

"He's here?" She asked.

He made an affirmative sound.

As if confirming his words, a dull "bang" sounded and a bright white streak of light lit up in the air. The streak of light had come shooting down from high above, resembling a bolt of blinding lightning as it instantly sliced through the evening sky and landed right on the shoulder of a person not far in front of An Zhe and Doussay.

An Zhe whipped his head around to look at the streak of light’s origin point and saw that on top of the light gray main body of the black market building, looking down from the peak, was a tall and lean figure. It was Lu Feng, clad in a black uniform. At that moment, he was slowly putting down the black weapon in his right hand. In his left hand was a pair of binoculars, which he handed to one side, and the young Judge following him accepted it.

"Position has been marked by the magnesium light bullet!" In the following moment, a terse order came from the direction of the City Defense Agency's troops. "Ready!"

Just as the voice finished speaking, a sharp sound came from an armored vehicle that was extremely close by, and a harsh scream rang out in the public square. An incendiary shell trailing thick smoke had been fired at the spot marked earlier by the streak of light from the magnesium light bullet.

Everything happened in an instant.

The acrid smell of burning traveled over. Amidst the crowd, one person fell heavily to the ground, and smoke emanated from his body with a hissing sound.

The sound of his shrill cries instantly resounded through the entire public square.

An Zhe suddenly felt Doussay's grip around his hand tighten.

"That person was sitting right behind me," she said.

"But he didn't attack anyone. I'm fine." She seemed to sigh in relief. "That was a white phosphorus shell... He should be completely dead."

She lifted her head to look at the top of the black market building.

Lu Feng's figure had already disappeared from the roof, but she still kept looking in that direction. An Zhe looked at her. In the twilight, Madam D.'s attractive, mature face suddenly showed an unusual tranquility.

A minute later, the screams near them gradually weakened. On the open space left from people spontaneously backing away, the blackened and twisted limbs had stopped convulsing and struggling, no longer moving at all. The other people in the public square seemed to all sigh in relief, but the City Defense Agency's blockade did not loosen up at all.

"Five years ago, the Colonel saved me once." An Zhe suddenly heard Doussay speak up. "At the city entrance. It was about the same as right now."

He didn't say anything, feeling the atmosphere gradually calm down. That day at the city gate, he understood why some people bitterly hated Lu Feng. Today, he also understood why some people didn’t.

Three minutes later, the soldiers of the City Defense Agency forced open a path in the crowd, and Lu Feng swiftly walked over to the four bodies with his men in tow. Because of their location, An Zhe and Doussay were very close by.

He put on snow-white gloves, got down on one knee, pulled aside the human body in the very middle, and said curtly, "Knife."

The Judge next to him handed over a shining dagger.

Then he saw Lu Feng expressionlessly cut open the corpse's abdomen. The blackened body gave off an acrid smell. However, the interior revealed after the abdomen was opened didn't have the organs that humans ought to have, but rather small and plentiful yellowish and translucent things, thousands upon

thousands of them tightly packed together.

Striving to look, An Zhe felt that they resembled insect larvae—something akin to spiders, and they were still wriggling slightly.

He saw Lu Feng frown, and the knife in his hand neatly sliced upward to cut open the body's entire esophagus and throat.

Similar things continuously fell out.

"Parasitic species, high degree of proliferation possible." Lu Feng stood up, then took off his gloves and dropped them on the body. A Judge promptly handed him a fresh pair.

"All personnel, investigate," he said.

Doussay's entire body went soft, and she fell forward.

An Zhe abruptly recalled what she had said a few minutes ago.

She had said that that person was sitting right behind her.

He tried hard to prop Doussay up, but her motions were too big, and Lu Feng had already looked in their direction.

Lu Feng's eyes stopped on her face. Following his gaze, An Zhe looked there as well.

In the chaos earlier, he hadn't carefully looked at her face, but now that he was taking a closer look—on her forehead, there was a small blister-like thing emitting a crystalline light, and something inside of it was wriggling slightly.

"I..." As if she felt something, Doussay slowly reached up to touch that spot. Trembling, she stared at Lu Feng, and two streams of tears fell as she took a few steps towards him.

This was the first time An Zhe had seen such an expression in a human's eyes. He couldn't tell if Doussay's expression was one of love or hate. Perhaps the majority of it was despair.

A gunshot ran out.

She fell forward, and An Zhe wasn't able to grab onto her. After a dull sound, the human’s body landed on the ground.

At that moment, An Zhe was only a short distance away from Lu Feng, and he met the other's gaze.

That pair of cold green eyes, the eyes that seemed like they had nothing—

Lu Feng suddenly reached out a hand towards him.

An Zhe shrank away.

But the Arbiter didn't move to pull the trigger. That wasn't the hand holding the gun. His fingers landed on the side of An Zhe's face and rested there for a moment. An Zhe recalled that when Doussay fell, some of her blood had splashed onto his face. It was warm at first, but it had very quickly turned cold.

The cold liquid was wiped away, leaving a smudge of red on the snow-white gloves, and the warm sensation of the touch lingered briefly on his cheek.

A slight shudder ran through An Zhe's body, and he closed his eyes.

Perhaps it was three seconds, or perhaps it was four. Lu Feng's fingers left his face, and that hint of warmth faded almost instantly in the evening wind before it swiftly disappeared altogether.

An Zhe opened his eyes again and saw his departing figure, which was identical to what he saw that day at the base's city gate.

At that moment, a bright white light suddenly came to life in the public square.

An Zhe squinted. In his field of vision, Lu Feng's figure was blurry. Once his vision cleared up again, that black figure had already been lost in the vast sea of people. Soldiers from the City Defense Agency came forward and carried away Doussay's body. A honey-like luster flowed along her long, brown hair beneath the lamplight. With her eyes closed, her expression looked very peaceful. What she had been thinking in her final moments, An Zhe didn't know. Perhaps he would never know.

Many people were looking in his direction. When the City Defense Agency soldiers had gone away, they began to whisper amongst themselves. An Zhe had good hearing, so he was able to catch a few snippets of conversation. Many people knew this mistress of the black market's third underground floor. Some

of them mourned the departure of a beautiful woman, while a greater number of them feared being infected by monsters themselves.

Soon, the robotic female voice began giving instructions.

"Everyone, please spread out and wait in place. In thirty minutes, the Trial Court will begin inspecting people one at a time."

The voice was very lovely, but nobody was in the state of mind to appreciate it. The people first looked around at each other briefly, then quickly came to the realization that right now, nobody knew whether the people next to them were truly human. The crowd of people began squirming like a colony of ants. Every single person tried to separate from the people near them as best they could, no matter if they knew them or not. In the end, the chaotic crowd turned into a scattered grid. An Zhe stood at the very edge, next to the bloodstain Doussay had left behind. His gaze swept over the fearful, trembling expressions on the nearby humans' faces. Fundamentally, there were no differences between the human base and the Abyss.

A shrill voice suddenly rang out from somewhere in the distance. "There's something on his face!"

It was followed by the sound of movements. It seemed that some people had begun to fight, which was then followed by a noisy quarrel. Thirty seconds later, a gunshot ended it all.

A deathly silence. The deathly silent atmosphere shrouded the public square. Even the sound of breathing had quieted down. If someone had told An Zhe right now that where he was currently was actually a cemetery and that the surrounding humans were actually a multitude of gravestones, he would not have doubted the authenticity of the statement.

He looked around, wishing to know where Lu Feng was, but there were too many people, so he couldn't find him. In the end, An Zhe retracted his gaze and looked at the marble floor, which appeared pale in the light.

Suddenly, his eyes stopped moving.

Around five meters in front of him, at a man's foot, there was a brassy glimmer.

His first thought was that the bullet shell hanging around his neck had fallen off, so he swiftly felt around his shirt collar. Through the layer of his shirt, the little cylindrical object pressed against his hand—he hadn't lost it.

Staring at the ground, he took a few steps forward—the man next to him let out a curse and pulled away.

"I'm sorry," An Zhe said. "I dropped something."

After passing by a few people and taking a few steps, he came to that place, crouched down, and picked up a brassy, cylindrical bullet shell.

The moment he held it, his hand trembled slightly.

Its weight, decorative pattern, and size were all very, very familiar. As he held the bullet shell, he was unable to discern any difference between it and the one hanging from his neck.

With his heart giving a few violent thumps, he tightened his grip around the bullet shell and stood up.

He thought back to five minutes ago, when Doussay touched the blister infected by bugs on her forehead and realized that she couldn't possibly live, that she was undoubtedly going to be executed by the Arbiter. But while she was afraid, she also seemed to want to get closer to the Arbiter, so she had taken a few steps in his direction. But before she could reach Lu Feng as she had wished, the bullet had already pierced through her body.

At that time, where had Lu Feng been standing?

An Zhe looked at the dark bloodstain on the ground nearby. At that time, Lu Feng had been standing where he was currently standing, or not far away, when he had opened fire.

What was a bullet shell? It was the jacket of a bullet, he knew. There was similar knowledge in An Ze's memories. When the bullet leaves the chamber and is fired, the bullet shell will be ejected in the other direction and land on the ground.

There was no doubt that this bullet shell he picked up belonged to Lu Feng, and Lu Feng was the master of the Trial Court. Then what about the identical

bullet shell he picked up in the wilderness where he had lost his spore? Was it also connected to the Trial Court?

An inexpressible sensation welled up in An Zhe's heart, and he felt a fear that could be precisely described. If his spore and the Trial Court were connected, then he could only imagine how difficult it would be to get back his spore. He couldn't directly ask, because asking about the spore was tantamount to admitting that he was a mushroom.

While he was in the midst of such fanciful thoughts, thirty minutes passed. The robotic female voice rang out again. "The buffer time has ended. Please line up in an orderly fashion and accept the infection inspection. After passing the inspection, please leave."

After the order was broadcast on repeat a few times, a large light lit up across from the public square, and people began to slowly move in that direction to be examined.

The people standing next to An Zhe seemed to be a father-and-son pair—they seemed to be father and son, because one of them was slightly older and growing a beard, while the other was a thirteen-or fourteen-year-old boy.

He heard the boy ask, "Why do we have to wait thirty minutes?"

"It's not like the Arbiter is a machine who can tell that you've been infected as soon as you've been bitten by a bug," his father said in a low voice. "The Trial Court says that they're able to pass judgment after thirty minutes have passed. You haven't gone to the city gate. At the gate, there is also a thirty-minute wait in line."

"Oh," the boy said.

But then he asked, "So how exactly do they tell?"

"Don't ask me," his father said. "How am I supposed to know that?"

"I heard that they kill whoever they—"

"Shut up." A trace of fear was present in the father's terse voice. "Do you want to get shot right now?"

As if to prove the father's words, the sound of a gunshot came from the

direction of the public square.

They promptly stopped talking.

The Arbiter inspected people at a quick rate, and the intervals in between each gunshot made people tremble. For a while, it was very regular. Every ten minutes, there was at least one gunshot, and sometimes there were several in quick succession. After these gunshots, there were long spans of time in which the Arbiter did not shoot again. The father near An Zhe said, "They're pretty much done killing, I think."

Right as he finished speaking, the sounds of gunshots rang out again, and the boy with him shivered.

People judged to be infected were shot on the spot, while people judged to be safe left through the openings. As the number of people in the public square decreased, they spontaneously formed a haphazard line and slowly moved forward. An Zhe, standing at the very end of the line, counted the sound of each gunshot. By the time he got close to the exit himself, he had already counted to seventy-three. He saw a stone pillar near the exits and Lu Feng leaning against it, his contours slim beneath the light. Two Judges stood next to him. Further out along both sides were heavily-armed City Defense Agency soldiers, and blood covered the ground in front of them.

No, not only blood. There were objects scattered on the ground in no discernible pattern, all brassy bullet shells.

The father-and-son pair up ahead passed through safely, and it was then An Zhe's turn. He took a few steps forward and stopped in front of Lu Feng.

Lu Feng was taller than him, so he had to tilt his head back to meet Lu Feng's gaze—and then he felt Lu Feng examine him once from top to bottom.

"What's in your hand?"

An Zhe didn't think that even such a small object in his hand would be noticed. In the face of the Arbiter's commanding and aloof gaze, he could only lift his hand, uncurl his fingers, and reveal the bullet shell lying in his palm. Just like those bullet shells scattered on the ground, it represented a human the Arbiter had executed.

The silence between them was drawn out.

After a long time passed, An Zhe heard Lu Feng say, "Get going."

The late-night wind was so powerful that it even broke up the sound of Lu Feng's voice, so when it came to his ears, it was softer than usual.

An Zhe silently turned and walked into the deep night.

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"At 7 p.m. on May 17th, a parasitic monster invasion occurred at the supply depot public square in the outer city via a new parasitization method. The Trial Court has implemented additional Trial conditions in response to the new parasitization method. At present, the danger within the base has been eliminated. Residents, please be at ease when moving about."

"To improve the accuracy of the Trials and ensure that the Arbiter is present throughout the entire process, the operation of the city gates will be reduced to the hours of 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. today. Please pay attention when you return to the city."

"According to the Lighthouse's observations, the breeding season of arthropod-class and parasite-class monsters has begun early. To prevent airborne invasion, the operating strength of the base's ultrasonic dispersion device has been raised to level III. The danger levels of Flatland 2, Basin 6, and the Southwest Ravine have been updated to four stars. Please pay attention to personal safety in the wilderness and protect your entire body. The same information has been communicated to all teams out in the wilderness."

"At 7 p.m. on May 17th, a parasitic monster invasion occurred..."

The three announcements played on repeat. Mr. Shaw lifted a hand and switched it off, then lowered his head and continued polishing the mold.

An Zhe was still implanting eyebrows in the corner, but this time it wasn't ordinary eyebrow implantation, for Mr. Shaw had drawn the specific shape and direction on the mannequin's blank face with a gray pen. He was practicing implanting eyebrows for the Arbiter's mannequin.

Doussay was dead, but they still had to proceed with the order she had referred to them because Mr. Shaw already received half of the money—the delivery time they had previously agreed upon was one month later. They were to deliver the goods to a room in District 6's Building 13, and at that time, the commissioner was to hand over the other half of the payment.

The color of Lu Feng's eyebrows and hair were the same, both pure black. It was a very distinctive color. The long eyebrow slanted upwards slightly, forming a sharply contoured peak, then gradually narrowed into a thin and sharp end. Mr. Shaw had spent an hour drawing just these eyebrows. After receiving the mannequin's head, An Zhe not only had to strictly follow the guidelines while implanting the eyebrows, he also had to lift his head from time to time to look at the profile-view photo of Lu Feng on the tablet computer propped up in front of him and check if there were any errors.

The phone-selling youth clad in black had delivered the tablet computer at seven o'clock this morning, saying that it was a gift from Hubbard to Mr. Shaw.

After delivering the gift, he glanced at An Zhe. "Whoa, you've found a nice gig. Do you have money to buy a cell phone from me now?"

An Zhe felt very apologetic. His wage was only enough to buy potato soup, so all he could say was "no". The youth sighed in disappointment and left.

Several close-up photos of Lu Feng were saved in the tablet computer he delivered. Most of them were from when he was patrolling the black market yesterday. The angles were very reasonable, and one of the photos even contained An Zhe. However, the focus of the photo was on Lu Feng, while everything else was very fuzzy. He was just a white smudge in one corner of the photo, and in front of him was a bowl of potato soup.

Mr. Shaw made a pleased sound, saying, "Hubbard has ways of getting what he wants out of the black market. It really isn't a trivial matter to get photos of the Arbiter. Although there's no exact data, the photos were taken well, so they'll suffice."

With those words, he swiped back and forth through the photos several times and said, "This face can really make women go crazy. Do you like him?"

According to the biological sexes of human bodies, An Zhe wasn't a woman,

so he didn't go crazy. He only felt very uncomfortable. He felt a bit of visceral fear towards this Arbiter. In this human base, only Lu Feng suspected that he wasn't human. An Zhe thought that, supposing he died one day at the human base, it would definitely be at the end of the Arbiter's gun.

He said, "I don't like him."

"Then you're part of the opposition party," Mr. Shaw said. "I hate the opposition party the most. My last apprentice was one of them."

"How come?" An Zhe asked.

Mr. Shaw said, "He took the pay I gave him and actually had the cheek to ask for half a day off every week to participate in demonstrations."

"... I'm not part of the opposition party either," he said.

"I don't care if you're part of the opposition party or the supporting party," Mr. Shaw said with sincerity. "Just don't ask for time off."

"I... won't ask for time off," An Zhe said.

Facing the amicable smile on Mr. Shaw's face that appeared after he said those words, An Zhe tentatively asked, "Can I live here?"

Based on his observations from these past few days, Mr. Shaw's shop wasn't actually small. In a corner, there were some unused containers, and the space between the containers was enough for a person to live in.

Mr. Shaw asked, "What's the matter?"

An Zhe knew that the people of the base normally wouldn't move easily to a new home. They would all be assigned a residence at a very young age—of course, whether or not they lived there was another matter. The vast majority of mercenaries spent their lives in the wilderness, and the men and women of the third underground floor returned home very rarely as well.

But he truly did not wish to return to Building 117, for Josh's clinginess exhausted him.

"It's my neighbor," he explained to Mr. Shaw. "He always..."

Before he found the appropriate words, he saw Mr. Shaw wiggle his eyebrows

understandingly. "He wants to bed you?"

An Zhe verified that there was only one thing in Scott Shaw's head.

"That's not it," he denied. "He just constantly wants to get close to me."

Mr. Shaw asked, "There's a difference between that and wanting to bed you?"

"There is." An Zhe earnestly thought back on Josh's actions. "We used to be very good friends."

There were some things that he couldn't say to Mr. Shaw, so he could only use "I" to substitute for "An Ze."

"I grew up together with him. We're neighbors. I submitted manuscripts to the City Affairs Office for small contribution fees, while he worked as a mercenary outside. Sometimes when I didn't have money, or when he didn't have money, we'd look after each other," An Zhe said.

"But afterwards, I wanted to take the exam for the supply depot, and he didn't want me to. He said... that it was too difficult, that he wanted to go out into the wilderness with me and do a bit of light work."

At that point, Scott Shaw let out a scornful laugh.

An Zhe looked at Mr. Shaw, wishing to receive his assessment. He couldn't understand why Josh would be like that towards An Ze. "Why would he be like that?"

Mr. Shaw held a mannequin arm, polishing it with a small file as he said, "After you pass the test for the supply depot and leave the civilian population, you'll stand out from the rest. What could he do? He'll just be a common mercenary for his whole life. Would you still spend time with him?"

Having spoken up to this point, Mr. Shaw lifted his head up to cast a look at An Zhe. "In all likelihood, once you go, you'd be able to seduce one of the supply depot's higher-ups. He wouldn't be able to hold on to you then."

But An Ze wouldn't do that.

An Zhe said, "I wouldn't."

"Even if you wouldn't, he'd think that." Mr. Shaw finished polishing a fingernail, sprayed on a layer of varnish, and switched to the next fingernail. "Who can tell? People are just this ugly.

"So, as for you, you best not get mixed up with these kinds of good-for-nothings—"

An Zhe dropped his gaze, feeling that Mr. Shaw was indeed a good person. A good elder would provide life guidance to young humans. On occasion, some social monsters in the Abyss would exhibit similar behavior.

But then he heard Mr. Shaw say, "As for you, keep a sharp eye out on the third floor and find a big mercenary team's boss, someone on Hubbard's level, to ensure that he'll take the long way around when he sees you. If he still dares to come to you, shout for your man to give him a beating. It's also fine if they aren't a man. AR1104's female captain will definitely like you when she sees you, but she looks like a gorilla."

An Zhe said, "The Arbiter's fingers are longer than this."

Mr. Shaw jumped from shock, then began to rework it while spitting curses. He no longer had time to provide life guidance to An Zhe.

As he watched Mr. Shaw, who had his head buried in the repair work, An Zhe smiled.

In this manner, he moved into the third underground floor.

Without Josh, the word became much quieter. An Zhe bought a folding bed with an advance on his wages and lived between two empty shelves in a corner of the shop. At night, with the lights off, the mannequin limbs, eyeballs, and heads could all keep him company as he slept. Sometimes when he went out, mercenaries would stop him and ask his price, but Mr. Shaw had taught him a very useful phrase—"I have someone". These three words could deal with almost *all* the mercenaries. According to Mr. Shaw, the reason why this sentence could take care of them was not necessarily because these people possessed the virtue of knowing to respectfully back down.

At the time, Mr. Shaw had a cigarette dangling from his mouth as he said, "With your good looks, you seem like the type to have a very powerful man.

Tsk, I better find one for you quickly."

An Zhe said nothing. In truth, all he had was a mannequin that hadn't yet taken shape. This mannequin was still being crafted day after day, and it resembled Lu Feng more and more.

# 7

## “AD4117. MY COMMUNICATOR NUMBER.”

"HOW COME you moved the Colonel to one side again?" Mr. Shaw asked loudly as soon as he entered the shop.

An Zhe had just sat up on the bed. Rubbing his eyes, he said in a small voice, "I can't sleep well with him next to me."

"You're so finicky." Mr. Shaw walked over and gave him a hard knock on his head. "Several days ago, you weren’t even capable of sleeping while hugging a human head, right?”

An Zhe wordlessly buried his head beneath the quilt once more.

A human head was a human head, and Lu Feng was Lu Feng. As a xenogenic who the Arbiter had repeatedly nitpicked, he didn't need a reason to be afraid of that person.

"I'm deducting your wages."

Left with no other choice, An Zhe could only get back out from under the quilt and slowly put on his coat.

The tone of Mr. Shaw's voice turned facetious again. "I think you better not go out to seduce mercenaries. Just work hard with me instead."

"How come?" An Zhe asked.

Mr. Shaw wasn’t saying that yesterday.

"With your small appearance, tsk, it's no good," Mr. Shaw said. "Those mercenary ruffians, they'll bully you."

"Why would they bully me?"

"For fun, probably."

Done talking, he knocked An Zhe on the head once more.

An Zhe frowned. He felt that Mr. Shaw was bullying him already with his actions just now.

However, he had no choice. He was currently just like a parasite, dependent on the pay from Mr. Shaw—so he could only obediently get out of bed and wash up, then throw himself into the day's work.

Today was the thirtieth day since he had started making mannequins. In other words, they had to completely finish the mannequin and then deliver the goods to the customer’s doorstep by tonight at the very latest.

Mr. Shaw had finished the torso and limbs ten days ago—though it was mainly An Zhe who made them under his guidance. After doing those things, he picked out a prop gun from the ones being sold in the shop and put it together with the mannequin. Finally, through the black market, they obtained a near-identical black uniform and dressed the mannequin in it. Now the mannequin of the Arbiter had a perfect body and only needed a head.

At present, An Zhe was holding the mannequin head and checking to see whether the alignment of the hairs he had personally implanted were pleasing to the eye. In the meantime, Mr. Shaw had fired up a melting furnace nearby and was stirring transparent adhesive in a small white ceramic pot with one hand while adding green dye one drop at a time with the other hand. The dye initially formed a dark green blob in the pot, but after a short while, countless tiny tendrils stretched from it and dispersed outwards. With the stirring, it was evenly distributed, and the adhesive became a light green that then gradually darkened. An Zhe had nothing to do after he finished examining the hair, so he stared at the color, recalling Lu Feng's eye color as he watched.

In the light, they were a green like that of leaves frosted over with ice. Often, when that pair of eyes looked at An Zhe, he would start feeling cold.

And in the dim lighting of the night, Lu Feng's eyes would appear to be a deep, dark green like a fathomless lake in the night that was hiding many unknown things.

As he was thinking, he paid attention to the substance's color. Once it matched the eyes in his memories, he said, "This is good."

With a smile, Mr. Shaw extinguished the melting furnace and said, "You have good eyes."

An Zhe handed the mold to Mr. Shaw without a word. The translucent material was poured into the spherical mold and allowed to cool and set. Then, once they were embedded into the eye whites, the eyes were completed.

Right away, these eyeballs were installed in the mannequin's eye sockets. The mannequin's eyelashes were also An Zhe's handiwork, implanted one by one. Now, the black eyelashes gently covered the green eyes, and even the most minute subtleties of the cold expression were visible. It was truly too similar to the real person. Feeling anxious, An Zhe picked up the black service cap and put it on the mannequin.

The next tasks were to tune the joints and polish the facial details. When they were completely finished, it was seven o'clock in the evening. An Zhe silently looked at the mannequin, and the mannequin silently looked back at him. He felt that it looked utterly like the Colonel himself.

They folded up the mannequin that looked utterly like the Colonel himself at the joints and placed it in a rolling suitcase. Mr. Shaw clapped his hands and said, "It can be delivered now. I'll get Jensen to deliver it. He's cheap."

Jensen was the black-clad youth who sold cell phones and handed over the Arbiter's data to Mr. Shaw.

But although Mr. Shaw dialed repeatedly on his communicator, nobody answered.

Mr. Shaw frowned. "What's going on?"

"Did he get discovered?" He dialed Hubbard's communicator instead, but a voice immediately came from the receiver. "The party you have dialed has left the base. Please leave a message."

Mr. Shaw turned to look at the tablet computer on the workbench, tapped on it, and deleted all of the photos with a few quick motions. He said to An Zhe, "Something's not quite right. Let's hurry up and get rid of the goods. There's

nothing else to do tonight, so come deliver it with me."

Thus, An Zhe came to District 6, where he hadn't set foot for a month already.

Unit 4, Room 312 in District 6's Building 13 was their commissioner's location. The suitcase was very heavy, so An Zhe and Mr. Shaw took turns carrying it up the stairs to the third floor. Unlike Building 117, where An Zhe lived before, Building 13's residents were all women, and along the way, An Zhe ran into a good number of them. Most of them had short hair, tall statures, and distinctive and strong facial features. As he looked at them, An Zhe couldn't help but think of Doussay again.

Doussay was a very special woman. She was tall but slenderer than all the other women An Zhe had seen. At the same time, her bosom was fuller than other people's—because of this slender fullness, her body seemed strangely soft, and this softness was very rarely seen even on the third underground floor.

At the same time, he saw that Mr. Shaw was also casting unrestrained looks at the women passing by. In the end, Mr. Shaw said, "There's no second Doussay."

Without saying anything, An Zhe gently tapped on the door to No. 12. "Hello, we've come to make a delivery."

Nobody opened the door.

An Zhe's knocking became a little louder. "Hello, we're here to make a delivery."

Still nobody opened the door.

Mr. Shaw took a step forward and pounded the door a few times with his fist. "Is anyone there? It's a delivery from the third underground floor."

Silence.

Amidst the silence, footsteps came from behind them. An Zhe turned his head and saw a middle-aged woman dressed in gray. He said, "Hello, are you the resident of No. 12?"

The woman shook her head and looked at the door. "You two are looking for

her?"

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said. "She ordered something, and we've come to deliver it."

There was no expression on the woman's face as her gaze shifted to the suitcase Mr. Shaw was pulling. "What goods?"

"Premium goods. Anything else, we can't say," Mr. Shaw said. "Is she not in? When will she return?"

The woman looked at him, the corners of her lips drawn taut. For a short while, she didn't say anything.

Unable to bear it any longer, Mr. Shaw said, "Is she—"

Just as the words left his mouth, the woman said, "She's dead. You guys didn't know?"

There was a brief silence.

"Dead?" After a brief silence, Mr. Shaw raised his voice. "Then who's going to give me the rest of my payment?"

The corners of the woman's mouth twitched. With an expression that held a shadow of a smile, she replied, "The Arbiter killed her. Go get him to pay."

Mr. Shaw, looking like a duck whose neck was being squeezed, said nothing for a while.

But An Zhe was suddenly stunned.

As he looked at the woman, he asked, "What was she called?"

As though the woman did not hear his words, she turned, lifted her hand, swiped open the room door on the opposite side with her ID card, and walked in. The moment before the door closed from the inside, two simple syllables came from within.

"Doussay."

An Zhe once again thought back to the expression Doussay showed to Lu Feng before she died and momentarily didn't know what he should say. Mr. Shaw was also silent. After a long time, he let out a sigh and said with a smile, "Do

you know how much money this order was?"

"I don't," An Zhe said.

"Even more than Hubbard's order." Mr. Shaw looked at the rolling suitcase on the ground, his eyes half-closed, and said slowly, "She played with so many men, I didn't think that she'd also have genuine feelings."

An Zhe said, "Doussay said that the Arbiter saved her before."

"Fool." Mr. Shaw sighed and shook his head. "The kind of person that the Arbiter is… even if he did save her, it was because he wanted to kill xenogenics. She had scraped a living off of men since she was young. She wasn’t a little girl anymore, so how could she not understand this? It's not worth it."

An Zhe didn't say anything.

He didn't understand why Doussay liked Lu Feng either. However—compared to other people, Lu Feng was indeed different. What those differences were, though, he couldn't say.

After a long time, Mr. Shaw said, "She's gone, so what should we do with the goods? It can't be tossed. If it's discovered, the Trial Court will definitely come looking for me."

An Zhe said, "Then bring it back to the shop?"

"Absolutely not." Mr. Shaw shook his head. "I can't get in touch with Jensen all of a sudden, so I'm afraid something's happened."

As he spoke, he looked at An Zhe and seemed to suddenly think of something. "I remember that your home is also in District 6?"

He jiggled the suitcase. "And you don't live over there, so there's no fear of being seen. Let's do this. For tonight, bring the goods back to your place. After a few days, if nobody checks, we'll find someone to buy it."

"What about you?" An Zhe asked.

Mr. Shaw looked down at his watch and frowned. "I have to go back first, it's the last train."

An Zhe thought for a while and felt that it was feasible. He didn't live at home,

so it was fine to temporarily stash the mannequin up in there.

Mr. Shaw patted his shoulder. "You can do it."

Then he swiftly left to catch the train.

But it turned out that An Zhe couldn't do it.

District 6 was a circular area, so Building 13 and Building 117 weren't far apart. This was also the reason why Mr. Shaw felt at ease about having him take the goods home. But the mannequin was solid and really couldn't be considered light. With practically turtle-like speed, he dragged the massive suitcase along the road. By the time he reached the foot of Building 117, the sky had already darkened completely.

Indistinct black shadows were everywhere, and the outline of the building was visible only by way of the aurora's glow. As An Zhe stood in front of the unit and thought about how he still needed to climb up to the fifth floor with the suitcase, he felt despair, for it really was very heavy.

The despairing An Zhe turned around on the spot so that he no longer faced the pitch-black staircase entrance. He planned to stop and rest a while first.

The sound of burning breaths suddenly came from behind him, and he was wrapped up in an abrupt hug.

"An Ze!"

It was Josh's voice.

"I saw you from the window, so I immediately came down." Josh held him tightly. "Where have you been? How come you've only come back now? Why didn't you tell me? I've been looking for you all this time."

He took a breath, then continued. "You aren't allowed to leave again. Where have you been?"

Mr. Shaw's words were correct. Josh thought of An Ze as his personal belonging.

Thus, An Zhe calmly said, "Please let go."

Not only did Josh not let go, he tightened his grip instead.

"Are you angry at me?" Josh asked.

Before An Zhe said anything, he spoke up again in a low voice. "I was wrong, I'll apologize to you. Whatever way you want me to apologize is fine. An Ze, I love you."

An Zhe was speechless.

Mr. Shaw's words seemed to be correct again. He really did want to bed An Ze.

"Thank you," An Zhe said, "but I have someone."

"You're truly angry?" Josh smiled. "You always did like to deliberately make me mad when you were angry."

An Zhe really was very annoyed with this human. He struggled to free himself, but Josh forcibly turned him around. "Look at me, An Ze."

"Bang!"

A gunshot ran out.

Josh gave a start and reflexively let go of An Zhe, then looked around.

An Zhe also looked in the direction where the sound had come from and saw that beneath the shadow of the black building, a person was standing there. The person had just fired into the air and was putting the gun away while walking over. Slim and tall, it was a figure he was extremely familiar with.

Only military people could legally bear arms within the city.

And within the military's various branches, only one kind of person could fire at will.

An Zhe thought that he seemed to have stumbled into the path of the Arbiter's city patrol again—what a coincidence.

Before he could carefully think about it, he heard Lu Feng's familiar cold voice. "What is he to you?"

"A neighbor," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng walked up to him.

From such a small distance, anyone could recognize that this was the Arbiter.

An Zhe felt Josh abruptly stiffen next to him.

"AD4117. My communicator number." Lu Feng's voice sounded nonchalant. "Next time this kind of thing happens, if you are willing to contact me, he'll be arrested for indecency."

An Zhe lifted his head to look at Lu Feng, his reaction temporarily delayed somewhat. But since this man was the military's Colonel, it seemed that he really did have the duty of maintaining law and order within the city.

He said, "Okay."

He felt Josh, who was behind him, get even more stiff.

But An Zhe couldn't be bothered to care about Josh at all.

Because Lu Feng's hand was gently resting on the handle of the rolling suitcase.

He asked, "Shall I help you bring it up?"

An Zhe and Lu Feng looked at each other.

The expression in Lu Feng's eyes was one of slight indifference, his gaze calm. He was being serious.

An Zhe stuttered, not even able to speak clearly. "There's... there's no need."

If it had been something else in the suitcase and the Arbiter had suddenly wanted to help for some strange reason, although he didn't want to interact with this man more than necessary, he wouldn't have gone so far as to refuse.

However, what this box contained right now was nothing good.

An Zhe put his hand on the handle as well and tried to take it out of Lu Feng's grip. "I can do it myself."

"Can you?" As Lu Feng looked at him, his long brows slightly furrowed. "You live on the first floor?"

"... I live on the fifth floor. But I can still do it."

"Oh."

His hand pressed down on An Zhe's fingers, and then An Zhe's hand was somehow instantly removed from the handle.

With a click, the handle slid neatly back into the suitcase. Lu Feng grasped the handle on the suitcase’s side, then effortlessly lifted the entire thing.

An Zhe gave a start.

He said, "There's really no need."

"The fifth floor?"

Fine.

An Zhe realized that he himself had given away the floor earlier.

But without waiting for An Zhe to react, Lu Feng already started walking to the unit's entrance, so he could only follow. Before entering the building, An Zhe even turned his head back to glance at Josh and saw that he was watching them, disconcerted, and hadn't moved a single step. Mr. Shaw had said that if An Zhe seduced a powerful mercenary, Josh would definitely take the long way around upon seeing him. By the looks of things now, that statement may have really been correct, even though the one at his side was the Arbiter rather than some mercenary and even though he actually had no relationship with Lu Feng whatsoever.

However, in the brief span of this distraction, An Zhe had already fallen several steps behind Lu Feng. The Colonel's legs were longer than his, so he could only increase his pace to catch up before entering the building together with Lu Feng.

To conserve power, only the corridor's tiny emergency lights were giving off a faint glow. The place was very dark and very cramped. In the silence, the sounds of the Colonel's combat boots treading on the floor was particularly distinct, every single sound seeming to knock on An Zhe's heart. Based on his understanding of Lu Feng, the man was about to ask, "What's in the box?"

But in a strange stroke of fortune, on the entire way to the fifth floor, Lu Feng didn't say anything at all.

An Zhe stood at the entrance to No. 14, took out his ID card, and swiped it to

open the door. The room's curtains hadn't been drawn shut, so as soon as he opened the door, the aurora's glow came in through the window. The aurora's bright luster covered the greater part of the pitch-black sky. It was mainly green, with orange and purple at the edges. An Zhe entered and turned on the little light in the room. Based on the courtesy that the human community should have, he looked at the Colonel, who was standing next to the door, and said, "Please come in."

Lu Feng readily walked in and put the rolling suitcase next to the wall. Observing his expression, An Zhe felt that he was actually in a good mood and also seemed like he didn't want to leave.

He asked tentatively, "Are you going to continue patrolling?"

Lu Feng leaned against the wall with his arms crossed and said, "No need."

With those green eyes watching him, An Zhe felt that the Arbiter did not completely believe that he was human even now and that he was still fastidiously searching for any possible slip-up.

An Zhe asked in a small voice, "Then what will you be doing later?"

"Head back to the City Defense Agency to rest," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe strove to converse with him in the manner of humans. "You aren't going back to the Trial Court?"

"It's too far."

"... Oh."

He felt that under the current circumstances, he ought to invite the Colonel in to sit for a while, but he wanted very badly for the other man to leave because although there appeared to only be one Colonel in the room, there were actually two.

He asked, "When are you going?"

Lu Feng looked at him.

An Zhe cast his gaze down and pursed his lips.

"Go get me a glass of water," Lu Feng said.

The tone was completely unlike that of a discussion or suggestion. No matter what this person said, it sounded like he was issuing orders.

"Okay," An Zhe replied.

He picked up the water cup on the table and opened the door. From here, it was very far to the communal water room in the corridor on this floor. He walked over and, facing the red and blue buttons, guessed as to whether Lu Feng liked to drink warm water or cold water.

Very quickly, he pressed the blue button that represented cold water. There was no ice water here, otherwise he definitely would've gotten it for Lu Feng.

Afterwards, as he held the water cup and thought about how he had to continue facing Lu Feng, he walked back to his room with a heavy heart.

The Arbiter helping him carry the suitcase upstairs late at night was just so he could come over and drink a glass of water. Could it have been that he was thirsty after being out on patrol all night?

Once he told Mr. Shaw about this experience tomorrow, based on the fact that Mr. Shaw's head only contained one thing, he would definitely say, "He wants to bed you."

Wrong.

An Zhe stopped dead in his tracks.

He suddenly recalled why Mr. Shaw had left the box with him.

Because Jensen had clearly always been selling cell phones in the black market without causing any trouble, but he suddenly couldn't be reached. Mr. Shaw felt that something was fishy, so they couldn't take the mannequin of the Arbiter back to the shop.

Frowning, he began to think back on Lu Feng's every action.

The Trial Court's patrols were all conducted in groups, just like that time at the entrance to the black market when Lu Feng had led three people. Why was he by himself now? And right downstairs from his home?

Furthermore, this Lu Feng person seemed to have the ability to read minds. Previously, whatever abnormalities he had were all discovered, so how come he

didn't ask at all about the suitcase’s contents this time?

An Zhe's hand, which had just landed on the door handle, froze.

He thought that the Arbiter, perhaps, had come to capture him.

He yanked his hand back, took out his communicator, and dialed AE77243, Mr. Shaw's number.

Four words appeared on the communicator's black-and-white electronic screen: "unable to accept call".

The alarm bells in An Zhe's heart went off.

But right at that moment, an authoritative and cold voice came from the other side of the closed door. "Come in."

An Zhe's heart thumped wildly. He took a deep breath, then opened the room door.

He saw Lu Feng standing in the same spot as before, head slightly bowed with the rolling suitcase upright at his side. An Zhe didn't know what he was thinking.

An Zhe took two steps and held out the cup. "Colonel, your water."

Lu Feng didn't move a muscle.

Something suddenly occurred to An Zhe.

He slowly, slowly turned his head to look at the other side of the room.

Then he met the gaze of the real Lu Feng.

Lu Feng was sitting at his desk with legs crossed, his sitting posture lofty. In his hand was a sheet of paper, and his head was tilted up to look at An Zhe.

An Zhe now knew true despair.

But at that very moment, all he could do was slowly take two steps forward and put the cup on the desk. "Your water."

Lu Feng picked up the water cup, put it to his mouth, and took a light sip, then frowned slightly. "Cold water?"

An Zhe didn't want to speak. He seemed to have done something wrong again.

He saw Lu Feng put the water cup onto the desk again, put the paper back on the table as well, and looked at him.

An Zhe swiftly admitted his mistake. "I was wrong."

Lu Feng didn't say anything. A full ten seconds went by before he asked, "What offense did you commit?"

"I didn't get warm water for you."

"Cold water is also fine."

An Zhe looked at the propaganda paper upon which "OPPOSE THE ARBITER'S TYRANNY" was written in bloody red, and his heart grew a bit colder again. He said, "I participated in an illegal demonstration."

"That's not it."

He was done for. There remained only one offense that he possibly could have committed.

What charge would cover the making a mannequin of the Arbiter?

As An Zhe felt self-loathing for not carefully looking at the base's laws before, he strove to find the correct words. Mannequin, a mannequin used for *that* kind of bad purpose—

The words Lu Feng said to Josh when they were downstairs popped up in his mind. In despair, An Zhe said, "... Indecency?"

He saw a shadow of a smile appear in Lu Feng's eyes. "Have you looked at the base's laws before?"

"I haven't."

Lu Feng said, "Come here."

An Zhe took a step forward.

"Hold out your hand."

An Zhe obediently held out his hand.

Lu Feng's words were still clipped. In the same commanding tone, he said, "Put it up here."

"Where?"

"On me."

An Zhe hesitated for a moment, then slowly placed his hand on the left side of Lu Feng's chest. The uniform's silver buttons and the badge pinned to his chest were all cold and had lines decorating their surfaces. He didn't know why Lu Feng wanted him to do this.

Click.

The icy silver handcuff was clipped onto An Zhe's wrist once more.

Lu Feng was expressionless. "For indecency."

An Zhe did not understand.

Immediately afterwards, he saw Lu Feng lift up his communicator.

"Capture complete. One item of contraband seized," he said. "Come provide backup."

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The City Defense Agency's corridor was even darker and colder than the one in the residential building.

An Zhe was taken to the first underground floor. In the dim lighting, there were iron doors all around, and he realized that this may be the humans' prison.

He was locked up behind one of them.

"You'll be tried tomorrow," Lu Feng said as he locked the iron door. "You have ten hours to prepare a defense."

An Zhe said, "... I don't have a defense."

"That's what I thought," Lu Feng replied.

With those words, he turned around and departed without even looking back, leaving behind only one sentence. "Rest well."

Clutching at the iron door, An Zhe watched Lu Feng's figure disappear in the corridor.

Whispers came from the opposite side.

"Like I was saying, they won’t skip over even one."

"If Hubbard hadn't gone out into the wilderness, he'd be eating prison meals too. He had me take the photographs in secret. You two really trapped me. After we get out, pay me."

"Go to Doussay. She placed the order, and the bill hasn't even been paid yet."

"Then take me with you."

Those were Mr. Shaw and Jensen’s voices.

An Zhe looked in the direction of the sound and strove to identify the two people who'd been locked up across from him in the dim lighting. "You two are also here?"

"Obviously," Jensen said. "I was happily selling cell phones when people from the Trial Court took me away."

Mr. Shaw sighed. "After I separated from you, I hadn't even entered the train station when I got caught."

Jensen asked, "What about you? How did you get caught?"

An Zhe didn't answer.

"Master," he said.

"What is it?"

"Do I really make people want to bully me a lot?"

"You only just realized?" Mr. Shaw said lazily. "Why do you ask?"

An Zhe didn't answer that either. He asked, "What offenses did you guys commit?"

"Does it still need to be said?" Mr. Shaw asked. "The crime of illegally stealing the Arbiter's information."

"Is that so?" An Zhe said.

"What?" Mr. Shaw asked. "Was that not the case for you?"

"It was," An Zhe said.

Mr. Shaw let out a long laugh. "Your tone has even changed. What, did someone bully you?"

An Zhe said indifferently, "No."

In the quiet space, Jensen yawned. "The prison beds are actually pretty soft."

An Zhe looked around his own space. In the cramped prison cell, there was a soft plastic board measuring one meter by two meters placed in a corner with a folded white blanket at its foot—this was probably the so-called bed.

He went over there and sat down cross-legged, then wrapped himself up in the thin blanket and leaned back against the wall.

Footsteps came from the end of the corridor, and eye-watering light brightened the corridor. Three City Defense Agency soldiers were making the rounds with flashlights in hand. When the soldiers passed by them, the one on the left said, "There's three more now. Who brought them in?"

"The Arbiter, I guess. Colonel Lu's powerful. Let’s be honest, the City Defense Agency is just the Trial Court's logistics team now."

"The Trial Court wants to completely take control of the City Defense Agency, but the director is still holding out."

The soldiers ran the flashlight beams over their faces and didn't say much else as they walked on. After examining them all one by one, they left through another corridor entrance.

After the sounds of their movements disappeared, the entire underground space became utterly silent except for the prisoners' breathing. An Zhe could sense that there were very few people. From the distance came the sound of water dripping onto plastic board, and Mr. Shaw muttered, "So this is how the City Defense Agency wastes water resources."

But the sound of the dripping water still continued, ceaseless and extremely consistent. Jensen said, "It's a watch."

Listening hard, An Zhe realized that the sound was coming from next door to him and sounding once every brief interval of time. It wasn't dripping water, but rather the sound of an old mechanical watch’s movements.

In the dark, the second hand went around at a constant pace, and time stretched out endlessly.

At last, Jensen said, "Mr. Shaw, you have a lot of experience. How long will we be locked up for?"

"Not too long, probably," Mr. Shaw said. "For illegally stealing the Arbiter's information, it'll depend on its usage. It's fine so long as it doesn't bring harm to the Arbiter."

"I'm not sure that's right. You used it to make a profit," Jensen said. "Even if we aren't locked up for too long, we'll have to pay fines, won't we?"

"Then I'd rather be locked up for a few additional years," Mr. Shaw said.

Jensen said with a sigh, "The Arbiter is the Arbiter. Even taking pictures will get you detained. In the future, I'll just stick to quietly selling cell phones. I had just taken a photo when people from the Trial Court pulled me away. At the time, I even thought I'd become a xenogenic at some point without knowing and got scared to death."

Mr. Shaw didn't say anything. From An Zhe's neighboring cell, however, came the clear voice of a young man. "I've seen the crime of illegally stealing the Arbiter's information before."

Mr. Shaw asked, "How long were they locked up for?"

"The shortest was three days, the longest was three years, and one was executed. He wanted to assassinate the Arbiter."

Mr. Shaw tentatively asked, "... Did he succeed?"

"He didn't."

"And he was still executed?"

"That's just how the Arbiter's Code is." The voice's tone was calm. "Without the Arbiter's absolute safety, there would be no Arbiter's absolute authority."

Mr. Shaw said, "Then... we didn't have any intention to harm him, so how long will we be locked up for?"

"Depends on the Arbiter's mood, really," the voice replied.

An Zhe's fingers curled around the blanket. He felt that the Arbiter was in a good mood.

He heard Jensen ask curiously, "Buddy, what did you do?"

The voice said, "They brought me up on charges of incitement and spreading fear."

Jensen seemed perplexed. "Huh?"

"I wrote contributions for the Cultural Affairs Administration, and the City Defense Agency arrested me," the person next door said. "The Cultural Affairs Administration closed down afterwards, yet I wasn't let out."

So he was An Ze's colleague, An Zhe thought.

Then he heard Jensen say, "How long have you been locked up for?"

"Lifetime imprisonment."

Jensen clearly went silent for a moment. "You're messing with me on this one."

The person let out a laugh but didn't reply.

An Zhe thought for a while. Based on An Ze's memories, the job he had performed was a very safe one.

He asked the neighbor, "What did you write?"

That person said, "Summaries of the base's history. My pen name is Poet. Have you read them before?"

"I haven't," An Zhe replied.

Poet said, "Then do you want to listen? Your voice sounds very nice. "

"Your voice sounds very nice too." An Zhe felt that he seemed to really want to talk, so he said, "I want to listen."

"Stop." Mr. Shaw spoke up. "The crime you committed was incitement. Don't think about inciting our kid too."

"Just listening is fine, you don't need to be afraid of being arrested." There was a laugh in Poet's voice. "Since you guys have already been arrested, and

all."

His words were very reasonable.

"Ever since I've been locked up here, I've had very few opportunities to talk about the things I spent a very long time sorting out," Poet said. "But you guys also roughly know those things."

An Zhe said, "I don't know them."

"Oh?" Poet said. "Then I'll go into a bit more detail."

"Let me think about where to start talking from..." His words gradually slowed. "I'll start from the Desert Era, I suppose."

"Before the Desert Era, was the 'Era of Great Prosperity'. The world had seven billion people altogether, and in flatland regions, you could drive for an hour and be able to come across a village or city. The cities were full of people. At the edges of the cities were croplands, livestock farms, and factories that provided manufacturing materials for the cities. There were wars during that period, but they were all wars between countries. Animals and plants were not the opponents of human weapons."

At that point, he paused, seemingly organizing his train of thought. A while passed before he said, "That was the year 2020. It's something from over a hundred years ago now."

"When I was a mercenary, I went to the ruins of a research institute in the nation's capital city. There, I dug out some information, which was a geomagnetism research report starting from 2020."

Nobody in the vicinity said anything. He continued, "Starting from that year, they detected that Earth's magnetic field was rapidly weakening—do you guys know about magnetic fields?"

Jensen said, "No need to ask me, buddy. I'm uneducated."

Mr. Shaw didn't say anything.

"The base doesn't teach these things," Poet said. "Anyhow, in 2030, the geomagnetic field disappeared."

Jensen bluntly asked, "So what exactly did the geomagnetic field do?"

"Earth was a massive magnet, with the South and North Poles as its positive and negative poles. The geomagnetic field was everything," Poet said. "After the geomagnetic field disappeared, compasses stopped working, biospheres all over the world were thrown into chaos, and human industries were all stopped, for there was no way to generate and use power. But those were the lightest consequences of the geomagnetic field's disappearance.

"The geomagnetic field... Its most important role was to protect Earth. Earth is suspended in the cosmos, and there's cosmic radiation in all directions along with solar winds, but after these things encountered the geomagnetic field, they were deflected in other directions and didn't harm organisms on Earth's surface. So in 2030, after the geomagnetic field disappeared, the entire planet directly faced the assault of solar storms and cosmic radiation. The external radiation was so strong that most of the land was directly blown away by the storms, the water disappeared, and the atmosphere thinned. Droughts, skin diseases, cancers... Half of the people on Earth died. That was the 'Desert Era'."

"Shit," Jensen said.

"However, the Desert Era ended very quickly." Poet let out a laugh, then continued. "From when the geomagnetic field's changes were discovered in 2020, humans had already put forth countermeasures divided into Plan A and Plan B. I flipped through so much information in the city ruins before finding out."

Jensen's tone of voice had become respectful. "Do tell."

"Plan A was to construct massive magnetic field generators at two special locations on the continents of Asia and North America. One was called the 'East Pole' and the other was called the 'West Pole'. By replacing Earth's North and South Poles with the two magnetic field generators in the East and West and producing resonance with the charged particles in the solar winds, a new magnetic field would be produced and cover the entire world."

Jensen clapped his hands a few times. "Amazing."

"Plan B was to construct large underground cities and shift the heart of human existence from the planet's surface to the underground to be free from the assaults of radiation and solar winds."

Jensen continued clapping. "Nice."

"In 2040, Plan B succeeded, and the underground cities became available to live in.

"In 2043, Plan A succeeded, and a weak magnetic field covered the entire world. The atmosphere no longer deteriorated, and living organisms no longer died because of the cosmic radiation. Human technology began to recover, and this period of time between 2040 and 2043 was called the 'Dawn Age'."

At this point, Poet sighed softly. "But humankind's most difficult times had only just begun."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

"I know," Jensen said from the opposite side. "The Era of Calamity came."

"Mm-hm," Poet said. "The cosmic radiation brought about unknown genetic mutations, resulting in very frightening things.

"Initially it was superbacteria, fungi, and viruses. They propagated in the human cities, indiscriminately infecting all people and leaving corpses everywhere in the cities. Those who have been to the ruins in the wilderness all know about this."

An Zhe asked, "How did they survive?"

"Surviving was a matter of luck," Poet said. "Within your genes, if you had immunity to these germs, you'd be able to survive, but otherwise you'd die. The people remaining were all immune. In the end, of the three billion people on Earth who survived the Desert Era, only one hundred million or so remained. But this wasn't humankind's most difficult time either."

"And afterwards?" An Zhe asked.

"What happened afterwards, you all know. You could say that it was the unknown evolution brought about by cosmic radiation or some kind of virus we couldn't detect. Overall mutation of creatures occurred, and the entire world was occupied by these things. There must be something special on their bodies. As soon as humans come into contact, they'll be infected, gradually lose their human attributes, and be assimilated. They like to attack humans, and human

genes are very tasty to them—and so the war began. This was the greatest war in human history."

After taking a soft breath, Poet continued. "The scattered humans had no way of withstanding the monsters' attacks, so humans began to combine their remaining resources and establish human bases. Our ID numbers begin with 3, which represents how this place is humankind's third base. The Underground City Base, Virginia Base, Northern Base, and Southeastern Base. The coalition of these four bases was the community of common destiny for mankind. After the bases were formed, humans could have a brief respite. Hence, you all can live like this now."

With this sentence, the atmosphere in the prison seemed to relax, but then with the next sentence, it dropped anew to the freezing point.

"Unfortunately, the bases weren't necessarily safe." Poet coughed a few times, and his voice gradually lowered.

"In 2061, there was an outbreak of rodent mutants, and the Southeastern Base fell.

"In 2073, marine xenogenics sneaked in, and the Virginia Base fell."

"Fuck." Jensen suddenly interrupted him. "Now I know why you'd commit crimes of incitement and maliciously spreading panic. The City Defense Agency ought to seal your mouth."

"But I didn't do anything wrong," Poet said with a smile. "I was only bumbling along in my boyfriend's mercenary team, collecting information everywhere from human ruins, and then organizing and publishing them when I was sentenced to life imprisonment."

Jensen said, "Your tongue ought to be cut out for good. You even had a boyfriend."

Poet laughed. "It's so boring inside the base. Why can't I have a boyfriend?"

No longer paying attention to Jensen, he said, "So now only the Northern Base and Underground City Base are still in operation. These two bases protect the magnetic field generators, so the auroras over the bases are brighter than in other places. The auroras are the flows of particles within the solar winds."

At that point, Poet sighed. "I don't know if there is still any communication between the two bases. There's the entire Pacific Ocean between them, after all. I said earlier that humankind's most difficult time wasn't the Desert Era, nor was it the Era of Calamity, because the most difficult time is right now. Who knows what will happen next?"

Just as he finished speaking, the earth shook violently

Dust fell from the prison's ceiling and landed on An Zhe's head and body, making him cough, but then stronger vibrations started up.

Jensen sprang to his feet and called out, "Earthquake?"

"It's not an earthquake." An Zhe heard the sounds of Poet climbing to his feet next door, and the well-informed man rambled on about some things he couldn't understand. "Earthquakes have transverse and longitudinal waves. Right now, it's random vibrations with a very shallow hypocenter—"

"—There's something underground!"

An Zhe understood that sentence.

"Boom!"

In the span of a moment, a loud sound came from the depths of the corridor, accompanied by the clanging of iron doors falling onto the ground.

"Boom!" The sound came again.

A vibration a hundred times stronger than the previous one rippled through, and An Zhe clutched the bars of the iron door to steady himself.

He could tell what the sound was now.

There was something—a massive living creature—fiercely slamming into the floor from below.

# 8

## “AN ZHE WAS SO ANGRY THAT HE EVEN WANTED TO EXTEND HIS HYPHAE.”

"FUCK!" Jensen cried out. "It's right below me!"

He was right. Immediately following, An Zhe felt the ground beneath his own feet begin to shake. The feeling was very close and very real, like a heavy hammer was beating the floor across from him.

Loud crashing sounds came from the end of the corridor again, and the rattle of the iron doors was accompanied by the alarmed cries of the prisoners in that direction.

"It's over there too." Poet's words abruptly sped up. "Underground creatures—could it be rodents? They live in groups, and the Southeastern Base was—"

Before he finished speaking, he swiftly corrected himself. "That's not right, rodents don't have such strength. Underground..."

The jumbled sounds of hasty footsteps came as a group of black-clothed soldiers sped down from the corridor stairs while waving their flashlight beams, and the sound of the loudspeaker echoed in the corridor, its volume earsplitting. "Do not panic. The City Defense Agency's foundation is very sturdy, as it is filled with cement and special steel plates. We are currently ascertaining the cause. Do not panic."

If they hadn't been swiftly opening the cell doors to let the prisoners out while they shouted, their words would have seemed more credible.

At the same time, a shrill sound began playing outside. The sound of the alarm rose and fell like waves.

"The evacuation alarm is going off!" Jensen smacked the cell door hard. "Buddy! Hurry up and open it for me!"

A soldier hastily opened three prison doors in the distance, then quickly strode over. Mr. Shaw was towards the outside of the jail. After the soldier found the key corresponding to the cell door, he swiftly jammed it into the lock. With a click, the iron door opened. Mr. Shaw practically flung himself out, and the soldier swiftly said, "Turn right and go upstairs to find the exit!"

Mr. Shaw stumbled a little, then ran towards the right. Dust rained down from the ceiling, and a soldier wiped his face as he stood in front of Poet's door.

Just then, Jensen shouted, "He's been imprisoned for life! He's a dangerous element! Open mine first! I'm a good citizen!"

The soldier appeared to hesitate briefly. As the shaking of the ground intensified, he turned to open Jensen's cell door.

Jensen clutched at the iron door with both hands, his voice trembling violently. "Hey, buddy, hurry up."

An Zhe saw that the soldier's hand was trembling too. Only after making multiple attempts did he manage to stick the key into the lock.

Jensen said, "You're my savior—"

His voice was abruptly cut off.

The floor creaked, and he was lifted up without warning. A huge black thing, pushing against broken bits of floor and dust, had suddenly sprung up!

With a dull "pff", Jensen's body was squeezed between the monster and the ceiling, and his eyes bulged out. Something sharp sliced open his abdomen, and blood mixed with viscera fell in splatters. There came a shrill scream. An Zhe's pupils dilated and he slowly turned his head. The soldier who had opened the door had been stabbed in the thigh and the right side of his chest by the crushed and twisted iron door and was convulsing and rolling on the floor while holding his leg, coughing violently. Large globs of bloody foam continually gushed from his mouth, so perhaps his lung had been punctured.

With a bang, the black thing fell back down again heavily. It broke open a hole in the ground, and it was empty underneath. Jensen's body fell in, never to be seen again.

The other soldiers' shouts came from the depths of the corridor. "Pull out—!"

But in the following second, the tremendous roar of the ground cracking sounded over there as well. The iron doors clanged as they fell to the ground, and the ceiling splintered and fell. Two fearful yells rang out, then stopped abruptly.

An Zhe heard the sounds of chewing.

First was the sound of water, then the dull sound of friction—the sounds of bodies being squeezed—and lastly there was the sounds of bones creaking and then splintering.

The sounds came from the end of the corridor as well as from the underground cavity in front of An Zhe.

While the soldier twitched and rolled around, his flashlight landed on the ground and rolled a few times. Its pale white glow lit up the pitch-black fissure.

At the same time, a single hypha reached out from the crack of the iron door, and additional hyphae then followed. They convened and snagged the splayed keys on the ground, then dragged them slowly through the iron door. The keys scraped against the floor, making a harsh sound. An Zhe saw the soldier's fearful gaze that was aimed in his direction—but he was in no position to care, and he knew the soldier was in no position to care either, because the latter had already breathed his last.

An Zhe asked his neighbor, "What number is my door?"

Poet's voice was trembling. "17. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," An Zhe said. He thought for a moment. His iron door was right next to Poet's iron door, so Poet's line of sight was limited and he could not see An Zhe taking the keys.

The hyphae retracted. He swiftly grabbed the keys, found the one for No. 17, and detached it from the rest.

The chewing sounds sped up.

Holding the key to No. 17, the hyphae once again extended out through the iron door. A portion of the hyphae stuck to the iron door, feeling for the

keyhole's location, while the other portion of the hyphae inserted the key. The hyphae were very fragile and had limited strength. An increasing number of hyphae converged, and the key finally turned. With a click, the lock sprung open.

Clutching the remaining keys, An Zhe pushed the door open and came to the neighboring door. His hands trembled a little as he found the key to No. 18. Then, with the flashlight beam facing the keyhole, he shoved the key in and forcefully turned it to the left. At that moment, the chewing sounds stopped entirely.

"My God..." A young man broke through the door and stumbled out. Before An Zhe even had the time to get a good look at his face, he firmly pulled him over a soldier's body, and the two of them ran towards the right-hand corridor, the only safe direction. The floor was still shaking, as there were more than two things under the ground.

At that moment, the emergency lights up ahead flashed a few times before going out completely, and the area ahead went entirely dark.

An Zhe heard Poet gasp for breath next to him. "Don't look back."

But An Zhe still turned his head back, unable to help himself.

A bug.

It was a black worm that spanned more than half the width of the corridor.

Its body was snake-like, but it was also divided into distinct segments. At that moment, it was slithering out through the massive fissure in the ground, its head raised as it looked in An Zhe and Poet's direction—perhaps it could not be called a head, for it had no eyes, nor did it have any structures that a head ought to have. The front end of its body only had a round mouth containing densely-packed teeth.

And behind it, another identical worm was slithering over. Two mouths in which densely-packed teeth pressing against each other unanimously faced them with a rustling noise. They approached, their speed not slow at all, and they were less than twenty meters away. An Zhe smelled the stench from their bodies.

Poet gritted his teeth and said, "Go!"

But the ground abruptly shook again, and the great force flung An Zhe against the wall. A sharp pain shot up his left arm—it seemed that he had collided with a deformed iron door. He pushed himself back up with his arms, and Poet gave him a tug as well. In the pitch-black darkness, they once again sprinted towards what they recalled to be the direction of the corridor entrance. In the darkness, anything could happen. Perhaps a third worm would break through the earth in front of them the very next second, or perhaps they would run straight into the wall because they could not see.

He truly did run into the wall.

An Zhe bumped his head against something with the consistency of metal and felt pain again. His entire body had collided with something. Then something wrapped around his waist in an attempt to scoop him up and stand him upright once more.

This wall also had hands.

"Are there still living people behind you?" Lu Feng's voice sounded from extremely close proximity, his words faster than usual.

An Zhe's heart practically stopped. He said, "No."

The people inside were all dead.

"Prepare the uranium shells, maximum equivalent," Lu Feng said. Just as he finished speaking, eye-watering white lights lit up from where they were and swiftly flew into the depths of the corridor.

Before An Zhe could react, Lu Feng once again pushed him down. They rolled on the ground, and An Zhe found himself pressed beneath the man.

In the following moment, the muffled sounds of explosions rang out, and the lightning-like white lights disappeared in an instant. Lu Feng's figure left a dazzling imprint on An Zhe's retinas. He closed his eyes and clutched at Lu Feng's sleeve cuff with his right hand, harshly gasping for breath—just now, he had run too quickly.

The ground was still violently shaking. Merely three seconds later, Lu Feng

pulled him up from the ground again. There were other people nearby, and lights brightened the area where they were. Lu Feng said, "Go."

An Zhe followed as they turned and ascended the staircase. He didn't have much strength left, but miraculously, the hand Lu Feng was helping him with seemed to have some special skill. Whenever he couldn't keep up, the man pulled him along.

He didn't know how long he had been blindly following for when the ice-cold air from the outside finally poured into his windpipe. He practically leaned against Lu Feng, panting the entire time.

Lu Feng said, "It's fine now."

"Apprentice! Apprentice!" A figure nearby approached and latched onto his arm, taking him from Lu Feng. It was Mr. Shaw.

An Zhe finally recovered a bit, and his vision cleared as well. He said, "Poet..."

"I'm here." A voice came from behind him. An Zhe turned back and saw a young and good-looking person leaning against the wall with arms crossed, gasping hard from strenuous exertion as well. Once his breathing finally evened out, he said in a leisurely manner, "You're great at bumping into people."

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

However, without waiting for him to say anything, Lu Feng spoke up.

"Director Howard," Lu Feng said, "you're late."

An Zhe looked forward and saw a row of soldiers standing up ahead. Their leader was a tall man dressed in the City Defense Agency’s uniform with iron gray hair, a magnificent hooked nose, and an emblem on his shoulder identical to Lu Feng's. He also held the rank of Colonel, and he looked to be the City Defense Agency's director.

Howard's voice was as steady and cold as his person. "We originally were prepared to bomb indiscriminately. Stepping outside the bounds of your authority and entering put me in a difficult position, Colonel Lu."

"My prisoners were still in there, after all." Lu Feng's voice was icy. "Do you also dare to indiscriminately bomb at the ultrasonic disperser’s location?"

"There's no need for the Trial Court to be concerned with the City Defense Agency's facilities," Howard said. "You'd better see if the people who came out from underground have been infected or not."

Lu Feng said, "There's no need for you to be concerned with the Trial Court's work either."

But Howard's gaze landed heavily on An Zhe. An Zhe briefly met his eyes and realized that the man was looking at his left arm—it had gotten injured underground and bled.

Lu Feng's right hand clapped An Zhe on his shoulder. "I'll take him away and keep him under watch during the buffer period."

Howard said, "Thank you for your hard work."

Immediately afterwards, he turned to the soldiers of the City Defense Agency. "Prepare for bombardment."

Then Lu Feng took An Zhe away as Mr. Shaw watched.

Lu Feng's office in the City Defense Agency was in an annex of the main building. It was a room without any decoration whatsoever. Just as An Zhe entered, he locked the door.

This might have been a type of preventative measure, An Zhe thought. If he really had been infected and turned into a monster, he wouldn't leave this room.

He saw Lu Feng walk over to the gray office desk, open a drawer, and take out a white object that he tossed over. An Zhe unconsciously caught it, and saw that it was a roll of bandages. The Arbiter probably meant for him to wrap up his wound. He sat down at another desk and chair set near the window and began to fiddle with the bandages. He thought that although the Arbiter declared people guilty as he pleased, perhaps he could yet be regarded as a good person.

He was wounded on his left arm. It was small, only a scratch from the sheet iron. It didn't hurt much, but blood had oozed out. An Zhe tore off a length of bandage approximately half a meter long and began to wrap it around his left arm with his right hand—but he couldn't wrap it up.

With great difficulty, he loosely wrapped it using one hand, but he couldn't tie a knot. Human fingers were not as dexterous as hyphae in the first place, and moreover he only had one hand to use, and furthermore he was by no means particularly familiar with human limbs. But An Zhe felt that as someone who was human on the surface, it would be somewhat embarrassing if he couldn't even wrap a bandage, so he frowned and continued trying to tie a knot.

He felt a gaze land on him. Lu Feng was watching him.

He continued tying the knot. But as soon as he thought about how the Arbiter was watching his every move, his knot-tying technique worsened. After trying hard for three minutes, not only did he not tie the knot, with a shake of his hand, the bandages that had been wrapped around his arm came unraveled as well. The moment it unraveled, An Zhe was so angry that he even wanted to extend his hyphae.

A soft laugh came from the opposite side.

In fact, it couldn't count as a laugh. It was only the sound of a breath, very short, but An Zhe could tell—that sound was a derisive laugh, a mocking laugh.

An Zhe was speechless.

The Arbiter was mocking him.

Right at that moment, a hand appeared in front of his eyes. Long fingers and pale skin. An Zhe was far too familiar with this shape, for after Mr. Shaw finished making this hand, it was placed in the container at the head of his bed where he could see it every night before going to sleep. It was Lu Feng's hand.

That hand picked up one end of the bandage while the other hand picked up the other end and looped the bandage around his arm a few times before tightening it slightly.

Then An Zhe watched those ten fingers nimbly interlock to tie a neat knot in the bandage.

Lu Feng had helped him with wrapping the bandage, although the man had laughed mockingly at him a second ago.

He tugged down his shirt cuff and mumbled, "Thank you."

Lu Feng said nothing in return.

The sound of a loud explosion suddenly came from downstairs, but it was very muffled, as if it was coming from deep underground. An Zhe looked down. The City Defense Agency’s layout consisted of four tall buildings surrounding a spacious atrium, and the building he was locked up in tonight was the shortest one. Right now, the interior of the building was in complete chaos—the people inside were evacuating, and heavily-armed soldiers entered one unit at a time with their weaponry. The sound of explosions rang out continuously, and the building creaked. The vibrations made the glass shatter, and some rooms had already collapsed. The building that had been solid and magnificent just half an hour ago gradually turned into ruins. Like a white fog, dust and the smoke from the uranium shell explosions enveloped the area. The City Defense Agency's soldiers, armed to the teeth, set up a cordon around it and erected radiation signs.

The uranium shells used by the military were depleted uranium shells. They had strong penetrative power and relatively weak radiation, though long-term exposure would still harm people and required special handling.

Most of the people evacuated from the building were scattered outside the City Defense Agency, but Mr. Shaw, Poet, and the other prisoners were placed in a makeshift tent in the atrium with five gun-carrying soldiers guarding them. An Zhe could see them.

He saw Lu Feng stand up and walk to the window.

Large ribbons of dark green aurora spread across the sky outside the window, looking very dazzling. Lu Feng's figure as he stood in front of the window was transformed into a black silhouette, and he turned his head to look at the other side of the atrium.

An Zhe looked in the direction of his gaze and saw that on the other side of the atrium, there was a massive black device resembling a black round disk, and layer after layer of massive octagonal coils encircled it. The disk curved smoothly inwards starting from the edges, and a stout conical object stood erect in the center. Very thin things—something akin to wires or utility lines—radiated outward, connecting the black cone and the coils. The entire device

was even more colossal than two buildings put together. If one were to stand beneath the disk and look up, it would be impossible to see the sky no matter what direction they faced.

An Zhe looked at it with his chin resting in one hand. He always felt that human creations were colossal and strange.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lu Feng take out his communicator and dial a number. His cold and quiet voice rang out, sounding like snow in the depths of wintertime.

"Trial Court, Lu Feng. Requesting transfer to the Lighthouse center."

The two of them were in close proximity. When the sound dispersed from the communicator's receiver, it reached An Zhe's ears as well.

The other side replied, "Transferring now, please wait."

After approximately twenty seconds, a male voice came from the other side. "What's going on with the City Defense Agency?"

Lu Feng said, "Underground invasion, large worm-class. Suspected to live in groups. The City Defense Agency is safe for now."

"Understood," the other party said. "The possibility of worms living in groups is extremely high. We will immediately dispatch the research team to the City Defense Agency. Pay attention to protecting the disperser."

"All right."

Just as he hung up, his communicator rang again on its own. This time, someone had dialed him.

"Howard?" Lu Feng asked.

"The ground underneath Building 3 can't be shelled anymore. Our men found crawl tracks and fought at close quarters with the monsters underground," Howard said. "Some men were wounded. The ones with heavy wounds have already been shot, and the ones with light wounds are currently being sent out. You have to keep watch."

Lu Feng looked downstairs. "I can see them."

After saying that, he added, "Worms are highly dangerous. Send them out immediately once they come into contact with mucus as well."

Howard uttered a curse, but Lu Feng's expression remained unchanged. He said, "Pay attention to the disperser."

"At present, no tracks heading towards the disperser have been discovered." Howard's tone of voice was a bit forceful. "The foundation beneath the disperser is stronger than that of the buildings. Just concentrate on your own job duties, Colonel Lu."

Lu Feng said flatly, "Thank you for your hard work."

The call ended. From the tone, it may not have been a pleasant call, but Lu Feng seemed to not care. He leaned against the window, his bearing slightly languid, but he was constantly watching the soldiers coming and going from the atrium. An Zhe knew he was monitoring the soldiers to see if they were safe or not.

With nothing to do, An Zhe continued examining the massive apparatus in the atrium.

From the conversations between Lu Feng and the others just now, he guessed that this was the aforesaid "ultrasonic disperser".

He was familiar with this term, for it was mentioned in the *Base Handbook*. The base's outer city had a total of ten ultrasonic dispersers, all of which were managed by the Dispersion Center located in District 1. Before, in Mr. Shaw's shop, he had also heard the base broadcast say that it was currently the breeding season for arthropod-class and parasitic-class monsters. To prevent aerial invasion, the base raised the operating strength of the ultrasonic dispersers to level III.

That was to say, the apparatus's function was to protect the entire base against invasion by airborne monsters such as arthropods and birds. An Zhe didn't know how it worked. He only felt it seemed very magical.

After examining every single one of the disperser’s details, he turned his gaze back to the interior of the room. This office was by no means large and did not have anything except for two sets of desks and chairs, a gun rack, and a few

filing cabinets. Many things were neatly stacked within the filing cabinets. There were papers with contents he couldn't see and file folders, a few copies of the *Base Handbook*, some apparatus operation guides, and a *Base Constitution* that was four finger widths thick—it turned out that the laws portion in the *Base Handbook* was an abridged version.

An Zhe continued looking around. Below the document organizers were some glass jars. Most of them were empty, but there was one on the side that seemed to contain a dozen or so plant seeds. To the side of that, there was also a bag of something akin to soil samples with a white "safe" label stuck to it.

An Zhe thought of his spore once again.

Seeds and spores were roughly similar. Would his spore, which the military had dug out, have also been placed in a glass jar or some other container? As soon as he imagined it, the instinctive discomfort surged up again; he seemed to have been placed in an airtight jar as well. His spore was the most important part of him, but he still didn't know where it was. Moreover, all of the leads were cut off by this Arbiter next to him.

If he wanted to find his spore, he had to ask Lu Feng for information.

But he was only a mushroom. He knew he wasn't like humans. He also knew that Lu Feng's power of observation was very fearsome. There was a very high probability that as soon as he spoke up, he would be suspected.

Or he could also do his best to observe Lu Feng for some time.

With that thought, he suddenly gave a start, then turned his head and met Lu Feng's eyes. In the lamplight, he didn't know how long those long and narrow deep green eyes had been watching him for, his expression indifferent.

An Zhe suspected that he was being suspected again, but he had to bluff his way through.

Facing the Colonel's gaze, he blinked.

The Colonel's expression didn't change at all as he said in a calm voice, "You may go."

The buffer period was over.

"Back down there?" An Zhe asked.

The prisoners were all living in the makeshift tents in the atrium.

"Mm."

An Zhe bit his lower lip. After a while, his yearning for his spore overcame his fear of the Colonel. He said, "It's cold there."

Eyeing him, Lu Feng said, "You're a prisoner."

"But I haven't committed any crimes of indecency."

Lu Feng looked at him. Two seconds later, he smiled.

"All right," Lu Feng said. "For the crime of illegally stealing the Arbiter's information, the penalty will be doubled."

"I didn't steal it." An Zhe tried hard to explain himself. "I only made something according to your information."

"Oh," Lu Feng said. "For the crime of using the Arbiter's information to make illegal profits, the penalty will be doubled twice."

An Zhe lowered his voice. "I didn't make a profit either."

Lu Feng looked at him with arms crossed. "Didn't make a profit? Did you take it for personal use?"

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

He couldn't outspeak him.

Lu Feng looked at him, frowning slightly. "How much profit?"

"I don't know," An Zhe said.

"What are your wages?"

“60R."

Lu Feng laughed again.

"How pitiful," he said. "Your boss cheated you. After you get out of prison, remember to ask him for a raise."

An Zhe felt that he was being mocked again. This was the third time tonight

that this person angered him. He firmly believed that Lu Feng was the human who was the best at bullying others within the base.

Before he thought of what to say, he saw Lu Feng glance down at his watch.

"It's early morning now." His voice once again took on the commanding tone An Zhe was familiar with. "Go down and sleep."

At that very moment, the cold night wind blew in from the window directly onto An Zhe's face. The temperature difference between day and night at the base was very big.

He let out a very small sneeze, then saw Lu Feng across from him furrow his brow, seemingly disgusted.

Frowning, Lu Feng said coldly, "So delicate."

An Zhe confirmed that he was being viewed with disgust. But the wind was too cold. Unable to resist, he sneezed again.

He truly was very afraid of the cold, and he also truly wanted to look for clues at Lu Feng's side. But as he looked at the Colonel's facial expression, he realized that if he stayed any longer, he may be thrown out the window.

He had no choice but to bow his head and silently gather his shirt collar, stand up, and turn to leave.

Just as he reached the doorway, he heard Lu Feng's voice come from behind him. "Halt."

An Zhe halted and turned back.

Lu Feng was still leaning against the window with his arms crossed. His gaze shifted to the right side of the room and he said, "You can go over there."

Following his gaze, An Zhe saw another door on the right-hand wall. He walked over and opened it.

It was a nap room with a simple bed and desk. At the door was an upright clothes-stand upon which a black uniform coat hung.

An Zhe realized whose room this was.

He said, "You..."

"I can't sleep tonight," Lu Feng said. "You can choose to sleep here or outside."

After weighing the two options, An Zhe said resolutely, "Thank you."

Without a word, Lu Feng turned to face the window and continued observing the area below. The sounds outside had never stopped; it was still utter chaos.

An Zhe walked into the room, and after closing the door, he examined the place. The room was filled with a cheerless atmosphere. There weren't many traces of human habitation save for a few creases in the folded quilt at the foot of the bed.

On the wooden table were some detachable magazines and a blunt silver military knife next to them, but those were not what attracted An Zhe's gaze. In the middle of the table was an opened book. On its pages was black handwriting.

6.16, normal.

6.15, normal.

6.14, normal.

An Zhe realized what it was. This was the Arbiter's work notebook—during that demonstration against the Trial Court, there was a poster written with the words "publicize the Arbiter's work notes".

But by the looks of it, based on how perfunctory Lu Feng's notebook was, even if it was publicized, there wasn't much worth seeing.

He flipped back to May.

Amidst a string of "normals", there was an additional line:

5.17, parasitic invasion, resolved, report to be submitted.

5.18, normal, 5.17 report submitted.

He continued upwards.

5.11, normal, suspect ID3261170514 (extremely low risk), passed genetic examination, permitted to enter city.

It seemed that on that day at the city gates, Lu Feng had not only discovered

his abnormality, but also how weak he was.

But he didn't stop there, for a kind of intuition drove him to keep flipping backwards through the pages.

Mr. Shaw said that all members of the military, even if they belonged to the Trial Court, would go out on missions in the wilderness.

And there was one of the Trial Court's bullet shells at the place where he lost his spore.

An Zhe's heart pounded as he hastily flipped through a dozen or so pages when one record different from the rest stood out before his eyes.

2.20, returned to base, samples handed over to Lighthouse.

An Zhe's gaze paused on this line before he continued to flip. The records on this page suddenly became much more compacted.

2.12, wilderness, Abyss, supplemented 4 map records, collected 7 plant samples, 4 animal samples, 7 secretion samples, 3 mixed polymorphic monster behavior information footages.

2.13, wilderness, Abyss, collected 13 plant samples, 3 animal samples, 3 secretion samples, 6 mixed polymorphic monster behavior information footage.

He had gone to the Abyss.

An Zhe's eyes flew wide open, and his gaze stopped on the page's last record.

2.14, wilderness, return home, collected 1 abnormal fungus sample (spore).

An Zhe's mind went blank for a moment, and his hand that was holding the page trembled.

In his time as a mushroom, he didn't have much of a concept of time. Sunrises and sunsets were only a type of change in the course of nature. He didn't know how long he had lost his spore for.

February 14th. According to human seasons, that was when winter had not yet ended. It was indeed so, for the howling cold winds of the night he lost his

spore still echoed in his memories and dreams.

There would be no other mushroom in the world who had likewise lost its spore in the same winter. His meeting with Lu Feng occurred far earlier than that time at the city gates. And perhaps it was the Arbiter himself, separated from him by only a wall, who had personally taken his spore.

He paused, then flipped forward through this work notebook. On the next page, February 20th, Lu Feng had returned to the base and written down "samples handed over to Lighthouse".

After his gaze lingered on that line for three seconds, he flipped the journal back to June 17th and put the black ballpoint pen back on the page, as if it had never been flipped through.

An Zhe looked away from the book and at the wall behind the desk. The Arbiter held ultimate authority within the base. He could open fire on any person and also order the cooperation of all organizations in the city. In emergency situations, he could mobilize the City Defense Agency's soldiers, just like that day at the supply depot's square. But despite his high position and authority, his quarters in the City Defense Agency were even more desolate and simple than An Zhe's own room. Even the walls had only received a thin layer of paint, faintly revealing the texture of the gray cement beneath.

And on this light gray wall, on a place slightly above the height of a person, seven words and a period were written with red paint.

"Humankind's interests take precedence over all else."

An Zhe shivered lightly. The underground prison was too cold, and he still hadn't yet recovered. He turned his gaze to the nearby bed. After hesitating for a few seconds, he got in.

His head sank down into the pillow, but he didn't dare to wrap the quilt around himself as usual. He only loosely draped it over himself and curled up. The quilt, pillow, and bedsheets were all the base's standard issue, with no differences whatsoever from the underground prison's prisoners' bedding. Even the scent of the synthetic material was identical. But An Zhe felt that it was very different—sleeping upon the Arbiter's bed, along with the sound of brief conversation between Lu Feng and some other person from the office on the

other side of the wall, the feeling was difficult to describe. Very dangerous, yet also very safe.

Anyone would have trouble sleeping in this situation, let alone himself, a mushroom.

But he actually didn't have trouble sleeping for too long. Lost in fanciful thoughts, his body gradually warmed up due to the quilt, the world before his eyes gradually blurred, and in that manner, he tumbled into a dream.

Someone woke An Zhe up, and he was convinced that only a short time had passed since he fell asleep.

Just a moment ago, he was still experiencing the feeling of having his spore dug out for the umpteenth time in the wilderness, and then he felt a hand patting the pillow next to him.

An Zhe gave a start and opened his eyes, meeting a pair of cold green eyes. It was the murderer who dug out his spore.

Lu Feng lifted the quilt off of him and quickly said, "Evacuate."

There was no need for him to explain. The moment An Zhe woke up, he also realized the building beneath him was trembling slightly, just like the underground prison—had worms appeared beneath this building as well?

After pondering briefly, the wave-like alarm went off again. It was another evacuation signal.

Before he had time to think much, he leapt out of bed and put on his shoes. Lu Feng grabbed An Zhe's shoulder with his right hand and led him out of the room. A cold wind blew in from the open door, and An Zhe instinctively shivered, having suddenly come to this situation from the warm quilt. Right away, he felt the hand Lu Feng was holding him with pause.

A black shadow dropped onto him, and he felt its weight on his body. Lu Feng had grabbed the coat from the nearby clothes rack and tossed it onto him. An Zhe did not have time to say 'thank you', only gathering the coat around himself. Lu Feng's movements didn't stop. He swiftly picked up the work notebook and ballpoint pen from the table, stuffed them into the pocket of the coat covering An Zhe, then grabbed his wrist and quickly walked towards the

exit. Two Judges were already waiting at the doorway. Upon seeing Lu Feng, they promptly called out, "Colonel!"

Then the two of them simultaneously glanced at An Zhe.

Lu Feng didn't say anything, and the group went downstairs from the nearest emergency passage. The interior of the passage was pitch-black, for the monsters' assault had affected the power systems. Only the green fluorescent guiding lights were still glowing. The stairs were both narrow and steep, so they could only just manage to accommodate two people side by side. But the other three moved too quickly. After Lu Feng dragged An Zhe down one floor, the latter had already stumbled a good number of times and realized that unless he changed into hyphae, he would not only be unable to keep pace with these people, but also slow down Lu Feng.

Just as he was about to say that there was no need for Lu Feng to pull on him and that he'd walk on his own, a force was suddenly applied to his shoulder as Lu Feng grabbed it and twisted him backwards—the momentum of going down the stairs was still there, so An Zhe instantly ran into Lu Feng's back. He had bumped his head against the badge on Lu Feng's chest earlier, and now he bumped it against the epaulette. The stairs sloped downwards and he was in a higher position than Lu Feng, so with this collision, he instinctively clutched at Lu Feng.

Then the man picked him up in a piggy-back carry.

With arms wrapped around the Arbiter's neck, An Zhe recalled the chaotic but also seemingly logical sequence of movements and felt very mystified.

The key point was that this person didn't seem to exert any effort while carrying him, instead easily leaping down the stairs and landing steadily on the ground. Then he made a run-up to the second floor window, leapt out of it, and leveraged the platform outside the first floor window. The wind howled in An Zhe's ears, and somehow Lu Feng landed on the lawn beneath the building.

Lu Feng clearly did not have the obvious bulky brawn of Vance or Howard, but through the layers of clothing, An Zhe still felt his terrifying explosive power the moment he tensed up. Human bodies were by no means the same as soft hyphae.

After Lu Feng landed, the sound of two other landings came in quick succession behind them. It was the other two Judges.

An Zhe felt that just holding onto Lu Feng used up a lot of his energy, but his was clearly also a human body.

He realized that the differences between people were greater still than the differences between people and mushrooms.

But three seconds later, he realized that all the people inside the atrium were looking at him. The sky had brightened earlier, and the light mist couldn't block others' gazes at all. Mr. Shaw stuck his head out from the nearest tent, glanced first at Lu Feng, then glanced at him, and promptly began to make suggestive faces at him.

Lu Feng put him down, and An Zhe also loosened his grip around Lu Feng's neck as he landed.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," Lu Feng said. "Go to the tents."

The tents were just a few steps away. An Zhe gave an affirmative response and turned, only to run right into the approaching Howard.

"What's the matter?" Lu Feng asked.

"The situation has changed. Many more have suddenly come. When the Lighthouse's people came and turned on the radar, it showed that there are bugs beneath all four buildings," Howard said. "It's not just one or two, but a group. There's a bug nest beneath the City Defense Agency. They broke through the earth to attack the people in the buildings."

"Full evacuation?" Lu Feng asked.

"Full evacuation. You as well," Howard said with finality.

Lu Feng said, "Let me see the radar imaging."

"No need to look, it's beyond saving."

"The disperser is here."

Howard's voice went cold as he dug in his heels. "The disperser can't be

protected anymore. How many more times do you want me to say it? After evacuating, I'll immediately contact the Dispersion Center to increase the operating strength of the other nine dispersers."

An Zhe looked back and saw that Lu Feng's expression was icy and that his right hand had come to rest on the gun at his waist as he repeated, articulating each word clearly, "Show me the radar imaging."

"You—!" Howard, seeming furious yet afraid of the Arbiter's privilege of killing at any time and any place, waved his hand in a certain direction.

A man in a plain shirt walked over from the other side, holding a black instrument in a hand. Lu Feng took the instrument from him and scanned the screen.

An Zhe watched helplessly as the temperature on his face dropped from zero degrees Celsius to eighteen below zero, and his voice was so cold that it could make shards of ice form.

"The monsters' objective isn't the people in the buildings, it's the disperser." He lifted his gaze to look at Howard, his speech quick. "The atrium has the disperser and its foundation is reinforced and can't be broken, so they can only emerge from beneath the four buildings."

"The Lighthouse's report does not support your conclusion, Colonel Lu," Howard said.

"I spend half of every year in the Abyss." With fingers pressed down on the gunstock, Lu Feng narrowed his eyes slightly, and his icy intimidation made everyone freeze. "Howard, I've seen more monsters than you have people."

Howard was silent for three seconds, not saying anything. Then, as if he suddenly thought of something, his pupils dilated and his expression changed drastically. "Then the other dispersers—"

"Contact the Dispersion Center," Lu Feng said. "Immediately."

The Judge behind him took out a communicator, dialed a string of numbers, and pressed the speaker key.

"Beep—"

The monotonous hold tone played.

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

It was silent throughout the atrium.

After nine hold tones, a hurried busy tone came from the communicator, and three seconds later, the busy tone stopped, nobody answered, and the communicator automatically hung up.

Howard swiftly pulled out his communicator, and after punching in a few buttons, he said to the other side, "City Defense Agency Colonel Howard, transfer me to the Dispersion Center, any line is fine, at once."

"Please wait." The operator's voice came through.

After that sentence, there was a long silence. A full three minutes later, the operator's voice came again, a slight tremble at the end of his words.

"The Dispersion Center is unreachable."

# 9

## “THOSE TEN DAYS WERE TRULY A BLOODBATH.”

THE SECOND AFTER the operator finished speaking, Lu Feng's countenance changed.

He turned on his heel and left, and the Lighthouse researcher quickly followed. One of the Trial Court's cars was parked outside the City Defense Agency, and a young Judge came running over. "Colonel!"

"You all will stay and assist the City Defense Agency," Lu Feng said.

"Colonel, do we need to convene the Trial Court?"

Lu Feng's gaze swept over the thin streams of people on the road. "Close the city gates and gather in District 5."

"Yes sir," the Judge said. "Stay safe, Colonel."

Lu Feng didn't say anything as he slammed the car door shut and started the engine. He turned the steering wheel hard, and the black car made a swift U-turn before heading towards the Dispersion Center in District 1 like an arrow leaving its bowstring. Following closely in its wake were Howard's car and the City Defense Agency's heavily armored vehicles.

In the back seat, the researcher was holding a communicator and holding a conversation as well. He was being questioned.

"We're currently heading to the Dispersion Center," the researcher said. "We must prepare for the worst-case scenario.

"For now, it's suspected that the special frequency used by the ultrasonic dispersers to drive off arthropods and birds is simultaneously attracting underground worms. But there is also no doubt that this was a premeditated attack.

"Yes, we are currently contacting the other disperser locations."

At the same time, in the middle of the city, the sound of the alarm tower abruptly rang out. Its constant shrill wail was deafening. After hearing it, the countenances of the people sparsely scattered on the early morning streets changed dramatically, and after looking at each other, they bolted towards the nearest buildings as the sustained sound meant "find emergency shelter".

At the same time, the street broadcast began to play and a pleasant robotic female voice said, "Alert. Due to a breakdown of the ultrasonic disperser, insects, birds, and worm-class monsters may appear in the city in the near future. Before repairs are confirmed, please immediately close all doors and windows and refrain from going out. Upon discovering a suspicious situation, please immediately dial the emergency line and contact the City Defense Agency. The base's military will do all it can to protect your safety."

"Alert. Due to a breakdown of the ultrasonic disperser, insects, birds, and worm-class monsters may appear in the city in the near future..."

The sounds of windows slamming shut came in an unbroken succession from the residential buildings all around, and the City Defense Agency's workers and prisoners were swiftly transferred to the nearest residential area. Steady streams of armored vehicles emerged from the City Defense Agency's various garrison points within the base and dispersed all over the roads.

An Zhe, Mr. Shaw, and Poet were in the same room. The City Defense Agency had its hands full with its own matters, and of the three of them, one had committed the crime of incitement, one had committed the crime of illegally stealing the Arbiter's information, and one had been charged with some strange accusations by the Arbiter—in short, they posed no lethal threat, so no soldiers kept watch on them and they were only locked in.

"The Dispersion Center remotely manages all the dispersers in the outer city." Poet looked out the window. "In the air of the wilderness, even a tiny flying bug may infect humans. Only by using special frequency ultrasound to disperse them can the base maintain the residents' absolute safety. Not even a fly can get into the base. If something really has happened to the Dispersion Center, then the entire city is exposed to the possibility of infection. To insects in the

midst of breeding season, human flesh and blood make the best breeding grounds for their eggs."

An Zhe sat on the bare bed board, hugging his knees. He asked, "What will happen?"

Poet reached out and pinched the nape of An Zhe’s neck. "Supposing that a little bug laid its eggs beneath your skin last night, the bug genes and your human genes will fuse. In another three days at most, you'll be a bag of skin wrapped around up to a hundred million insect eggs. The little bugs will fly out from your eyes and windpipe onto other people, and very soon—"

"Don't scare the kid.” Mr. Shaw said, clearly disgruntled by this exchange.

Poet leisurely retracted his hand. "I'm speaking the truth."

The xenogenic whose stomach Lu Feng had cut open that day at the supply depot square suddenly appeared before An Zhe's eyes. His abdominal cavity and windpipe were full of small translucent bugs.

He asked, "Then what can we do?"

Poet shook his head.

"We can only pray that nothing major happened to the Dispersion Center or that the disperser can be quickly repaired soon after, otherwise..." He sighed softly. "Otherwise, either there will be a base-wide outbreak or... Judgment Day will repeat itself."

An Zhe frowned as he looked at the deserted streets through the window.

But he heard Mr. Shaw ask, "You know about Judgment Day?"

"I've heard a bit about it," Poet said.

Mr. Shaw sighed. "I thought that so long as I obediently stayed within the base, I could live until I died of old age."

"The base has been safe for too long." Poet was still looking into the distance. "I always forget that safety is what's temporary while danger is eternal. Life isn't something we're owed. Life is a gift."

An Zhe didn't really understand, nor did he know how to ask about it.

He only had one question. "What is Judgment Day?"

But Mr. Shaw glanced at him. "I forgot to ask you. What's the story behind your clothes?

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

Lu Feng's coat was still draped over his shoulders, and in the coat's pocket were Lu Feng's work notebook and ballpoint pen.

Mr. Shaw narrowed his eyes.

"Last night, when Poet and I were in the tents, where were you?" he asked. "Did you sleep with him?"

"No." An Zhe always felt that Mr. Shaw was interrogating him. He replied in a small voice, "He didn't sleep."

Mr. Shaw let out a huff of laughter. "How did you know he didn't sleep? You did sleep with him. How was he? 'Fess up."

An Zhe knew that he couldn't outspeak anyone, so he pretended to not hear his question. Instead, he repeated his own. "What is Judgment Day?"

"Then do you know how the Arbiter's Code was proposed?" Poet asked him.

"I don't," An Zhe said.

Poet looked at Mr. Shaw. "The elder must know."

Mr. Shaw said with a lift of his eyebrows, "I do."

Poet said, "How old are you?"

But Mr. Shaw didn't reply. He said, "When I was young, everyone greatly supported the bill."

Poet sat down on the corner of the bed right next to An Zhe. His gray prison uniform was worn out in some places, his black shoulder-length hair was tied at the back of his head in a simple manner, and his facial expression was very calm. When he spoke, it was with a contrived cadence that was perhaps the tone commonly used by those in Poet's line of work. "The Arbiter's Code has lasted for almost seventy years. I think the Northern Base is very grateful towards it. I don't know much about that thing in particular, because the base

has too few old people."

Mr. Shaw's interest seemed to have finally shifted from the question of how An Zhe slept. As he played with small mannequin parts he had taken out from his pocket, he said, "I also heard it from others when I was young."

"Do tell," Poet said.

"After the Southeastern Base met its doom, everyone was very afraid. In those days, the xenogenics' degree of mutation was not yet as severe as it is now. When people returned to the base from the outside, they only needed to pass a full-body examination. Which was fine, as long as they didn't have wounds or other abnormalities. There were soldiers everywhere within the base, and as soon as a mutant was discovered, it would be immediately killed," Mr. Shaw said. "The ultrasonic dispersers hadn't been invented yet either, so insects flew around within the base. The soldiers killed the big ones with obvious mutations, but the small ones couldn't be caught, so insect-catching lights were hung up everywhere within the base. Minors weren't permitted to leave the base, so they formed insect-catching teams and stamped out insects everywhere."

Poet said, "The Turmoil Age."

"Pretty much," Mr. Shaw said. "I was even an insect-catching team captain in my youth. It wasn't until more than ten years later that we had the ultrasonic dispersers and not even a single bug could fly into the base."

"At that time, the Arbiter's Code had already been enacted," Poet said.

"Correct," Mr. Shaw said. "But the enactment of the bill wasn't because of the bugs, but because of a surveillance recording. When a supervisor was making a routine inspection of the water tower footage, he saw that something had happened in one corner, but the spot was too dark and not clearly captured on video, so nobody discovered it at the time. The moment the supervisor saw the footage, he was scared out of his wits. You guys can't imagine the sight."

Mr. Shaw's story piqued An Zhe's interest, and he saw that Poet was also listening with rapt attention.

Then he heard Mr. Shaw continue. "He saw a person with a very strange

posture walk to the edge of the circulating pool. Then that person sat down like they had no bones in their body. I heard from the people who recorded the footage that the person was like a human-shaped leech. After sitting down, he stuck his legs into the pool."

"He was a xenogenic and using his secretions to pollute the water source?" Poet asked.

Mr. Shaw smiled. "Hah, that wouldn't have caused that much fear."

Poet raised his eyebrows.

"Then that person's legs turned into something translucent and whitish. As if they had exploded, a large patch diffused into the water. There's no way to describe it." Mr. Shaw shook his head and continued. "And after that, the person's entire body also flowed into the pond, and the water level immediately rose by a lot. I heard people say that it was like it had been stuffed full of white minced pork. That water was a part of the base's water circulation system.

"And after that, it flowed away through the outlet along with the water, which was the base's drinking water," Mr. Shaw said. "What made it even worse was that it was a recording from more than twenty hours prior already."

Poet frowned slightly, seeming somewhat nauseated. Only after his Adam's apple had bobbed a few times did he say, "The whole city was exposed."

"Correct," Mr. Shaw said. "The Lighthouse gave out its investigation results. It was a soft-bodied aquatic xenogenic, and diffusing into the water may have been a reproduction method. In short, the entire base was at risk of infection, and nobody was safe. That bill was urgently enacted soon afterwards."

"There's a saying," Poet said, "that the initial generations of Arbiters and the Trial Court did not belong to the military but were subordinate institutions of the Lighthouse instead."

"That's also correct. After the aquatic xenogenic invasion, amongst the Lighthouse's scientists, some studied humanoid xenogenics and understood quite a lot about their characteristics. They formed the Trial Court, and in ten days, they organized for everyone in the base to be examined one by one.

Nobody was wounded, but anyone could have been infected. They also did not have any methods with which to perform inspections, so it was entirely dependent on observation by the naked eye and intuitive judgment. Although you've done nothing but drink a mouthful of water, if the Trial Court wanted you to die, you had to die." Mr. Shaw sighed. "Those ten days were truly a bloodbath. It's said that half of the entire base died."

"It's roughly the same as the information I collected before," Poet said. "Those ten days were the legendary Judgment Days."

"Only those of you who fiddle with your pens, all mysterious-like, say that those ten days are 'Judgment Day' and talk about God and whatnot—" Mr. Shaw said with a frown.

Poet smiled. "On doomsday, everyone on Earth will be judged before God and either ascend to Heaven or be cast down into Hell. That is Judgment Day."

"Who knows?" Mr. Shaw brushed the dust off his sleeve cuffs. "After the Virginia Base caught wind of it, they cursed out our base's strategic decision, dispatched a scientific research team over so that we could have devices that differentiate xenogenics on a scientific basis, and circulated opposition leaflets everywhere with drones, denouncing the Northern Base for its loss of humanity and violations of human rights. And the result?"

Poet said in a low voice, "Three years later, humanoid marine xenogenics invaded, and the Virginia Base was completely infected and declared fallen."

"With the idiots of the Virginia Base as an example, the Arbiter's Code was formally extended. Any Judge could shoot people. Those whom the Judges couldn't make decisions on were given over to the Arbiter to make a decision with their full powers, and they would bear no responsibility for manslaughter. The Arbiter is God." Mr. Shaw grinned. "Unfortunately, it's easy for God to go mad. After killing too many of their own people, they won't be able to stop. The Lighthouse's scientists who were responsible for the Trials were switched out batch after batch. In ten years, three went mad and two committed suicide. Nobody else was willing to do it, so the military took over.

"People in the military are stationed in the wilderness for long periods of time, have seen many monsters, have a decent ability to distinguish xenogenics,

and are psychologically strong. The speed at which Arbiters were replaced finally changed from one going mad every three years to one going mad every five years. Lu Feng wasn't even twenty years old when he became the Arbiter. I think he's too young, and I even bet with others that he wouldn't last past three years." Mr. Shaw shrugged. "I've lost no small amount of money. This year will be his seventh. Hubbard said that the number of people he's killed is several times the amount of the previous Arbiter. Moreover, in each of these past three years, the number kept doubling. Everyone knows that he's not far off from going mad."

"Between the Arbiter and the person being judged, it's hard to say whose psychological pressure is greater." Poet leaned against the wall. "But since Colonel Lu still has the frame of mind to sleep with our young friend, it looks like he's still far away from losing control."

"No, that's wrong." Just as he finished speaking, he frowned and corrected himself. "On the contrary, for a cold and heartless person like Colonel Lu, this is one of the omens of madness."

He sidled up to An Zhe, a look similar to Mr. Shaw's in his eyes. "How was he? Did he hurt you?"

An Zhe tightly wrapped himself in the coat and shrunk into the corner, reluctant to talk to them.

Thump.

The sound of an impact.

The atmosphere in the room instantly tensed, and all three of them looked at the source of the sound.

A colorful beetle had struck the window.

# 10

## “WAIT THERE.”

SOMEWHERE DOWNSTAIRS, a woman screamed. Perhaps she had also seen the bugs.

The beetle, approximately the size of a human palm, crawled slowly over the glass. On its eight slender legs were densely-packed, small protrusions that adhered smoothly to the glass, and in the middle of each protrusion was a pinprick-sized white dot, which was a suction cup. The beetle dragged along a long, soft brown tentacle behind its drop-shaped tail, leaving a wet, dark brown ooze in its wake as it crawled—it seemed to want to come in.

Poet tested the seams between two of the windowpanes by running over them with his fingers. "It's fine. It's sealed, so it can't get in."

"Each generation is worse than the last," Mr. Shaw said. "They just keep getting uglier. Before, they still looked like bugs."

"The fusion of genes." Poet looked at the glass. "The more fusing there is, the more bizarre its appearance and the stronger its infectiousness. I know a scientist, and he said that throughout the past hundred years, none of humankind's research could explain the principle of infection."

"Hah," Mr. Shaw said.

He released a meaningless sound from his mouth but then shrank into a corner of the room, as far away from the window as possible, and said, "Can't you close the curtains?"

"I want to look at the city some more." As Poet spoke, he lowered one side of the curtains, shrouding the room in darkness. Within the gloom, a strange grief showed in his profile. "This... city that may not have much time left."

An Zhe looked outside. It was early morning, and beneath the dim skies, the gray city stretched outwards, half of it concealed in the thin white mist. The sun had risen and the mist was burning off, revealing some colossal mechanical structures at the maximum range of his field of vision that towered and pierced straight up into the sky. Humans always had many strange devices that guaranteed the base's safety, but there were some times in which they couldn't do so, such as right now.

Poet turned towards him. "You don’t seem the slightest bit afraid."

An Zhe pursed his lips, unsure how to respond.

Poet lowered the other side of the curtains and smiled at him. "You're truly very strange."

"Am I?" An Zhe asked.

"You're too quiet, like it doesn't matter regardless of what happens next," Poet said. "In our generation, there are very few people with your type of character."

An Zhe smiled. "Perhaps."

It was impossible for there to not be even the slightest difference between mushrooms and humans. In an attempt to make himself more human-like, he asked Poet, "Then what shall we do now?"

Poet thought for three seconds, then said, "Pray.

"Pray that the ultrasonic disperser hasn't been completely destroyed. Or pray that this is just a group of bugs that are brainless and live entirely on instinct.

"After that, pray that our glass is sufficiently solid and won't be easily smashed."

Right as he finished speaking, the sounds of things pelting the window came in a flurry. It was the sound of countless bugs flying into the glass.

Mr. Shaw shot a dark look at Poet. "I pray for you to be a mute."

Poet became flustered too. He lifted a corner of the curtain, then swiftly closed it again. "Don't look, you guys."

"Already saw it," Mr. Shaw said. "The bug swarms have come."

In the following moment, his countenance abruptly changed. "Hurry! Check the vents!"

Poet suddenly looked towards one corner of the room. "The vent is there!"

The direction they looked in was right over An Zhe's head. It was a hole leading outside that was protected by wire mesh, but because it hadn't been repaired for a long time, it had deteriorated and an opening had formed. Seeing it, Poet tore off half of his shirt sleeve and handed it to An Zhe. "Plug it up!"

The vent was not small. An Zhe accepted the fabric, then wadded it up in his right hand and stuffed it into the hole. "It's not enough."

Poet tore off another piece. An Zhe held the first piece in place with one hand and took the other piece with his other hand.

He felt a sudden sting of pain in the tip of his right index finger.

An Zhe paused, then calmly stuffed the other wad of fabric in as well, firmly stopping up the vent before sitting back down on the bed. While Mr. Shaw and Poet were checking the rest of the room for other holes, he lifted his index finger up to his eyes.

A red spot the size of a pinprick.

The texture of his skin shifted slightly, changing into snow-white hyphae. Taking advantage of how the other two were facing away from him, he tore off those hyphae with a fierce yank.

New hyphae extended from the breakage point and formed a human finger once more, a new one without any wound.

An Zhe didn't know if doing so would have any effect, nor could he see anything wrong with the hyphae he tore off, but he didn't really have any other options.

"There aren't any other holes," Poet said, turning back around.

"... Mm," An Zhe replied.

However, the sounds of insects colliding into the glass came faster and

harder, and the glass rattled as if it was about to shatter. The broadcast in the corridor continued to issue instructions, but they were nothing more than some nonsensical "please close the doors and windows, and do not panic".

Poet sat down, his face slightly pale. "It's in God's hands now, I guess."

"Shut up right now." Mr. Shaw's gaze was grim. After yelling at Poet, he looked at An Zhe.

An Zhe didn't understand why. "What is it?"

"Hurry," Mr. Shaw said. "Call your man."

An Zhe was speechless.

---

District 1, Dispersion Center.

The huge, black ultrasonic disperser loomed half-hidden beneath the gray skies, its disk-shaped main body making it look like an enormous flower blooming in the city.

As the car sped along the road, the buildings continuously drew away and the shadow of the disperser up ahead swiftly grew.

"If the Dispersion Center is destroyed," Lu Feng said, interrupting him, "will the other dispersers still work normally?"

"They might stop working," the researcher said, then briefly fell silent. "The operation of the dispersers is excessively complicated. To ensure that the entirety of the Outer City is perfectly covered by the ultrasonic waves, the intensity and wave bands of all the dispersers are uniformly managed from afar by the Dispersion Center. If the emergency procedures were not promptly initiated when the center was destroyed, I'm afraid there will be very serious consequences.

"However, that's only the worst outcome, and the probability of it happening is very low," he said. "The Disperser 1 at the Dispersion Center has is the biggest

ultrasonic disperser in the entirety of the Outer City. Because its power is too strong, it has adverse effects on the human body, which is why District 1 doesn't have permanent residents and there aren't many workers or troops stationed at or near the Dispersion Center. In the event of insufficient manpower, temporary loss of communication may be because of other reasons, not necessarily—"

His voice abruptly cut off as he looked through the car window and straight at the ultrasonic disperser up ahead.

Over a hundred years ago, in the Peaceful Age's springtime, when flowers and leaves were developing, gardeners would spray insect repellent on the plants so that they would be free from insect bites.

And at the present moment, the ultrasonic disperser—this black flower—was covered with protrusions that were striped in gray, white, black, and yellow. Huge worms had crawled all over it.

No, it wasn't only worms.

His breathing became sharp pants, stuttering all of a sudden.

"No..." he said. "Colonel, do you see it?"

Lu Feng yanked the steering wheel around!

The car executed a hair-raising sharp turn on the narrow road and drove back in the direction it came from!

At first, the armored vehicles behind it angrily flashed their lights, but then they all made sharp U-turns as well—

At the end of the road, the black swarm of bugs exploded like fireworks, covering the sky as they flew up and came back down like a sudden downpour of rain. The arthropods' exoskeleton-covered bodies pelted against the glass, and it felt like the entire car was moving forward in the face of stray bullets.

Inside the car, the communicator's volume was set to maximum, and the operator's violently-trembling voice came from it.

"Colonel, emergency communication from District 2. Full-scale outbreak of bug swarms. Requesting assistance."

"Emergency communication from District 3. Large numbers of insect monsters were discovered during the evacuation process. Requesting assistance."

"Emergency communication from the City Defense Agency."

"Emergency communication from the City Affairs Office."

"Emergency communication from District 8—"

"Connect to District 8," Lu Feng said quickly. "Can the underground shelter safely accept the entire city's emergency evacuees?"

"Colonel Lu!" The person on the other end spoke even more quickly. "Small flying mosquitoes have entered via the ventilation system, and more than ten infected ones have appeared here. Requesting the Trial Court's assistance!"

A three-second-long silence.

Lu Feng said, "Kill the infected ones. Everyone else take refuge and wait for assistance."

The communication line was cut off.

"Colonel." A young voice rang out. "The Trial Court has assembled, and at present, there have been no casualties."

"Disperse assistance to the various districts. Prioritize District 8."

"Yes sir."

The call ended.

"Colonel." In the car, the researcher spoke with a forced veneer of composure. "We're returning to the Main City."

Lu Feng's tone of voice was flat. "The Main City?"

"The Main City has an independent defense and dispersion system, so it can ensure absolute safety."

The car gradually slowed. Up ahead was a fork in the road.

Lu Feng said, "What about the Outer City?"

"The entire Outer City is exposed. The insect monsters can penetrate

anywhere with their advantageous body sizes, so the danger level of the insect swarms is higher than when the Southeastern Base fell to the rodent swarms." Calm gradually returned to the researcher's voice. "You may be the Arbiter, but under these circumstances, you can't save anyone."

The abundant justifications allowed the researcher to regain his reason and composure, and he even smiled as he said, "It's meaningless to go anywhere now. There's no way to reduce the number of casualties. You know that what I'm saying is correct. You can't protect anything else, but you can keep us safe."

A voice came from the communicator again. Previously, the situation was critical, so Lu Feng set it to emergency mode, and the communication was automatically answered three seconds later as a result.

But what came through wasn't an operator's voice.

"Colonel," a clear voice spoke, slower than the speed Lu Feng was accustomed to and with a soft lightness to the words. "Your things are still here with me."

"Where are you?" Lu Feng asked.

"Next to the City Defense Agency," An Zhe said. "... Lots of bugs are crashing into the windows."

There was a tremble at the end of his words, as if he was afraid.

Lu Feng turned the steering wheel halfway around and drove onto one of the road's branches. The researcher looked at the abandoned branch with eyes wide open, his body seemingly about to bounce up from the seat yet secured in place by the seat belt. He blurted out, "You—"

Lu Feng seemed to have not heard him at all. He only replied to the communicator, "Wait there."

# 11

## “GOD JUDGED THE COMMON PEOPLE, EVEN USING GOOD AND EVIL AS THE BASIS.”

AN ZHE FOUND himself being led out with his head wrapped up in the uniform coat after Lu Feng kicked the door open.

Of course, Poet and Mr. Shaw came along as well—but they wrapped up their own heads.

Lu Feng had brought over a small ultrasonic jammer to the building entrance, temporarily clearing out a space with a ten-meter circumference. An Zhe was safely stuffed into the car, and Poet and Mr. Shaw climbed in as well, and the three of them squeezed into the back seats.

Lu Feng returned to the driver's seat and said, "We're over capacity."

An Zhe somehow felt that the Arbiter was targeting him again.

Mr. Shaw took the initiative, saying, "Reporting in, I'm not a person, so we aren't over capacity."

"Oh," Lu Feng said.

He made a call. "The rescue plan using ultrasonic jammers is feasible. Organizing large-scale transfers of residents is recommended."

Howard's voice came from the other side. "Transfer to the underground shelter?"

Lu Feng said, "I'm going to District 8's shelter first to confirm that it's safe."

"Thank you for your hard work."

Lu Feng started the engine, and their car drove around a bend and headed towards District 8.

Along the way, Lu Feng's communicator rang madly. Just as the City Affairs Office sent a distress signal, District 5 requested reinforcements, and just after District 5 received reinforcements, the Trial Court called to say that their manpower was insufficient.

By the end, Lu Feng's replies had become very robotic.

"Please transfer to the City Defense Agency."

"Please transfer to the City Defense Agency."

"Please transfer to the City Defense Agency."

"You've worked hard, please transfer to the City Defense Agency."

"Lu Feng, you fucking—"

This time, the other party was Howard.

Lu Feng hung up right away.

But after hanging up, he frowned slightly and asked the researcher next to him, "Have I received communications from District 6?"

"I don't think so," the researcher said.

Lu Feng dialed a number. "District 6?"

"Hello, this is District 6's City Affairs Office. May I ask..."

The operator's voice was so calm that even An Zhe was surprised.

Lu Feng frowned even more deeply. "Trial Court, Lu Feng. How are things at District 6?"

The other party paused. "Everything is normal in District 6. Do you have any—"

Lu Feng interrupted again. "Everything is normal?"

"Indeed."

Lu Feng neatly hung up and looked at the researcher.

The researcher was initially stunned, but then his voice couldn't hide his excitement. "There's only one explanation, that District 6's ultrasonic disperser emergency procedure has successfully started."

"Wow," Poet said.

Lu Feng continued dialing. "Trial Court, Lu Feng. Please confirm again that everything is normal in District 6. Please confirm that the disperser is working normally."

"Confirming that everything is normal." The operator's voice even contained a hint of uncertainty. "Colonel, has something happened?"

"Yes." Lu Feng's reply was short and direct. "Immediately raise the isolation walls, confirm the material supplies, and prepare to shelter others."

"Yes sir!"

"Howard. The situation has changed. Have the entire city take shelter in District 6."

"Okay," the other party said. "The City Defense Agency will be responsible for the rescue and transfer of personnel."

"Roger that," Lu Feng said. "The Trial Court will be responsible for the screening of personnel."

"Thank you for your hard work."

After that call ended, Lu Feng once again dialed a number, and An Zhe noticed that the string of numbers was unusually short.

"Main City, United Front Center. Hello, Colonel Lu."

"Trial Court, Lu Feng. Requesting jurisdiction to try the whole city."

"Please give expected mortality and duration of implementation."

Lu Feng was silent for three seconds before saying, "Sixty percent, five days."

"Please wait."

"Trying the whole city..." An Zhe heard Poet mutter next to him, "Isn't this..."

Mr. Shaw looked straight ahead as he said, "Judgment Day."

Five minutes later, a voice came from the communicator.

"Permission granted to implement."

"Understood."

The car turned and drove towards District 6.

On the whole way there, An Zhe felt that Lu Feng was unusually silent.

When they got onto District 5's road, one of the City Defense Agency's huge armored vehicles was parked up ahead, An ugly ultrasonic device was temporary installed on top of it, and it was currently rescuing the residents inside the building. Lu Feng stopped at the bottom of the armored vehicle and opened the car door.

"I'm going to a meeting to prepare for Judgment Day," he said. "You all go with the City Defense Agency."

An Zhe could only blindly obey the Arbiter's order. It wasn't until the City Defense Agency's soldiers stuffed him into the armored vehicle that he suddenly recalled he had forgotten to return the coat to Lu Feng again, and unexpectedly, Lu Feng hadn't asked for it.

There was no time to go find Lu Feng again. With a dull sound, the armored vehicle's compartment closed and the light disappeared before it drove towards District 6. In the darkness, there were human bodies all around. Poet clutched An Zhe's hand, and An Zhe's other hand clutched Mr. Shaw's sleeve. The car compartment shook slightly, and within the warm and humid air, the sounds of crying came from somewhere.

"Did you hear that?" Poet murmured. "This Judgment Day, the expected mortality rate is sixty percent."

An Zhe made an affirmative sound.

"I'm a bit scared," Poet said. "But we'll live."

An Zhe didn't know. He was indeed a bit anxious, not because of Judgment Day, but rather because of that bug bite.

Seeming to feel his stiffness, Poet gently patted his back. "Don't be scared. Sleep for now."

An Zhe made a soft sound in reply and closed his eyes. The slight swaying of the compartment made it very easy for one to enter dreamland.

The world gradually darkened and turned heavier when a scene suddenly

appeared before his eyes.

The earth, wind, blurry but expansive vision, strange fluctuations. This wasn't something humans could see.

He was flying, with the wind around him, and his body was very light.

Where was he flying to?

He saw it. A blurry gray city, warmth coming from it—

With a start, An Zhe jerked awake.

He blankly looked at the darkness before him. The scene from just now was too blurry, so he didn't know what it meant. But he had encountered similar scenes before in the Abyss's cave, when his hyphae absorbed An Ze's blood and took root in An Ze's organs and bones—human knowledge had appeared before his eyes in the same way.

An Zhe softly panted for breath. He lowered his head, uneasily rubbing the fingerpad of his thumb with the bitten finger. In the Abyss, no monster would think to attack mushrooms, but he occasionally bumped into bloody remnants of some creatures' body parts or experienced his hyphae being broken by the sharp thorns on the vines, but he hadn't been infected before. He didn't know if it was because of luck or some other reason.

So what would happen this time?

---

The unexpected arrival of the next calamity was also like the sudden arrival of these Trials.

Late at night, at the entrance to District 6, dim yellow lamplight shone silently, and the black crowd formed a long, snaking line along the isolation wall that extended to the limits of one's line of sight. The sounds of insects' flapping wings came from all directions, and one could imagine how they covetously gazed upon this city, as though they were gazing upon a warm room that could produce future generations. At the same time, the rumbling sounds of rolling vehicle wheels, the sounds of caterpillar treads, and the vibration of the earth

as heavy armored vehicles rolled over it came as well. The military was rescuing the residents of the various residential districts in a continuous stream, and the rail transit trains likewise bore the responsibility of transporting residents. Sometimes bugs sneaked into the trains, but they were in no position to care. After these residents reached the periphery of District 6, they lined up at the end of the line, awaiting Trial.

The queue was a black stream with an uncountable number of people. They moved forward slowly, and after passing their Trial, they could enter the safe District 6.

The robotic broadcast didn't stop for even a moment as it emphasized "everyone please observe the queue discipline", "everyone please wait patiently", and so on. Screams would occasionally come from amidst the line as a person mutated in full view of the public, after which the soldiers patrolling around the line would immediately open fire. After some gunshots, the crowd would change from their initial restlessness to a deathly silence. The speed at which they advanced was very slow. Nobody was willing to move forward, but the soldiers were constantly herding them along.

However, the main source of the gunshots was not the middle of the queue, but the city gate at the isolation wall.

"It's been a hundred years," an old man said. "Judgment Day has come again."

The nine-year-old boy the old man was holding by the hand lifted his head and fearfully looked at his elder but didn't receive any hint of comfort worth mentioning. The old man's eyes were completely empty as he merely tightened his grip on the boy's hand.

Outside, it was bugs that were killing people. They had been rescued from the bug swarms and arrived at District 6, where people were killing people.

At least when God judged the common people, good and evil were His basis for doing so. In front of the Trial Court, however, some people had done nothing at all but had to face death.

The night deepened, and the boundless sound of wind came from afar, resembling distant ocean tides.

With a gunshot, someone in front of An Zhe fell, and two soldiers dragged his corpse away. Each residential district had a massive garbage incinerator, and now it was used to incinerate corpses.

Another gunshot, and another person fell.

The line continually shrank, and the people who were killed were more numerous than the people who passed the Trial and entered the city.

As the line continued moving forward, An Zhe saw this Trial's structure.

First, there was a closely-guarded buffer zone. If the person had already exhibited mutation characteristics distinguishable with the naked eye, the soldiers would shoot them first. After passing the first check, there were four Judges distributed on the sides of the isolation door. Each one had the power of veto and could open fire at any time—so long as they believed this person wasn't human, no matter if their colleagues' judgments were the same or not.

The people they killed accounted for approximately one-fourth of all the dead. Being used as a host for spawn was different from being bitten. The process was very slow, and many people’s infection characteristics were not clearly visible. More often, they locked eyes and let the person pass.

At that time, that person would walk to the place where the stench of blood was strongest and face the final checkpoint.

Lu Feng.

His posture was not one where he was sitting solemnly upright or standing straight with hands at his sides. As before, he leaned a bit languidly at the bottom of the gate, seeming as though he were carelessly playing with the gun in his hand—it was with that gun that he exercised the highest and final jurisdiction.

Another gunshot. He had executed a twelve-year-old child whose eyes were still fixed on him after falling.

A young Judge's complexion was pallid. His throat twitching, he bent over at the waist and tried to suppress his dry-heaving.

Lu Feng cast a flat glance in that direction. "Switch him out."

Soldiers carried the Judge away, and within the short span of time it took to switch, nobody was tried. Clad in white shirts, the workers of the City Affairs Office came forward and gave each Judge a bottle of ice water in which green mint leaves were being soaked. But Lu Feng didn't want one.

Less than a minute later, a new Judge took the old one's place, and the Trial process began anew.

Mr. Shaw and Poet pushed and pulled, neither willing to be the first to go forward. In the end, An Zhe was pushed to the front.

The soldiers looked at him and gestured to indicate that he passed, and An Zhe continued walking forward. The four Judges all locked eyes with him briefly and let him go as well.

An Zhe walked up to Lu Feng, and the Arbiter looked at him with those green eyes of his. Beneath the lamplight, they were slightly darkened and completely lacking in emotion, similar to the day they met for the first time.

An Zhe slightly lowered his gaze.

Coincidentally, it had only been a month since he came to the human base, but it was already his fourth time facing the Arbiter's Trial.

Just this morning, a bug had bitten him on the hand, but apart from some brief strange images flashing through his mind, nothing happened.

If not even Lu Feng could discern any problems—

Just as he had this thought, he saw Lu Feng lift his left hand, then lower it slightly—the gesture indicating that he passed.

He sighed in relief and walked in—Lu Feng's clothes and work notebook were still on him, but in this scenario, it was clearly inappropriate to return them to Lu Feng, who was in such a state.

He stopped at the passageway entrance.

Up ahead were the military's big trucks. If people were to squeeze together in the most space-saving way, a single vehicle could hold sixty or seventy of them. People who passed through the city gates could choose to get in, and after the vehicle filled, the military would take them to the shelters—some vacant

residential buildings. If even the vacant residential buildings were filled, they would be assigned to the regular buildings, where they would share rooms with the original residents. All in all, there were still places to go.

And if the person coming was originally a resident of District 6 or had friends or relatives they were close to in District 6, they could move about on their own.

Before a minute had passed, Mr. Shaw and Poet came in one after another as well.

"Phew," Mr. Shaw said. "I lived."

"It was confirmed that we hadn't been infected when the Arbiter rescued us from the City Defense Agency, and along the way, we've been in the car the entire time," Poet said with a smile. "Passing is a given."

Mr. Shaw cast him a sidelong glance. "Then who was the one scared to be tried first just now?"

Poet said, "I've forgotten."

Mr. Shaw patted An Zhe on the shoulder. "Where's your home? I gotta find a place to sleep. I haven't slept for two days."

An Zhe said, "I'm not going home."

Mr. Shaw frowned. "Then what will you do?"

An Zhe pointed to the clothes he was wearing. "I'm waiting for when he's free so I can return this to him."

"I forgot. I can't go to your home." Mr. Shaw patted his head. "Never mind," he said, "I'll go find my paramour too."

An Zhe watched his master depart, momentarily unable to understand why he used the word "too".

Then he heard Poet say, "Mr. Shaw has run his business in the third underground floor for so many years, at least ninety percent of the base's pornographic books and films originated from his shop. It's said that when he was young, he had countless lovers."

An Zhe discovered that it seemed his master was truly very famous. He asked, "You all know him?"

"The base is only so big," Poet said with a smile. "Who doesn't know what Mr. Shaw does?"

"However, after he got older, he wasn't so prolific anymore," Poet said. "Speaking of the third floor, I thought of Doussay again. You've seen her before, right? Doussay was the most beautiful woman in the Outer City."

An Zhe nodded.

Poet sighed. "I don’t know where she is right now. If she's dead, I'd feel very sorry."

An Zhe said nothing.

Poet had been locked up in prison, so of course he didn't know that the mistress of the black market's third floor had already died in the breeding season’s prelude.

But upon seeing Poet's slightly listless expression, An Zhe suddenly understood something.

A person would feel grief at the death of another person, and this was an emotion that humans alone had. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why humans were more afraid of death compared to other creatures.

"You're showing that expression again," Poet said.

An Zhe softly asked, "What?"

"Everything that happens here has nothing to do with you. You seem to only be watching." Poet rested an elbow on An Zhe's shoulder, and with facetiousness in his tone, he said gently, "You seem to be either observing us or taking pity on us. Earlier, there was a second in which I felt some sort of divinity from you."

An Zhe blinked, not quite understanding.

Perhaps he was indeed unlike humans. He was a xenogenic, after all.

"It's gone now." Poet blew into his ear. "Now you're like a little simpleton."

An Zhe was speechless.

Poet patted his shoulder. "I'm leaving too."

"Where are you going?" An Zhe asked.

"Wherever, I suppose," Poet said. "The City Defense Agency is too busy to control me, so I'm going to break out of prison."

He smiled at An Zhe. "Goodbye."

An Zhe watched his receding figure vanish into the boundless night.

Poet was a prisoner the City Defense Agency had locked up. Where he could go without a communicator or an ID card, An Zhe didn't know.

Perhaps he'll go find his boyfriend, An Zhe thought.

Or perhaps he'll go find other people to tell the story of the bases' establishment to, and then after no more than three days, the City Defense Agency will take him away again.

After Poet left, only An Zhe remained standing at the base of the wall alone. It was an open space, and he wasn't the only person staying there. There were still many people milling around and talking nearby, and some people had gathered in the distance as well, but he didn't know what they were doing.

The temporarily-erected isolation barrier was low and translucent, so he could see Lu Feng's back view from here.

The aurora twisted and fluctuated in the sky. Every night, the color of the sky was different from the previous night. Corpses were being continually dragged away from the city gates, but the people entering were few in number. Gunshots and death seemed to be the only things that were eternal. The turbulent night wind blew in the stench of blood. An Zhe couldn't see Lu Feng's expression. He only felt that such a back view was very good-looking and very... lonely.

A person would feel grief at another person's death, so would the Arbiter feel grief for the people he killed? Perhaps he had already gotten used to it.

Footsteps came from behind him.

"How come you're here?" It was a familiar voice.

An Zhe turned around and saw that it was the young Judge who was often at Lu Feng's side. He was holding a bottle of mint water, his complexion poor, but the expression on his face was still very gentle. "You aren't going back?"

An Zhe nodded.

"I wanted to return the Colonel's things to him." He took off the coat. "Can you pass this on for me?"

The Judge smiled slightly. "You won't wait for him?"

An Zhe thought that he had only worn the Colonel's coat once, yet everyone seemed to tacitly recognize that they had some sort of relationship.

"The Colonel and I... We aren't very well-acquainted."

"I know." The Judge's reply was outside his expectations. "It's just that I haven't seen the Colonel with other people before."

He held out his hands. "Give it to me."

After An Zhe confirmed that the work notebook and ballpoint pen were both there, he folded the coat in a simple manner and handed it over. The Judge accepted it with both hands, and his pretty eyelashes dropped slightly.

"The Colonel has been working for a very long time already," he murmured. "Are you really not going to wait for him?"

Right at that moment, the aurora up in the sky abruptly changed, lighting up the sky and earth like a flash of lightning.

An Zhe's heart thudded, and an irresistible intuition came over him. Unable to hold back, he looked at the city gates and Lu Feng's figure, that tall yet lonely figure in the night.

He suddenly realized that if he left now, he would not have any connection whatsoever with this person for the rest of his life.

He once again grabbed the coat.

The Judge looked at him.

"I... I'll wait for him," An Zhe said.

The Judge gently smiled at him, unfolded the coat, and draped it over him once more. "Thank you."

An Zhe looked back at Lu Feng's figure. In just the span of their conversation, Lu Feng had killed two more people.

He asked, "When will he rest?"

"I don't know," the Judge said. "Perhaps in another two or three hours."

"Thank you," An Zhe said.

But he heard the Judge ask, "How did you get to know the Colonel?"

An Zhe thought back.

"At the city gates, I suppose." He skipped over the matter of his spore. "He suspected I wasn't human, so he took me to have a genetic examination done, and I passed it."

The Judge raised his eyebrows.

An Zhe continued. "Afterwards, he arrested me."

The Judge's eyes curved as he smiled. "I know. To make that kind of thing, you guys are really daring."

An Zhe was speechless.

"Then it was at the City Defense Agency. I'm a bit afraid of the cold, so he lent me his room for a night." An Zhe continued counting on his fingers. "And then my friends and I were trapped in a room and didn't know what to do, so I called him, and now we're here."

After he finished, he asked, "In normal times, does the Colonel also frequently help others?"

If that was the case, then Lu Feng was indeed a good person.

"I don't know. There are no others at his side," the Judge said.

After a while, he spoke again. "Sometimes, I also want to protect some people. But I don't have the opportunity, for nobody seeks help from the Trial Court."

An Zhe pursed his lips and said, "You're very kind."

Then added, "You don't seem like a Judge."

This Judge's temperament, even amongst all the people he had seen, could be considered a very gentle one.

The Judge smiled. "Many people say so. Perhaps only people like the Colonel are qualified."

"It seems so," An Zhe said.

He thought that perhaps Lu Feng's cold temperament was precisely the reason why he was able to make the most accurate judgments.

"This year is the seventh year that the Colonel has worked for the Trial Court," the Judge said. "Having to judge the true species of those things who are no different from humans on the surface is truly the most difficult thing in the world to do. Sometimes there will be mistakes and sometimes there will be accidental killings. When a Judge passes judgment, the Arbiter can tell him whether or not he was correct, but as for the Arbiter himself, there is nobody who can tell him if he was right or wrong. What he has to fight against are unimaginable giant monsters, hidden xenogenics, others' doubts... along with himself.

"That's why I think that, other than his indifference, there are some other things that have supported the Arbiter in his past seven years at the Trial Court." the Judge said. "I hope you can understand him."

This Judge always turned the conversation topic towards Lu Feng. An Zhe saw right through him.

But then he saw the Judge frown slightly and look somewhere within the walls not far in front of them.

A lot of people were concentrated there, even more than earlier. An Zhe had assumed that it was residents from within the city walls who had come to gawk at the spectacle, but their expressions were all very solemn, like they had come to participate in a large-scale gathering.

They were talking, but their voices were very soft. An Zhe heard only a few

faint words.

"Scale... frightening..."

"Four thousand people."

"... Begin."

He saw the Judge next to him frown and gesture to the distant guards.

A team of guards walked over, and right when they did, the people who had gathered at the base of the walls dispersed. There were hundreds of them, and their scale seemed even more massive after they had dispersed. Furthermore, newcomers continuously walked out from the city to join them.

Amidst the crowds, someone waved, and An Zhe confirmed that the wave was directed at him. He looked over. It was a familiar young face, the person who had brought him to Building 117 on the first day he came to the human base.

At that time, they were demonstrating.

An Zhe suddenly knew what these people had come to do, and he looked at them with wide eyes.

The first person took a folded piece of white paper out from his clothes and unfolded it.

On the white paper, the words "oppose the Arbiter's brutality" were written in big red letters.

Then someone next to him also unfolded their own paper that said "publicize the Trial regulations now".

"Please publish the Trial criteria."

"Refuse a repeat of Judgment Day."

"Give an explanation to the dead."

"Reject unjustified murder."

"Refuse maintaining the base's safety via indiscriminate killing."

"Requesting regular assessments of the Arbiter's mental state."

"To the Trial Court: please take responsibility for the base's population loss rate."

"The current Arbiter's kill rate far surpasses his predecessors. Please give the base an explanation."

Beneath the aurora, these white papers unfolded like flowers. They converged, resembling a silently flowing ocean with a pallid white as the ocean's main color and the blood red words as its billowing spray.

The people outside the walls started moving. They stretched out their necks, their gazes passing through the translucent isolation walls to clearly see the situation on the opposite side. The silent atmosphere was suddenly broken by this change, and they began to quietly talk amongst themselves.

But An Zhe looked towards the city gates.

At the city gates, Lu Feng's figure moved slightly, turning so that he was looking into the city.

It was just an ordinary look. As if he'd seen nothing at all, he turned around, loaded his gun, and pressed the trigger. Yet another person, a short-haired girl, fell in a pool of blood.

If An Zhe did not misremember, this was the eleventh person in a row that Lu Feng had killed.

It was the twelfth person's turn. A man with bronze-toned skin, he looked back and forth between Lu Feng, the Judges, and the deep pool of blood on the ground with a frightened gaze and didn't step forward for a long time.

Gun-carrying soldiers came forward to herd him along. His facial muscles twitched as he stared at the crowd demonstrating in place across from him. Finally, he gritted his teeth, closed his eyes. and sat on the ground. "I'm not going!"

This movement greatly roused the demonstrating crowd within the walls, and they held their posters even higher.

Outside the walls, a second person sat down.

And a third.

Then a fourth.

As though a powerful current swept through, within five short minutes, they all sat down like toppled dominoes. Nobody spoke, and not a single person stepped into the Trial area. As the aurora fluctuated wildly in the sky, they silently looked at Lu Feng standing in the middle, expressing their resistance with their refusal to cooperate.

In front was the Trial, and behind were the insect swarms. Sitting here, it seemed like they could resist everything in front and behind and thus obtain eternal life—

But Lu Feng's expression didn't change at all. His eyelashes lowered slightly as he bowed his head and loaded a new magazine into his gun. This man's slightly slanted eyebrows and long eyes naturally possessed an upwards curve. In normal times, they were forceful, but when his gaze was lowered, those arcs seemed to take on a cold disdain and scorn.

With a soft click, the magazine was loaded.

He said, "Bring him forward."

The soldiers of the City Defense Agency hesitated briefly. Only after the scene was at a standstill for a full ten seconds did two soldiers step forward and roughly pick up the first man who sat down.

Lu Feng slowly lifted his gun.

Everyone's gazes landed on them. A woman's broken sobs came from amidst the crowd, and then the sobbing spread like a virus to form a vast ocean of mournful cries. No place was free of crying. It was as though what they were about to face was not a trial, but rather a massacre.

Perhaps the intrinsic nature of Judgment Day was a massacre. It was the same the first time a hundred years ago, and it was the same a hundred years after.

The sound of armored vehicles broke the tense atmosphere. Howard, who had brought a team of guards with him, got out of a vehicle and asked Lu Feng, "What's going on?"

Lu Feng's voice was expressionless. "The residents are refusing to cooperate."

Howard looked around, frowned deeply, and said with a slightly critical tone, "Lu Feng, aren't you killing too many?"

Lu Feng's intonation did not change, but his voice was slightly hoarse. "No."

"Today's situation is urgent." Howard's aide handed him a loudspeaker, and he said to the residents, "This is related to the safety of the base. Large-scale infection may occur at any time, so please cooperate with the Trial Court and City Defense Agency's work."

Nobody moved. Perhaps between the infection that may break out at any time and the muzzle of the Arbiter's gun in front of them, the latter was more frightening.

It was obvious that Howard had also noticed everyone's silence. After his gaze passed over the demonstration banners, he thought briefly and said, "Let's both take a step back. The Trial Court will make public the detailed regulations of the Trials, and the residents will once again enter the Trial process."

"Howard," Lu Feng started in a flat voice.

Screams suddenly burst out from the crowd!

Because the muzzle of Lu Feng's gun had slowly turned to point at Howard.

Initially stunned, Howard then furrowed his brows and said, "Colonel Lu, what are you doing?"

Howard's guards all took a step forward, loaded their guns, and aimed at Lu Feng!

A stalemate.

Howard let out a cold laugh. "Colonel Lu, I've been outside the entire day, but I swear that I haven't come into contact with a single bug."

"You've been infected," Lu Feng said.

"I understand that the Trial Court wishes to take control of the City Defense Agency and does not wish to make public the detailed regulations of the Trials." Howard's voice was grim. "But this is the juncture of whether the base survives or perishes, Colonel Lu. You may abuse your power, but there has to be a limit."

As soon as he spoke those words, the crowd promptly became restless.

Lu Feng put his finger on the trigger. He didn't say a single word, but his movements made clear what he wanted to do.

It was the same with the City Defense Agency guards. Their movements were bigger. Obviously, so long as Lu Feng opened fire on their Director Howard, they would also wildly shoot him down right away.

A death-like silence spread out and condensed like ice.

In the suffocating silence, someone within the walls shouted.

"Oppose the Arbiter's tyranny!"

His rallying cry received a multitude of responses. Everyone—those inside the walls, those outside of the walls, those who were already there, those who newly arrived—shouted this slogan as well.

"Oppose the Arbiter's tyranny!"

"Oppose the Arbiter's tyranny!"

"Oppose the Arbiter's tyranny!"

The voices came in waves that were each louder than the last, but Lu Feng, in the middle of it all, did not move from beginning to end.

As An Zhe looked at Lu Feng's back view, he nearly forgot to breathe.

His understanding of Lu Feng was not deep, but based on just that shallow understanding, he knew that Lu Feng would really open fire.

He would die.

The young Judge next to him also murmured, "Don't..."

The aurora abruptly jittered, and the atmosphere was as cold as ice.

Right at that moment.

An ear-piercing whistle tore through the heavy night and covered up the people's shouts. A white light suddenly appeared on the distant road, continually flickering as it approached, and the crowd all avoided it. A white mechanical car with a red triangle painted on its body speedily approached with

a roar, and when it came near, the door opened and a young man dressed in a white coat stuck his upper half out of the window. An Zhe recognized him. At the city gates one month prior, it was this doctor who had performed his genetic examination.

"I'm the head of the Lighthouse's Inspection Division." Holding a loudspeaker, he took a few hurried breaths. "The first-generation genetic coupling agent was successfully deployed an hour ago. It can achieve rapid imaging of target spots, and it only needs..."

Out of breath, he panted some more before saying, "... Only needs five minutes."

Nobody moved. He hopped out of the car and hastily ran over.

At the entrance, he twisted open a disposable syringe and walked forward. "Director Howard—if you would be so kind as to cooperate."

Howard calmly rolled up the sleeves of his all-encompassing protective military uniform and allowed his blood to be drawn, then looked at Lu Feng with a frown.

Everyone else looked at Lu Feng as well. An Zhe knew they were waiting for one particular result: the result that Howard's genetic examination was normal, so as to prove the Arbiter indeed killed indiscriminately.

Amongst the demonstrators behind him, someone said, "We're about to change history."

An Zhe saw Lu Feng lower his gun and expressionlessly wipe down his gun while leaning against the wall, seeming to not care about anything.

What was he thinking about? An Zhe thought.

Three minutes later, having finished wiping down his gun, Lu Feng clipped it to his waist again and scanned the crowd with a dispassionate gaze.

An Zhe looked at him, and perhaps there was a moment in which their gazes met for a brief fraction of a second.

An Zhe promptly stood closer to the Judge to make his own position clear.

Lu Feng's lips seemed to curl up into a smile, but An Zhe didn't see clearly

because the man turned back in the following second.

One minute left.

The demonstrating crowd became increasingly riotous, holding animated discussions amongst themselves.

Half a minute.

Ten seconds.

They began counting the seconds.

"Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one—"

The red light atop the detection car was decisive.

The ominous alarm sound had extremely high penetrative power as it abruptly sounded. "Alert—"

The crowd was plunged into a deathly silence for several seconds.

"Bang!"

A gunshot ran out.

There was no need for Lu Feng to take action, for the guards of the city gates had opened fire.

A silence spread throughout, for nobody spoke. In the end, the doctor said, "Colonel—"

Without saying a word, Lu Feng turned and walked towards the interior of the city. He walked straight past everyone, including An Zhe.

The silent crowd seemed like frozen wooden puppets, only reacting once he had walked near them. They slowly parted to form a path.

The view of his figure in An Zhe's eyes overlapped with his figure when he had turned and left the city gates that day. An Zhe had only seen him turn and leave, but never walk towards anybody.

The Judge suddenly nudged An Zhe with an elbow.

An Zhe promptly came to a realization. Holding Lu Feng's work notebook, he chased after Lu Feng—the Arbiter was tall and had long legs, so he could only

catch up by jogging.

"Colonel."

Lu Feng didn't reply.

"Colonel, please wait."

Lu Feng still didn't reply.

"Colonel..." An Zhe took a few breaths. He didn't have much strength in the first place, and now that he had run, his voice had been affected, becoming somewhat softer. He frowned as he said, "Slow down a bit, I can't keep up..."

The Colonel stopped and turned to look at him.

An Zhe still hadn't caught his breath when he lifted his head. "Colonel..."

"Speak properly," Lu Feng said coldly with a glance at him. "Don't whine."

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

# 12

## “ALTHOUGH YOU AREN'T OF MUCH USE, YOU CAN GO AND TAKE CARE OF CHILDREN.”

"I DIDN'T," An Zhe said in a small voice.

He handed the work notebook to Lu Feng, who frowned slightly and accepted it.

"And the clothes." He took off the coat and handed that to Lu Feng as well. "Thank you."

Lu Feng draped the garment over the crook of his elbow and lowered his head to look at An Zhe.

"There was no need to wait for me," he said. "You could have just left it at the city gate."

An Zhe didn't reply. He and Lu Feng locked eyes for a few seconds before he carefully asked, "Are... you okay?"

Lu Feng looked away. "I'm okay."

His voice was flat, as if nothing had happened earlier.

"... Oh," An Zhe said.

Then An Zhe continued by asking, "Where are you going?"

Lu Feng looked at him. That pair of incisive cold green eyes always made An Zhe think of chilly things. With the addition of the mighty cold wind of the city at night, he, who had just left the warm coat, curled up upon himself slightly.

Lu Feng dropped the coat back in An Zhe's arms.

"I don't know," he said. "I'll escort you back first."

Holding the garment, An Zhe once again draped it over himself. After he put it

on, Lu Feng walked ahead, and he followed.

To either side of them was the road formed by the parted protesters. Their expressions were solemn, the corners of their mouths taut and downturned, and they still had not put down the posters and pamphlets in their hands. The papers flapped noisily as they were blown by the night wind.

Every single person stared at them silently, their stances tense. The green, purple, and orange aurora shone on their faces, mixing with their skin tones to form a strange metallic tint.

From those eyes, An Zhe saw distinct hatred and cautious vigilance—if it weren't for their misgivings regarding the gun Lu Feng carried at all times and his privilege of killing people at any time, they seemed like they would be able to do anything.

The same eyes landed on An Zhe as well, and it could even be said that most of them were looking at him. An Zhe involuntarily drew closer to Lu Feng—he knew why Lu Feng wanted to escort him back now. He had voluntarily approached the Arbiter, so the dissenters stared at him like a pack of wolves.

Fortunately, although the size of the crowd was not small, it could not be considered large when compared to the entire city. In less than five minutes, they passed through the demonstration area and stepped onto the residential district's road.

The aurora made the numerous buildings of the residential district cast heavy black shadows on the ground, and the light gray cement road was broken into black and gray stripes by the lights and shadows. Lu Feng's and An Zhe’s shadows were also cast onto the ground, elongated, and overlapped with those irregular stripes.

An Zhe didn't know what he should say to Lu Feng, and Lu Feng didn't take the initiative to speak up either.

Although it was nighttime, this place was by no means quiet. One of the military's big trucks roared past them before coming to a stop at the fork in the road. The vehicle door opened, and the residents who came in through the city gate to seek shelter were released and led into the building and settled in place by a team of soldiers and a staff member of the City Affairs Office clad in a

white shirt and holding a notebook.

A man asked a soldier, "How long do we have to take shelter for?"

The soldier said, "It depends on the situation."

Another resident asked, "I heard only District 6 is okay. Can you ensure District 6 will always be safe?"

The soldier said, "There's no definite information. Wait for the Lighthouse's research report."

"Then..." Someone still wanted to ask something but was promptly interrupted by the soldier. "Everyone come with me, hurry."

Disorderly footsteps sounded as they entered the building.

An Zhe lifted his head to look at the number on the upper right part of the building. This was Building 55.

Lu Feng's footsteps didn't stop, so he didn't stop either. They walked another thirty meters and arrived at Building 56.

Number 56—

Something in An Zhe's heart was touched, and he lifted his head to look at the number, then looked at the pitch-black unit door in the middle of the building.

This area was very close to the isolation gate, and the military had already begun settling people in Building 55, so they would very soon turn to Building 56.

Lu Feng asked, "You wish to go?"

An Zhe shook his head.

Lu Feng's tone of voice was forthright. "Go if you want to."

An Zhe said nothing.

He suspected that the Arbiter and Judges had received mind reading training.

He said, "Let's go, then."

Lu Feng changed directions and walked towards Building 56. An Zhe walked next to him, and as he walked, he pulled out an ID card from his pocket. A string

of numbers was printed on the card: 3260563209, representing Building 56, Unit 3, Floor 2, No. 09.

This wasn't An Zhe's room, and nor was this ID card his—it had belonged to Vance, the man who brought him to the Northern Base.

That day, after Vance's body had been carried away, the soldiers gave this ID card to An Zhe to serve as a memento, and he carried it on him at all times ever since then.

An Zhe swiped the ID card to open the room door—it was not yet invalid, which indicated that the base had not yet taken back the right to use this room. He walked in and turned on the light. It was a simple room, and the quilt was carelessly heaped on the bed as if its owner had just gotten up and left. Some daily necessities—a water cup, cigarette case, and lighter—were placed on the table. This was Vance's home.

It had already been a month since Vance died, but An Zhe would sometimes think of him. This entire time, he did not understand why, despite being fully aware that he may have been infected, Vance still chose to return to the base. But on this day, after witnessing the deaths and terror of so many people, when he passed Building 56 again, he felt that, he understood Vance in some sense.

He himself was dominated by instinct, dead-set on risking death by going deep into the base to search for his spore. Perhaps it was impossible for humans to agree with his motivation. But unlike monsters, which were dominated by instinct, humans were a kind of creature often dominated by emotion. They did things that did not conform to common sense or need too many reasons, so as long as he understood this, he wouldn't doubt humans' baffling behavior.

As An Zhe thought this, he gently placed the ID card beneath the cigarette case—he remembered that Vance liked smoking.

After doing so, he turned to leave. Lu Feng leaned against the door frame, waiting for him.

His gaze was akin to a falling snowflake as it landed on An Zhe, seemingly different from before.

An Zhe asked, "What's the matter?"

"I subjectively believe you're human now." Lu Feng turned and walked out.

An Zhe silently caught up, not wishing to make any sound. As expected, the Arbiter had constantly, continually, always suspected he wasn't human.

When they got back onto the road, Lu Feng's communicator rang, and the doctor's voice came from within.

"The detector has been incorporated into the Trial process at the city gate, and the residents' emotions have been placated to a certain extent. The Lighthouse will transfer five more instruments tomorrow, but their speed is still somewhat unable to keep up. Colonel, you may still need to return."

"I know." Lu Feng's voice was cold. "I'll go back in the daytime."

"Thank you. Rest well tonight." The doctor paused. "Now that Director Howard is dead, what'll happen next? In the Outer City, you are the only colonel with executive power remaining. The City Defense Agency's colonel is a civilian, and the distribution of emergency supplies alone is enough to make him lose all his hair."

"The Trial Court will temporarily take control of the City Defense Agency, and all troops will be assigned to rescue work for the time being," Lu Feng said. "After Judgment Day ends, I hope the Lighthouse can assist us in formulating a plan to restart the various dispersers."

The doctor said, "Of course."

Lu Feng hung up, then dialed another number and made work arrangements for the Trial Court. An Zhe quietly listened with his ears pricked up. The Arbiter's words were clear and concise as always, and his tone of voice was cold and methodical as always. Many things happened tonight, but Lu Feng remain seemed to still be that Lu Feng.

An Zhe turned to look at his profile. According to the doctor’s words, this person still had to return to the city gate tomorrow, and the man himself also tacitly agreed to return. That young Judge had said that what the Colonel was fighting against were unimaginable giant monsters—perhaps Lu Feng was already used to it.

The only unusual thing he did this night was turn and leave that place.

Once the phone call ended, they arrived at Building 117. Lu Feng seemed to be even more familiar with the roads than him, and the two of them arrived at the door to No. 14 without issue. After turning on the light, everything inside was as usual save for one thing missing from next to the wall.

But even if An Zhe was given the bravery of ten men, he didn't dare to ask where the mannequin was now after being confiscated.

An Zhe asked Lu Feng, who was standing at the door, "Would you like to come in and sit down?"

"No need," Lu Feng said. "You go and rest."

An Zhe hesitated for a while before asking, "Then... where are you going?"

Lu Feng frowned slightly, seeming to contemplate the question.

After a brief period of contemplation, he said, "I don't know."

The communicator screen showed that it was already eleven o'clock at night. An Zhe counted the hours and came to the conclusion that the Colonel may not have rested for nearly forty hours already.

He knew that today's incident was urgent and that many things were Lu Feng and Howard's temporary arrangements. They tried their best to settle the residents in District 6, but those such as the soldiers and the staff of the Trial Court and City Defense Agency may temporarily not have offices or residences, or perhaps there were only simple arrangements for them to rest and spend the night at the residential district near the city gate.

But he felt that the current Lu Feng may not necessarily wish to return to the city gate.

An Zhe felt very conflicted.

His fingers involuntarily clenched and he pursed his lips.

"What is it?" Lu Feng asked.

His voice was a bit soft, and the corridor light was very dim. Perhaps as an effect of the lighting, his contours were not as fierce and forceful as usual.

An Zhe steeled himself.

Even if it was for the sake of his spore, he had to establish a better relationship with the Colonel.

"If... if you don't have anywhere to go," An Zhe said, lifting his head to look at Lu Feng, "you can stay here at my place."

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To humans, it was very difficult to take back words that they had spoken.

So this was how things turned out.

In the public bathroom on the fifth floor, next to a sink that was covered in brown water scale marks, in front of a faucet, An Zhe held a cup in one hand and a toothbrush in the other as he earnestly washed up. He understood the daily living habits of humans and earnestly imitated them every day, but today, his attitude was even more careful than normal because the Colonel was right next to him.

After finishing, he continued cautiously putting everything away and looked at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng had just washed his face with cold water, and a few crystal-clear drops of water hung from the tips of his damp hair just like beads of freshly-melted snow.

An Zhe silently handed him the towel.

Lu Feng accepted it with a terse word of thanks.

"You're welcome," An Zhe said.

He believed that what he did conformed to human etiquette, for sharing things was something humans commonly did.

He held out his cup to Lu Feng.

"Do you want to use it?" he asked. "But there's only one."

The base was short on materials, so there were limits on the daily necessities allocated to each person. If there was an additional need, one would have to go

to the black market and buy on their own. An Zhe only had one cup and one toothbrush. Furthermore, the black market no longer existed, so there was nowhere he could go to buy more.

Lu Feng's eyes were fixed on him, and only after looking for approximately five or six seconds did he move.

An Zhe lowered his head. The dim yellow light of the bathroom cast a pale golden hue on the rim of the cup, and Lu Feng grasped the china-white handle with his slim fingers, taking the cup from his hand. His right hand was the one that held his gun, so there was a slight callus on the pad of his finger. When An Zhe let go, his fingers gently came into contact.

Lu Feng didn't use his toothbrush. He only used the cup to hold water and then rinsed his mouth with a mixture of liquid and toothpaste. Afterwards, he put away the cup, and the two of them walked out.

It was eleven o'clock at night. If it were normal times, the bathroom and corridor's water and electricity would have been cut off in accordance with the base's rules, but the entirety of District 6 had entered a state of emergency shelter today, so the water and electricity restrictions were all canceled. In a state of trepidation, quite a number of people hadn't slept. And because of this, although it was late at night, there were other people in the bathroom—those few people washed either themselves or their clothes while casting surreptitious glances at the two of them. An Zhe noticed, and he knew Lu Feng definitely noticed as well, but the Colonel didn't seem to care too much.

An Zhe walked in front. The bathroom floor was damp and had a few puddles, so he had to walk with his head down to avoid those spots.

When they walked to the doorway, a black figure unexpectedly came from the corner up ahead. An Zhe lifted his head.

"You—" It was Josh's voice.

An Zhe unconsciously took a step back and bumped into Lu Feng's chest. He saw Josh looking at him, wanting to say something—but with a shift of his gaze, he froze in place.

An Zhe had also become half-frozen. Josh just happened to block the door,

and he was neither going in nor out.

At that moment, he felt a slight weight on his shoulder, for Lu Feng's fingers had come to rest there.

Josh's eyes were wide open, and An Zhe could practically see his pupils jitter. Then Josh ducked his head, took a step back, and turned sideways, giving way with a deferential posture.

Lu Feng exerted a little bit of effort with the hand on An Zhe's shoulder and steered An Zhe out the door before letting go.

All of it happened within the span of a moment. An Zhe's heart thumped wildly, and his whole body was tensed up, for fear that in front of the Arbiter, Josh would call out "An Ze" or say "he's not like An Ze" or some such.

However, even after they walked more than ten steps away, Josh hadn't said a word.

An Zhe turned back to look at Josh's profile. Josh's fingers, which hung at his sides, were clenched around the hem of his shirt, and the corners of his mouth were taut.

An Zhe suddenly realized something—in this place, what the Arbiter held was authority over every person's life and death. Therefore, the vast majority of people in the base, including Josh, were afraid to say even a word to the Arbiter.

They walked through the corridor and returned to the room. Lu Feng didn't ask him just who that was, nor exactly what entanglements were between him and Josh. Strictly speaking, apart from staying overnight in each other’s quarters, he and Lu Feng could only be considered strangers after all.

After returning to the room, Lu Feng sat down at An Zhe's desk, opened his work notebook, and began to take notes. He wrote very quickly, and on the line for 6.19 he wrote:

Judgment Day, countless dead.

Standing to one side, An Zhe watched him and once again pondered a question—what exactly was the purpose of such a work notebook?

He said, "You write so little."

Lu Feng closed the notebook. "It's to satisfy inspection."

His tone of voice was very matter-of-fact.

"Oh," An Zhe said.

Then he said, "I'm going to change my clothes."

"Mm," Lu Feng replied.

An Zhe changed out of his daytime clothes. He had a very soft white cotton nightgown. After changing, he burrowed under the quilt and slept on the side of the bed closer to the wall. Although the base's rooms only had a standard single bed, the bed was by no means narrow—he could even roll over on it. An Zhe guessed that this may have been because the base had many hulking mercenaries who took up a lot of space.

Therefore, after he lay down, this bed had more than enough space to accommodate another person.

After he settled in, he looked at Lu Feng and said, "I'm good now."

He discovered that Lu Feng was looking at the supply depot exam guidebook on his desk.

Lu Feng said, "You wished to go to the supply depot?"

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said.

It was a pity that it seemed like he'd never be able to go—if the Outer City was going to constantly be occupied by bugs.

"Go to the City Affairs Office tomorrow afternoon," Lu Feng said. "In the past few years, there have been many newborns and not enough manpower in the Main City, so the City Defense Agency has been tasked with recruiting people from the Outer City."

As he spoke, he got up from the chair, then took off his coat and draped it on the chair back before walking towards An Zhe. An Zhe knew that those green eyes were examining him.

Then he heard Lu Feng continue. "Although you aren't of much use otherwise,

you can go and take care of children."

An Zhe wanted to refute his statement, but he discovered that he actually had no way of doing so.

Feeling very embarrassed, he covered himself up with the quilt.

He heard Lu Feng let out a laugh, and then the side of the bed dipped down as Lu Feng got in.

The chilly scent was very close, and he could hear the sound of Lu Feng's breathing. The things that happened today were like a dream. As a xenogenic, he was about to spend a night with the Arbiter.

"So," An Zhe murmured as he peeked out from under the quilt, "do you still suspect that I'm objectively not a human?"

"You've passed the genetic examination and the thirty-day observation period." Lu Feng's face was expressionless. "You're a human objectively as well now."

"What's the observation period?"

"After being infected, within thirty days, those who have been infected will definitely lose their human mind, and the probability is infinitely close to 1," Lu Feng said.

"Then... would there be xenogenics who don't lose their minds?" An Zhe asked tentatively. "Although they're xenogenics, they still have a human shape and thoughts. They just have an additional ability, being able to change into other living creatures."

He knew that he was a xenogenic, but he also knew that he was still quite lucid.

"Do you think humans' willpower is very strong?" Lu Feng said.

An Zhe didn't know how to reply, but it seemed that Lu Feng didn't need him to reply.

"It's actually not worth mentioning. The Lighthouse has performed many experiments," Lu Feng said. "Humans will not surmount xenogenics' survival instinct. In contrast, xenogenics gradually digest humans' thinking ability and

use it for their own survival. Take today's bugs for example. The Lighthouse's investigation report has not come out yet, but I unilaterally believe they were premeditated attacks."

An Zhe slowly opened his eyes wide. This was the first time Lu Feng had spoken for so long, and the weight of his words was very heavy.

He said that the specific will that made humans human was not worth mentioning in the face of gene fusion and that humans were such a weak sort of creature.

"I think that's not right." After being thought of as human both subjectively and objectively by the Arbiter, An Zhe felt much more at ease. At the very least, he dared to talk with Lu Feng a little more. "If their willpower was very strong..."

"It doesn't depend on strength, there is no 'if'."

An Zhe frowned and thought hard. "For example, if you were infected—"

Lu Feng promptly covered him up with the quilt.

"I would immediately commit suicide," Lu Feng said coldly. "Go to sleep."

An Zhe thought that the Arbiter may have become drowsy and was no longer willing to talk nonsense with him—in fact, he himself was sleepy as well. Altogether, Lu Feng hadn't rested for forty hours, and he himself had only slept two or three more hours early yesterday morning in Lu Feng's room. At virtually the moment he closed his eyes, he passed out.

When An Zhe woke up again, he was momentarily unsure what time it was. He sat up from the bed. The entire room was still like how it was last night, with only a faint ray of light coming through the gap between the curtains like weak sunlight penetrating through the Abyss's layered plant branches and leaves. After pulling open the curtains, the room was still very dim, for it was overcast outside.

He took out the communicator and looked at it. It was already 11 a.m.

Suddenly, An Zhe felt that he had forgotten something. With a start, he woke up completely, and he first looked at the bed—there was nothing at all, only

him alone, and the same could be said for the room.

Then he discovered a piece of paper lying flat on the table, and next to the paper was a ballpoint pen.

An Zhe got out of bed and came to the table, then picked it up—it was that "oppose the Arbiter's brutality" leaflet. It had been flipped over, and a few words were written on the back of it in black.

I've left.

Call if anything comes up.

Lu

For some reason, An Zhe smiled. He thought that Lu Feng's note was just like the man's work notebook, concisely worded.

After putting down the note, he came to the wardrobe and began picking out clothes to wear to the City Affairs Office. He thought for a very long time, and in the end, he finally took out a gray sweater and changed into it.

Gray—An Zhe lifted his head and looked outside.

The sky and the light in the sky were both light gray and very low, hanging on the tops of the buildings. Thick gray clouds gathered in clumps and extended to the ends of the city and the horizon. It looked like it was about to rain heavily.

An Zhe felt very happy, for mushrooms liked rainy days. Moreover, Lu Feng told him that piece of information yesterday, so assuming he could pass the City Defense Agency's recruitment, he could go to the Main City—and that was where the Lighthouse was. He seemed to have gotten one step closer to getting his spore back.

He decided to not quibble over the matter of Lu Feng digging out his spore anymore.

# 13

## “WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT?”

AT THE TOP of the street's utility pole, the broadcasting equipment repeatedly played the robotic female voice's announcement.

"At present, District 6 has sufficient materials. Water and electricity will be supplied as usual. The City Defense Agency has implemented real-time omnidirectional protection of the ultrasonic disperser."

"According to the observatory, the weather will turn overcast, and there will be a high probability of rainfall. Residents, please shut your doors and windows and cut down on travel."

"The City Defense Agency's personnel screening of the entire base has begun. Residents who meet the requirements, please go to the City Affairs Office as quickly as possible. The following are the personnel selection requirements..."

This was the only sound on the entire street apart from that of An Zhe's footsteps. After the incident happened at the base, the city gates were sealed off with nobody allowed in or out, and the various districts were paralyzed. The atmosphere in District 6 was likewise tense. On the way to the City Affairs Office, it was deserted everywhere, with only the "oppose the Arbiter's Code" pamphlets that had been sparsely pasted on the building walls drifted around on the ground after being blown off by the wind. After walking a while longer, he noticed the military's armored vehicles passing by on the road from time to time, their speed extremely fast, all driving in the direction of the entrance.

The base was divided into eight districts altogether. The Dispersion Center, the City Defense Agency, and the Trial Court together ensured safety within the city, while the City Affairs Office and supply depots managed the city's general affairs. Just like how the Trial Court was located at the city gates, the City

Defense Agency headquarters were located in District 5, and the Dispersion Center was located in District 1, the City Affairs Office's headquarters were established in District 6—it was fortunate that this was the case, for the City Affairs Office had no casualties. It maintained normal operations and even could recruit people.

The City Affairs Office was located in the center of District 6 with its back to the train station and the alarm tower next to it. The main building was seven stories high, with a spacious office hall in the middle. Right now, the sky was entirely overcast. Although it was clearly noontime, the atmosphere was as gloomy as five or six o'clock in the evening, and the dark clouds seemed like they were on the verge of drenching the City Affairs Office building.

It wasn't until after walking into the large hall that An Zhe finally felt the aura of living people. There were five or six hundred people divided into two long lines, all young faces.

Their recruitment requirements were constantly repeated over the broadcast, and An Zhe heard it as well—they had to be between eighteen and twenty-five years old, free of disease and disability, and have no criminal record or records of inappropriate political views. Regarding that point, he pondered for a long time. Although he had been imprisoned, he had only received a verbal guilty verdict from Lu Feng, so perhaps there had not been time for it to be entered into the system.

And after meeting the basic conditions, there were additional requirements: civilian candidates had to have completed at least three of the base's basic education courses, and non-civilian candidates had to have been awarded more than five thousand of the base's currency as a mercenary.

These two requirements alone could filter out the vast majority of the young people within the base, such as Josh. When he was in his teens, he didn't choose to study the base's basic courses, but rather trained with mercenary units instead. However, his performance as a mercenary could not be considered outstanding either. Even now, his feats have not earned him five thousand R.

An Zhe walked in and lined up at the end of the civilian queue. Perhaps he

had arrived late or perhaps the weather was too poor, for there were no other people behind him.

The person who used to be at the end of the line heard his footsteps and turned back to look at him.

Their eyes met.

An Zhe felt a trace of awkwardness suffuse the air.

Then he shifted his gaze to the nearby wall, and the young man swiftly turned his head away as well.

The reason was none other than the fact that they could be considered acquaintances—this was the boy who pulled An Zhe along to demonstrate at the very beginning and called him "comrade". Just yesterday, outside the city gate, he had mingled in the crowd of demonstrators opposing the Arbiter and even waved at An Zhe.

However, right on the spot, An Zhe had left with the Arbiter while draped in the Arbiter's clothes.

He didn't wish to acknowledge An Zhe, and An Zhe didn't wish to acknowledge him either. In this manner, they silently stood in line.

The interviewer was a man who wore silver wire-rimmed glasses and had delicate and cold facial features. At a glance, he wasn't easy to interact with. But strangely, the speed at which the line shrank was very fast. Every person was asked only a few simple questions before being admitted to another corridor behind the hall. There were occasionally some who were asked to leave, but their numbers were extremely few.

In no more than an hour and a half, the line only had a few people left, and it came to the boy in front of An Zhe.

But the interviewer gestured to pause and picked up his communicator.

"Please let the Colonel know that he must come as quickly as possible. Five minutes at most," he said. "Sending these people to the Main City is already breaking the rules. The Main City's safety is the most important thing. There cannot be any mistakes, so the Arbiter must be present."

"The Main City?" the boy in front of An Zhe said in surprise. "We're going to the Main City? Wasn't the City Affairs Office recruiting?"

"The situation now is indeed what we didn't wish to see. The weather's violent changes weren't predicted, and the recovery of the Dispersion Center isn't something that can be completed in a short span of time. To ensure the Main City's safety, the Arbiter must evacuate with us. Humankind's interests take precedence over all else. Please remember this sentence."

With those words, he put down his communicator and glanced at the boy in front of An Zhe.

The boy put his ID card on the sensor, and his information popped up on the screen.

Name: Colin

Age: 21

ID: 3260070412

There was another screen in front of the interviewer, and An Zhe thought that it should have more detailed information.

Colin voluntarily said, "I've completed the basic courses for mathematics, physics, and biology."

The interviewer gave a slight nod, then handed the ID card back to him and said, "Turn right and go out."

It was An Zhe's turn next.

After he swiped his card, he answered based on An Ze's experience. "I've completed the courses for literature, language, and economics."

"Your grades are good," the interviewer said.

At that very moment, the loud sound of rain suddenly came from outside.

The interviewer stuffed the card back into his hand and quickly said, "Hurry up and go!"

An Zhe swiftly caught up to Colin and walked into the corridor on the right. After the corridor was a glass covered bridge that had already been splattered

with densely-packed sprays from the huge and concentrated raindrops, so the situation outside wasn't visible at all. They rapidly walked forward, but they saw that this covered bridge was connected to the train station platform. Next to the platform was a black-clothed ground traffic controller.

"My dad doesn't know yet!" Colin said. "Are we going to the Main City right now?!"

The interviewer grabbed his arm and stuffed him into a coach, saying, "Don't waste your breath!"

An Zhe was promptly stuffed in as well. The train's seats were packed. Colin was frantically dialing his communicator, but he couldn't get through, and they came to the last coach—it was empty.

An Zhe sat down in the very corner, and behind him was the train's rear window, through which it was possible to clearly see the scene behind. The tracks were flooded in the boundless misty rain. Colin sat down in the place farthest from him, continually dialing his communicator while talking to himself. "Something's wrong, there's definitely a problem, I have to go back—"

He practically jumped up from his seat, but what immediately followed was the sound of all the train's doors slamming shut at the same time.

Colin hammered on the coach door several times, but he couldn't get it to move at all. On the contrary, he drew the train staff’s attention.

"Sit down properly!" The train conductor was a strong man. "We're about to go to the Main City. What are you kicking up a fuss for?"

"My dad doesn't know yet," Colin said. "I can't suddenly leave. Is there something you guys are hiding from us?

The conductor was silent for three seconds before saying, "Your dad will be happy for you."

In his seat, Colin gasped for breath. "Something's wrong, something's wrong..."

But despite repeating himself for a while, he couldn't articulate any reason for it, so he could only continue fiddling with his communicator.

An Zhe quietly waited in the corner. Five minutes later, the sounds of coach doors and a few voices carried over from the distance, and approximately ten minutes later, the entire coach suddenly fell silent.

"The Arbiter has come to perform his inspections," a person in front of him said in a low voice.

Following that was the sound of two people's footsteps, having the unique sound of military boots. It was very easy to recognize.

When the footsteps came closer, he lifted his head.

Then he met Lu Feng's eyes.

"My God." The young Judge behind Lu Feng said, looking at him as well, "We thought you weren't here."

"'I'm... here." As An Zhe looked into Lu Feng's eyes, he felt faintly uneasy. Softly, he asked, "Did something happen?"

This was his first time seeing that sort of thing in Lu Feng's expression, although the man's exterior looked no different from before.

It wasn't coldness, yet it was very... heavy.

Lu Feng said, "Nothing's wrong."

A voice came from his communicator. "How's the situation?"

"Confirmed safe," Lu Feng replied.

"Roger."

An Zhe's uneasiness gradually increased, and he lifted his head to look at Lu Feng. Lu Feng looked at him as well, but he didn't speak.

Right at that moment, Colin suddenly said, his voice trembling and raspy, "I get it... I get it."

He turned his head to look at the nearby conductor. "The disperser has failed in the end, hasn't it—hasn't it?"

"I've studied physics. Ultrasound—ultrasound is a soundwave, and the transmission of soundwaves requires a medium. It's raining heavily right now, so the air temperature, density, and pressure have all changed. The medium

has changed, so the frequency parameter must be adjusted anew, but, but—" He threw himself forward, latching onto the conductor's arm, his eyes red and entire body trembling. "But the Dispersion Center is gone, so there's no way to adjust it, isn't that right? The original frequency has lost its effectiveness in the heavy rain, hasn't it?"

As his trembling voice trailed off, a scream suddenly came from the coach ahead.

"Bang!" The glass next to An Zhe was also struck hard.

Amidst the rain, a black winged insect had rammed into the train glass. An Zhe looked outside the window, and the insect's six blood-red compound eyes stared at him. He locked eyes with this insect that was only the size of a human head and as long as a human arm, then watched it fly up in the rain before knocking into a window on the other side.

The crisp sounds of the collisions came from outside the train in a continuous barrage. After a sharp whistle, An Zhe saw that outside the window, the ground traffic controller in his fluorescent uniform made an abrupt "forward" gesture.

The sounds of shaking and rumbling started up together, and after a few clanks, the train gradually began moving forward.

Colin let out a loud cry, then fainted while clutching his communicator.

That ground traffic controller was swarmed by countless insects both big and small, and in the sheets of rain, the bugs became blurred shadows as well. After only five or six seconds passed, his body crumpled to the ground while surrounded by the shadows, sending up a bloody spray of water.

The train gradually sped up, and after going around a bend, his figure disappeared completely.

An Zhe watched all of it with wide eyes. He stood up, facing the coach window in the back.

Black shadows.

Black shadows that blotted out the sky, round ones, long ones, irregular ones, massive worms wriggling on the ground, and insects with huge sickles that

could swiftly move and jump. When did they arrive? Perhaps it was at the very second the downpour started.

The roof clanged and cracks appeared on the windows' outer glass, but the inner glass remained.

The train sped up, flying forward, and An Zhe lifted his head and looked at the entire city.

What came down from the sky was not necessarily rain. Those things that blotted out the sky—it was an amalgam of red and green raindrops mixed with blood, monsters, monster body parts, and human body parts. Although the coach windows blocked some sound, he could still hear continuous screaming and shouting along with the sounds of the other people within the coach dry-heaving or trembling. After the heavy rain began, he stayed in the coach for ten minutes, so he didn't know what kind of massacre was going on outside. Now, he could imagine it.

How many people lived, and how many people would die?

He couldn't imagine it. He couldn't see the entire city.

"The base made a plan for the worst-case scenario yesterday," the young Judge murmured. "Transferring young and useful personnel was an emergency measure. It's just that we didn't imagine that the unexpected would arrive so quickly."

His voice was a bit hoarse. "My apologies. If we were given a few more days, perhaps the military could have recovered the Dispersion Center, but..."

But now there was no more time, and nobody could predict what would happen next. An Zhe knew what he wanted to say, just like how in the Abyss, nobody knew what would happen next.

He put his hand on the coach glass. The glass was stained with a layer of red and mixed with bits of flesh. As he looked outside, his breathing was slightly hurried.

Just like that, the train swiftly departed District 6. The bloody water gradually diluted, and the coach glass was washed clean and became clear again.

In the Abyss, he had seen countless monsters' attacks, struggles, injuries, and deaths.

But he had never seen something like this—this kind of one-sided slaughter and instant destruction.

The voice of the person in front of him trembled as he continued speaking. "Just... like that, it's... gone?"

It was gone.

All it needed was a bout of rain.

An Zhe saw large numbers of black birds fly towards District 6 from the upper edge of his field of vision.

After another few seconds, he noticed that those birds' wings were flat and unmoving as they flew forward in straight lines. Those weren't birds, but rather human fighter planes—they had come from the direction of the Main City and headed towards District 6. In less than a minute, they came to a hovering stop right above District 6's alarm tower.

He thought that perhaps this was the Main City's assistance to the Fortress.

Thus, he asked, "Are they rescuing people?"

"Human genes cannot be acquired by the monsters," Lu Feng said.

Within Lu Feng's steady voice was a trace of icy cold. With a few footsteps, he came to the rear window as well and stood behind An Zhe. An Zhe could hear his breathing from very close up; if he just backed up slightly, his shoulder would touch Lu Feng's chest.

He heard Lu Feng say into the communicator, "Get ready."

Indeed, human genes could not be acquired by the monsters. Every time an additional person died, the world would gain an additional or perhaps many more additional xenogenics with high intelligence. Therefore, no matter if it was in the wilderness or the base, once infection occurred, the person had to be immediately killed and their body burned in the incinerator. So now the Main City had to send troops to rescue as many of the Outer City's people as they could in order to prevent more people from being infected by the bugs—that

was what An Zhe thought.

"... Okay," he said.

Poet and Mr. Shaw were both there. He hoped they could be rescued.

The soft sound of rustling fabric suddenly came to his ears as Lu Feng held out a hand. An Zhe, not knowing what he intended to do, just watched the scenery in front. The train left the building zone and entered the massive buffer zone between the Outer City and Main City. Districts 6, 7, and 8's abundant buildings became smaller and more distant in his field of vision, turning into a gray forest amidst the rain and fog.

A searing white light suddenly lit up from that direction!

An Zhe instinctively squinted, but the strong light still penetrated through his eyelids, and all he could see was bright red. Then suddenly it was dark—Lu Feng's hand completely covered his eyes.

In the silence and darkness, An Zhe's senses were boundlessly amplified. Three seconds later, the train's floor and the whole ground suddenly trembled a little.

The silvery-white train swiftly traveled forward along the fixed rails.

At the very moment its last coach left the Outer City area, a massive mushroom cloud rose from District 6.

# BOOK TWO: ROSES

# 14

## “THE SYSTEM OF HUMAN SCIENCES IS ALL BUT WORTHLESS.”

AFTER TEN MINUTES of high-speed train travel, the city had been completely left behind. Once Lu Feng took back his right hand, An Zhe saw thick clouds in the direction they had come from. The fighter planes, returning to their base, passed over the train with a roar before disappearing from his field of vision.

He said nothing. After quietly watching for a short while, he returned to his original spot and sat down.

The moment he boarded, he was still thinking that once communication was restored, he'd use his communicator to tell Mr. Shaw where he was going, but now it seemed that it would no longer be necessary.

He looked outside with his chin resting on his hands, and in his peripheral vision, there was a black figure. Lu Feng had sat down one seat away from him, and the young Judge who always followed him sat down at his side.

"Colonel, a message from the Trial Court," he said. "Of the Trial Court, twenty-one people have evacuated, nine people died, and four people were infected and have already been exterminated."

Lu Feng said, "What about the City Defense Agency?"

"No data at present."

Then their voices ceased. An Zhe looked out the window the whole time—but in truth, there was nothing outside the window that was worth looking at. In the rain and fog, all that was visible was the vast and barren cement ground.

It was a buffer zone. From the city gates to the Outer City, and even between each one of the Outer City's districts, there were huge buffer zones where no

buildings whatsoever had been built. This was so that as soon as a xenogenic invasion or large-scale warfare occurred, the buffer zone could buy valuable rapid response time for the military instead of allowing xenogenics to charge directly into densely-populated residential areas.

Before long, there was movement in the coach as Colin regained consciousness after his brief fainting spell. He got up from the aisle, returned to his original spot, and sat down, his face pale. Head bowed, he took out a pair of black-rimmed glasses from his pocket and repeatedly polished them with the hem of his shirt without saying another word. At that moment, An Zhe felt that this boy was no longer the same person as when they first met.

He turned back and looked at Lu Feng.

At the exact same time, Lu Feng looked away from Colin and at him.

Their eyes met, and An Zhe uneasily grabbed the hem of his own shirt.

Lu Feng only gave him a flat glance before breaking eye contact. He felt the current Lu Feng was very unfamiliar—even though they had slept in the same bed last night.

After some thought, An Zhe still said, "What's next?"

Lu Feng said, "Based on the courses you studied before, you might go teach children how to read."

"Then what about you?"

Lu Feng said, "I'll obey the Main City's plans."

An Zhe mustered up his courage. "Will you go to the Lighthouse?"

He knew his spore was likely at the Lighthouse.

Lu Feng looked at him.

An Zhe felt that this seemed to be the look he would give to someone slow in the head.

"I'm part of the military," Lu Feng said. "My next task is to recover the Dispersion Center."

"... Oh."

Then An Zhe said in a small voice, "Good luck."

Lu Feng quietly looked at him for a few seconds. "Thank you."

After that, neither of them spoke further. Somehow, An Zhe felt that the Colonel may not have been in much of a mood for conversation.

After yet another dozen or so minutes, the train arrived at the station, and Lu Feng walked towards the front of the train.

At the same time, an announcement was broadcast within the train. "Passengers, to ensure the safety of the Main City, please form a line for a second inspection."

The people in the train began to line up, and An Zhe and Colin were at the very back. The second inspection was a genetic examination using machines, and the inspector was still that young blonde and blue-eyed doctor in the white coat. After An Zhe and Colin had their blood drawn, the doctor started the machine and said, "Wait five minutes."

An Zhe obediently pressed a cotton swab to the spot where his blood had been drawn as he stood to one side. The doctor smiled. "It's you again."

"Hello," An Zhe said.

"So the Arbiter would actually bring people over for genetic examinations," the doctor said with a click of his tongue. "Everyone in our examination office was surprised."

An Zhe said, "He believes that I'm human now."

"He may have just wanted to nitpick." The doctor shrugged. "People of the Trial Court, you know, there'll always be minor problems with their minds."

An Zhe says, "He's all right."

The doctor tossed an admiring gaze at him. "You're the first person I've met who will speak on behalf of Colonel Lu."

As the doctor spoke, his gaze moved to An Zhe’s left arm. "You got hurt?"

An Zhe noticed that because his movements were rather large, his sleeve cuff had been pulled up, and some of the bandages wrapped around his left arm

peeked out.

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said.

"You should change the dressing." The doctor picked up a nearby medical kit and pulled out a new roll of bandages. "I'll change it for you."

The doctor seemed to be an easygoing and kind person. An Zhe murmured, "Thank you."

As the doctor took off An Zhe's original bandage, he said off-handedly, "This knot was tied well."

An Zhe thought for a while but didn't say anything. He decided to not tell the doctor that Lu Feng had wrapped it for him for fear that the examination office would be surprised again—they seemed to believe that Lu Feng was an evil person with no uncrossable line.

Once this thought popped up, An Zhe suddenly frowned.

At that moment, he seemed to understand why Lu Feng seldom conversed with others. The position of Arbiter was destined to be like this.

Just as he had that thought, he heard Colin softly say from next to him, "Doctor."

The doctor finished wrapping the bandage for An Zhe and looked at him. "Hm?"

"Now that the Outer City has completely fallen, there's no need for the Trial Court anymore either," Colin said. "Can we know the principles behind the Trial Court's judgments now?"

An Zhe thought that Colin was indeed a steadfast member of the opposition party.

"Why do you want to know?" The doctor leaned against the instrument-bearing vehicle with arms crossed, looking at him as he said, "Did you have family members or friends whom Lu Feng killed?"

"My mother," Colin said. "That time she went into the wilderness, she hadn't gone out of the armored vehicle the entire trip."

"Although there are few tiny monsters, they are by no means nonexistent."

"But there was nothing abnormal about her appearance or behavior."

"Uh-huh," the doctor said flatly. "So? If every single person's relatives demanded an explanation from the Trial Court and the examination office, we wouldn't have any time to ensure the safety of the city gates."

"But it's different now. You guys have time now." Colin raised his voice. "We only want to know the reasons."

While watching him, the doctor smiled.

"You're right, it is different now," the doctor said softly. "Now you are people of the Main City, so you'll gradually come to know a lot of information."

He nonchalantly said, "Do you guys think that after being infected—that human bodies will slowly be corroded?"

Colin said, "What else?"

"That's not it." The doctor lifted his head and looked up at the sky. "At the very moment infection occurs, your strands of DNA—all the DNA structures—will instantly change. Once infection occurs, a person's fate is sealed."

"Impossible," Colin said. "I've studied biology. Viruses need time to spread, and there will be incubation periods—"

But the doctor interrupted him straight away.

"Following that, the DNA strands' structure will affect the composition of RNA, and the changes in RNA will affect the manufacture of proteins, and humans' biological characteristics will begin to change. All of these things begin happening within a very short span of time. Your skin, appearance, expressions, how you move, how you think, language ability... All of them will change. All the training Judges receive before formally becoming Judges is to observe these differences with the naked eye." He smiled. "Once their differentiation accuracy reaches eighty percent, they can graduate and formally serve. Do you think your shallow observation of human behavior is comparable to their more than ten years of training?"

"Eighty percent." Colin abruptly lifted his gaze. "So the Trial Court cannot

completely identify xenogenics either. They really do ensure that they won't erroneously let xenogenics pass via large-scale random killings, right?"

"I'm very sorry, but there's something I must tell you." The doctor looked at him. "Lu Feng's result that year was a hundred percent."

Colin dumbly stood in place for a few seconds before saying, "... Impossible."

"I hope you don't use ordinary standards to determine the upper limits of other people's abilities, especially after entering the Main City." The doctor's tone of voice was flat. He was speaking to Colin, but he was looking at An Zhe. "At the very least, under circumstances where it could be tested whether the judgment outcome was correct or not, he has not made a mistake even once. The examination office and the Trial Court have a very close relationship. I've seen his examination results. Back then, the Arbiter received full marks on all indicators. However, that may not be the reason why he can determine xenogenics with a hundred percent accuracy either."

"He seems to have an innate gift, a kind of intuition," the doctor said. "Back then, after discovering his talent in this field, the examination office drew his blood every month, but unfortunately their research bore no fruit."

"No..." Colin frowned deeply. "This goes against science. Intuition can't be used as the basis for science, and what you said about infection methods at the very start also—"

There was a brief beep, and a green light lit up on the machine.

"Here's your new ID cards and communicators. Get on the shuttle. The Main City will allocate living quarters to you." The doctor handed them two blue chips and communicators. "Afterwards, wait for information from the communicator."

Colin accepted the items. "But..."

"I know it goes against some principles of biological science, but the most fearsome part of this era is—" As the doctor looked at him, his azure eyes seemingly frosted over, he said one syllable at a time, "We've discovered that the systems of human sciences are all but worthless."

"Human science is like mountain climbing, but a hundred years ago, we lost

our footing." The doctor smiled. "Just like how we weren't able to explain from then until now why the geomagnetic field would suddenly disappear for such a long time."

With that, he was no longer talkative. "Get going, then."

Colin bowed his head and walked towards the shuttle without another word. After An Zhe bid the doctor goodbye, he boarded the shuttle as well.

Lu Feng's location was a mystery, for An Zhe hadn't seen him. He was a very busy man, and it also seemed that he didn't want to interact with An Zhe much today, so he had probably already left.

After confirming the last two people had boarded, the shuttle bus left the train station along the track. It was the last bus, and it was packed tight with close to a hundred people standing inside. The place they set out from was inside the building, so the situation outside was not clearly visible. It wasn't until three minutes later, when the shuttle passed through a tunnel, that the sound of rain and the light from the outside world came in. Up ahead, it suddenly became clear, and from within the vehicle came the sound of faint gasps.

An Zhe’s gaze passed through both the crowd inside the vehicle and the vehicle window—there was another buffer zone, but right after the buffer zone, countless large gray-blue buildings that shone with a glassy sheen rose up.

His eyes slowly opened wide.

One month ago, the first time he came to the human base, he felt the mysticality of human buildings. They were taller than the vast majority of giant mushrooms, unusually magnificent and lofty—but those were the magnificence and loftiness with regard to a mushroom who had never seen the world.

It was different now. As someone who had become accustomed to the building standards of the Outer City, he once again felt that those skyscrapers were looking down at him. The Outer City's residential buildings were mainly ten stories high, but the buildings here were different. After he counted to thirty, because it took too long, that building had already retreated and disappeared from his field of vision, while he had only counted a little over half of it.

At the same time, they were unusually concentrated together and intricate, intertwining dazzlingly in An Zhe's sight. The rain gradually lightened up, for summer storms always left very quickly. Golden sunlight penetrated through the clouds and shone off of the glass curtain walls at the tops of the buildings.

An Zhe once heard the entire story of how the base was established from Poet's mouth. At first it was the weakening and then disappearance of the geomagnetic field—to solve this problem, humans built two magnetic field generators, and the Northern Base's Main City protected one of them.

It wasn't until afterwards, when the mutation of bacteria and plants and animals occurred, that humans began gathering together to save themselves, which led to the emergence of the entire Northern Base. Therefore, the Main City was established earlier than the Outer City, and many things had not yet happened at that time. The magnetic generator and the Main City were the pinnacles of human technology and construction respectively at the time.

And after that, it all went downhill.

The robotic guide’s voice said, "Passengers, due to the scarcity of housing in the Main City, the residential areas affiliated with the Lighthouse and Garden of Eden are at full capacity, so you will be temporarily placed in the military residential area. Please find the corresponding address based on your ID card number and await further instruction."

An Zhe took out his new ID card. The card number had changed; now it was 3124043702.

3 represented the human base, 1 represented the Main City, and the remaining numbers delineated the exact residential location.

The people within the shuttle began to whisper amongst themselves, and they discovered that their addresses were all very scattered.

"I got it," someone said. "There's no danger to the people working in the Lighthouse and the Garden of Eden. They won't die, so the residential areas are at full capacity. But the military's numbers are often depleted, leaving many spaces, so they're perfect for us to be stuffed into."

The other people all agreed with this view. Before too long, the shuttle

stopped and let them out. There were a few others living in Building 24's Unit 04 with An Zhe. They walked into the building and began learning how to use the elevators in a flurry—those were something the Outer City did not have.

Finally, Colin got off at the thirty-sixth floor, and An Zhe came alone to the thirty-seventh floor. There were no other buttons above thirty-seven, as it was the top floor. Two doors faced each other, both with white seals pasted on them. An Zhe tore off the seal on the door to No. 02, then swiped his card and entered.

The living spaces in the Main City were clearly larger than those of the Outer City. This was a suite with a bedroom and a living room, and it had a separate bathroom and kitchen. In the living room was a simple tea table and small gray sofa, and on the wall facing the small sofa hung a black rectangular object. The rectangle's structure and color reminded him of the tablet he had played with at Mr. Shaw's place. He went up to it and pressed the button at the bottom.

"... have safely been transferred into the Main City, and the Main City has entered a state of emergency defense. The United Front Center has expressed that the base will enter a five-to ten-year withdrawal period until the next generation matures. At the same time, the Lighthouse has surmised that the monsters outside have produced high-intelligence mutants and that the swarm's invasion is the collective action of insects in the midst of their breeding season. To avoid the potential danger of gene leakage, the Lighthouse recommends that the United Front Center carefully dispatch troops to the outside, no longer carry out high-risk operations, shift their work focus to the production of resources and combat readiness research and development, and search for ways to overcome the current predicament. Next, we'll turn to Lighthouse researcher Mr. Chen."

The interface changed from a suit-clad broadcaster to a middle-aged man with a serious expression clad in a white coat.

"As everyone knows, arthropod-class monsters do not necessarily have a survival advantage in high-risk areas, but during their breeding season, they need nutrient-rich and genetically-advantageous animal blood and flesh to serve as the breeding grounds for their eggs. We surmise that this is why they have collectively attacked the human base. After all, reproduction is the first

priority of species, so they can do anything. But how they produced an intelligent group consciousness is unknown. We fear it may be related to some of the individuals absorbing human genes."

The broadcaster asked, "Regarding this situation, what would you like to convey to everyone?"

"It is a misfortune that the entirety of the base's Outer City has been lost. But in the end, we have eliminated the possibility of further human gene leakage and left the monsters no opportunities to reproduce, which is also a form of victory," the researcher said. "What I want to tell everyone is, there is currently no need to worry about the safety of the Main City. The Main City is the crystallization of the pinnacle of human technology, and the degree of its security is such that it will not be invaded by the monsters of the outside world. At the same time, there's no need to be anxious over the future of the human species. I've received news that our reproduction technology has advanced and that the number of newborns in the Garden of Eden has sharply increased in recent years, so the base is about to enter a period of population expansion. Our future is bright..."

The researcher spoke at length, generally focusing on placating the people. After he finished, the broadcaster connected to someone from the military and asked him to introduce the most recent progress of the work out in the field to everyone.

An Zhe thought that the Main City's news broadcasts were much more detailed than the Outer City's monotonous broadcasts.

He felt that it was very interesting. Once the news finally finished broadcasting, the screen turned a dull gray and began playing meaningless music, and only then did he turn it off.

It was now evening. Outside the bedroom window, stars had begun to appear, and a black silhouette in the shape of a massive cylindrical tower stood in the distance. It was too big, occupying almost a quarter of An Zhe's field of vision, and taller than all the other buildings, resembling a huge monster hibernating in the middle of the city. A thin aurora swiftly fluctuated around it, and An Zhe thought that perhaps it was the legendary magnetic field generator.

He watched for a while longer, then opened the door with the intention of going out for dinner. The Main City was just like the Outer City, with communal dining rooms on certain floors.

He noticed that the seal of the neighbor across the hallway had been torn off.

An Zhe had no intention of investigating when his neighbor had come back, nor what kind of person they were. This day had a hair-raising beginning, and he didn't like it. He intended for it to come to a quiet conclusion.

Thus, he achieved his wish and quietly reached the next morning. A message had come from his communicator, requesting all civilian personnel transferred from the Outer City to gather at the entrance to the Garden of Eden.

Last night, An Zhe read the map of the Main City and the *Base Handbook*, so he knew the Main City had twenty thousand permanent adult residents, seventy percent of whom belonged to the military and the remaining thirty percent consisting of scientific research personnel and various kinds of civil servants. The periphery of the Main City was composed of the military areas, military bases, landing fields, train stations, and residential areas, while the interior was the core area, containing three of the base's important institutions.

The first one was the United Front Center—the military—and it was responsible for managing military personnel and materials. The second one was the Scientific Research Center, which had the same function as its name. Because its symbol was a simplified lighthouse, it was also simply called "the Lighthouse". The United Front Center and the Lighthouse each had its own large building, and the two of them were connected by corridor bridges. The buildings that they were composed of were called the "Twin Towers".

The third one’s name was rather long. It was called "Reproduction, Nurturing, and Education Center", and it had two functions. One was to provide foodstuffs and nutrition for the base—An Zhe thought that this may be where humans planted potatoes. The other was to grow their younglings. Human babies grew up and received their initial education here. Because the name was too difficult to pronounce, it was also known as the "Garden of Eden".

An Zhe's future workplace was the Garden of Eden.

He looked at the distant Twin Towers, then looked at the Garden of Eden. In

truth, he was looking forward to it a little because he hadn’t seen human younglings before. His spore was a very soft and white little thing. He didn't know if human younglings would be the same.

But could taking care of human younglings allow him to accumulate experience for taking care of his own youngling?

It seemed that it couldn't.

# 15

## “DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT.”

"DO NOT GO gentle into that good night—"

An Zhe and Colin walked through a long and narrow white corridor. From next to them came the synchronized sound of recitation, an assemblage of very young voices creating faintly discernible echoes in the surroundings.

This was the sixth floor of the Garden of Eden, and the one who brought them in was a man around thirty years old named Lin Zuo. In his white shirt and gold wire-rimmed glasses, he looked gentle and cultured.

Lin Zuo brought the two of them to the office, where he said, "It's nice here, isn't it?"

Colin said, "It's very nice."

Lin Zuo said, "The Main City's conditions are somewhat better than those of the Outer City."

An Zhe noticed. At the very least, when he was in the Outer City, he never thought that the world would have a building as massive as the Garden of Eden.

In this corridor, apart from the office, there were ten rooms altogether. Five were classrooms, and the other five were children's dormitories. The dormitories were packed with small, low beds, and each room could accommodate a hundred people. According to Lin Zuo, this floor of the Garden of Eden consisted of a total of ten such corridors, and the children on each floor were the same age. In other words, there were four thousand nearly-six-years-old human younglings here.

"After the children reach six years old, the vast majority of them originally would have been sent to the Outer City to await adoption. But now that the

Outer City has fallen, the Main City has to bear the work of their education past six years old and there's not enough manpower. It's good that you all have come," Lin Zuo said. "We dare not hand over babies under the age of six to newcomers, so this group of children will be assigned to you after they turn six."

An Zhe said, "Okay."

"At present, the plans for the next step in their education isn’t quite set just as of yet. You two, come with me and familiarize yourselves with the process first, okay?"

Colin replied with an affirmative sound.

Lin Zuo smiled faintly, then took some books from a bookshelf. "These are the textbooks and shift plans. Take a look at them first, then ask me if you have questions."

An Zhe accepted his portion.

There were two education courses here, with one course being language and literature and the other course being mathematics and logic. What he received was the language and literature textbook. The six-year-old children had already grasped basic pinyin and grammar, so the textbook contained some short fables and poems. An Ze had learned these things very well, so there were no syllables or words An Zhe didn't recognize either.

After flipping through the textbook once, it was time for class. An Zhe moved a desk and chair into a back corner of the classroom and sat down, holding a copy of the children's seating chart. The task Lin Zuo gave to him, other than listening to class, was to take notes on the children's behavior. If a child took the initiative to answer a question or ask a question, points would be added, and if a child whispered or did irrelevant things, points would be deducted.

When he sat in, the younglings all turned their heads to look at him. The younglings had very tender skin, and their gazes were also pure and clean. They all wore white shirts, black shorts, and similar short hairstyles, so there was momentarily no way of differentiating between male and female. They whispered a little, continuing to examine An Zhe, and An Zhe smiled at them in response.

Thus, a few of the younglings smiled back at him as well. Among them, one blinked, eyelashes fluttering a few times, and asked, "Are you the new teacher?"

An Zhe said, "I am."

"Wow," another youngling said in a small voice. "You're so pretty."

An Zhe said, "Thank you."

The youngling said, "You're welcome."

Yet another youngling asked, "What're you called?"

An Zhe gave his name.

Chattering, the younglings introduced themselves as well. "I'm called Bai Nan."

"I'm called Ji Sha."

"I'm called Du Cheng."

Of course, there were some indifferent younglings as well, such as the one in the corner who turned back after one look at An Zhe.

But the excitement around An Zhe didn't last too long because Lin Zuo had come in.

The younglings instantly dispersed from An Zhe's side and returned to their own seats. Lin Zuo looked around and, after confirming that nobody was absent, began the lecture.

What he lectured on was the poem An Zhe had heard in the corridor earlier, and it was also the last one in the textbook—it was somewhat more complicated than the other contents, and it just happened to be what he heard the children in a classroom reciting when he was walking in the corridor.

The younglings first read the poem out loud from beginning to end.

"Do not go gentle into that good night.

Old age should burn and rave at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,

Because their words had forked no lightning they

Do not go gentle into that good night."

After they read it out loud once, Lin Zuo stood in front of the podium and asked, "Is there any part you don't understand?"

One youngling raised their hand, and An Zhe checked the seating chart. That was the youngling Bai Nan.

Bai Nan said, "I don't understand any part."

The other younglings all laughed.

"Narrow the scope of your question," Lin Zuo said.

"Then..." Bai Nan scratched the back of his head. His tone was hesitant as he asked, "Why can't we go gentle into the night?"

An Zhe added a point for Bai Nan on the chart, then looked at Lin Zuo, waiting for his answer.

He didn't know the answer to Bai Nan’s question either. In the Abyss and in the human base, he had seen twilight gradually replace the daylight too many times. Every single night gently descended upon the ground in that manner, unable to be resisted.

Lin Zuo's gaze swept over them, and his lips pursed slightly to form a faintly solemn arc.

"This is the last text of your course this year," he said. "It has a meaning different from all the previous texts, although to you all, it may be a bit difficult."

He turned around, wrote down the line "Do not go gentle into that good night" on the whiteboard, then once again turned towards the younglings below.

"This is a poem composed of metaphors and symbols," Lin Zuo said. "Do not go gentle into that good night. Its implied meaning is: do not meekly accept destruction."

An Zhe slowly opened his eyes wide, and he wrote down this sentence in his notebook.

Then Lin Zuo began explaining from the first line, and An Zhe earnestly took notes.

After he finished explaining, the younglings once again read the poem out loud from beginning to end.

"There on the sad height,

Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night."

The tip of the pen An Zhe was using paused. He lifted his head to look at the bright scenery outside the window. Nearby, the Twin Towers were shining gloriously beneath the sunlight, and the city gently sprawled, its edges disappearing into the blue horizon. He knew that this city had not yet gone into that good night and was striving to not go into that good night.

After the day's classes ended, Lin Zuo was off work, so he handed over the children to An Zhe and Colin. They had to take the younglings together with the dormitory teacher to eat, then gather in the dormitories to watch the day's news. In order to improve his relationship with the younglings, An Zhe had to explain any confusion they had regarding the news at any time, and he could only get off work after the news was done playing.

The well-fed younglings were very lively. In the corridor, they quarreled and talked. An Zhe felt like there were ten thousand mosquitoes screaming in his ear, but he tolerated these human younglings. Even in the Abyss, monsters would treat their younglings gently—but only their own.

Once it was time for the news, the dormitory teacher took out a scoring sheet, and the younglings instantly quieted down when they saw the sheet and spontaneously formed a ring next to the large projection screen with An Zhe sitting in the middle.

As he watched the screen, he suddenly felt something touching his fingers. When he looked down, he saw that it was the youngling named Bai Nan sitting next to him and hooking his own fingers around An Zhe's.

An Zhe didn't have much physical contact with humans before, and the one incident he had a strong recollection of was when he bumped into Lu Feng and even hurt his head on the badge on Lu Feng's chest—but the youngling's body was different from Lu Feng's. It was soft.

Like his spore, the human younglings quietly stayed by him, just like how his spore quietly stayed inside his body. Through this fantasy, An Zhe obtained a false sense of peace, and he once again rubbed Bai Nan's head.

Thus, Bai Nan scooted even closer to lean firmly against him and hugged his arm. At the same time, another youngling named Ji Sha leaned over as well. This youngling looked vaguely like a girl. Immediately afterwards, the group of younglings wriggled towards him. Colin, who was to one side, also received the affection of a few younglings. Getting close to adults seemed to be an instinct of all species' younglings.

But there was a solitary youngling still sitting cross-legged in place, remaining unmoved. An Zhe remembered that his name was Si Nan. Si Nan never asked questions in class either. He made eye contact with Si Nan and smiled at him, but Si Nan avoided his gaze, turning his eyes back to the big screen.

The news started.

"After the bombing of District 6, the number of monsters in the Outer City has significantly decreased. The military's Second Air Formation took flight at 6 a.m. this morning and landed in District 1 to assist the Outer City. The Trial Court's Colonel Lu Feng will command the existing troops to carry out the Dispersion Center recovery mission..."

An Zhe suddenly heard a familiar name. Since he came to the Main City, he hadn't seen Lu Feng. It turned out that he had already gone to the Outer City.

Bai Nan suddenly murmured, "It's the Arbiter."

Ji Sha said, "I'm so scared."

An Zhe asked them, "What's the matter?"

Bai Nan said, "The news will often say how many people the Arbiter executed."

Ji Sha added, "He also often goes to the Abyss. The Abyss is so scary."

An Zhe rubbed her head. "There's no need to be afraid."

Ji Sha wrinkled her nose.

"You're human, so the Arbiter will protect you."

Ji Sha continued wrinkling her nose.

Bai Nan asked, "Teacher, have you seen the Arbiter before?"

At the same time, the news said, "Next, we'll connect with our war correspondent."

With a flash, the camera lens showed the reporter interviewing an officer clad in a black uniform. When that figure first appeared, An Zhe thought it was Lu Feng, but then he noticed that it wasn't. That person was the young Judge by Lu Feng's side. The news screen showed his name: Seraing.

He softly answered Bai Nan's question. "I have."

"Then how does he look? He hasn't shown his face on the news before," Bai Nan asked.

Ji Sha chimed in too. "Does he look very mean?"

The younglings all looked in their direction, seemingly very interested in this question.

"He..." An Zhe recalled Lu Feng's appearance and strove to decide based on human aesthetics. "He's a little fierce, but very handsome."

"What does he look like?"

Each of the younglings' questions were more difficult than the previous. An Zhe didn't know what kind of comparison to make at all. Just as he was pondering deeply, he suddenly recalled the color of Lu Feng's eyes. That cold deep green—like where the aurora proliferated in the sky.

He said, "Like... the aurora, I suppose."

Doubts appeared in the younglings' eyes.

Right then, An Zhe saw the dormitory teacher give him a thumbs-up from the

side.

"As expected of a language and literature teacher," the dormitory teacher said.

An Zhe didn't know if the dorm teacher was praising or criticizing him, so he could only give a close-lipped smile.

In this manner, he passed the days in the Main City one at a time, and without even noticing, he had lived here for nearly a month.

Life in the Garden of Eden was very peaceful, with nothing more than arguments and fights between the younglings. There were a few times when An Zhe walked to the base of the Twin Towers, but these two towers both required for a card to be swiped before entering, and he did not have the permissions to enter. If he wanted to see his spore, he first needed to know where exactly it was within the Lighthouse, and he also needed to be able to gain entry to the Lighthouse. Right now, both goals were both far off.

However, at the same time, the information that came from the news was increasingly heartening. Ten days ago, Colonel Lu had led a team into the core of the Dispersion Center and worked out a detailed plan of action—the news stressed that because of the Trial Court's periodical training in the Abyss, they had an extreme abundance of experience in dealing with monsters.

Five days ago, the troops officially recovered the Dispersion Center, cleaned out the remaining monsters inside, and carried out large-scale cleaning and disinfection. The team sent by the Lighthouse then entered and began the emergency repairs.

Today, An Zhe had originally planned to continue listening to the news, but on this day, Lin Zuo had to take the night shift, so he was forced to leave work ahead of time.

At six o'clock in the summer, the sky was still very bright, with only the western sky being slowly suffused with a thin layer of gray-blue. An Zhe swiped his card, and the "Garden of Eden" building's glass door slowly slid open. He walked out, and Colin, who had also gotten off work early, walked out as well.

It wasn't the conventional time to get off work, so there were few pedestrians

on the road. He wandered about the streets and took a shortcut towards the shuttle bus stop. He and Colin were both tired of the other, so even though they had to walk the same path, they maintained a very large distance with one in front and one behind.

The world was originally very quiet, but just as he was about to cross this small street and set foot on the wide road, hurried footsteps suddenly came from behind him, followed by a white shape passing him in his peripheral vision—a short white figure, and An Zhe frowned as he looked—that was a little girl, he was convinced.

Of the children in his class, the ways the boys and girls dressed and looked were very similar, but they were all five or six years old. This child before his eyes was undoubtedly a girl. She had an exceptionally slim body and shoulder-length black hair that hung loose, and she wore a white gauze dress.

Up ahead was the road, and vehicles were driving over it. An Zhe said, "Be careful!"

Coincidentally, a car roared as it passed by, and the girl stopped dead in her tracks as though startled by it. As she rapidly gasped for breath, she turned back to look at An Zhe, her gaze terrified yet seeming very apprehensive.

An Zhe asked, "Do you need my help? Are you from the Garden of Eden?"

Unexpectedly, just as he finished speaking, the girl's tension increased instead, and she whipped her head around before rushing straight towards the road!

An Zhe chased after her.

At that very moment, a black figure appeared at the street corner and, with crisp and tidy movements, blocked the girl's path. Right as the girl's footsteps paused, that person leaned down and picked her up, then took a few steps back. The girl struggled violently, but she couldn't get free at all.

An Zhe, who had only just arrived, was speechless.

Their eyes met.

"... Hello," An Zhe said.

"Hello," Lu Feng replied.

An Zhe wanted to ask him if the Dispersion Center had been recovered, but at that moment, he had something even more important to say, and it had already been fermenting for a month.

That day on the train, Lu Feng was in a bad mood—in truth, his mood had never been particularly good before, and An Zhe inferred the reason—in this world, very few people could look at the Colonel rationally.

Combined with the Colonel's action of sacrificing himself on the dangerous road to save the little girl just now, that statement was even more well-founded.

"Colonel," he said.

Lu Feng seemed to lift his eyebrows slightly. "What is it?"

The girl was still struggling. With her gaze empty and hair disheveled, it looked like there was something wrong with her. Lu Feng carelessly patted her on the back, and although the technique was very unpracticed, at the very least his intentions were good.

Thus, that statement was proven right once more. An Zhe looked at the little girl, then once again looked back at Lu Feng before he said sincerely, "You're a good person."

This time, the Colonel really lifted his eyebrows, and there was a hint of a smile in the corners of his lips, but it wasn't a genuine smile. It was like he had heard An Zhe say some blatant falsehood instead.

In the following second, he subdued the girl with one hand and picked up his communicator with the other. "Intersection 7, target captured."

With those words, he gave An Zhe a flat look.

An Zhe did not understand.

# 16

## “I DON'T HATE YOU BECAUSE OF THOSE THINGS”

AN ZHE STOOD IN PLACE.

The evening wind lifted up his hair.

He saw a silver car bearing a Garden of Eden logo make a screeching turn before stopping in front of them. From inside, a man in white overalls rushed out, and he took the girl from Lu Feng. "Thank you for your help."

The expression in Lu Feng's eyes was flat. "Be more careful in the future."

The man got back into the car. "This time was an accident."

Without any further words, the man pulled the door shut, and the car swiftly started up and sped towards the Garden of Eden.

Lu Feng turned back.

An Zhe felt a little angry.

Then he saw Lu Feng give him a flat look before saying evenly, "I'm a good person?"

An Zhe finally knew how he should describe his own mood.

He thought that Lu Feng had deceived his feelings, if mushrooms also had feelings.

He didn't want to acknowledge this man anymore, so he turned around and walked past him onto the road.

Before he had taken many steps, Lu Feng had pressed down on his shoulder.

"Lead the way," Lu Feng said. "I don't know how to get back to the residential area."

An Zhe was confused.

He asked, "Don't you know your way around?

"I haven't come back in many years," Lu Feng replied.

An Zhe thought for a while. What he said made a bit of sense. If the Colonel was not in the Abyss, then he was at the city gates, so he may not have stayed in the Main City for at least seven years. Whereas he himself had already stayed in the Main City for a month, so he was familiar with the way back.

Thus, he asked, "Where do you live?"

Lu Feng seemed to think for a while before taking out a blue ID card from his chest pocket and handing it over.

An Zhe accepted it. Even the decorative pattern on the Colonel's card was different from his.

He looked down and saw that the back of the card had a string of numbers printed on it in gilt.

3124043701.

Recalling his own new ID number, An Zhe expressionlessly said, "I'll take you there."

The Colonel seemed to have noticed his expression. "You aren't willing to?"

"I'm willing."

Thus, with Lu Feng in tow, he sat down on the Main City's free shuttle. There were seats on both sides, and the seats were arranged in connected pairs. He sat down at a window seat, and Lu Feng sat down next to him. Lu Feng was a good-looking man, and coupled with the imposing and tidy Trial Court uniform, he was very conspicuous amongst the crowd. As a result, when they boarded, all the people inside looked at them.

An Zhe said, "Get off at the last stop."

"Thank you," Lu Feng said. "Where do you live?"

"I live near you."

"All right."

The original residential area for the Garden of Eden's workers was nearby, but An Zhe was a late addition, and the military residential area he had been assigned to was far away. The shuttle stopped and went, and almost forty minutes passed before it reached the last stop, where he had to get off.

The Garden of Eden's younglings looked very well-behaved, but they actually were not, especially when they asked about this and that. At the end of the day, An Zhe would be lethargic for a while—such as right now.

In the past, he would choose to lean against the vehicle and nap for a while, but Lu Feng was beside him today, so he felt that it was better to stay awake.

Thus, An Zhe chose to rest his chin in his hand and look at the scenery outside, such as the Twin Towers, Garden of Eden, and other various buildings and structures. It had been two months since he'd started living in the human city, but he still felt like he was dreaming.

As he looked, An Zhe's eyelids gradually drooped.

And after that, he lost consciousness.

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The gentle robotic announcement played. "We have arrived at the last stop. Passengers, please get off in an orderly manner, and we will see you next time."

Lu Feng looked at An Zhe, who was leaning on his shoulder.

The glow of the setting sun spilled in through the window, and a golden sheen suffused the ends of An Zhe's eyelashes. His sleeping appearance was very quiet, with the gentle rise and fall of his breathing the only movement. He looked like he had no aggressiveness whatsoever nor any vigilance or caution against everything outside, just like a child who had not grown up. Lu Feng thought that it wouldn’t be bad if he kept sleeping like this.

But immediately, the shuttle slowed down and came to a gradual stop. The people on board stood up one after another, and their footsteps sounded in the aisle.

An Zhe opened his eyes.

He discovered that he had slept more comfortably than any other time before.

His gaze slowly, slowly traveled to the side, and he saw black fabric and a silver badge.

With a start, he straightened up and saw Lu Feng watching him with a gaze that was by no means cold; it seemed that he hadn't gotten angry because of what happened just now.

Lu Feng said, "Let's go."

An Zhe rubbed his eyes. He fell asleep quickly and woke up quickly as well. He followed Lu Feng off the shuttle, and the evening wind brought with it a slight chill. He pointed towards a building up ahead. "Building 24 is there."

Lu Feng uttered a short word of thanks, then walked in that direction.

An Zhe followed.

Halfway there, Lu Feng said, "It's enough to bring me to this point."

Saying nothing, An Zhe continued following him.

At Unit 04, Lu Feng pressed the button for the thirty-seventh floor, and so An Zhe went up to the thirty-seventh floor via the elevator as well. Naturally, the kind of simple choice between No. 01 and No. 02 did not need another's directions.

An Zhe looked at the remains of the seal that had just been torn off from the door of No. 01 last night, thinking that even now, this Colonel was still unaware that his abominable conduct had been seen through long ago.

The seal on the door of his neighbor across the hall, No. 01, had been torn off a month ago. He had personally witnessed it. It meant that Lu Feng had stayed here for a night back then, so there was no possibility that he didn't know the way.

And Lu Feng made the false claim that he didn't know the way at all and wanted him to lead the way. This meant—Lu Feng was completely making fun of him, making him expend worthless and unnecessary labor.

Unfortunately, when he saw Lu Feng's ID card, the man's lie collapsed.

At that very moment, he heard Lu Feng say, "You're very conscientious."

This man truly thought he was conscientiously doing his best to lead the way—with this thought, An Zhe's expression became more merciless. He looked at Lu Feng, and Lu Feng looked back at him.

Mimicking Lu Feng, An Zhe indifferently turned and came to the door of No. 02, then placed his blue ID card on the sensor.

The sensor let out a crisp "beep" and lit up with a green light. Then there was a "click" as the door lock automatically opened.

An Zhe turned back and looked at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng was briefly stunned before saying, "What a coincidence."

An Zhe's face was blank.

"What is it?" There seemed to be a slight questioning in Lu Feng's eyes, but merely one second later, he seemed to understand everything. The expression in his eyes changed completely into a smile, and the corners of his lips lifted as well.

"I didn't lie to you," he said. "I had a night-long prewar meeting in the Main City one month ago right before leaving for the Outer City."

"The seal," An Zhe said.

"The military knew I had returned to the Main City, so they sent people to come tidy up," Lu Feng said.

"Oh."

But An Zhe had no plans to believe this man again.

He turned around and returned home. Right at that moment, Lu Feng's door suddenly let out a piercing and hurried "beep—".

He turned back and saw Lu Feng swiping his card, but although the correct card was clearly placed against the sensor, it glowed red.

Lu Feng frowned.

An Zhe looked at him with suspicion.

Then he saw Lu Feng dial a number and briefly describe the current situation.

The sound of an explanation came from the transmitter on the other end.

After hanging up, Lu Feng looked at An Zhe and said, "Three years ago, the Main City's ID cards were upgraded, but mine wasn't upgraded in time."

An Zhe thought that he may truly have unjustly blamed Lu Feng.

But, but—

The Main City's roads were not complicated at all, and the buildings all had conspicuous numbers. Once on the shuttle, even a mushroom like him knew when to get off.

For a moment, he wavered. But in the end, for the sake of his spore, he still said, "Then would you... like to come to my home for now?"

Lu Feng readily accepted.

After inviting the Arbiter to sit down on the sofa and then turning on the TV for him, An Zhe went into the kitchen.

Before entering the kitchen, he asked, "Have you eaten?"

Lu Feng said that he had not.

An Zhe's original intention for saying this was to hint that he could go downstairs to the communal dining hall to eat, but Lu Feng's reply had a hidden meaning—it meant that he had to cook for two today.

An Zhe chopped two additional potatoes. The Main City's communal dining hall provided both food and raw materials. In this month, he had gradually gotten accustomed to cooking his own soup—it would be thicker and more delicious than that of the dining hall.

After putting the potatoes and bits of smoked pork into the pot, pouring in water, and adding milk, he turned on the heat, covered the pot, and returned to the living room.

The news announced that the restoration work of the Dispersion Center was proceeding smoothly.

Lu Feng was on the sofa and looking at his textbook, seemingly in a good

mood.

When this man was in a good mood, he would bully others. When he was in a bad mood, he would not acknowledge others, such as that time a month ago on the train when he seemed to be completely unwilling to talk to An Zhe.

After the impulsive emotion of being lied to subsided, An Zhe calmed down. While he was chopping potatoes in the kitchen, he earnestly contemplated the relationship between himself and Lu Feng.

The key to finding his spore lay in establishing a good relationship with Lu Feng.

The premise upon which establishing a good relationship with humans rested on understanding his preferences.

Thus, An Zhe sat next to Lu Feng, and he saw that Lu Feng was looking at a poem in the textbook that described autumn's scenery.

"You teach this?" Lu Feng asked.

"I'm still learning," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng's unprompted question made An Zhe even more convinced that the man was in a good mood.

Thus, he said, "Colonel."

Lu Feng put down the textbook and looked at him. "What is it?"

"Before, on the train..." An Zhe murmured, slowly dropping his gaze, "You seemed unwilling to acknowledge me. Did I do something wrong?"

Lu Feng looked at him with a deep gaze.

"No," he said. "It's my problem."

"So that's what it was."

"Were you very bothered?"

"... Mm."

After a short silence, Lu Feng reached out a hand.

His fingers lingered briefly on the skin at An Zhe's neck, then traveled down

and pulled out the bullet shell hanging around his neck.

An Zhe lifted his head to look up at Lu Feng, slightly panicked. At what point Lu Feng discovered the existence of the bullet shell, he didn't know.

"I killed the black market's mistress. At that time, you were by her side. Did you work under her?"

An Zhe shook his head. "I only followed Mr. Shaw."

"3260563209, at the city gates." Lu Feng continued. "Was he your teammate or boyfriend?"

"My friend."

Holding the bullet shell at his neck, Lu Feng asked, "Who was this?"

An Zhe said nothing. He couldn't say it, but silence was also a form of answer.

After the silence, Lu Feng did not ask further and simply stuffed the bullet shell back beneath An Zhe's collar.

"I've killed many people. However, for the most recent mass killings, you've always been present," he said. "Under these circumstances, the fact that you're still able to say I'm a good person surprises me greatly."

An Zhe thought back and discovered that things were indeed so.

The first time they met, Lu Feng killed Vance. The second time they met, it was Doussay. That night, xenogenics had invaded the city, and he had also killed seventy-three other people.

One month later, An Zhe stood within the isolation wall and witnessed Judgment Day being carried out with countless gunshots.

Finally, on the train leaving the Outer City, at his side, Lu Feng issued the order to bomb District 6.

Lu Feng had killed many people he had connections to.

However, this by no means impeded him from thinking that Lu Feng was a good person. Firstly, he knew Lu Feng was very accurate in distinguishing xenogenics. Secondly, even if he was recognized as a xenogenic by Lu Feng and killed, or when District 6 was bombed, he was one of them, and it seemed there

was nothing to say. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. He had come to the human base, so he had to accept human rules.

But Lu Feng was the person who carried out the death sentences.

"Are you... sad because of this?" An Zhe asked.

"No." Lu Feng said while looking at him. "I know what I'm doing."

"Then..." An Zhe only managed to say that one word.

Was that because of some sort of emotional fluctuation?

But Lu Feng seemed to see what he was thinking.

"I haven't violated the principles," he said, "but nobody will come to determine whether I'm right or wrong."

An Zhe remembered what the young Judge Seraing said to him. He asked, "You aren't certain whether you've killed people correctly or not?"

"No, I am certain." Lu Feng looked out the window. His green eyes were like icebound lakes, containing an empty and distant stillness. "I'll just sometimes think about... the choices I made. Just what am I judging, and who will judge me in the end?"

An Zhe didn't fully understand his words. When humans have gone mad, perhaps they would say some nonsense that others did not understand.

But he also felt that he did understand.

As he looked at Lu Feng, he said, "I don't hate you because of those things."

After a pause, he added, "You haven't done wrong."

Lu Feng looked at him, and there was a long silence. It was so long that An Zhe felt an illusion—within that pair of eyes were not icebound lakes, but rather gentle cold water.

Twilight slowly descended upon the room. Lu Feng reached out with his right hand and ruffled An Zhe's hair.

An Zhe lowered his eyes slightly. The feeling of being patted on the head by the Arbiter was very wondrous. He felt that Lu Feng was now very soft.

If it was because his previous words comforted this man, he would feel rather happy.

Thus, he smiled at Lu Feng.

Then he saw Lu Feng's gaze turn malicious, and the fingers that had been patting his head moved downwards and pinched his face.

An Zhe felt that it was better when this man was in a worse mood, because at least then he wouldn't randomly bully others.

He escaped from Lu Feng. "I need to go check on the pot."

"Uh-huh."

An Zhe returned to the kitchen and discovered that, as expected, the water had already started boiling, with the foam surging up and almost bursting through the pot lid. These days, he had grasped a sufficient number of cooking techniques. He lifted the transparent pot lid, and the white steam evaporated and the bubbles swiftly vanished. The smoked pork had been soaked through by the boiling water, and the edges of the small pieces of potato had also become rounded. The small amount of milk made the soup slightly white, and in the fresh and salty scent that wafted up, there was a subtle hint of a tender and lingering sweet fragrance. It was a smell An Zhe liked very much.

He picked up a nearby ladle and used the bottom of it to mash the softened pieces of potato. As they were stirred and mashed, the small pieces gradually dissolved into the soup, and the pot of potato soup became visibly thicker.

Lu Feng had also come into the kitchen at some point. Leaning against the doorframe, he asked, "Do you want me to help?"

An Zhe naturally didn't count on the mighty Colonel to be familiar with kitchen work, so he said, "No."

But Lu Feng didn't leave. He only stayed there and watched An Zhe. Then his gaze shifted to the kitchen, looking around the small space.

Finally, his gaze stopped on the silver faucet over the sink. "Does it leak?"

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said.

Since the first day he moved in, the kitchen faucet leaked. No matter how

tightly he turned it, water would drip. In the daytime, the sound was not obvious, but in the profound quiet of the night, when even the lights of the distant Twin Towers were extinguished, the repeated sound of dripping water echoed throughout the rooms and would sometimes disturb his sleep—though disturbing his sleep came second. More importantly, with day after day of this, he was afraid he would have to pay a bigger water bill.

But then he saw Lu Feng take off and put aside his coat, roll up his uniform shirt's sleeves, and lift his hand to close the black valve up on the water pipe—that was a place someone of An Zhe's height could not reach.

Then he unscrewed the faucet.

An Zhe silently watched his movements. He felt that Lu Feng's activity had only two possibilities: one was wanting to utterly destroy his faucet, and the other was wanting to help him repair it.

Rationally, he felt it was the former, but emotionally, he was more willing to believe the latter.

At that exact moment, someone knocked on the door.

Lu Feng was taking apart the faucet. Without even lifting his head, he said, "Go."

His manner of speaking was as self-assured as if he were the owner of these living quarters.

An Zhe, the true owner, put down the ladle, walked over to the entryway, and opened the door. It was a soldier clad in a military uniform.

The man looked around the living room and said, "Colonel Lu had me come here."

His voice was very loud.

Lu Feng's calm voice came from the direction of the kitchen. "Over here."

The soldier walked to the doorway, then clicked his heels and saluted. "Colonel Lu, I'm with the logistics service. Neglecting the issue with your ID card was the fault of our operating—"

His words suddenly cut off, and his gaze turned towards the faucet parts in Lu

Feng's hand. With an expression like he'd seen a ghost, he then continued. "... For this, we sincerely apologize and—"

"Cut the chatter," Lu Feng said, coldly interrupting him.

The soldier said, "... I'm here to deliver your new ID card."

"Thank you." Lu Feng didn't even look at him as he put two parts back together with both hands. "You can put it down."

Potato peels lay piled up next to the sink, and next to them was the kitchen knife.

In the sink was water.

In the Colonel's hands were faucet parts.

The soldier held the ID card, momentarily unsure where he ought to put it.

An Zhe could only say in a small voice, "You can give it to me."

After taking the ID card, next was seeing the visitor off.

At the entrance, the soldier once again glanced at the Colonel in the kitchen, then looked at An Zhe. He deliberately lowered his voice, but because his voice was loud in the first place, it still wasn't quiet after he lowered it. "... What is the Colonel doing?"

"Fixing the faucet."

"The Colonel knows how to fix faucets?" The soldier looked at him with suspicion. "Then you and he are..."

"Right now, we're neighbors."

"What about before?"

"Before..." An Zhe recalled how they had slept in each other's beds. "Friends, I suppose."

The corners of the soldier's mouth twitched unnaturally. "... Ahaha."

He seemed to not believe An Zhe.

Perhaps it was that Lu Feng very rarely took apart other people's faucets. An Zhe calmly sent the soldier away.

As soon as he returned to the kitchen, he saw that the faucet had been reinstalled in its original place.

Lu Feng twisted open the valve.

The faucet did not leak at all.

"Wow," An Zhe said.

While looking at the faucet, he felt that the Colonel did not necessarily stay aloof at all times, refusing to acknowledge others, and also felt that this man seemed to know how to do everything.

He said, "You're really amazing."

His voice was still soft and very delicate. The aroma of the potato soup had already completely wafted out to fill the room with the dense steam. Without any hint of emotion, Lu Feng said, "You're not bad yourself."

After the potato soup was completely cooked, An Zhe divided it into two bowls and matched it with two packets of hardtack to serve as the staple food. Lu Feng looked to be in a very cheerful mood, but An Zhe had no appetite. He racked his brains, wanting to get some information related to the Lighthouse from Lu Feng, so he asked Lu Feng no small number of questions.

"What will you do next?"

"Wait for plans."

"Will you work in the Twin Towers?"

"Maybe."

"Does the Lighthouse and military often interact?"

"No."

"The doctor works at the Lighthouse... Do you know him very well?"

"No." Lu Feng was expressionless.

The blatant coldness made An Zhe give up the thought of continuing his questioning, but to stop there seemed more suspicious, so he continued. "That little girl today..."

In the following second, Lu Feng looked at him.

"Don't ask questions you shouldn't be asking," he said, "and don't talk while you eat."

An Zhe disappointedly shut up.

By the time dinner ended, he hadn’t gotten anything related to his spore at all, but the Arbiter's attitude towards him seemed to have improved a lot.

An Zhe opened the door to see Lu Feng out.

Lu Feng said, "Goodbye."

An Zhe also said, "Goodbye."

He saw Lu Feng put the new ID card up to the sensor. The green light lit up, and the lock successfully opened.

Lu Feng pushed the door open.

Then he suddenly stopped moving, his entire person seeming to have come to a standstill.

For the Colonel, this kind of behavior was very seldom seen, so An Zhe surreptitiously stuck out his head and looked inside the room.

With that look, he froze as well.

The room was not empty.

Next to the sofa that directly faced the entrance was a huge opened suitcase, and on the sofa was an officer in a black uniform sitting upright. This officer had black hair and green eyes and was coldly looking at the doorway.

The Lu Feng standing in the doorway turned and looked at An Zhe with an identical gaze.

"... It wasn't me," An Zhe said.

It truly wasn't him.

Since his arrest, he had never seen the Arbiter's mannequin again, and he even assumed that the evil thing had been blown to bits along with District 6. Why would it appear in Lu Feng's home?

At that exact moment, Lu Feng's communicator rang. The other person's voice was very loud, for it was that soldier from the logistics department who had come earlier to deliver the card. "Colonel, have you returned to your living quarters? Can the new ID card be used normally?"

"It can, thank you," Lu Feng said. "But I wish to know, what is going on with the mannequin in my living room?"

"The mannequin?" The soldier on the other end was first a little uncertain, but then he suddenly had an epiphany. "Before, during the Trial Court's emergency evacuation, they were saving important documents and goods, and the soldiers responsible saw this and believed it may be an important military tool, so they brought it over. We didn't know how to deal with it, so we put it in your living quarters."

Lu Feng repeated a sentence. "Important military tool?"

"Indeed. Although we're in the Main City, we also know the Outer City has some reactionary groups opposing the Trial Court. We judged the replica mannequin to perhaps be one of the Trial Court's tools to bait the enemy. Moreover, its manufacturing cost looks to be very..." The man talked endlessly.

Lu Feng didn't say a word.

The other person finally noticed that something was amiss. "Colonel, did I say something wrong?"

"You haven't. Thank you." Lu Feng hung up.

After hanging up, he said to An Zhe, "Come here."

An Zhe felt deep despair. He had not been convicted in his previous case, and it was only because of a sudden worm attack that he was able to get out of prison. Now that the dirty goods reappeared, would the Arbiter bring up the past again and convict him?

He walked over.

Lu Feng carelessly picked up the mannequin from the sofa, put it back in the suitcase, then pushed the suitcase towards An Zhe. Uncomprehending, An Zhe pressed down on the suitcase handle.

"For you," Lu Feng said, leaving An Zhe at a loss for words.

# 17

## “IT'S LIKE A BEEHIVE.”

GRASPING THE HANDLE, An Zhe asked, stupefied, "I haven't committed a crime of indecency now?"

"No." Lu Feng turned to go back to the bedroom. "Whether the crime of indecency is established or not depends on the wishes of the victim."

This man had the gall to call himself a victim.

An Zhe had already seen through him. After pulling the suitcase home, he put it in the most inconspicuous corner of the room. He wouldn't allow the Lu Feng inside to see the sun again.

The news broadcast on the TV had just finished and transitioned into the next day's weather forecast. In a sweet voice, the anchor said that the flatland where the base was located would be welcoming a rare windy day and asked everyone to please close their doors and windows.

At the start, when An Zhe was a mushroom, he feared strong winds because they would destroy mushrooms. It wasn't until later, after he snapped and his body changed, that he slowly stopped being afraid of the wind. On the contrary, he liked the feeling of the wind blowing against him.

Once he washed up and returned to his bedroom, he looked at his textbook for a while. After the night gradually deepened, An Zhe planned to sleep.

Right at that moment, a strange low noise sounded in his ear.

Long and undulating, it resembled the sound of the wind echoing in the narrowest of canyons. Sometimes it was a very low whine, and sometimes it would abruptly turn shrill. It was like the sound of the wind outside, yet also like it was coming from the inside of the whole room, but he couldn't find the

sound's source.

This was by no means the first time he heard this sound. On many previous nights in this room, the low and distant noise was accompanied by the plip-plop of dripping water, forming a strange harmony. The combination of these two sounds often gave him the illusion that he was still in the Abyss—outside the cave, wind blowing in from the depths of the dense jungle, and the mucus and saliva secreted by animals or plants dripping on the moss-covered rocks. Sometimes the wind and the structure of the cave produced a strange resonance, causing a low noise to sound from all directions, resembling the sleep-talk of some creature.

But tonight, the sound was louder than any other time before, and An Zhe was finally able to confirm that the origin of the sound was in his own room.

He frowned, then closed his eyes and carefully perceived his surroundings. Apart from the sound of the wind outside the window, that kind of sound, the sound near himself—

His eyes flew open, and he got out of bed. Standing barefoot on the floor, he picked up the flashlight on the table and turned it on, then got down on one knee, lifted the bedsheets, and shone the flashlight beam beneath the bed.

A pitch-black round hole appeared before him—it was on the wall the bed was up against, around where the wall connected to the floor.

The hole was the size of a human head and resembled a man-made pipe mouth. Its interior was completely dark, with nothing inside and nothing visible. He felt a wind blowing out from it. The sound that had disturbed him for a month was the sound of the wind in the pipe.

After examining the hole for half a minute, An Zhe put down the bedsheets and climbed back up onto the bed. Human rooms always had some odd structures. He had to sleep early tonight, for tomorrow was a very important day.

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Your bodies

still struggle

to return."

And yet the nameless wildflowers

have bloomed amply upon your heads.

An Zhe watched Bai Nan write down a poem from memory onto the exam paper. Today was the graduation exam for this group of younglings, and he was responsible for patrolling the examination room to prevent cheating.

The low noise from last night also echoed in the classroom, but everyone seemed used to it. In an inconspicuous part of one of the classroom’s corners, An Zhe discovered a similar hole. It seemed that this was a commonly-seen thing in human buildings. He hadn't noticed it before because it was too noisy during the day, causing this sound to be covered up, but today, the strong wind outside made the wind inside the hole stronger as well.

Passing Bai Nan, he walked forward. Ji Sha's exam paper was a mess, full of marks from scribbles and corrections. She had only filled in a scattered few neat and tidy words in the English questions, but when An Zhe took a look, it seemed that she hadn't gotten many correct.

Most of the younglings were in a similar situation as Ji Sha. Some of the other ones hadn't even put forth the effort to make corrections, the exam papers in front of them practically blank. Of course, there were an exceedingly few seven or eight younglings whose exam sheets had been filled out well.

An Zhe looked as he walked, and he came to a corner of the classroom, next to the cold youngling named Si Nan.

Si Nan's exam paper had already been completely filled out although only half an hour had passed since the exam started. He was faster than everyone else.

At the moment, he wasn't checking his answers nor daydreaming, but rather drawing in the blank space of the exam sheet with a black pen.

In truth, it was not appropriate to call it drawing. Those were some irregular black lines, and they messily tangled together, resembling the vines in the Abyss and possessing a madness that broke out of the surface of the paper. By the

time the one-and-a-half-hour exam ended, the deranged lines had already filled the entire exam sheet, and only in the answer areas could his writing still be seen.

After the papers were collected, the dormitory teacher took the younglings back to the dormitory. An Zhe took the papers back to the office, where Lin Zuo and Colin were both inside. Lin Zuo had just finished correcting the mathematics and logic exam papers. Upon seeing An Zhe enter, he took the papers and said, "Record the scores with Colin."

An Zhe obediently agreed and came to Colin's side. Colin read out loud the younglings' names and grades, and An Zhe entered the grades into the chart on the computer.

"Si Nan," Colin read out loud. "100."

An Zhe recorded his grade and said softly, "He's so amazing."

He had looked over the mathematics and logics exam sheet. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division were already the simplest of its contents, and An Zhe believed he himself might not be able to solve the geometry and logic questions.

Just then, Lin Zuo, who was correcting the language and literature exam papers, said, "Si Nan is a very rarely-seen genius."

"Mm," An Zhe said.

"But I don't plan on having him enter Class A," Lin Zuo said.

After working with them for the past month, An Zhe now knew the rules governing the younglings' school promotions.

The dormitory teacher had a chart for adding and deducting points, and there was one during class as well. These records of added or deducted points were added to the grades for the typical major and minor exams, and with the scores from the final exam added in the end, they formed the younglings' final grades. The handful of younglings with the best grades in this class would get promoted into Class A and continue receiving the Main City's education, and after they grew up, they would enter the Main City's various organizations based on their own strengths. The other younglings would enter the military base for training

and assessments, and after a month, the military would select a dozen or so Class B younglings based on the situation and continue developing them. After those younglings grew up, they would become the military's soldiers. The remaining younglings would be classified as Class C and sent to the Outer City to await adoption by the Outer City's residents. If nobody adopted them, they would continue living a communal life in the district assigned by the Outer City and become Outer City residents from then on.

But Lin Zuo said that he did not plan to allow Si Nan to enter Class A.

An Zhe asked, "Why not?"

"There are problems with his character," Lin Zuo said. "He is also unsuited for joining the military. He lacks emotions and simultaneously harbors resentment against the base, so he cannot serve the Main City. The Garden of Eden also agrees with my assessment of him. He'll be assigned to Class C. I'll be counting on you two in the future."

"... All right," An Zhe said.

"He is a very strange child," Lin Zuo said. "The dormitory teacher told me that he often wakes up at night and will sometimes tremble, but no cause can be found. I heard from the nanny who took care of him before he turned three years old that he had once lost a friend, which may have left a psychological scar."

The morning passed, and the calculations of the final grades were completed. Five of the younglings, including Bai Nan, were selected and sent together with the outstanding younglings of the other classes to the Garden of Eden’s seventh floor to be educated. Lin Zuo was transferred to the third floor and began taking care of the new first-years. An Zhe and Colin officially became the teachers in charge of the remaining younglings. Their duty was to take the younglings to the military base and watch them take the military's training and assessments.

The Main City was very efficient. That very afternoon, they took a shuttle to the military training ground on one side of the city, and with them were the younglings from other classes.

The wind at the training ground was strong and brought with it fine grit, but the younglings were in high spirits, running and jumping about in the spacious

grounds—the military's personnel who were in charge of screening the younglings were about to come over to take over them, so An Zhe and Colin became idle. All they needed to do was watch from the side.

As they sat side by side on the iron bench, Colin suddenly spoke—in this past month, neither he nor An Zhe made conversation with the other.

"I'm willing to let go of a little of my hatred for the Arbiter now," he said.

An Zhe looked at Colin and noticed his gaze pass through the buildings as he looked at a gray corner of the distant Garden of Eden that stuck out. It was a very cold gaze.

"Because the entire Main City is just as cold and heartless as the Arbiter," Colin said while looking over there.

"How come?" An Zhe asked.

"Have you seen the Garden of Eden?" Colin asked. "It's like a beehive."

The Garden of Eden was a massive hexagonal building, and it did have some similarities to a beehive. An Zhe said nothing, and Colin continued talking to himself.

"The Garden of Eden is the queen bee, producing up to ten thousand children every year. Starting from when they're three years old, they're made to take difficult assessments so as to cherrypick the small portion with the highest IQ and have them stay in the Main City to do scientific research or whatnot in the future. To the Main City, these children are useful—are drones—so they can receive the Main City's superior living conditions," he said. "The others are all worker bees, and they're allocated to the Outer City, where conditions are poor. The base controls the supply of food and water, and the worker bees can only become mercenaries. Only by going out to struggle in the wilderness and bringing back materials can they survive. And those materials are used by the base to benefit the Main City."

He let out a cold laugh. "This is how the entire base operates. Only people with value to the Main City are people. They wouldn't feel the slightest bit of distress at blowing up District 6 because the people of the Outer City were things they had abandoned in the first place."

An Zhe said, "But the Main City is sufficient for only a very few people to live in."

Colin turned towards him. "Do you think what they're doing is right?"

After briefly hesitating, An Zhe nodded.

"You think what they're doing is right because you survived. You're standing here, taking the Main City's position." Colin became agitated, and his chest heaved.

"Humankind's interests take precedence over all else, so whatever they do is right," he said. "But the people who died—the people they blew up, your family and friends—what did they do wrong? Were they not human?"

An Zhe said nothing. He was by no means perplexed because of Colin's question, for the Abyss also had social creatures. Through his long-term observations, for a solitary creature, living was the most important thing, but for a group of social creatures, the continuation of the entire group was more important. He didn't think that Colin was wrong, it was simply that this person may have been more suited to living in the Virginia Base.

Colin looked into his eyes, and at last, he said, "I get it. You don't have feelings at all."

Their conversation stopped there.

An Zhe turned his gaze back to the younglings once again. The younglings were much cuter than Colin.

But at that moment, the younglings were in total chaos, for a fight was going on.

An Zhe stood up and walked into the group of younglings, and Colin came over as well.

The ones fighting were Si Nan and a sturdy-looking boy. Si Nan's eyes were a little red as he pressed the other boy securely to the ground.

"Let go of him," Colin said. "Si Nan, I'm deducting points."

Si Nan still didn't let go of the boy, so Colin had no choice but to come forward and separate them by force. Adults had much greater strength than

children, after all.

Si Nan stood to one side, a cold expression on his face. An Zhe looked down at him and asked, "What's the matter with you two?"

Si Nan said nothing, but the other boy said loudly, "You were sleep-talking at night! You shouted out Lily's name! Lily's been taken away and locked up ages ago, and in any case, you can't find her!"

An Zhe saw Si Nan clench his fists.

Lily. It sounded like a girl's name.

He asked, "Who is Lily?"

This time, Si Nan finally answered him. "My friend."

"Where is she?"

"The Garden of Eden," Si Nan said icily.

An Zhe recalled Lin Zuo saying "he had once lost a friend" and guessed that the reason for this dispute was because that boy had mentioned Si Nan's sore spot.

"Don't be angry anymore." He got down on one knee to get to Si Nan's eye level and gently patted his shoulder. "I won't allow him to mention this in the future."

Si Nan's expression didn't change. He was clearly a youngling, but he had a coldness that was different from all the other younglings.

An Zhe could only pat Si Nan's hair and then stand up. At the training ground, the younglings were in total chaos. Colin, who was next to him, was educating another youngling, and his education was much more successful than An Zhe's. So long as he said the two words "deduct points," the youngling would immediately obey him.

Inspired, An Zhe said to Si Nan, "You aren't allowed to fight in the future, otherwise your points will be deducted."

The corners of Si Nan's mouth curled up, and he said, "You guys don't want to let me stay in the Main City anyway."

At times when the other younglings stumbled over their own words, this youngling knew everything.

An Zhe felt helpless, but nobody could help him.

Right at that moment, in his peripheral vision, a black car stopped and three people emerged from it.

An Zhe looked over and met the eyes of the person in the middle.

He blinked.

Lu Feng had seen him as well. With a slight raise of his eyebrows, Lu Feng walked towards them.

"You were here too?" An Zhe asked.

"For a meeting," Lu Feng said. "What happened to you?"

In An Zhe's voice was a hint of helplessness along with a request for help. "Two of the children were fighting."

"Just give each one a beating," Lu Feng said.

His words made An Zhe laugh involuntarily. Then An Zhe leaned down and said to Si Nan, "Next time you fight, I'll beat you."

Lu Feng looked at him.

"You're so good-natured," he said coolly, "that not only will they continue to fight, they'll beat you too."

An Zhe was speechless.

He adjusted his expression, striving to make himself look a bit fiercer. If he had even one-tenth of Lu Feng's fierceness, everything would go smoothly when he taught the younglings.

As Lu Feng looked at him, the corners of his lips curled up, and then he turned his gaze to Si Nan.

His gaze froze in place.

"Get away from him," Lu Feng said coldly.

Uncomprehending, An Zhe obeyed Lu Feng almost on reflex and backed two

steps away.

Lu Feng took two steps forward, placing himself between An Zhe and Si Nan. He put on gloves, grabbed Si Nan's jaw, and forced the child to look at the sun.

The sunlight was glaring, and Si Nan's pupils contracted.

"There's something wrong with him." Lu Feng effortlessly held Si Nan in place. "Contact the Lighthouse."

# 18

## “DR. JI, YOU'RE WAVERING.”

"PRELIMINARY INFECTION, infection progress twenty units, thirteen animal-type targets, which points to arthropod mutation." The doctor walked over while carrying a thick report, then put them in front of Lu Feng. "How is it that wherever you go, there will be xenogenics?"

Lu Feng picked up the report.

The doctor crossed his arms and said, "I'm surprised you didn't shoot him on the spot."

"I'm not familiar with the infection characteristics in children," Lu Feng said.

"Then don't kill him. Leave him for me to use as a sample."

"As you like."

"With arthropod mutations, there's not much to say." The doctor looked at the report in his hands. "Why don't you go ahead and prepare for the meeting now? Since an infection has occurred in the Main City, and a child of Eden at that, I've already reported it. It's no small matter."

"Arthropod," Lu Feng said. "Does it have any connection to what happened before in the Outer City?"

"The final investigation results of the Outer City's insect swarm just came out today. It was determined to have been a one-time collective action of mutant insects under the pressure of the breeding season." The doctor's voice was very soft, and his expression was solemn. "But we don't know exactly what method they used to become connected, nor if there was a commander role."

"But... The Main City is impregnable from top to bottom, so things from the outside can't get in." He took a deep breath, then thought with his eyes closed

as he said, "Even if an accident did occur in the Main City, it should have been the escape of one of the Lighthouse's xenogenic samples. Why was it a child from the Garden of Eden?"

Lu Feng looked over the report once, then looked at An Zhe.

As Si Nan's teacher, An Zhe bore the responsibility of going to the Lighthouse with them.

"What places has he been to?" Lu Feng asked.

"He's been with the other children the entire time," An Zhe said. "When I got off work yesterday evening, they were either watching the news or sleeping. This morning, they were taking an exam in the classroom, and in the afternoon, they were at the base."

Lu Feng said, "Contact his teacher and dormitory teacher."

An Zhe gave an affirmative reply.

After calling Lin Zuo and explaining the situation, he thought for a while, then said, "I can go ask him... He’s very smart."

Lu Feng hummed in response.

Thus, An Zhe walked up to the sealed glass door—as one of the infected, Si Nan was isolated from other people, and his current location was a silvery-white laboratory.

Within the laboratory was a very small figure. Si Nan sat alone on a silvery-white dissection table, his head slightly bowed. He still had that same expression on his face, as if everything that happened outside had nothing to do with him.

A sound came from behind An Zhe. Lu Feng's communicator was ringing frantically, showing the seriousness of the situation. In merely these two or three minutes, already three groups of people had come here to find him. Lu Feng said something to the doctor, then got up and walked out into the corridor.

There were audio devices inside and outside of the door. An Zhe picked up the handset. "Si Nan."

Si Nan looked at him.

"Are you aware of what happened to you?" An Zhe asked.

Si Nan nodded.

"Then do you know the reason for it?" An Zhe asked. "In the Garden of Eden, did you come across anything strange?"

Si Nan looked straight at An Zhe with his jet-black eyes, that gaze seemingly wanting to pierce through him.

In that instant, An Zhe suddenly understood why xenogenics and humans had differences that could be distinguished with the naked eye—that kind of gaze was like a... a... something that was different from humans. If a pair of eyes like this existed on a monster of the Abyss, he would not feel the slightest bit of incongruity.

After a minute of silence, Si Nan said, "No."

"Think a little harder." An Zhe strove to guide this youngling. "What did you do yesterday? Were you with your classmates the entire time?"

Si Nan only looked at him with that dark gaze. No matter what An Zhe asked, he said nothing more.

Just as they entered a stalemate, the doctor's communicator rang as well, and An Zhe looked over.

The doctor pressed the hands-free mode button, and Lin Zuo's voice came out. His tone of voice was very steady, but he spoke quickly. An Zhe knew this was the behavior of humans when they were forcing themselves to keep calm.

"We've retrieved all the footage from the past three days, and he's always been with others. He'd leave the scope of surveillance when using the restroom and during the occasional free time, but that is normal. The longest duration he was away was no more than three minutes, and he could only move about in the corridor on our floor," Lin Zuo said. "There are no abnormalities in the Garden of Eden whatsoever. Could he have been infected on the way to the training base or at the training base itself? I heard that the speed of a child’s infection outbreak is much faster than that of an adult."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Lin. Although children are infected more quickly than adults, based on the degree of morphological change in his tissue cells, he was infected at least fifteen to twenty hours ago."

Lin Zuo was silent for a while before he said, "If that's the case, then he was indeed infected in the Garden of Eden—but the Garden of Eden's other children and teachers are all very normal, with no signs whatsoever of infection."

"Please do not panic," the doctor said. "We're currently awaiting further orders from the higher-ups. At three o'clock at the latest, the Lighthouse will ally with the Trial Court to screen for infection amongst the children who were moving about on the sixth floor during that period of time. Please get ready to cooperate."

Lin Zuo said, "Okay."

"Thank you for understanding. If there's nothing else..." the doctor said.

"Wait," Lin Zuo said.

"Do you have other clues?" the doctor asked.

"It's not a clue, but I hope it may be helpful to you," Lin Zuo said. "Si Nan has always been a very strange child... His IQ is very high, but his state of mind has always been very... dissociative. I watched him grow up, and I'm sure that there are differences in either his way of thinking or his senses compared to the other children."

"Thank you for informing me. I will look into it," the doctor said. "The Arbiter has returned. We're about to set out, so let's discuss in greater detail after meeting up."

Lin Zuo said, "All right."

Lu Feng walked back into the room.

"How is it?" the doctor asked.

"The Garden of Eden and training base have already been placed under martial law," Lu Feng said. "We're currently counting the number of people and will set out in ten minutes."

"Okay," the doctor said.

Lu Feng looked up at Si Nan, who was in the laboratory. "How are things on your end?"

The doctor shrugged.

Lu Feng walked forward and stood next to An Zhe.

Si Nan's eyes slowly turned towards Lu Feng, and at that very moment, An Zhe noticed that his black eyes, which originally had clear borders, were slowly diffusing outward radially, resembling threads of spiderweb extending outward.

Lu Feng said, "Ten hours."

An Zhe was stunned. He knew what Lu Feng meant—within ten hours, Si Nan would completely change from a human youngling into an irrational monster.

He called out Si Nan's name again in an attempt to produce a bit of communication.

But he saw Si Nan's gaze fixed unmovingly on Lu Feng, and Lu Feng returned the look.

Si Nan opened his mouth.

The child's voice was youthful, but he spat out five words in an ice-cold tone.

"All of you will die."

Lu Feng smiled.

He took the handset from An Zhe.

"There's no person who will not die," he said. "Humankind will survive."

With that, he hung the handset back up, then turned and left.

An Zhe compared them. In terms of ice-cold expression and tone of voice, the Colonel was still superior.

A few researchers took control of Si Nan, and the partition door rose. The doctor said, "This child is very strange."

"I'll transfer people over for questioning," Lu Feng said.

"Thank you for your hard work," the doctor replied.

Right at that moment, the windy noise sounded in An Zhe's ears again. He

looked around and saw a similarly hidden round hole at the junction between ceiling and wall.

"Lu Feng," An Zhe said as he gently tugged on Lu Feng's sleeve, "what's that?"

Lu Feng followed his gaze and looked up at the ceiling, then said, "It's a vent."

An Zhe blinked.

"You haven't seen one before?" the doctor asked. "The Outer City doesn't have them because it was constructed later."

The doctor was always willing to explain knowledge to others, so An Zhe continued asking questions. "What does it do?"

"It supplies air." The doctor's reply was very simple. Then he explained, "When the Main City was constructed, the magnetic field had not yet disappeared entirely, and humankind's industrial capabilities were still at their peak. To construct a base that was capable of resisting cosmic radiation and solar wind to the maximum extent, the walls of all buildings were four to five times thicker than those of ordinary buildings, and the materials are special. They're completely closed off and rely on the ventilation systems to provide clean air."

"For the Main City to have been able to survive, the ventilation system can receive at least a First-Class Merit award." He smiled. "After the artificial magnetic poles were built, various mutations began. Before the disperser was invented, there were insects everywhere, so the Main City added three-layer filtering and strangulation systems at the air inlets and outlets of the ventilation system to ensure that not even a single bug could fly in."

"In other words, no matter what, as long as we control the ins and outs at the city gates, the Main City will be absolutely safe." As he typed out an email on his computer, he talked almost to himself. "Why exactly would an infection incident happen? This doesn't make any sense. Moreover, the Garden of Eden's other children are all fine."

At that point, his movements stopped, and then he looked at Lu Feng. "I heard that a girl escaped from the Garden of Eden yesterday."

"I've asked," Lu Feng said. "That girl is completely normal."

The doctor frowned even more deeply, and he typed out some information on the keyboard.

Lu Feng looked at the computer screen. "Are you contacting the Underground City Base?"

"Because of the series of events that have happened recently, I'm a little... afraid." The doctor took a deep breath. "I want to know to what extent the monsters in North America have evolved. However, the emergency channel between our bases has always been subject to the vagaries of fate, and it's almost certain that we won't be able to get a result."

With those words, he clicked send, and An Zhe saw him send an identical email to another recipient labeled "Research Institute" at the same time.

"All right." The doctor closed the interface. "I'm going to go calibrate the instrument."

"I'll go to the Garden of Eden first," Lu Feng said.

The Lighthouse's corridor was long and white, lit by a cold light. There was a break room in the corridor, and when they pushed the door open and exited, two researchers in white coats were kissing in the break room. After hearing the sound of footsteps outside, one of the researchers grabbed the other and turned, and their figures disappeared into the depths of the break room.

This spectacle seemed to pique Lu Feng's distaste, for he frowned slightly. "What happened to your discipline?"

"It can’t be helped," the doctor said. "The more we research, the more we despair. Right now, the Lighthouse is suffused from top to bottom with an air of carpe diem. You can't ask for the military's discipline from us. I myself also feel hopeless sometimes."

Lu Feng didn't say anything. At the corner, he took An Zhe in a different direction from the doctor.

That afternoon, An Zhe blindly followed Lu Feng. The reason was because he didn't know where he ought to go—he could only be considered a temporary worker in the Garden of Eden, so he hadn't received any other orders or instructions. However, despite being followed, Lu Feng didn't seem to feel

displeased. When this man examined the Garden of Eden's children one by one, he even had An Zhe go to the main hall to rest for a while.

Thus, An Zhe read a book while on the sofa in the main hall, and upon the wall in front of him was the blood-red "humankind's interests take precedence over all else" slogan again. At 4 p.m., the doctor brought others to the Garden of Eden. He was a bit dispirited as he led several subordinates in starting up the detection instrument in the hall.

Seraing had been sent by Lu Feng to cooperate with the doctor's work.

The young Judge saw the instrument in the center of the hall and frowned slightly. "There's only one of them?"

"What else?" the doctor said. "The other one was left at the entrance to the Main City, receiving the returning mercenaries who were originally from the Outer City."

"In other words, the entire base currently has only two instruments?" Seraing asked.

"Darling, aren't you misunderstanding something about our current industrial production capacity?" the doctor said. "For high-precision large instruments such as these detectors, two units is already the limit."

"My apologies," Seraing said.

"It's fine," the doctor said. "You all go over things once first, and we'll use the instrument to screen slowly."

Seraing said earnestly, "The Trial Court has not conducted special training focusing on children."

The doctor said, "I believe in the Arbiter's eyesight. He'll definitely be able to ferret out other infected bodies."

While they were talking, the sound of Lu Feng's footsteps came over.

"The investigation of the fifth, sixth, and seventh floors is complete," Lu Feng said into his communicator. "No suspected infected ones have been found."

An Zhe saw the doctor's hand trembling as he adjusted the instrument's control stick.

Lu Feng walked past him. "This side will be left to you all."

The doctor's face was a little pale for some reason as he said, "All right."

After that, he also said, "The Lighthouse has many xenogenic samples. Since infection has occurred in the Garden of Eden, I'm afraid of an accident happening in the Lighthouse as well. Could you apply for a temporary stationing of the Trial Court with the United Front Center?"

Lu Feng asked, "What's my level of authority?"

The doctor said, "The same as mine."

"All right."

He walked to the elevator entrance.

An Zhe silently watched him go.

And then he saw the man turn back and look at him.

In that gaze was written a command.

*Come here.*

An Zhe put down the book in his hands and obediently followed him.

Right at that moment.

"Lu Feng," the doctor suddenly said.

Lu Feng didn't turn back. "What is it?"

An Zhe turned slightly and saw the doctor looking in their direction. There was a lost look in his azure eyes, and their rims were slightly red.

"A hundred years ago, after people were wounded, there was only a thirty percent infection rate, and slight scratches or pricks wouldn't result in mutations at all. But these past few years, the situation has been constantly deteriorating. Especially this year, the infection rate has skyrocketed. You know as well that even a wound the size of a needle’s eye can result in infection. I've always been thinking whether or not there would be a day like this when we do nothing at all and our genes will become disordered regardless, turning us *all* into xenogenics."

Lu Feng neither moved nor spoke. With a ding announcing the elevator’s arrival, the silver doors smoothly opened.

The doctor's voice was slightly tremulous. "The Garden of Eden doesn't have monsters or xenogenics. This child's infection happened without any rhyme or reason, and we still don't know what causes infection or how it spreads. The Lighthouse cannot capture that virus and does not know how to defend against it. If those things have already crawled their way to our insides like an epidemic... The weakest children will be infected first because of their individual constitutions."

He gasped for breath. "Then what exactly are we to do?"

"Dr. Ji." Lu Feng's voice was cold. "You're wavering."

With that, he rested his right hand on An Zhe's shoulder and steered him towards the elevator without even a backwards look.

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After reaching the residential building and getting out of Lu Feng's car, An Zhe said, "Thank you."

"No problem," Lu Feng said. "What are your meal plans?"

"I'll cook," An Zhe said.

"Potato soup?"

"Mm-hm."

"You like it?"

An Zhe earnestly pondered for a while.

"I do," he said. "But I also don't have money to buy anything else."

"I can see that," Lu Feng said. "Tonight, I'll treat you to something else."

"How come?" An Zhe asked.

Lu Feng said, "To thank you for helping me discover a xenogenic."

These words sounded correct. It was only because of him that Lu Feng noticed

Si Nan.

Thus, An Zhe received the opportunity to pick and choose from the ingredients area. Referencing the menu given by the base, in the end, he bought tomatoes, potatoes, and frozen beef. The price of the beef was very high, and it was specially marked with a label next to it indicating that its production was about to stop. He was undecided for a while on whether to buy it or not, but while he was undecided, Lu Feng had already swiped his card. The balance displayed on the card machine made An Zhe feel the differences between people.

Next to the ingredients were simple usage instructions. An Zhe didn't know anything else, so he still made soup.

As the soup cooked, An Zhe discovered something.

He stood in place, silently watching the slightly turbulent surface of the water in the pot.

The soup had become very thick, and the potatoes had completely softened as well. The soft sweet-sour aroma of the tomatoes and fragrance of the beef mixed together, forming a smell different from that of potato soup. It was very delicious.

However...

Lu Feng looked at him. "What is it?"

"I..." An Zhe lifted his head to look at Lu Feng.

But Lu Feng returned the gaze with his green eyes, and through a layer of white steam, they didn't seem very fierce.

"I..." An Zhe said. "I seem to have made too much."

"Too much?" Lu Feng walked over to him, leaned over slightly, and looked into the pot.

It truly was too much, An Zhe knew.

He had added too many ingredients and too much water.

When he made potato soup, in order to make the potatoes a bit softer and

the soup a bit thicker, he liked to add a lot of water and then slowly reduce the large quantity of water into a very small amount of soup.

However, the principles of this soup seemed different from those of potato soup—if he continued to reduce it, the ingredients would fall apart, and then it would become a pot of mysterious things mixed together.

He estimated that even if this soup was divided into portions for three, it would be more than enough.

Lu Feng said, "It is too much."

An Zhe thought hard and finally arrived at a corrective measure. "I can invite Colin up to eat."

Lu Feng turned and gave him a flat look.

From that flat look, An Zhe astutely picked up on a hint of Lu Feng's feelings. It seemed that making too much soup had become a severe mistake.

Lu Feng said, "Seraing lives in No. 3202. Go give him a portion."

After ringing No. 3202's doorbell, Seraing opened the door very quickly from inside.

"It's you?" He seemed slightly surprised.

An Zhe handed the thermos to him. "I made soup. Here's a portion for you."

"Wow," Seraing said. "Thank you. I was just about to go out for dinner."

An Zhe gave him the soup and said, "You're welcome."

Seraing spoke up again. "Why... Did you give this to me? Perhaps the Colonel will like it."

An Zhe was momentarily unsure how to respond.

In the end, he said, "The Colonel has some too."

Seraing smiled. "That's what I guessed. So it was the Colonel who told you that I live here?"

An Zhe nodded.

Seraing brought An Zhe inside and, after putting the thermos on the living

room table, took out something wrapped in pink from a drawer—by the looks of it, it seemed to be a human snack.

He stuffed it into An Zhe's hand, saying, "I'll treat you to some candy."

An Zhe said, "Thank you."

Seraing said, "Have you gotten used to living in the Main City? Which floor do you live on?"

An Zhe said, "I'm in No. 3702."

"My God." Seraing smiled. "What a coincidence."

Wild gales blew outside, and the wailing sound of the wind in the pipe was coming from Seraing's room as well.

An Zhe looked in the direction of the sound's origin.

"The ventilation pipes were originally closed, but in the summer when the wind is strong, they will be entirely opened for a period of time to prevent the insides of the pipes from getting too damp. During this time, it'll always make noise. When the sound is too loud, sometimes even those who have lived in the Main City since they were young will be unable to sleep because of it, but there's no need to be afraid." Seraing's tone of voice was very gentle. Once he was done talking, he gave another smile. "But the Colonel has probably reassured you already."

An Zhe felt confused.

Firstly, he didn't feel afraid, so he didn't need to be reassured, and secondly, Lu Feng had never reassured him before at all.

He said, "He hasn't."

"... Maybe he forgot."

An Zhe felt that Seraing thought of Lu Feng as too kind of a person and the relationship between the two of them to be too good.

He returned to No. 3702, where the Colonel had unexpectedly deigned to set the table himself—but unfortunately, even though a portion of it had been given away, there was still quite a lot of soup remaining.

A certain Colonel's ice-cold green eyes looked at him. "You can do it."

"I can't."

"You can't waste the base's resources."

An Zhe scooped up a small piece of beef with his spoon and strove to swallow it. After he had finished eating his own portion, he had been forced by Lu Feng to face the remainder in the pot, and now half of it was gone.

Lu Feng's tone of voice was flat. "Keep going."

An Zhe ate another piece of potato and a spoonful of soup.

He felt like he had reached his limit.

Humans' appetites had limits, even if this soup was very delicious.

He'd break.

He lifted his head and looked at Lu Feng.

But he saw this man looking at him, eyebrows slightly lifted and a hint of quiet joy in his expression.

An Zhe was speechless.

He should've already known. Lu Feng's objective wasn't to conserve the base's resources at all. The Colonel's happiness was built upon bullying him.

He frowned, slightly angry. This time, with a resolute attitude, as he said, "I'm not eating any more."

Lu Feng said, "Crime of wasting provisions."

An Zhe retorted, "Then you've committed it too."

Lu Feng looked at him with crossed arms, and after seeming to examine him once from top to bottom, he said, "You've gotten smart."

An Zhe understood what he meant.

He vowed that the next time this man came to eat, he would cut off a piece of his own hyphae and put it in to poison him. Planning to no longer acknowledge this man, he dropped his spoon.

But on the contrary, Lu Feng smiled. He reached out and put the remaining

soup in front of himself. It looked like the Arbiter was going to exonerate himself. An Zhe observed his actions for a while, then decided to reduce it from one piece to half a piece.

After dinner, he saw Lu Feng out. The Colonel still had telephone conferences to attend at night.

At the doorway, Lu Feng seemed to suddenly recall something.

He took a small, translucent box from the front pocket of his uniform and tossed it to An Zhe.

"If you can't sleep, you can use that," he said.

After returning to his own room, An Zhe took apart the box. It was a pair of white umbrella-shaped rubber noise prevention earplugs.

He contemplated over and over, still wavering between whether Lu Feng was really a good or bad person, and in the end, he temporarily defined the man as a changeable person.

The wind outside continued picking up, and the sound inside the hole turned faintly shrill to a degree where it indeed made it difficult for humans to fall asleep—but he had no intention of putting in those earplugs, at least not for now.

An Zhe stood in front of his bed. This entire afternoon, he had been thinking of one thing.

If he couldn't move about freely within the Lighthouse, then when exactly would he be able to find his spore?

Once he felt that this was an insurmountable problem, but now he had a path he could walk. All of this city's buildings were linked together by the ventilation pipes.

He turned his head and looked at the window.

The window was very small, only about the size of two textbooks put together, and at its sides were two sliding metal shutters. He walked over to the window and forcefully pushed the sliding doors together. With a click, the shutters fit together perfectly. Like this, nobody could see into the room from

the outside.

Hyphae.

Hyphae extended outwards from An Zhe's body. His clothes and the bullet shell necklace around his neck fell to the ground together, making a soft noise. At the same time, a ball of snow-white hyphae made its way out from the shirt collar and rolled under the bed, quietly facing the pitch-black hole.

When his body changed into a mushroom, An Zhe had a vague perception of the outside world. His senses of sight and hearing combined while his senses of smell and touch could not be distinguished from each other. They were no longer sights or sounds, but rather a peculiar feeling; there was no way to describe this kind of change with human language.

The hole had fine wire mesh—three layers of it—which was enough to block all insects big or small.

But it couldn't block a soft mushroom.

# 19

## “HE WAS BY NO MEANS AN IMPATIENT MUSHROOM.”

A SINGLE SNOW-WHITE hypha reached out and gently rested on the surface of the wire mesh. Then it made its way inside through a tiny chink in the metal lattice.

It was safe, at least at this point. There were no lethal weapons, only the barrier of the lattice.

After the first hypha went through the three layers of the lattice barrier to the other side, the remaining hyphae moved forward as well. They gathered together, and because they were so soft and flexible, they appeared to be almost liquid. The snow-white tide was pervasive as it penetrated the three layers of wire mesh and then recombined behind them. A pipe leading forward appeared in An Zhe's perception. The pipe was smooth overall, but spots of rust were beginning to appear in some places. The smell of rust spread, resembling the smell of blood. Wind was blowing in from the end of the pipe.

An Zhe proceeded forward. His hyphae stuck to the pipe walls like tentacles as he smoothly flowed ahead. This pipe was straight, and after turning at a right angle, it was still a straight path. He continued, and a four-way intersection appeared up ahead. A horizontal and slightly wider pipe was connected to the pipe he was currently in.

The wind got stronger, and the direction of the airflow was also very complex, indicating that this massive pipe system was like a winding maze.

An Zhe briefly hesitated on the spot. Then he extended one long hypha, leaving it in the pipe before he continued moving forward—although Lu Feng thought he wasn't smart, An Zhe felt that he couldn't be considered stupid either. He decided to mark his path with this hypha. That way, no matter where

he went, he could make his way back via the same path by following this hypha.

After making this decision, An Zhe felt much more at ease. He went straight through the four-way intersection, proceeding in the same direction as before. After another right-angle turn, there was a faint light up ahead.

An Zhe came to the light's source—another vent. The familiar news broadcaster's voice was playing. Predictably, he had come to the vent in someone else's home.

"Over the course of a month, the Main City has recalled a total of twelve thousand mercenaries from the outside and formally entered a recovery period. In the expected ten-year recovery period, the Main City's research power will be entirely invested in the investigation of the source of infections..."

"Tap tap tap." There came the even sounds of knocks on the door.

An Zhe had entered by mistake in the first place. He didn't intend to pry into other humans' secrets, so he planned to leave, but then he temporarily gave up on the idea.

There was the sound of a door opening.

"Colonel Lu." A female voice rang out, its tone very crisp.

Colonel Lu.

This was Lu Feng's room.

An Zhe surreptitiously emerged from the vent and moved outwards a bit so that he could hear more clearly, for he was indeed somewhat curious about Lu Feng's life.

Then he heard a familiar cold voice. "Hello."

"Hello, Colonel Lu. I am a staff member of the Garden of Eden's twenty-first floor."

The Garden of Eden.

An Zhe pricked up his ears—or he would have if his current form had such things.

"What do you want?" Lu Feng asked.

"It's like this." The woman smiled. "Firstly, congratulations on your return from the Outer City, Colonel. Secondly, I'm asking on behalf of my superiors if you have any desire to donate sperm to the Garden of Eden at present."

Lu Feng's reply was very succinct and heartless. "No."

"That is truly regrettable. If you are interested in the future, please contact us. Your genes are extremely outstanding, so if they cannot be put to effective use, it is a loss for the entire base."

"Thank you." Lu Feng's tone was not softened by her praise. He said, "Is there anything else?"

"The flowers Madam Lu planted have bloomed," the woman said. "She requested that I deliver you a bunch along the way. The Main City's work is very busy, and the Madam urges you to make sure to rest and take good care of yourself."

After a short silence, Lu Feng asked, "Is she still in good health?"

"Everything is normal."

"Thank you." Lu Feng's voice dropped somewhat. "Give her my regards."

Their conversation ended there, and after the door closed again, there was no other activity within the room.

The weather forecast stated that the gales would continue and the temperature would drop.

The sound suddenly stopped, presumably because Lu Feng turned off the TV. Then footsteps gradually approached as Lu Feng returned to the bedroom and then sat down at his desk. After a few sounds of sheets of paper being flipped, a silence descended upon the room, and there was only the sound of Lu Feng's breathing.

An Zhe wanted very much to extend a few hyphae out from underneath the bed and see what the Colonel was doing, but he didn't dare to. At last, he slowly went back the way he came through the vent.

At the four-way intersection, he chose the direction that the wind was blowing from, and with the slender hypha he used to mark his path in his wake,

he continued forward.

The wind, ice-cold and smelling like blood, blew at his hyphae. The pipe walls were connected to other pipe mouths, and each pipe mouth was connected to other complex pipe structures. At the same time, there was yet another intersection up ahead—a path merely this short was enough to make An Zhe realize the complexity of the entire system. He didn't have a road map, only knowledge of the Lighthouse's general direction, so he could imagine the difficulty of entering the Lighthouse via the pipes.

But he could keep searching, for he was by no means an impatient mushroom.

After several turns, An Zhe was completely unable to discern directions, nor did he have any way of being conscious of the passage of time. He only knew that when he was traveling in the direction the wind was blowing from, the pipe would get wider and the wind would get stronger as well. He guessed that this was because he had found the ventilation system's backbone. Sometimes, he worried that his hypha would break, but he could not reinforce it or leave another strand. To mushrooms, their hyphae were like blood to humans. Excessive blood loss would lead to death, so he couldn't use it all up.

Sometimes, there would be wire mesh or some sharp turbines that seemed capable of slicing up all flesh and joints up ahead. At these times, he would carefully slide past the cutting edges to avoid his hypha getting severed.

An Zhe didn't know how long he had traveled for. Only the sound of the wind and the minute rustling of his hyphae moving over the rusted pipe walls accompanied him.

In front of him was an infinitely long black pipe, and behind him was the same. This feeling made him return to the span of time when he lost his spore—mindlessly wandering here and there in the Abyss, perhaps he'd find it tomorrow, perhaps he'd never be able to find it.

When the pipe's diameter was as wide as the height of two men, An Zhe felt a blurry red glow light up ahead. He moved forward, carefully passing a large turbine—then unexpectedly fell out of the pipe mouth.

He landed on the hard and rough metal ground and was illuminated by the

dim red light. An Zhe looked around—this place was no longer the inside of a pipe, but rather an open and roomy cylindrical space. It was as big as the Garden of Eden's main hall, and both wind and the red light poured in from above. It was too high up, so An Zhe couldn't feel it.

His snow-white mass elongated on the ground, and the hyphae gathered together to become a human body and skin. It was very cold, so the hyphae spread over his body, creating a closely-woven loose white robe that blocked the biting chill outside.

An Zhe stepped barefoot upon the metal floor and lifted his head to look upwards.

A massive turbine was placed at a slant at the very top of the entire space, and it occupied his entire field of vision. A dim red curtain of laser light shone around the turbine, similar to the city walls of the Outer City. He knew that this was one kind of the humans' defense weapons. As soon as a creature attempts to pass it by force, it would immediately trigger an alarm.

Looking past the turbine's iron teeth, An Zhe saw the sky outside, where the aurora was still shining. This place was connected to the outside world. He realized that this was the air inlet of the ventilation system, and after the turbine started up, the air from the world outside would continuously be taken in and then supplied to the pipes in all directions.

He retracted his gaze and looked forward. In the center of this cylindrical space, there was a rectangular metal workbench—it may have been the console for the entire system. He walked over, but he discovered that it was not the case.

Upon this metal platform, three small rectangular boxes were welded. Using the light, An Zhe could see that next to the boxes were mottled writings that seemed to have been plated on.

An Zhe leaned down slightly and wiped away the dust and rust to clearly see those cramped writings.

It was a letter.

*To those who come after:*

*I am Kang Jinlan, the person in charge of constructing the Northern Base's underground ventilation project. The ventilation system took one year to design and nine years to build, with a construction cost of 110 million yuan per kilometer.*

*Opponents have suggested delaying the construction period due to the difficulty of the base construction and the enormous amount of manpower and resources consumed. But through discussion, we believe that once the weakened geomagnetic field continues deteriorating, within ten years, the human economy will inevitably collapse, and within fifty years, the surviving humans will inevitably lose the entirety of heavy industry's research and development along with production capacity. The means of production and focus of scientific research are all biased towards the medical field. We no longer have time.*

*Fortunately, the construction of both the underground ventilation system and the aboveground base have been completed without any issues this year, and my fellow humans can live under the strict protection of the base from now on. This is the only thing I feel relieved about. Thanks to cosmic radiation, despite being under strict protection, I'm still suffering from various cancers and autoimmune diseases. I have requested that the base inter my ashes in the ventilation system's core. That way, when each generation of engineers enters it for maintenance, I can know that the base is still safe and that the great species of humankind still exists.*

*May you have a bright future.*

*Best regards*

*June 2030.*

These were ashes.

This box contained what was once a human body. It was a tomb, and these

writings left behind were a message this human left for later generations.

Perhaps it was more appropriate to call it an epitaph.

An Zhe looked to the right. On its right side was a box that was almost identical in shape and welded to the table surface at the bottom. There were plated words next to it as well, a letter with an identical tone.

*To Mr. Kang Jinlan, and those who come after:*

*I am Liao Ping'an, the person in charge of the Northern Base's underground ventilation system project maintenance. The ventilation system is serviced every half a year and undergoes overall maintenance every two years. At present, it is operating in perfect condition.*

*As Mr. Kang expected, not only did the situation with the weakening geomagnetic field not improve, it completely disappeared in December of the year 2030 instead. Fortunately, the artificial magnetic pole project succeeded not long afterwards, and the world once again came under the protection of a magnetic field. Humans no longer suffer from illnesses because of radiation exposure. Unfortunately, cosmic radiation gave rise to the infection and mutation of bacteria, fungi, and viruses, and humankind has met an unprecedented catastrophe. As one who experienced this catastrophe, I've witnessed the shrinkage of the territory in which humans live, the collapse of the economic system, and the gradual loss of industrial capacity. The base has invested all of humankind's remaining production capacity into military production, the construction of military bases, and the expansion of the base, producing a steady stream of guns, ammunition, nuclear weapons, aircraft, armor, and tanks. I do not know where the purpose of this base lies, nor do I know if these actions have accelerated the depletion of humankind's resources. I can only hope that the base has a deeper purpose.*

*In the midst of this catastrophe, I have unfortunately been infected with deadly bacteria. As my life is coming to a close, I am still feeling endless panic regarding the base's future, so I chose to be interred here*

*with Mr. Kang and wait for the next generation of engineers to report that it is safe.*

*May you have a bright future.*

*Best regards*

*November 2052.*

Next was a third box of ashes and epitaph.

*To Mr. Kang Jinglan, Ms. Liao Ping'an, and those who come after:*

*I am Yang Ye, the person in charge of the Northern Base's underground ventilation system project maintenance. The ventilation system is serviced every half a year and undergoes overall maintenance every two years. At present, it is operating in perfect condition.*

*I must inform the two predecessors that in this era, the ventilation system is no longer one of the base's countless infrastructures, but rather has played a peerlessly brilliant role in protecting humankind's safety. In the year 2053, the start of global biological mutations, the human bases have committed themselves to the vast defensive war with the military as their primary forces and the civilian mercenaries as auxiliary forces. With the deficiencies in resources and industrial construction capacity, the strong military bases and powerful military weapons left to us by the previous generation have played an unimaginable role, ensuring the safety of the remaining humans. And after being transformed, the ventilation system has become one of the defenses of the base's Main City, protecting people from the invasion of insect monsters.*

*At present, the Northern Base is still safe. The military and mercenary teams are continuously bringing back monster samples from the outer world and recovering scientific research equipment, cultural documents, and other needed materials from abandoned cities. The base's scientific*

*research strength is centered on the research of infection theory and human reproduction. At present, no direction has been found for the former, whereas initial steps have been taken for the latter. A large number of new lives have come, and the human population has begun to rise. Although the environment is still hostile, I believe that everything will take a turn for the better.*

*Under the protection of the base, I die happily of geriatric illness.*

*May you have a bright future.*

*Best regards*

*January 2104.*

An Zhe carefully finished reading, then looked to the side. It was empty, with no more boxes. 2104 was already a very distant age. Perhaps the next generation of engineers would soon lie here too, with epitaphs telling stories of what occurred recently, such as the fall of the Outer City or something else.

Just then, great mournful sounds came from all around. The mighty night wind blew in from the air inlet, and An Zhe shivered. The strong wind was like an unstoppable flood current, rendering him almost unable to open his eyes—he put his elbow up to his eyes to resist the blowing of the gale and bowed his head slightly.

At that very moment, he suddenly felt pain.

In the wind, a length of snow-white hypha fluttered up in his peripheral vision. The white shape flickered, then disappeared in an instant.

An Zhe whipped around. Only a short length of the white hypha he had previously left to mark his path dragged along on the ground, trembling in the wind. The fierce wind had broken his hypha, and he didn't know where the wind had carried the broken portion off to.

His pupils contracted sharply, and when he looked in the direction he had come from, six pitch-black holes were lined up, all identical to each other.

# 20

## “THIS BASTARD LU FENG.”

IN THE DIM RED LIGHT, the six round and pitch-black holes looked at him as if they were the compound eyes of insects.

An Zhe unconsciously took a step back and bumped into the metal table. In that instant, he lost his balance, and his hand landed on the epitaph with its engraved words that were uneven to the touch. For some reason, this ice-cold metal table that stood alone in the empty hall and held the ashes of the deceased made him feel safe instead.

He let out a soft sigh, then tentatively walked forward until he reached the row of holes.

He climbed into each one of the six pipes in succession, but he still could not find the slightest trace of his hypha. It was too thin and would have contracted after snapping, and lastly, after it was blown up by the wind, he didn't know what corner it would have gotten stuck in. It was also too dark in this place.

An Zhe blankly looked around. In this cylindrical space, all sides—in front of him, behind him, to his left, and to his right—had six pipe mouths each for a total of twenty-four that led in different directions. This was the source of the entire city's ventilation system.

He knew he had two choices: hurry to find his way back to his living quarters before sunrise and then continue searching tomorrow evening or... or simply just not go back.

He could give up his human identity from this moment onward, allowing the person named An Zhe to disappear from the city. As a mushroom, An Zhe could

wander in the underground pipes for a long time, without regard to day or night. So long as he roamed long enough before he withered, he would be able to sneak into the Lighthouse.

The wind grew stronger, and he gently shivered. He knew that the decision he was about to make would affect his entire destiny hereafter.

But even if he decided to go back, could he really do it?

An Zhe didn't know.

As he looked at the six holes in the direction he came from, he clenched his teeth and crawled into the middle right one—he was unsure whether this was the original path.

He could only let fate decide.

It actually would have been more convenient to crawl into the hole in his hyphae form, but three of humankind's predecessors were here, and he did not wish for them to see a xenogenic come in. Thus, it wasn't until An Zhe had completely entered the pipe that he once again changed into a ball of hyphae.

The hyphae sped up, moving along the direction of the wind, and the wind was also pushing him from behind. An Zhe made a few turns and passed many intersections. Now, he only wanted to wander to a pipe mouth that was connected to a human's room as quickly as possible—it would be even better if the room had a window, because he could sneak out of the window, find the nearest shuttle stop under cover of night, and surreptitiously stick to the bottom of the shuttle. The nighttime shuttle would take him to the final stop near Building 24, and then he could slip back to his own corridor. So long as the night was dark enough, nobody would discover him.

He traveled in this haphazard manner for a long time. When the pipe became narrower and narrower, a dim light finally appeared in front of him. He had arrived at a pipe mouth.

This was a ventilation pipe located on a ceiling.

An Zhe looked down from the pipe mouth. What appeared in the center of his field of vision was a transparent cylindrical container containing a slightly cloudy liquid, and inside the liquid, a flesh-colored object was floating. It was

very small, about the size of two human fists. One end of a transparent tube was connected to this flesh-colored thing, and the other end was connected to a complicated-looking device.

A peculiar feeling arose in this device. An Zhe couldn't describe exactly what he was feeling; he only knew that the container held a living thing.

Suddenly, he was stunned.

He knew.

This was a youngling.

No. It was an embryo, the embryo of a human youngling.

Further to the side, there was an identical device. Not only that, the entire spacious room was densely packed with such things. His field of vision was limited, so he couldn't tell exactly how big of a room it was, but he knew that the base could produce five to ten thousand younglings per year.

This was no other place—to his surprise, he had accidentally come to the Garden of Eden.

An Zhe let out a sigh of relief. The Garden of Eden was a place he was familiar with, but at the same time, he felt even more troubled, for he knew how much humans cherished their younglings. Practically all areas in the Garden of Eden were covered by video cameras as well as constantly guarded by staff. Nobody could harm the younglings.

At this thought, he became angry again.

If the world of mushrooms had video cameras, how could his youngling have been dug out by Lu Feng?

But merely three seconds later, he discovered the mistake in his logic. Even if there were video cameras, they would not be able to stop Lu Feng from digging out his spore. The crux of this matter rested not in the video cameras, but rather the existence of this bastard Lu Feng.

... Wrong.

The crux of the matter was how he was to get out now.

# 21

## “THEN YOU DON'T KNOW THE 'ROSE MANIFESTO' EITHER.”

"BEEP—"

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

The instrument's monotonous sounds came from somewhere. But there was another kind of sound throughout the entire room as well.

"Ba-thump."

"Ba-thump."

"Ba-thump."

This sound was extremely similar to a human heartbeat, but it wasn't real, because it permeated the entire room. It seemed like there were sound playing devices in the four corners of the room.

Right at that moment, footsteps came from the end of the room. It was two humans who were conversing as they walked, seeming to be taking notes on something.

After a while, the sounds of a simple conversation drifted over.

"Area 4 is normal."

"Area 6 is normal."

"Number 113's development has stopped."

"Continue observing."

"Number 334's cell growth is abnormal. It must be destroyed."

"Number 334 was transplanted too early."

"There was no choice, the last report wasn't approved. The higher-ups are determined to counter the high abnormality rate with a high birth rate."

"The abnormality rate of the embryos has been constantly increasing in these past two years. This isn't a wise decision at all. Only by staying in the mother's body for at least another month can the embryo's smooth development be ensured."

"The mothers' flowering periods are too short. If that time is too prolonged, the birth rate will be insufficient."

"Why is it this difficult?"

"Look on the bright side, the overall number of children is increasing."

The footsteps drew away, and all that remained were the heartbeats that still pervaded the room. The light in the room was dim and soft. It was a safe nest, or a massive hollow organ. That powerful heartbeat was like a form of proof of the existence of life.

An Zhe slowly backed out of the pipe. He felt a bit of discomfort in his own body—in this place, there seemed to be some strange waves affecting his body. But fortunately, after seeing the arrangement of the human rooms, he finally regained his sense of spatial orientation. He had to go towards the outside of the building.

After circling in the pipes many more times, he found many vents, and these vents all led to one small square room after another. It seemed that it was still the time for people to be sleeping, for one person slept in each room. He had no way of getting out from under the beds to see, but he could hear weak breathing sounds, the breathing sounds of younglings. The windows were sealed shut, and the red light of video cameras shone high up in the rooms. He had no way of getting out of this kind of room.

It wasn't until after another very long time that An Zhe successfully found a vent placed in a corridor ceiling at last.

He carefully emerged, and his body spread out on the ceiling before he moved through the corridor along the ceiling—the cameras were angled

downwards, so they couldn't capture the visuals of the ceiling.

Every floor in the Garden of Eden had a similar layout. He recognized that this ought to be a corridor used for taking care of chores, for the storehouses that held indoor cleaning tools, household goods, foodstuffs, and junk were here.

He became slightly excited. Based on the pattern, at three-quarters of the way down the corridor, there would be a door leading to a mid-sized balcony—occasionally it would be used for drying things, and staff members would sometimes smoke there.

Very soon, An Zhe found the door. Striving to stretch out his hyphae, he flowed in through the crack of the door.

The sky was bright outside—unexpectedly, it was already daytime.

But before An Zhe had time to think carefully, his attention was completely diverted.

On the spacious balcony, a very small white figure stood upon the concrete railing. It was a girl in a white dress. She had her back turned towards An Zhe as she faced the outside. She was slowly spreading her arms, and her body leaned forward—she was about to fall.

His human form materialized, and he took a few steps forward, grabbed the girl's shoulder, carried her down from the railing, and put her onto the floor. "You..."

The girl turned around.

An Zhe was stunned.

He had seen her before, just two days ago. She had run from the Garden of Eden to the road outside, been stopped by Lu Feng, and finally taken away by the staff members of the Garden of Eden. He wouldn't mistake her for anyone else.

She looked at An Zhe. It was a look almost devoid of spirit, without the brightness of the children in An Zhe's class. For a moment, An Zhe felt that this girl was a lifeless doll. He knew that his current appearance was not ordinary, draped in a robe woven from hyphae. Perhaps he looked like a human who had

come outside draped in a bedsheet—but normal humans wouldn't come outside draped in a bedsheet.

But the girl acted like she hadn't seen anything at all. She seemed to not think that there was anything peculiar about An Zhe's attire or that there was anything abrupt about An Zhe's appearance. She also seemed to not recognize him. Perhaps she didn't remember his existence at all. Three seconds later, she once again slowly turned to look forward.

It was currently early morning. The aurora had just disappeared, and thick white mist overflowed within the dark gray city, surging towards the gray-blue skies like rolling waves. From this angle, half of one's field of vision was blocked by the nearby cylindrical magnetic field generator. Bigger and taller than all other buildings, it was like a mountain, an island in the sea of mist, or a spiral staircase connecting the sky and the earth. The street lights and the dawn stars flickered together, but in front of such a massive form, they were eclipsed.

The girl lifted her head and looked at the limitless sky above.

"I don't want to jump." Her voice was very young, but her words were very clear. "I want to fly."

An Zhe said, "You'll fall."

She said, "I know."

Her tone of voice was calm, not befitting a child her age. The morning wind blew, lifting her white dress and black hair. That was an unusual delicacy and softness. The women and girls outside didn't have this kind of thing—Doussay had this quality as well, but it was even more obvious in this girl.

An Zhe stood behind her. He had just protected a human youngling, and at the same time, he had paid a price. At least, his existence had been exposed to this girl's eyes, and now he stood in the midst of extreme danger, unable to reveal any weaknesses.

He said, "Why are you here?"

"Sometimes, the surveillance will be messed up for a while. They haven't discovered it yet," the girl said. "I come out to look at the sky."

"You can look at the sky during free activity time too," An Zhe said. "What floor and class are you in?"

He earnestly carried out the responsibility of a teacher. He couldn't allow a youngling to stay in such a dangerous place.

She said, "I'm in the Garden of Eden."

"Which floor and which class of the Garden of Eden are you in?"

"I'm not in any floor or class," she said. "Only boys are there."

An Zhe patiently explained, "The classes have girls too."

There were many girls in his class alone, such as Ji Sha—although their appearances were about the same as the boys, not wearing dresses or letting their hair grow to shoulder-length like the girl in front of him.

"Those girls aren't girls." She turned her head to look at him. "Only the ones on the twentieth floor and above are real girls."

"How come?" He asked.

"You don't even know that?" she said.

"I don't know," An Zhe said.

It was the truth. He indeed knew very little about this human base.

An expression other than indifference appeared on the girl's face for the first time. The corners of her lips lifted, carrying a faint pride. "Then you don't know the 'Rose Manifesto' either."

"What is it?" He asked.

The girl turned around and draped herself on the railing. The sun rose faintly in the sky.

"Then you wouldn't also be unaware of bacterial infection, right?" she said.

"I know about it," An Zhe said. He did indeed know about the calamity that led to the death of ninety percent of this planet’s humans, once upon a time.

"Only people with outstanding genes could survive," she said.

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said.

Against strong mutated bacteria, human treatment methods had no effect, so they could only escape infection by relying on innate immunity. If a human's genes destined him to resist this disease, he would be able to survive.

"Then, after those people survived, they discovered that very few live children were being born in the world." She reached up to comb her hair and paused for a while, as if she was sorting out her words. Only then did she say, "After being infected, the surviving girls all had defects in their ability to give birth. Only a very few of them had relatively small defects that would allow them to safely do so."

An Zhe didn't say anything. She wrinkled her nose and continued. "Scientists would give them genetic examinations. The rubric said that if they had beneath sixty points, they lost the ability to do so entirely. Above sixty points, there was a chance they could have normal children. Then there was the 'Rose Manifesto'. You're a boy, so the Manifesto has nothing to do with you."

An Zhe asked, "What is the Rose Manifesto?"

"We just memorized it," she said. "Would you like to hear it?"

"Okay, "An Zhe said.

In a calm voice, she recited, "The 23,371 women of the four human bases with a fertility score of 60 and above passed the following manifesto with zero rejection votes: I'm willing to devote myself to the destiny of humankind, accepting genetic experiments and all forms of assisted reproduction, to strive for an entire lifetime for the continuation of the human race."

"That's how it is," she said. "That's why I'm on the twentieth floor, and you guys are down below. Now you know."

"Thank you," He said. "But you still need to take care to not come to such a dangerous place."

"I won't jump down," she said. "I come every week. Haven't you come as well?"

She looked at An Zhe again and repeated, "I want to look at the sky, so I come here. Why are you here?"

"I can't find my way back," An Zhe said.

"I know the way," she said. "I have a secret passage."

He thought for a while. "I also don't have clothes to wear."

"I also know where the laundry room is," she said.

An Zhe asked her, "Could you tell me where it is?"

But she didn't give a direct reply. Instead, she asked, "Are you a student from the lower floors?"

"I'm a teacher," An Zhe said.

"Promise me one thing." Her eyes seemed to gain a bit of spirit as she said to An Zhe, "Promise me one thing, and I'll go find clothes for you, then take you outside through the secret passage."

An Zhe asked, "What thing?"

"Find a boy on the sixth floor called Si Nan and tell him that I've been injected with a tracking agent, so I can't go out to play with him anymore," she said. "At this time next week, come back here and tell me what he said."

He was silent.

The girl looked at him and asked, "Are you unable to do that?"

"I..." An Zhe met her eyes. She blinked, and only at this time did she seem like a normal child.

In the end, he said, "I may not be able to.”

She said, "You can find him. He's just on the sixth floor."

An Zhe didn't say anything.

But she seemed to become a bit anxious. As she pushed open the balcony door, she said, "I'll go find some clothes for you."

Before An Zhe could stop her, her white dress disappeared behind the door.

If the Si Nan she spoke of was the Si Nan who An Zhe knew, then he was already no longer in the Garden of Eden, but rather the Lighthouse. But he didn't know how she would react if he really told her this information. He knew

that human emotions would bring her pain.

So even after the girl left and came back, pulled him along through the quiet and deserted empty corridor, and finally stopped at a half-open small door in a pile of odds and ends, he still hadn't figured out how to respond.

"If you can get in, you can go down to the first floor." She pointed to the door.

That door was half-open. Strictly speaking, because it had been long neglected, it was no longer perfectly shut, but rather loosened. But the rusty door bolt still hung on one side of the door, one side of it embedded in the wall, making it so that the door could only open far enough to allow a child to slip through sideways.

An Zhe said, "I'll try."

He walked up to the door and leaned over slightly.

It was impossible for an adult human to pass through here, but he was still a mushroom after all. Under the cover of his clothing, his body briefly changed into hyphae. After losing the limitations of a human skeleton, he very easily got through the door.

"Your body is so soft," the girl said.

"I have something as well," An Zhe said. "Can you not tell others that I came here today?"

The girl said, "If you come here again next week—"

Her voice cut off.

"Lily?" A female voice sounded.

"You came here again." The voice carried an undertone of reproach.

An Zhe dodged to the side, and he heard Lily say, "I'm sorry, Madam."

"This time it was I who found you." The voice of the woman referred to as "Madam" was gentle. "If it was them, you'd be locked up again."

Lily said, "I won't do it again."

Following that conversation was the sound of footsteps as they seemed to walk away. An Zhe looked in that direction through the crack and saw that a

madam in a long white dress was holding Lily's hand as their figures gradually receded in the dimly-lit corridor.

Lily hadn't finished speaking, but he knew what she wanted to say. He seemed to have reached an agreement with Lily. Next week, he had to come here again and tell her Si Nan's reply.

Preoccupied, he looked around—it was dark all around, and the aroma of dampness wafted towards him. He dimly saw that the walls were mottled and flaking and covered with grayish-green spots of mold and that the ground was covered with fallen light gray powdery debris—this was a narrow and steep staircase. Furthermore, it was obvious that it hadn't been used in who knows how many years.

An Zhe found the stair handrail and walked down along it bit by bit. There were no windows, and it was even darker than the night. This place wasn't much better than the pipes.

Every floor had twenty steps. As An Zhe walked, he counted the floors. When he got to the sixth floor, there was a gap in the staircase's small door approximately the same size as the one on the twentieth floor. He exited from there and reached the sixth floor's utility room.

The bright light shone upon him. The clothes Lily gave him were the standard uniform of the Garden of Eden's staff members, a snow-white shirt—no different from his previous dress. He walked out and took a look at the time on the wall clock in the corridor. It was seven o'clock. If he went to work at the training base from the Garden of Eden—he was already late.

Thus, An Zhe went downstairs, speeding up as he walked towards the doorway. The bright red "Humankind's interests take precedence over all else" slogan was particularly eye-catching on the snow-white wall. The staff clad in white uniforms walked about on the bright ground, and children's voices traveled over from afar. Everything was different from the interior of the quiet and circuitous pipes.

He felt that he had been reborn.

The main hall's glass door opened, and he ran head-first into someone.

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

Lu Feng.

Behind and slightly to one side of Lu Feng was Seraing.

He saw Lu Feng's eyes narrow, and from this movement, he felt an aura of danger.

As expected, Lu Feng said grimly, "Why are you here?"

Facing this person, An Zhe's hyphae were on the verge of standing on end.

He shouldn't be in the Garden of Eden right now; he should be at the training base with Colin.

"I..." He lifted his head to look at Lu Feng.

Those ice-cold green eyes observed him, seemingly saying: you can start telling your tall tales now.

An Zhe said, "... I went the wrong way."

He really did go the wrong way, having gotten utterly lost under the entire city. If he hadn't come to the Garden of Eden by coincidence, or if he hadn't found that balcony in time, he may have continued to be trapped in that place, then lose his identity as a human and never again be able to come out.

And...

And this bastard Lu Feng would never have anything to do with him from then on.

He slightly dropped his gaze. For some reason, he unexpectedly felt that the current Colonel wasn't as hateful as before.

Then he heard Seraing gently say, "You're supposed to go to the training base for work today. Did you not realize that the location has changed?"

An Zhe said nothing. The sun rose from behind the distant artificial magnetic pole, and its golden light shone on the silver buttons of Lu Feng's uniform.

His voice was a bit hoarse. "Moreover, you'll be late."

Lu Feng didn't say anything, but he also didn't deliberately make things

difficult for An Zhe. He felt that, based on Lu Feng's understanding of his IQ, Seraing's reason was sufficiently convincing. He moved to one side, trying to bypass Lu Feng and leave.

Suddenly Lu Feng's voice came from next to him. "I'll take you there."

Lu Feng drove very steadily and quickly, his speed at least twice that of the shuttle. When he stopped at the entrance to the training base, the display inside the car showed that the time was just 7:25 a.m., five minutes before it was time to go to work. He wasn't late.

It was just that when he got out of Lu Feng's car, An Zhe felt that those other people who had also come to the training base for work all cast a look at him.

In any case, it wasn't his first time being looked at. An Zhe came to the card-reading turnstile at the entrance. People came over one after another, swiped their cards to open the turnstile, and walked in.

An Zhe froze—he realized something.

Footsteps came from behind him. He turned around and saw Lu Feng standing very close behind, looking at him with eyebrows raised.

"... I forgot my card, too," An Zhe said.

He heard Lu Feng softly click his tongue.

Two slender fingers clasped the blue ID card and put it up to the sensor. With a "beep", the turnstile opened.

Lu Feng used his own ID card to open the gate for him.

At the same time, the Colonel's voice, tinged with a faint disdain, sounded in his ear.

"So stupid."

# 22

## “COME WITH ME TO THE LIGHTHOUSE.”

EVEN A MUSHROOM like him knew that these were not good words.

But An Zhe had no way to refute them.

He walked through that door, and the doormen at the sentry box observed the proceedings, looking angry but afraid to speak up.

He understood them.

This position of Arbiter, although it was not the greatest military rank, had the highest authority when it came to killing people. Nobody was willing to cross Lu Feng.

An Zhe himself wasn’t, either.

He said, "Thank you, Colonel."

"No problem," Lu Feng said. "In the afternoon, request time off."

"... Huh?"

Lu Feng seemed to nonchalantly lift his eyelids as he said, "Come with me to the Lighthouse."

"What for?" An Zhe asked.

"Dr. Ji wants you for something," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe was a little suspicious of this sentence's authenticity. Why would the doctor want him?

For a moment, he suspected that this was Lu Feng's excuse to arrest him and bring him into the Lighthouse, but he felt that his own performance this morning was flawless. Even Seraing took the initiative to speak for him.

Then he suddenly realized that in Seraing's eyes as well, he didn't seem very smart.

But even if he wasn't a smart human, he was a rational mushroom, and going to the Lighthouse was actually just what he desired.

He said, "Okay."

Lu Feng gave a vague hum in reply, then turned and left.

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While the children were being trained by the drillmaster, An Zhe sat on a bench nearby. When the instructor needed assistance—such as for scoring and timing and such—he would be called over.

There was nothing else to do, nor were there any reading materials in the office he was interested in, so he could only take an introductory manual on the operation of various weapons.

Colin didn't sit with him, but rather on another bench nearby. He had made a new friend, the language and literature teacher of the class next door, a boy around twenty years old.

The book page he was reading had described in detail a large fighter plane with the model name "PL1109". A masterpiece of human science and technology from the period when the magnetic field was in disorder, it had a top-tier exterior that shielded against radiation, top-tier engine and motors, and an independent cruise system that was unmatched throughout the entire base, capable of accurately determining its course in the absence of a magnetic field.

It sounded very amazing, but An Zhe really had no interest in it whatsoever, and because he hadn't slept all night, he even began to doze off slightly.

To his right, Colin and the language teacher's greetings to each other had ended. They exchanged names, then began to converse, and the wind blew the contents of their conversation to An Zhe's ear.

"Do you like the Main City?" Colin asked.

An Zhe was astutely aware that Colin was about to start preaching again.

"Why wouldn't I like it?" the boy said. "The Main City gives us stable lives."

He seemed to also be a talkative person. Just as he finished this sentence, he continued with the next. "It must have been a month since we came to the Main City. How do you feel?"

"Liking it is out of the question," Colin said.

"How come?" the boy said. "You don't need to be a mercenary and go out to throw your life away, something that we previously wouldn't have even dared to think about. Every day I thank my mother for forcing me to finish three educational courses, although she mainly wanted me to finish studying language and economics to test into the supply depot in the future so that I wouldn't need to make a living out in the wilderness."

Colin was silent for a while before asking, "What about your mother?"

"Died in the wilderness," he said. "The two of them hadn't raised me for many years before my father failed to return, and then she failed to return as well."

"My apologies," Colin said.

"It's fine." The boy smiled. "I'm used to it. What about you?"

"My mother was killed by the Arbiter, and my father... When we went to the Main City, he was left behind in District 6."

"My apologies," the boy said as well.

But the exchange of their experiences seemed to swiftly bring the two of them closer together. After a short silence, the boy looked at the children on the training ground, put his arms behind his head, and sighed. "Having been in the Outer City for a long time, I've forgotten that we came from the Main City too when we were little."

"I remember quite clearly," Colin said. "When I was five or six years old, I wanted to be a biologist, and my grades were good as well, yet I still wasn't able to remain in the Main City."

"When I was young, I wanted to be a military officer," the boy said. "In the end, I fell during the final assessment, and the military didn't want me."

Colin said, "Fate is fickle."

"Look on the bright side. Our intelligence was insufficient, so even if we remained, it would be painful for us," the boy said with a sigh. "One might not be able to be happy even if they remain in the Main City. I heard that someone wanted to sort and study humankind's archives, but because of his outstanding talent in mathematics, he could only stay in the Lighthouse for his entire life and calculate ballistics trajectories. Think about it. You wanted to be a biologist, but the base thought you were more suited to be a linguist and made you translate documents. How painful that would be. If it were me, I would suddenly die."

"This is the reason why I don't like the base," Colin said. "It's a cold-blooded and ruthless machine."

"You have to think of yourself as a little part. A cog in a greater wheel. Your genes are your model number, determining which sector you work in."

Colin gave a rare smile. "You're very amusing."

The boy said, "Those of us who studied language are rather good at coming up with analogies."

"But people aren't parts. Under the banner of doing everything for the sake of serving humankind's interests, the base has been constantly losing its human characteristics instead."

"What alternative is there? We can't just mooch off of the base, we have to produce some value." The boy stood up and looked at the children before them.

"I truly like children," he said with a sudden and very happy smile. "I really like this job. Maybe someday, amongst the children I teach, there will be an unmatched genius who can save the whole world."

Then he spoke to himself. "In that case, I should prepare lessons in earnest."

With chin resting in hand, An Zhe looked at him curiously before looking at Colin again.

Colin didn't say anything else. An Zhe thought that this time, he wasn't able to

succeed in finding a comrade.

When they were in the Outer City, Colin had held up a poster that read "oppose the Arbiter". If they were in the Main City, what would he hold up? He felt that it may be something like "oppose human classification" or "we want freedom".

His train of thought became more chaotic as he got sleepier. Trying to focus on the military's illustrated handbook, he cursorily flipped through the fighter plane section, then looked at the weapons section. Conventional bombs, nuclear bombs, and hydrogen bombs of varying equivalents could easily blow a mushroom to bits. But he was by no means afraid. Humans were unlike the things inside the Abyss. They were a rule-abiding existence, so as long as he complied with the rules, he would be able to live.

He spent the morning in this manner. At noon, the children finished training. A few of the younglings had received bumps, and some other younglings thought that the training was too difficult. They didn't go to eat, instead surrounding him at the bench and whimpering.

As An Zhe gently stuck a bandage on a youngling, he comforted a short-haired girl next to him who thought that training was too difficult. "Hang in there. After you pass the training, you can be an officer."

The girl said, "I can't just be eliminated?"

"No, you can't," He said.

He thought that even if she couldn't stay in the Main City, she ought to train hard. Otherwise, once they grew up—if the Outer City resumed operations by then—nobody would adopt children with poor physical fitness, no mercenary team would want them, and they wouldn't be able to pass the test and get into the civilian posts of the City Affairs Office or the supply depot. They'd only be able to go to the third underground floor, regardless of their gender.

Having stayed there for a month, he knew that the people there did not live well.

Thus, he said, "You all have to train hard."

The girl hugged his arm and said, "But even after becoming officers, we need

to train every day."

An Zhe patted her hair and thought for a while. "But they have good-looking uniforms."

A boy looked at the soldiers at the training ground and said, "They're super ugly."

"Their military ranks aren't high enough," An Zhe said sincerely to him. “The uniforms get better once you reach… Once you reach Colonel, or so”

"Really?" a youngling asked.

"Will it be as good-looking as the one that person wears?" another youngling asked.

"Which person?" An Zhe asked.

The youngling pointed behind him.

An Zhe turned around.

Against a utility pole two or three meters behind him and to one side leaned a certain Colonel clad in a black uniform. At such a close distance, the younglings were unexpectedly unafraid of him.

Perhaps it was because this Colonel was currently looking straight at An Zhe, his slightly-lifted eyebrows carrying a hint of joy.

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

What he said just now had probably been overheard.

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In Lu Feng's car, An Zhe had fallen asleep.

The moment he woke up was when he instinctively sensed danger. As soon as he opened his eyes, he discovered that the car had stopped at the entrance to the Lighthouse, and the Colonel had opened the car door on his side and was examining him from above.

"Did you not sleep last night?" The Colonel's voice was cold enough to turn

water into ice.

An Zhe's brain was still in a non-functioning state. He rubbed his eyes to wake himself up, then got out of the car.

But because he was sleepy to the point of toppling over, his unsteady footing made him pitch forward into Lu Feng.

A pair of powerful arms held him steady, and An Zhe finally stood firm. He didn't fall, but he did become quite a lot more awake.

The Lighthouse was quiet and bustling with activity as always. When they were walking through the corridor on the first floor, four soldiers carrying two bodies covered in white cloth passed by. Seraing was by their side, his face slightly pale. Upon seeing Lu Feng, he explained succinctly, "Experimental malfunction. They were exposed."

Lu Feng gave a slight nod, then took An Zhe to the elevator to go up to the tenth floor.

Dr. Ji was standing in the middle of the corridor on the tenth floor. "You’re here."

Lu Feng said, "What's the matter?"

"I'm going to borrow your little cutie here for something." To An Zhe, the doctor said, "Come with me."

An Zhe didn't think he had become Lu Feng's property, but he still followed.

The doctor took him to the familiar laboratory where Si Nan had been locked up.

Through the transparent airtight glass wall, he spotted Si Nan.

But it also wasn't Si Nan.

He walked up to the glass wall.

Inside was a black—a black insect.

It was bigger than Si Nan's original form, about half the size of an adult.

There were two black compound eyes at the top of his head, glowing with a dark silver luster beneath the lamplight. Between the two compound eyes, on

top of its head, a pair of thin, long antennae extended. Long translucent wings hung from its back, its abdomen was slender and long and covered with some dark gray fuzz, and the same fuzz also covered its mouthparts.

It looked like a bee.

Right now, it was wildly flying around and crashing into this transparent cage, its body continuously ramming into the glass wall as though it wanted to escape, but its torso and limbs were trembling non-stop, as if it was suffering extreme pain.

"Its situation is abnormal. There are great discrepancies between its brain waves and previous records in the database. I suspect that it still retains a portion of human consciousness and that it's resisting the xenogenic instincts," the doctor said. "But none of us have any way of effectively communicating with it, so we wanted to invite you here to try."

So An Zhe stood in front of the communicator once again.

"Si Nan," he said.

Si Nan's wing covers opened and closed, making rustling sounds as they rubbed together. He seemed to not hear anything, still flying wildly in the whole space as before.

But An Zhe was convinced that there was a moment in which that head with its compound eyes had looked in his direction.

"Si Nan," he said. "Do you remember Lily?"

The rustling sounds stopped for a moment, but then the gray bee rammed the glass wall even more fiercely.

As he watched Si Nan, he asked softly, "Do you have something you want to say to her?"

Si Nan's wings trembled madly, but he had already lost his human vocal organs, so all he presented to the doctor were irregular peaks and troughs on the EEG.

Dr. Ji said, "There are changes in the electric waves. He understands you. Who is Lily?"

An Zhe's gaze was slightly blank.

The conversation between himself and Lily was a secret nobody knew about, but now there was no other option.

An hour later, someone gently tapped on the laboratory door.

An Zhe turned around.

The first thing that caught his eye was a snow-white skirt.

"Madam Lu?" There was a note of slight surprise in Dr. Ji's voice. "Why are you here?"

An Zhe lifted his head. The woman who entered was a lady with an elegant, gentle bearing.

She had long black hair that was loosely twisted into a bun at the back of her head and was wearing a light blue mask, so An Zhe could only see a pair of kind black eyes. Her body was slightly plump, which served to make her disposition even more kindly.

The girl whose hand she was holding in her own right hand was none other than Lily, and on each side of them was a Garden of Eden staff member.

"In the last three months, the Garden of Eden's aberration rate has risen. I must personally deliver my report to the Lighthouse and request them to decide again," she said. "I just happened to receive an application from the Lighthouse requesting Lily's assistance with a certain task, so I brought her here along the way."

Dr. Ji said, "Sorry to trouble you."

"This outing is an exception." Madam Lu handed Lily over to Dr. Ji. "Please treat her well."

"Please rest assured."

After completing the handover, Madam Lu slowly turned her head.

Lu Feng was in one corner of the room, eyes tracking her since she'd entered the lab.

"You're here too," she said.

Lu Feng dropped his gaze slightly and said, "Mother."

"It appears to be very important research." Madam Lu looked at him.

At that moment, one of them was at the room entrance while the other was at the corner of the room diagonally opposite, their gazes meeting. Madam Lu's expression was soft while Lu Feng's gaze was calm.

When An Zhe witnessed this, a type of intuition told him that there was some unknown undercurrent surging in their eye contact, but he couldn't understand it.

Approximately ten seconds later, Madam Lu said, "I should go."

One of the two staff members helped her turn around, and the two of them protected her completely.

The footsteps receded, and Dr. Ji closed the door.

"This is the thirty-fifth year Madam Lu has worked for the Garden of Eden." His gaze seemed careworn. "She truly is a great woman. Why don't you talk to her a little more?"

Lu Feng looked at the tightly-shut silver door. "We haven't met in a very long time."

"Then all the more reason to talk with her some more. Could it be that your work these years at the Trial Court has already made you cold-blooded and indifferent to this point?" Dr. Ji said. "Remember when I was younger, I even helped you mess up the surveillance on the twentieth floor, allowing you to often run out to see her—the candy Madam gave me was very tasty."

"Dr. Ji," Lu Feng said, "there's no harm in speaking less."

Dr. Ji shrugged.

Three seconds later, he suddenly said, "I really did a flawless job back then. Tell me, after all these years, has the surveillance been fixed?"

Lu Feng looked at Lily, then looked at An Zhe who was looking at Lily, and said, "Looks like it hasn't."

Lily had already pressed herself against the glass wall.

She looked at the bee-shaped xenogenic behind the glass, and an unprecedented delight at seeing something new appeared in her soulless eyes. "Is this a bee?"

The gray bee lay prone against the glass wall, locking eyes with her. Its movements finally stopped for a brief spell, but then it fell into painful convulsions again.

"It looks like it's in a lot of pain." Lily looked at An Zhe, obviously recognizing him, and asked, "Was it you who wanted me to come over and look at the bee?"

He murmured, "That's Si Nan."

Lily was stunned. Just as An Zhe thought she was about to show a sorrowful expression, she broke out into a sudden smile instead.

"Si Nan," she said to the gray bee through the glass wall. "You can fly now."

There was neither fear nor unfamiliarity in her eyes. She had never seen monsters kill people, nor had she ever been warned to stay away from xenogenics. In the eyes of children, there weren't many differences between bees and humans.

She wasn't even surprised by the fact that Si Nan had suddenly turned into a bee—probably because, in the eyes of younglings, the world was just this full of unpredictable changes.

"It's jumbled again." The doctor looked at the instrument. "But for three seconds just now, its electric waves were very close to those of humans."

Dr. Ji patted Lily's shoulder. "Lily, come help us with something."

"What thing?" Lily asked.

"Si Nan's consciousness is fighting against the bee's consciousness. Perhaps you can help him wake up. Can you keep talking to him?"

"I can," Lily said. "Can you change me into a bee too?"

"If you also changed into a bee, the Garden of Eden would execute me," Dr. Ji said. "If you can communicate with him, it would be even better. We have to know how exactly he was infected. The source of infection is in the Garden of

Eden, but it has not been found so far. Only by finding it as quickly as possible can we ensure the Main City's safety."

"Okay." Lily put her hand on the glass wall. "Then can you give me a reward?"

Dr. Ji said warmly, "What would you like?"

"I don't want to stay on the twentieth floor." Lily pressed her cheek to the glass. "Can you rescue me from there?"

"My apologies," Dr. Ji said. "This exceeds the scope of my capabilities."

"It’s okay. I guessed as much." Lily once again looked at the gray bee. "I'll try my best."

She truly did try her best for an entire afternoon, but Si Nan's condition swung between good and bad. There were only a few times in which he gave normal feedback, but according to Dr. Ji, his situation was much improved from before, and so he decided to invite Lily again the next day.

The doctor was busy with other research duties, and Lily didn't like interacting with others, so in the following few days, An Zhe also had to accompany Lily at the Lighthouse and communicate with Si Nan.

By 7 p.m., Lily had exhausted her young strength and energy. She was delivered back to the Garden of Eden, and An Zhe could also get off work.

At noon, he had fallen asleep in the car and received Lu Feng's ire. Having learned his lesson, he stayed awake the entire trip, got out of the car awake, and took the same elevator with Lu Feng up to the thirty-seventh floor while awake.

Similarly, he faced his own room door while awake.

The tightly-shut room door.

One second, two seconds, three seconds.

Lu Feng's voice, carrying an undertone of a smile, rang out behind him. "How come you aren't going inside?"

An Zhe took a deep breath.

Rashly making his way into the pipes last night was one of the two biggest

mistaken decisions he had made in his life. The other one was deciding to go roll around in that windy wilderness on the night of February 14th.

He was deeply regretful.

Of course the Colonel understood the dilemma An Zhe was facing. He said, "The Main City's City Affairs Office can reissue ID cards. For the next three days, find someplace to live."

With those words, he unhurriedly opened his own room door, walked in, and made to close the door.

On the other side, An Zhe turned around to look at him, brows slightly furrowed and gently biting his lower lip, the very image of someone struggling. He seemed to be pondering something.

But Lu Feng said nothing, only looking at him flatly.

Time passed quietly.

Unexpectedly, An Zhe turned around and pressed the elevator's down button.

"Then I'll go find Seraing."

# 23

## “IS IT BECAUSE YOU CANNOT WAVER?”

THE COLONEL'S living quarters seemed like quarters nobody lived in.

It was just like his nap room in the Outer City's City Defense Agency.

As for why An Zhe knew how the Colonel's room looked, it was because at the very moment the elevator door opened, he felt that the surroundings were overly chilly.

After turning around again, he met Lu Feng's gaze.

The Colonel leaned against the door frame with his arms crossed. "Get back here."

An Zhe pressed his lips together into a flat line.

In truth, he was by no means close with Seraing. When he pressed the elevator's down button, he even thought that if Seraing was not at home or showed reluctance at his request, he would only be able to awkwardly request Colin's help instead.

He looked back at Lu Feng and was suddenly a bit distressed—he felt slightly wronged. This man clearly knew he didn't have any friends at the base.

Lu Feng also saw that something was amiss with him. "What is it?"

An Zhe lowered his eyes but didn't know what to say. He actually wanted to speak up and stay in Lu Feng's room, but he feared the Colonel's rejection.

He heard Lu Feng let out a soft laugh.

"I was just teasing you." Lu Feng walked over and pulled him into the elevator. "Let's go eat first. At night, you’ll sleep with me."

They ate dinner at the communal dining hall. This dinner was by no means tasty, and what’s more, Lu Feng's order was a portion of mushroom soup.

But if he were to sleep with Lu Feng... Of course it would be a bit better than sleeping with Seraing, and it would be much, much better than sleeping with Colin. An Zhe attributed this to the fact that he was only familiar with Lu Feng after all, and moreover, they had stayed overnight at each other's quarters twice before.

After bathing in the Colonel's bathroom, he wiped himself dry, then quickly got into bed while wrapped in a big, snow-white towel. Holding the quilt in his arms, he sat on the innermost side of the bed—he didn't have pajamas.

In the Colonel's room, all the appliances seemed to be more perfect than the ones in his room, which may have been special treatment the military gave to him.

However, no matter how special the treatment, there would be no extra quilt, nor would there be an extra pillow either. He voluntarily moved the pillow from the middle of the bed to the outer side.

At that moment, a bouquet of red at the head of the bed caught his eye.

There was a simple glass bottle there, and within the bottle was three bright red flowers with thorny stems and dark green leaves. Two of them were already in full bloom, while the last one was still a plump bud.

This was the first time An Zhe had seen plants inside the human base. This city made of iron and steel seemed to prohibit the existence of any living thing besides humans.

The flowers' fragrance drifted through the air. Just then, Lu Feng, who had been listening to his subordinates report the state of work affairs, ended the call and returned to the bedroom.

At that very moment, Lu Feng noticed he was looking at the bouquet.

"My mother's," he said.

"Madam Lu?" An Zhe asked.

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

His gaze also lingered on those three flowers. After a very long time, he looked outside.

The night sky outside the window was very dark, with shadows flickering, and the hexagonal Garden of Eden stood tall next to the artificial magnetic pole.

Following his gaze, An Zhe looked down as well. In this manner, the Garden of Eden really did look like a beehive. A thought suddenly occurred to him, and he looked back at the three bright red flowers at the head of the bed. He was a little familiar with this kind of color and shape, for it came from An Ze's memory of a picture album from a long time ago. It was a commonly-seen plant from when human civilization was still flourishing.

"Roses..." he murmured.

"They are roses," Lu Feng said.

When the children in his class had free time, they would play games of house and pretend flower planting, using colored paper of various hues as flowers. However, it looked like the Garden of Eden had real roses.

"Does the Garden of Eden plant roses?" he said.

Lu Feng's reply was very concise. "No."

Just as An Zhe thought his response would stop there, Lu Feng spoke again.

"She likes plants, but the base doesn't have any." His voice was very calm. "When I was sixteen, I was training out in the wilderness and collected some seeds. After the Lighthouse confirmed that they were safe, I gave them to her."

"Then the Madam planted them?" An Zhe said.

Lu Feng said, "Mm-hm."

An Zhe suddenly recalled the sealed plant seeds he saw in Lu Feng's office cabinet a month ago. He thought that Lu Feng must greatly value his mother. At the Lighthouse today, Madam Lu had gone to submit some reports. She looked like she was a scientific researcher. So he asked, "Is Madam Lu a scientist?"

Only after some time had passed did Lu Feng reply to him. "More or less."

At that moment, Lu Feng suddenly said, "You knew the girl from the Garden

of Eden."

An Zhe nodded. Lu Feng had already seen Lily, so he didn't have anything to hide.

"How much do you know?"

He guessed that the Colonel was asking him about his degree of understanding of the Garden of Eden. Recalling Lily's words, he said, "I know the 'Rose Manifesto'."

He saw Lu Feng look out the window, seemingly recalling the past.

Lu Feng said, "Allegedly when she was twelve years old, because of her intellectual gifts... the base believed that compared to giving birth, she would bring greater contributions to humankind by throwing herself into scientific research, so she was sent to the Lighthouse to study."

"That's so amazing," An Zhe said.

He was invariably curious about humans with superior intellect.

"But afterwards, she voluntarily applied to be transferred back to the Garden of Eden and bear the responsibility of birthing children while studying how to improve the technology of in vitro embryo culturing."

"And after that?" An Zhe asked.

"There is no after that," Lu Feng said. "It still holds true now."

An Zhe recalled Madam Lu's appearance. Even though she wore a mask today, showing merely a pair of eyes, the impression she left upon him was very deep. He said, "She's very beautiful."

Lu Feng said, "Thank you."

Upon recalling the situation from the daytime, An Zhe asked, "Do you have a bad relationship with her?”

"Yes."

An Zhe blinked. "Why is that?"

He felt that Lu Feng clearly cared about his mother very much.

"She had always thought I was at the United Front Center, but in fact, I chose to go to the Trial Court in the end." Lu Feng's tone was calm. "Perhaps I've killed too many."

"She can't accept it?"

"It was I who wasn't willing to maintain my relationship with her." Lu Feng picked up the pillow and tossed it to An Zhe's side.

An Zhe caught the pillow and looked at Lu Feng. Strangely, he understood what Lu Feng was saying.

In order to always be correct, always be clear-headed, and always be impassive, the Arbiter had to utterly exile himself—the word 'exile' abruptly appeared in An Zhe's mind.

"The Garden of Eden and the Trial Court are doing opposing things," he said. "Is it because you cannot waver?"

"Shut up." Lu Feng leaned over and yanked the pillow from An Zhe's arms, then lifted him up and put the pillow beneath his head. "You can't even keep your eyes open anymore."

Sinking into the soft pillow, An Zhe felt his consciousness gradually blur. He really was sleepy, and this night, he had been forcibly trying to stay alert the entire time.

Before completely falling asleep, he saw Lu Feng pick up a silvery-white case, which was something a staff member had given to Lu Feng when they left the Lighthouse. An Zhe didn't know what it was, and he thought that he didn't need to know either. The Colonel always had his reasons for doing things.

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An Zhe's folded clothes had been set to one side, some light gray dust on the shirt collar area. Neither the training grounds or the Lighthouse had this sort of thing, but Lu Feng also knew that there was a small-scale disturbance in Garden of Eden's surveillance during that period of time, so there was no way of tracing An Zhe's whereabouts.

Lu Feng looked away from it, and his finger pressed the button on the suitcase. The silver suitcase opened, and wisps of white cold air escaped from within. Inside the refrigerated layer was a long and slender syringe, its contents an aquamarine hue.

Next to the suitcase was his gun.

After his gaze lingered briefly on the two items, he turned to look at An Zhe, his fingers resting on the gunstock.

Right at that moment.

An Zhe rolled over and gently leaned against him.

He was asleep.

Like a small animal curled up inside the snow-white quilt, he revealed a smooth and milk-white neck and shoulder, relaxed eyebrows, and slightly-curled eyelashes, his breaths rising and falling in an even and calm rhythm.

Part of his fingers showed from beneath the quilt, gently curled, but it was also a very relaxed demeanor. Not a single nerve was tensed up. As he slept here, without the slightest alertness or vigilance, it was like he was sleeping in a... place he wholeheartedly trusted to be safe. He believed that in this place, nobody would harm him.

Lu Feng suddenly recalled that day from two months earlier.

That day was the first time they met. An Zhe looked into his eyes and said to him, "He hadn't gotten wounded."

He had long ago gotten accustomed to the sight of disputes and denials, and interrogations and rage were things he had to encounter countless times every single day.

But that was his first time seeing a pair of eyes like that. He did not ask questions, nor did he fail to understand. There was only grief. Yet within the grief was an innocent calm, as if, so long as Lu Feng gave a reason, he would accept anything and forgive anything.

He had never paid attention to anyone's pleas before, but that one time, he lifted the white cloth covering the corpse to reveal that person's wound.

A person's wavering starts from the first time their heart softens.

# 24

## “WHAT DID YOU DO TO IT?"

AN ZHE HAD A DREAM.

He seemed to be standing above an abyss of flowing black water, and in front of him was a boundless empty world. The feeling of danger gripped him like a hand. There must have been something in the faraway darkness observing him; he couldn't catch his breath.

Feeling that it was dangerous, he unconsciously looked around and took two steps back. Within the dangerous gaze, he wanted to find someone or get close to someone to obtain a sense of safety.

Thus, his hand uneasily moved, gently grabbing the corner of Lu Feng's sleeve.

His breathing sped up slightly, as if he was afraid.

Lu Feng shut the silver refrigerated box, threw the emptied disposable syringe into the trash bin at the head of the bed, and put the gun back at the head of the bed within easy reach.

After doing all that, An Zhe's somewhat sped-up breathing calmed down, but his beautiful eyebrows were still slightly furrowed.

A tiny bead of bright red blood welled up on one side of his neck, but no more than three minutes later, that bead of blood coagulated into a red spot. It was a pinhole, but the substance that was injected would not do any harm to his body besides this spot of blood.

He was like a small animal with soft fur, having a sort of fragile comfort that seemed very easy to utterly destroy yet also seemed very easy to protect completely.

Lu Feng expressionlessly looked at him. After a long while, he reached out a

hand and rested his fingertips on the skin at the center of An Zhe's eyebrows like a dragonfly resting on the water's surface—that pair of furrowed eyebrows slowly relaxed, and no more than three minutes later, he had fallen asleep again as peacefully as he did at the start.

---

When An Zhe woke up, the entire room had brightened. It was the sort of brightness of eight or nine o'clock in the morning. The fear of being late made him wake up completely.

Then he discovered that the towel he had wrapped himself in last night had opened up and slid down no small amount, leaving his upper back bare.

And his hand was clenched around the hem of a certain human's clothes while he leaned his whole body against this human, his face pressed into the other party's shoulder.

If it had been Seraing, An Zhe would have apologized to him in accordance with human etiquette.

If it had been Colin, An Zhe would have immediately gotten away at top speed.

But it was a certain Colonel named Lu who often got mad at him.

An Zhe quietly loosened his grip, then lifted his head to look at him.

But to his surprise, Lu Feng didn't get mad at him this time.

He pulled up the quilt to cover An Zhe's exposed arms and shoulders back up, then said, "It's 8:30."

Today, An Zhe's workplace was still the Lighthouse, but the job tasks were terribly dry and boring. And this Lu Feng person also seemed to not have any proper work today, staying together with him the whole time. The scene within the laboratory could be summed up as Si Nan looking at Lily, Lily looking at Si Nan, him looking at Lily, and Lu Feng looking at him.

After half the day had gone by, Si Nan's condition unexpectedly made steady improvements. The amount of time his brain waves were stable increased from

a brief one or two seconds to a sustained four seconds straight. During these brief periods of lucidity, he would knock on the glass wall in regular patterns, as if he were telling Lily that he was there. The doctor was very happy upon hearing the results but said that he couldn't leave for the time being, so he had them continue on their own.

During the periods when Si Nan completely lost his sanity, Lily would talk to An Zhe.

"I still want to fly out," she said. "The outside is so big."

"You all can't go out?" An Zhe asked.

"No, they say the outside is too dangerous," Lily said. "When I was little, I begged them to let me out for five minutes, but they didn't agree. I'm angry with them every day."

"So the Madam will tell me not to squabble with them. She said that all of the base itself is made up of the Garden of Eden's children. Children will sometimes be wayward and will sometimes hurt their mother, but it's all understandable. Moreover, the things we eat, the places we live, and the electricity we use are all the base's things." Lily sighed, but for a girl who was still at the age of a youngling to do this, it was rather incongruous.

An Zhe patted her head.

"Only Madam Lu can go outside. She's a scientist," Lily continued. "I want to be a scientist too."

"I heard them say that previously, embryos had to grow within the body for at least five months before they could be removed, so it was very painful. But the Madam and the Lighthouse's research team have constantly been cutting down this time, so now it only needs one month."

An Zhe silently listened to her talk.

Just then, Lu Feng's communicator rang. He picked it up, and An Zhe faintly heard a few words like "sample", "growth", and "verify" from the other side.

After hanging up, Lu Feng said to him, "I'm going out for a bit."

"Okay," An Zhe replied.

When Lu Feng's footsteps had receded in the corridor, Lily suddenly came closer to An Zhe and said in a very mysterious tone, "Colonel Lu is the Madam's child, did you know?"

An Zhe looked at the girl. After two days of interacting, she had become much livelier.

He said, "You even know this?"

"Because I'm smart." Lily lifted her chin slightly. "They only know how to sleep, but I know *everything*."

Regarding the words she said before, An Zhe wasn't too interested, but upon her mention of Lu Feng, his curiosity was piqued again. He asked, "What do you know?"

"The Madam's communicator has always had pictures of the Colonel. I've seen them before." Lily swung her little legs on the chair. "They said that only the Colonel is the Madam's real child because he didn't use a machine to supplement his development."

An Zhe thought that Lu Feng and Madam Lu's relationship was indeed very special. The Garden of Eden's children didn't know exactly who their own parents were. The only thing that accompanied them since birth was their ID card number.

Lily continued. "It seems that there were two reasons. The first one is that the Colonel's condition at that time wasn't stable, and therefore was unsuited to in vitro culture. The other one, everyone is only guessing."

"What are they guessing about?" An Zhe asked.

"The Madam stayed outside the Garden of Eden before. Afterwards, she also wanted to go to the Lighthouse to hold meetings and wanted to negotiate with the people outside so she could go out. I'm guessing the Madam had fallen in love with someone outside. I bet Colonel Lu is the child of the Madam and her lover."

Upon saying this, Lily looked at An Zhe, her chin resting in her hands. "Are you Colonel Lu's lover?"

An Zhe pondered the implication of this word for a while, then shook his head.

"Then have you ever contributed sperm? You seem to have already come of age," Lily said. "Although you don't have a lover, you probably already have children."

"I don't," An Zhe said with a frown. "But..."

"But what?"

An Zhe slowly shook his head and said nothing more.

He didn't have a child in the human sense, but he had his spore, his spore that he didn't know the location of.

If he rashly asked Lu Feng, he feared that he would expose his identity as a xenogenic.

Yet if he continued to enter the ventilation pipes to search, there was an ever-present risk of getting lost or being exposed.

The only thing he knew was that based on Lu Feng's notebook, his spore was most likely within the Lighthouse—and now he was in the Lighthouse, but in the face of those complicated access doors and secretive laboratories, he had no idea how he should go look for it.

Clearly, he may have already gotten very close to his spore.

During these two days in the Lighthouse, every time he had this thought, An Zhe felt distressed.

Lily said, "Are you unhappy?"

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said.

He wasn't a complete mushroom. An incomplete mushroom couldn't be happy no matter what.

Right at that moment, soft tapping noises sounded again. Si Nan had recovered his sanity—Lily promptly abandoned him and went up to Si Nan.

An Zhe became even more dejected.

The sound of footsteps came from the corridor. It was Lu Feng and the doctor

returning together.

The doctor was talking to Lu Feng. "What did you do to it?"

"What could I have done to it?" Lu Feng said.

"It was always completely motionless as if it were dead until these two days that you frequented the Lighthouse, when it suddenly began to grow. I think it's not a coincidence."

"Furthermore, as it soaked in nutrient solution, it has always floated irregularly. Why is it that when you went next to the culture chamber, it would float over to get close to you?"

Lu Feng coldly replied, "Isn't that what you and your people are supposed to research?"

"You must first provide enough information to us. What special relationship do you have with it?"

"I took it, sealed it up, and sent it to the Lighthouse." Lu Feng's tone of voice gradually became colder, which was a sign that he did not wish to continue this conversation. "That's it."

"This is a key project. You have to cooperate with their research."

"As you like."

The voices drew closer as the two of them returned to the laboratory. The doctor walked back over to the instrument, and Lu Feng took the illustrated base armaments handbook from An Zhe's backpack and leafed through it to kill time.

Upon recalling their conversation just now, An Zhe gradually felt a trace of suspicion.

He slowly looked at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng, feeling the weight of his gaze, lifted his head from the book pages to meet An Zhe’s eyes.

An Zhe looked at him. "What did you go to do?"

Lu Feng gave him a flat look but didn't directly answer his question. Instead,

he responded, "Hm?"

An Zhe saw that he looked unwilling to answer, but when he thought about the clues he might get, he still plucked up his courage and said, "Something got close to you..."

Lu Feng raised his eyebrows. "Nothing got close to me."

"Just now, the doctor said—"

"I went to go look at a project." Lu Feng's tone of voice was nonchalant. "Nothing else happened."

An Zhe was going to die of anger thanks to this person. He wanted to ask Lu Feng what project he went to go look at, but this person was obliquely saying he didn't do anything.

"A laboratory called for him." The doctor returned to the instrument. "It was normal work, and he came back after cooperating. But he may need to make a few more trips."

With that, the doctor began to concentrate on studying the earlier footage of Si Nan.

Lu Feng's way of thinking was difficult to figure out. Since An Zhe failed to grasp the key point, he would have left it at that, but the doctor unexpectedly also gave a reply that didn't answer his question. Having received no information whatsoever, An Zhe sat next to Lily, his mood restless. He felt both dejection because he didn't get an answer and self-hatred because he couldn't ask too obviously lest he reveal his identity; he even had the thought of following Lu Feng the next time he went—

He heard Lu Feng say from next to him, "Focus on your work."

An Zhe was left speechless.

At 5 p.m., it was time for Lily to go back. After she went back, Si Nan no longer lucidly knocked on the wall and began to bump about wildly in his cell. An Zhe took some simple notes on the day's situation, and the doctor told him that he could go back.

An Zhe looked at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng said, "I'm staying here."

The doctor said, "He's on duty tonight."

"... Oh," An Zhe said.

Various experiments took place within the Lighthouse, a majority of them having to do with research on xenogenics. Sometimes when improper operation or accidents happened, staff members would be infected, and therefore the Trial Court also had permanent staff in the Lighthouse.

With that thought, he suddenly felt that things were somewhat difficult to deal with.

He didn't have his ID card, so he couldn't go back to his home, and if Lu Feng didn't go home, there were even fewer places he could go.

With that thought, he saw Lu Feng take out his ID card from the chest pocket of his uniform and give it to him. "Go back by yourself."

An Zhe accepted it and said, "Thank you."

The doctor clicked his tongue.

An Zhe asked, "Are you eating dinner here?"

Lu Feng continued looking at the illustrated armaments handbook and said flatly, "Mm."

An Zhe asked, "What are you eating?"

"The compressed nutrient tablets that the neighboring laboratory and the Garden of Eden recently invented together," the doctor said as he tapped on the keyboard. "For the time being, it's only provided for use within the Lighthouse."

With those words, the force he tapped the keyboard with increased by a few degrees. "It's the nastiest thing I've eaten in my entire life."

An Zhe stood in place and thought for a moment.

He realized that the ventilation pipes were empty and that the Lighthouse was also empty. The only one who truly had any connection to finding his spore was Lu Feng.

He said to Lu Feng, "Would you like me to bring you food?"

Lu Feng lifted his head and looked at him. Within those cold eyes, his emotions couldn't be seen.

An Zhe saw that he had also happened to flip to the page with the "PL1109" fighter plane.

Lu Feng didn't reply. An Zhe said in a small voice, "Then I'll bring you something."

The doctor clicked his tongue again.

The doctor said, "I want some too."

Lu Feng said, "There's none for you."

The doctor turned to look at An Zhe. "I want to drink tomato soup."

"There might not be any," An Zhe said.

By no means did he lie. Apart from potatoes, the residential area's food supply was different every day—specifically, it depended on the Garden of Eden's production circumstances at the time.

However, there were indeed tomatoes among the ingredients today.

An Zhe stood in front of the container that held the tomatoes and hesitated for a while.

Then he turned around to face the icebox where the mushrooms were.

He remembered that yesterday when eating dinner with Lu Feng, Lu Feng had chosen mushroom soup from among the identically watery potato soup, tomato soup, and mushroom soup that the communal dining hall provided that night. His choice made An Zhe feel somewhat uncomfortable, but...

He internally debated with himself for two minutes, but in the end, he took two portions of mushrooms.

The kind of mushrooms the base cultivated were a grayish-white and had round stems and soft caps. He often came here to buy things, so the staff members of the ingredients area already recognized him. "Cooking mushrooms tonight?"

"Mm-hm," An Zhe said. "Do I need other ingredients?"

Under the guidance of the staff member, An Zhe took back fresh meat and a packet of seasoning. He swiped Lu Feng's card. Originally, he would have felt that the cost of these ingredients was huge, but compared to the balance, it seemed unexpectedly trivial.

An Zhe picked up the knife, took a deep breath, and began chopping the mushrooms, which were so soft that they split into halves with just a gentle cut. Mushroom soup also took much less time than other soups—after the small chunks of fresh chicken were cooked through in the boiling water, he put the packet of seasoning in, then added the mushrooms. Before long, a light and fragrant aroma wafted from the water. An Zhe closed the pressure cooker lid, and after setting the timer, he left the kitchen.

He didn't have anything to do, so he watered the roses in the Colonel's room, and after tidying up the room, he turned on the TV in the living room.

It was the exact time for the news broadcast. The image appeared, and An Zhe was surprised to see a familiar figure.

Hubbard, the mercenary team captain who had once ordered a mannequin from Mr. Shaw and also helped Mr. Shaw get Lu Feng's information.

At the time, if he hadn't taken his team out on a mission again, perhaps he would have been amongst the accused as well.

"At present, the work of recalling mercenaries is progressing smoothly. This morning, all members of mercenary team AR137 returned to the base. This is the only team who can perform six-star level missions apart from the base's military, and they have brought back precious samples and the latest information on the outside world. Our reporter has interviewed AR137's captain, Mr. Hubbard."

In the frame, Hubbard, dressed in field equipment, had just gotten out of an armored vehicle. A reporter was interviewing him.

"Welcome back, Mr. Hubbard."

"Thank you," Hubbard said.

At one side, a staff member who was guiding them to get their blood tested said, "The Main City welcomes you."

"Thank you," Hubbard said. "The base's situation surprised me greatly."

The reporter said, "Your recall date is somewhat later than that of other mercenary teams. Did you encounter difficulties along the way?"

"No." Hubbard's reply was very terse. "The signal was bad. I just received the recall message."

The reporter smiled. "May I ask which region you returned from?"

"The fringes of the Abyss."

"How is the situation there now?"

"The monsters' shapes are even more varied."

"The Abyss is indeed a very fearsome place. What did you bring back from there?"

"Samples."

"Thank you for your contributions to the base," the reporter said.

"You're welcome."

An Zhe felt that with regard to being terse, Hubbard might be able to compete with Lu Feng, but his eyes were not as good-looking as Lu Feng's.

The frame switched back to the news anchor. "As far as we know, the returning mercenary teams will be classified as part of the military establishment after their meritorious feats are accounted for, and they will continue serving the base."

After that news broadcast finished, up next were a few unimportant pieces of information. Of the things that happened every day in the Main City, there weren't many worth reporting on. Most of the time, the anchors reported on the new progress in the Lighthouse's scientific research, and there were many specialized words and jargon, which made An Zhe drowsy.

The pressure cooker in the kitchen let out a long whistle, rescuing An Zhe. After opening the lid, a rich fragrance wafted into his face. The soup had

become very thick and showed a velvety texture, and snow-white mushrooms bobbed up and down within. He tasted a mouthful. Feeling satisfied, he happily put enough for three people into a thermos, planning to take it to the Lighthouse.

But right when he walked out the kitchen door, he was stunned.

On the news was a silver laboratory with complicated machinery all around, and in the center of the laboratory was a cylindrical glass tank, inside which was a clear, pale green liquid.

And inside this tank that was the height of a man, there was a tiny little white thing quietly floating in the very center.

An Zhe's eyes widened, and he strode to the TV screen—at that exact moment, the camera drew closer, giving a close-up of that little white thing.

White like snow, a soft mass, its main body was like a cloud floating in the water, its size just like the mushrooms An Zhe used in his cooking today.

Apart from that, the fine snow-white hyphae had also spread out, soaking in the water and gently swaying in the wake of its trajectory as it floated in the water.

An Zhe practically stopped breathing.

He definitely wouldn't mistake his own spore—although compared to when it left him, it seemed to have grown a bit bigger.

An Zhe lifted his hand. His fingers trembled a little as they laid against the TV's ice-cold screen, as if he were touching the surface of the tank and only a glass wall separated him from that snow-white thing. But then the newscaster's voice broke that illusion. "Four months ago, the anomalous fungus sample collected by the Trial Court was listed as a first-class observation subject, for it has never undergone any mutations from its fundamental shape. As a result, the Lighthouse believes this sample has a high research value. Perhaps by studying the sample, we can reveal the process and principles of biological infection and mutation."

An Zhe frowned deeply. As expected, his spore had been taken for research.

Then the news broadcaster said, "According to the researchers, in the past four months, the sample had maintained a half-dead state. However, in these last two days, it has unexpectedly resumed activity and increased in size. This is very exciting news..."

An Zhe's heart thumped hard.

He knew the spore recognized him too.

Why else would it only start growing bigger in exactly these two days that he had been staying in the Lighthouse? The spore sensed him. It definitely also wished to return to him.

The announcer continued talking. "The laboratory contacted the Trial Court and confirmed that the sample's growth direction is similar to the original main body."

At the same time, in the frame, the spore floated unsteadily in a certain direction. An Zhe thought that this must have been the direction he was in relative to the laboratory. The spore wanted to find him.

In the very next second, a human figure appeared next to the glass tank. The person's body was outside the frame, and there was only a vague reflection, so he didn't know who it was.

An Zhe wanted this person to get away from his spore.

The situation was the exact opposite. This person reached out with a hand to gently touch the surface of the tank with their fingertips, the fingers slender and knuckles very beautiful. An Zhe frowned, for he was very familiar with the shape of this hand.

He was also very familiar with this person's sleeve as well as the silver buttons.

An Zhe ground his teeth. He confirmed that this person trying to touch his spore was, beyond a doubt, that bastard Lu Feng.

However, right at that moment, the spore floated over to that bastard, and its fine snow-white hyphae stretched out and touched his fingers across the tank.

Why would it do that?

An Zhe was confused.

# 25

## “A RESPLENDENT MILKY WAY.”

AN ZHE helplessly watched his spore reach out its hyphae and touch Lu Feng through the glass. When Lu Feng's hand left, the hyphae even drooped, its appearance carrying a hint of loss.

Seeing his spore act this way, An Zhe felt a bit distressed as well, as if he had just personally experienced it. When Lu Feng lifted his hand, An Zhe didn't want him to get close to the spore, but when the man let go, An Zhe wanted him to stay a little longer.

In this brief second, the camera switched to a researcher in a white coat who said that the sample showed an unprecedented inertia against infection and mutation.

"After four months of analysis and research, the sample's extracts will not infect any organisms. Likewise, when we infected the sample with mutated organism extracts, we have not observed any changes whatsoever in its composition," the researcher said. "The Lighthouse believes this may be our breakthrough point to overcoming mutations."

An Zhe gripped the thermos handle. The human said that his spore was the breakthrough point to overcoming mutations, which meant that the spore would be under heavy protection.

Finally, the newscaster summarized the news in a very optimistic tone, said that the future of the base was bright, and thanked the researchers for their efforts.

After the news ended, the weather forecast followed. According to the Lighthouse's observations, within the next three days, the region where the base was located would welcome a substantial rise in temperature, and there

was a reminder to all areas—especially the Lighthouse's laboratories and the Garden of Eden's crop husbandry base—to respond to it.

An Zhe was not in the mood to continue listening. He left home and got onto a shuttle. Along the way, he pondered how exactly he should get close to his spore—firstly, he had to know the exact location of that laboratory, then observe the researchers' work patterns. Under normal circumstances, researchers wouldn't stay in the laboratory for all hours of the day. If he could enter the laboratory through the ventilation pipes when nobody was there, then think of a way to take the spore back into himself—

Then he could think of a way to leave the human base and return to the Abyss.

If the experimental sample was stolen, the humans would chase it to the end. Apart from escaping, he seemed to have no other options.

At that thought, An Zhe blankly turned his head and looked at this city with its lights blazing in the night through the shuttle's glass. The aurora had already risen, its green light fluctuating in the night sky and swiftly changing, just like the flow of time.

The announcement sounded. He had reached the Twin Towers.

An Zhe got off, holding the thermos in his arms, then swiped Lu Feng's ID card to open the door, entered the hall, and went upstairs. In the silver corridor, every laboratory was brightly lit. Various instruments emitted sounds at various rates, the back-and-forth rising and falling. He found the doctor's laboratory, but only Dr. Ji and his assistant were inside.

"You've come." The doctor lifted his head and looked at An Zhe. "Lu Feng will be back later."

"All right." An Zhe put the thermos on the workbench, unscrewed it open, and filled a bowl for the doctor. The insulation device's function was very good. The soup was boiling hot, and the rich fragrance wafted out along with the rising steam, filling the laboratory.

"My God." The doctor picked up the tableware An Zhe handed over. "You're wonderful."

An Zhe smiled.

"You aren't eating?" the doctor asked.

"I'll wait for him to come back," An Zhe replied.

The doctor clicked his tongue.

"I'm not waiting for him," the doctor said, then looked at the assistant. "Continue rolling the clip."

The assistant replied, "All right."

An Zhe looked at the computer interface in front of the doctor. The window in the very center was playing footage of Si Nan. Beneath this window was another window that was partially covered, but a mailing list was visible. The doctor had sent one email each to the recipients "Underground City" and "Research Institute".

His gaze turned back to the Si Nan in the footage, the gray bee. Lily was aimlessly chatting with him, and in the previous second, she was even saying, "Will you have honey?" which was promptly followed by "Is it more fun to be a person or a bee?"

He said, "It's gotten bigger."

Moreover, it was a very easily-detectable increase in size.

The doctor ate a piece of chicken and narrowed his eyes as he looked at the screen. "Indeed."

The assistant chimed in, "An increase of ten kilograms."

"What has it eaten?" the doctor asked.

"It has taken no sustenance," the assistant replied.

The doctor said, "It's like this yet again."

"I shouldn't have considered this question while eating," he said. "I was very happy."

An Zhe asked him, "What's the matter?"

"The change and growth of xenogenics not only violates the existing definition

of biology, but also has always challenged the law of conservation of energy." The doctor looked at Si Nan. "Organisms take in energy from the outside world and convert it into the self. But when humans change into xenogenics, their bodies may grow tenfold in size, and the muscle mass is also many times higher than that of humans. Where does that energy come from? As Petri dishes, human flesh can't provide that much. They're practically made out of thin air."

An Zhe said nothing. He didn't have this knowledge, but the creatures in the Abyss were indeed all very massive.

"Never mind," the doctor said with a sigh. "The complete failure of our knowledge framework isn't something recent."

He continued devouring the bowl of delicious mushroom soup, but his gaze was still fixed on the screen.

When he was almost done drinking, An Zhe asked, "Do you want more?"

The doctor didn't reply. An Zhe looked at his eyes and discovered that he was staring relentlessly at the screen.

"Replay it," he said.

The assistant replayed the video from one minute prior.

Lily, already worn out from talking, was leaning against the glass wall. "Don't bump into the wall anymore, it hurts so much."

Then she added, "Although it's very tiring to constantly talk, the Lighthouse is more fun than the Garden of Eden."

Right at that moment, Si Nan recovered his lucidity for a brief spell, and his fluff-and spine-covered mouthparts gently tapped on the glass.

"You're awake," Lily said.

The gently-trembling mouthparts continued tapping a few more times.

The doctor frowned.

"Half speed, play it again."

The frame was enlarged and the speed was reduced, focusing on the bee's movements as it tapped the glass.

"The intervals of the first and second taps are the same, tapping again after a long pause, and then another long pause." The doctor took out a notebook and swiftly made marks with a ballpoint pen. "This time after the pause, there were three consecutive taps with the same interval."

As he spoke, he jotted down on the paper the numbers 2, 1, and 3.

After the segment of footage finished playing, the doctor said, "The next recorded segment of when he was lucid."

The assistant began adjusting the video timing. He looked like he was the doctor's student. "Are you suspecting that he's transmitting a message via the tapping frequency?"

The doctor said, "This is absolutely not normal... but he's just a six-year-old child."

He looked at An Zhe. "What do you cover in your mathematics and logic classes?"

An Zhe said, "Arithmetic, geometry, and reasoning."

"Will you tell them stories outside the classes?" the doctor asked. "Such as about radio code and such."

"That's not right," he then said. "He hasn't entered Class A, so he wouldn't have such a high IQ."

An Zhe said, "He got full scores on his tests. Not being able to enter Class A was because of psychological factors."

The doctor nodded to indicate that he understood and began watching the next video. In this segment of footage, the period Si Nan was lucid for was very short. He swiftly tapped twice, the interval different than before.

The doctor drew two very closely-spaced dots on the paper. "Next segment."

In the next segment, within the same span of time, Si Nan tapped the wall seven times.

Then the next segment—in this recorded segment, he was lucid for a full five seconds. In the first half of the recording, his behavior was surprisingly consistent with the first segment of footage. Two taps, one tap, three taps.

After completing the third set of taps, he paused for a long span of time, then swiftly tapped twice immediately afterwards. This segment of footage was like an amalgam of the first and second segments.

The doctor took notes in his notebook, and the videos continued to play. In the fifth segment of footage, he once again evenly tapped seven times in a row. After that, in all the lucid fragments, his tapping maintained this repetition until five o'clock rolled around and Lily was taken back by the Garden of Eden's staff.

The doctor recorded a string of numbers in his notebook.

2, 1, 3, 1, 1, 7, 2, 1, 3, 1, 1, 7, 2……

The assistant said, "Do you want to get someone well-versed in mathematics to come and decode it?"

"No need," the doctor said. "The message he wants to convey is very short, so it won't be difficult... Let me think."

An Zhe frowned as he looked at the string of numbers. Humans communicated through language, so he didn't know how numbers were to assume the function of transmitting messages, unless these numbers implied characters.

"2, 1, 3..." The doctor's deeply-furrowed brows seemed to relax a bit.

An Zhe hesitated for a while before saying, "Is it B, A, C?"

"The alphabet." The doctor scribbled down the letters 'bac' on a page. An Zhe looked at the recording from before. After 2, 1, and 3, Si Nan knocked twice in a row, so it should have been 'bacaa'. The sixth knock consisted of seven hits, and the number 7 corresponded to the letter 'g'.

In accordance with An Zhe's thinking, the doctor wrote down the six letters 'bacaag' but then underlined the consecutive 'a's.

The assistant said, "The interval between these two knocks is very short. It's a different expression of language."

"Eleven," the doctor suddenly said. "Two short knocks don't represent two separate 1s but rather the double digit 11."

The letter corresponding to 11 was 'k', so that string of letters became 'backg'.

The doctor asked, "How was his English?"

"Full marks as well," An Zhe said.

Foreign languages accounted for nearly half of the content in the language and literature courses. If these children were to enter the Lighthouse after growing up, consulting the documents of human civilization would require very high levels of linguistic competence.

"Back." The doctor uttered one word, then moved the letter 'g' up to the very front and narrowed his eyes. "'Go back', a very concise expression. In other languages, it wouldn't be so short. Furthermore..."

The assistant said, "Furthermore, it's within the scope of Lily's understanding. If she is able to notice, she will understand it."

The doctor nodded. "He wanted to make her go back. What does this mean?"

The videos continued to play. Lily said listlessly to Si Nan, who was throwing himself and flying around wildly, "The doctor said that it's very dangerous in the base now. You have to help us or everyone will change into monsters. It's very scary."

The assistant said, "If they are very good friends, that means the Garden of Eden is a safe place, and he knows or predicts that the outside world is very dangerous, so he wants her to go back."

"But it was in precisely the Garden of Eden that this boy was infected and turned into a xenogenic." The doctor thought for a while. "Could he be saying that the first xenogenic appeared in the Garden of Eden, and then the Trial Court's investigation center was transferred there, so it is a feint strategy instead?"

"Do you want to hold a meeting and discuss it?" the assistant asked.

The doctor glanced at the laboratory door. "How come Lu Feng still hasn't returned yet?"

He picked up the communicator and dialed, but a busy tone came from the other side. The assistant said, "Perhaps he entered the signal-jammed laboratory."

An Zhe astutely picked up on the opportunity and seized the opportunity to ask, "What did he go to do?"

"The same project from this afternoon," the doctor said. "They believe the Colonel can advance the growth of a sample, so they insisted that he go over there and babysit."

An Zhe said without hesitation, "I can go find him."

Smiling, the doctor looked at him. "You two have a really good relationship. That's fine too. Bring him back and have dinner while you're at it," the doctor said. "That laboratory's level is very high, as it's combined between the military and the Lighthouse. Take the elevator up to the thirteenth floor, cross the corridor bridge, and look for room D1344."

"All right," An Zhe replied.

He turned and left the laboratory—it was obvious that Lu Feng was with his spore again now, and probably this person was somewhere very close to the glass tank or once again holding out his hand to play games of touch with the spore. He didn't know why this sort of thing would happen, but he absolutely didn't believe the "Lu Feng advances the spore's growth" nonsense. When the spore was taken away, it hadn't yet reached the point of maturity where it could grow by itself. It would only grow when it was either within his body or next to him.

The elevator arrived, and inside were two people. They were researchers, and they were discussing the recent weather.

"A rise in temperature after high winds. The recent weather has been very extreme."

"Summer has come, so it counts as normal. Compared to a rise in temperature, the base is more afraid of drops in temperature."

"That's true."

"But I heard this is because of fluctuations in the magnetic field's strength."

"Is it a problem with the artificial magnetic pole?"

"The neighboring laboratory observed several abnormal fluctuations. Our East

Pole has no problems, so everyone believes that the frequency of the West Pole is being manually adjusted."

"Wow." The researcher smiled. "Has there been new progress in the Underground City Base's technology?"

"I'm guessing so, otherwise nobody would dare to touch the magnetic pole. They've already contacted the United Front Center, applying to open strong frequency short-wave communication and communicate with the Underground City Base."

"Everything is changing for the better."

Everything was indeed changing for the better, for he was about to see his spore—the elevator door opened, and An Zhe walked out.

The corridor bridge connecting the buildings of the Lighthouse and the United Front Center was very wide, and both sides were transparent, being made from glass or some other material.

Laboratory D1344 was very easy to find. He knocked on the door.

A female voice said, "Please enter."

As soon as An Zhe entered, he saw the glass tank in the center. It was identical to the one on the news, and that small white mass—

Next to the little white mass was Lu Feng in his black uniform. He had put his fingers on the tank, and the spore was once again bobbing towards him—then this person withdrew his finger and put it at a different place much farther away.

Then the spore slowly changed direction, going to a new place.

When it almost caught up, Lu Feng changed places again, deliberately not allowing it to touch.

When An Zhe saw this, he was so angry he almost forgot to breathe—whereas Lu Feng's expression looked impassive when he was in fact completely joyful. He seemed to be finding pleasure in bullying and playing with the spore.

At that very moment, Lu Feng lifted his head and looked over at An Zhe, eyebrows raised.

An Zhe looked around. With sophisticated instruments and surveillance equipment as well as a dozen or so researchers, he could only look at his spore from afar.

No, he could do one other thing, which was to take away this person who bullied his spore.

He walked over to the tank, but hatefully, the spore didn't approach him, but rather continued to linger around Lu Feng.

Lu Feng's tone was very light. "What is it?"

An Zhe said in a very unkind tone, "You should go back and eat."

There seemed to be a trace of a smile in the gaze Lu Feng looked at him with. Unexpectedly, playing with the spore made the man this happy.

Lu Feng walked over to him, then said to a researcher, "I'm leaving."

The researcher replied, "Please be sure to come tomorrow as well."

An Zhe gritted his teeth as he took one last look at the little spore floating helplessly in the nutrient solution, and the laboratory door mercilessly shut right in front of him.

He and Lu Feng walked through the corridor.

He said, "Are you coming here tomorrow too?"

"Mm-hm."

"Were you playing with the sample?"

"I'm cooperating with a study."

An Zhe wouldn't believe his blatant lies. He didn't say anything, and they turned around a corner and arrived at the corridor bridge leading to the Lighthouse. On either side was the city's night sky and the aurora on the horizon.

But Lu Feng seemed to have sensed his mood. "You're unhappy?"

An Zhe said nothing.

Lu Feng stopped walking and looked at him.

An Zhe turned to look at the aurora outside, and the entire world seemed to go quiet for a second.

Right at that moment—

An Zhe's pupils sharply contracted!

A sharp pain traveled through his entire body. The light was too strong, so he unconsciously shut his eyes. Just a moment ago, the aurora that filled the sky released a burst of light that was as bright as day, cleaving the sky like a flash of green lightning.

Lu Feng grabbed his shoulder and yanked him down, pressing him to the ground, and then the two of them rolled over once. All of it happened within tenths of a second.

An Zhe wasn't hurt by the impact, for Lu Feng had protected him with his arms. He opened his eyes and discovered that he had been brought back into the corridor.

Lu Feng pulled him up.

The inside of An Zhe's head buzzed. He looked at the outside of the corridor bridge and was stupefied.

The aurora was disappearing—all of it.

After the short-lived burst just now, it was like an ebb tide disappearing in the night sky. The color faded within ten short seconds, then completely disappeared.

A resplendent Milky Way spanned the indigo night sky.

He had never seen such a sight before. Then his gaze lowered. The entire human city's lights were blinking wildly, complementing the Milky Way.

The corridor lights flickered madly, and chaotic sounds came from the laboratories as several researchers ran out.

Lu Feng pulled An Zhe back to a place where the outside wasn't visible, then asked grimly to a researcher hurrying past, "What happened to the magnetic field?"

# 26

## “WHEN THE AURORA LIGHTS UP AGAIN, THE COLONEL WILL RETURN.”

### "THE EMERGENCY POWER HAS BEEN ACTIVATED."

"The emergency internal communications channel has been activated."

"The emergency defenses have been activated."

"The ventilation system has been activated."

"The radiation defense windows have descended."

"All departments, please stand by."

In the corridor, amidst the chaotic footsteps and shouting, the broadcast system was turned on. It was no longer a robotic voice, but rather a human female one.

In the wake of the voice, muffled "clunk-clunk" sounds came continually from all directions. An Zhe looked at the connecting corridor once again. Ice-cold steel curtains had dropped abruptly, blocking all windows. It looked very thick—he recalled how Poet had said that once the magnetic field disappeared, the radiation and solar wind from the cosmos would immediately attack the earth's surface.

Thus, he knew that when Lu Feng pulled him away from the corridor just now, it was to leave the possible scope of the cosmic radiation—and as the construction from the era in which human science and technology were at their peaks, the thickness and special materials of the Main City's walls were able to defend against the radiation's assault.

After the lights of the United Front Center's building flickered madly, they lit steadily again, but the glow was now much weaker than before, displaying a feeble paleness.

The sound of a researcher dialing a number on his communicator came from the closest laboratory. He was too anxious, so his voice was very loud; it could be heard throughout the entire corridor.

"D1342 requesting an increase in power supply! The instruments cannot stop!"

A voice came from another laboratory as well. "D1343 requesting emergency power, otherwise valuable samples will be inactivated."

Who would answer their requests and whether or not they would be fulfilled, An Zhe didn't know. He looked in the direction of D1344 and unconsciously grabbed the edge of Lu Feng's sleeve.

Lu Feng looked down at him and said, "It's fine."

An Zhe nodded.

The announcements continued broadcasting.

"Would the persons in charge of the Equipment Center, City Defense Agency, Emergency Response Department, and Logistics Division please proceed to Conference Room 1 on the seventeenth floor of the United Front. Please refrain from taking the elevators and use the passages to go upstairs and downstairs."

"Requesting the Lighthouse's Magnetic Field Observation Office to immediately contact the United Front Center."

"Requesting the Lighthouse's Magnetic Field Observation Office to immediately contact the United Front Center."

The announcement voice was turned up to the maximum volume, and the echoes reverberated in the corridor.

An Zhe looked at Lu Feng. "Are we going back to the Lighthouse?"

"I'll wait for orders." Lu Feng looked at the far end of the corridor, seeming to be contemplating something, then turned his gaze back to An Zhe. "Don't run around. Stick with me."

An Zhe said, "Okay."

Then the announcement said, "Would the persons in charge of the Command

Post, Joint Staff Department, Trial Court, and Combat Center please proceed to the communication center on the fourteenth floor of the United Front. Please refrain from taking the elevators and use the passages to go upstairs and downstairs."

As An Zhe followed Lu Feng through the communication center's entrance, he heard voices inside.

"Northern Base to Underground City Base, please respond."

"Northern Base to Underground City Base, please respond."

"Northern Base to Underground City Base, please respond."

The dispatcher, wearing a pair of massive black headphones, was speaking. In front of him, more than a dozen display screens were spread out, upon which curves and parameters jumped.

But in this communication channel, only he was talking. From the other side came nothing but empty electrical noises.

At the center of the hall was a middle-aged man in a black military uniform. His facial features were cold and expression was dignified, and the symbol on his epaulettes indicated that he was a lieutenant general in the military.

Upon seeing Lu Feng enter, he gave a nod in their direction. "You've come."

There were some other soldiers who entered before and after Lu Feng. Though their military ranks and the departments they belonged to differed, their expressions were identically cold and solemn.

The communication hall had chairs, so they dispersed and sat down. An Zhe quietly sat next to Lu Feng.

The lieutenant general answered a communication, and after a short thirty seconds, he hung up and said to the officers in the hall, "That was a notice from the Lighthouse's Magnetic Field Observation Office. Five minutes ago, the strength of the global magnetic field dropped to zero, but there were no abnormalities in the East Pole we are protecting.

"It's very clear that there was a major failure of the West Pole on the other side."

An Zhe listened to the lieutenant general's words. He knew the meaning the magnetic poles had to humans.

The magnetic field protected everything on Earth. Once it was lost, cosmic radiation and solar winds would enter without resistance. In the short term, it would bring severe drought to the entire world, and exposed humans would receive radiation, contract various malignant diseases, and then die or mutate. And if there was a long-term lack of protection from the magnetic field, the entire planet's atmosphere would be dispersed by the solar winds, and then the world would turn into a desert of death.

And of the two magnetic poles humans made, one was in the Northern Base and the other was in the Underground City Base. The two of them jointly maintained a weak magnetic field that covered the whole world and were indivisible. As soon as something went wrong with one of them, the other one would lose its function as well.

There was no need for unnecessary communication between the two of them, either. Every night, the aurora appearing in the sky would tell the other, we still exist and are still safe.

Now the aurora was gone.

Just then, the worker troubleshooting the equipment nearby said, "Reporting. The artificial magnetic field has disappeared, so the ionosphere is in chaos and short-wave communication is not feasible."

The lieutenant general frowned deeply. After three seconds of silence, he said, "At all costs, open the long-wave communication."

"Yes sir!"

In the era in which humans lost satellites and telecommunication, long-distance communication had become incomparably difficult, and only by using radio—short-wave radio communication through the atmosphere's ionosphere—could signals be transmitted. But the artificial magnetic field was weaker than the original geomagnetic field, after all. Communication was already very unstable, and now that the magnetic field completely disappeared and the ionosphere had become completely disordered, communication was even more difficult.

Long-wave communication was different. It was ground-based, using the earth and sea water as its medium. It was stable and reliable, but the activation cost was high, and only the most ancient code could be used to transmit messages.

It was also unidirectional, which meant that unless the other party also happened to activate long-wave communication at the same time, there would be no way to communicate.

The message was transmitted layer by layer, and at last, the communication center received a feedback message that the long-wave communication device had been activated.

The operator picked up the device. Codes with varying spacing and lengths made monotonous "beeps" as they were entered into the system in order, then uploaded to the communication channel.

"Northern Base to Underground City Base, please respond."

A long silence.

"The Underground City Base has the most perfect construction amongst the four human bases, so it's very difficult to imagine that it would encounter a catastrophe," an officer said. "If only it were just an equipment failure."

Just as he finished speaking, a piercing electrical noise suddenly came from the receiver!

With rustling sounds and scratching sounds, it was as chaotic as though it was coming from the boundless universe, yet it also resembled the dying breaths of a huge monster.

Everyone in the room stopped breathing until twenty-odd seconds had passed.

"Beep."

"Beep beep."

"Beep, beep—"

The message sounded, and the operator's entire body trembled. He practically threw himself onto the workbench and swiftly took notes.

Five minutes later, the lieutenant general asked, "What did they say?"

The operator's face was pale and lips were trembling. He looked at the paper with the signal notes and said, "They said... The Underground City Base... suffered an invasion of united xenogenics and suffered heavy losses. They're currently... resisting, and currently repairing the magnetic pole."

"The ammunition reserves are at less than one-fifth... Their thermonuclear weapon reserves are exhausted, and they have a shortage of soldiers. Requesting..." He gritted his teeth. "Requesting support."

Silence.

Silence frequently meant facing a crucial choice.

To rescue, or not to rescue.

"Is it possible to still contact the Underground City?" A voice broke the silence.

"There are no more responses."

"The meeting in Conference Room 1 has ended. With existing resources, if guaranteeing the entire city's survival, we can hold out for three to ten days."

"And if not guaranteeing the entire city's survival?"

"If only guaranteeing the Twin Towers and Garden of Eden's resource supplies, we can hold out for fifteen to thirty days regardless of climate factors."

"Under extreme circumstances, if core personnel are transferred to the Garden of Eden's underground shelter, we can consider long-term survival."

"There's still a little hope."

Another beat of silence.

At last, someone said, "Do we save them or not?"

The lieutenant general looked around the room. After hearing the announcement to convene the meetings, An Zhe knew that the room was now filled with the highest-ranked officers from the Command Post, Staff Department, and Combat Center. Unlike the logistics and city defense

personnel who were meeting in Conference Room 1, they all had to go to the frontlines.

It was just that even An Zhe knew how dangerous of a place the frontlines would be this time. What was it that could render the most perfectly-equipped human base and even the artificial magnetic pole unable to hold fast?

Perhaps by the time reinforcements arrived, it would have already become a dead city. Perhaps before they even reached their destination, the troops would crash their planes in the storm and fall to the earth or into the Pacific Ocean. Or perhaps after the Northern Base used its own armament reserves to help the Underground City Base, the next time xenogenics united to attack this place, it would've lost its ability to resist.

In the long silence, An Zhe heard Lu Feng say from next to him, "I'll go."

The lieutenant general looked at him for a long time.

"You're the best candidate," he said.

An Zhe looked at Lu Feng. He knew why the lieutenant general said Lu Feng was the best candidate.

In different regions on a continent, there were great differences between monsters. The Northern Base and Underground City Base were separated by the entire Pacific Ocean, so the monsters' habits and methods of fighting them may be entirely unknown.

Who could adapt the best to this kind of unknown?

Someone who often went into the Abyss. The monsters of the Abyss were both chaotic and frenzied, with practically all kinds of mutation types present.

Then another officer said, "I'm good at directing large-scale joint operations. I apply to go."

"AR137's captain," Lu Feng said. "Dispatcher, please inquire if he will voluntarily go."

"Mr. Hubbard agreed to go."

The meeting adjourned, and upon leaving, the lieutenant general called Lu Feng back.

"Who will take on the Trial Court's work?"

"My adjutant."

"Is he capable?"

"Yes."

After exiting, Seraing walked over. The Trial Court's work area was in this exact building. He said in a low voice, "Colonel."

Lu Feng gave a flat response.

In the dim lighting, the rims of Seraing's eyes were slightly red. Lu Feng left, for he still had much to prepare.

Seraing had An Zhe stay in the Trial Court's office to rest. Midway there, An Zhe made an excuse to go out and climbed up to the thirteenth floor. The entrance to D1344 was still lit up, and inside were the sounds of researchers talking. They said there was no time left—precisely because there was no time left, they had to seize every moment in completing all their research. An Zhe lowered his head. His body as a mushroom was too fragile and soft, so he couldn't rashly charge in after all. He returned to the main hall on the first floor.

In the main hall, people came and went, and Seraing came to his side. Saying nothing, An Zhe quietly watched everything happen. The throngs of people that were busy and moving back and forth, the continually-playing announcements, the flashing lights and intermittent electricity supply. All of this happened very quickly. The fate of humankind was as changeable as the aurora in the sky.

At 11 p.m., the Equipment Center reported that their tasks were completed.

At midnight, the Logistics Division reported that their tasks were completed.

At 1 a.m., the PL1109 maintenance was completed, and the fighter plane formation set out.

Muffled rumbling came from afar. The ground command needed a wide field of vision, so the isolation walls rose, and scorching radiation and gusts of wind burst forth. Everyone backed up to the safe area in the depths of the main hall. A row of lights lit up in the distance, and An Zhe strove to look in that direction. Wing and nose lights delineated the fighter planes' massive contours. Three

PL1109 fighter planes, along with an entire flight formation, smoothly traveled over.

PL1109—An Zhe knew it. The masterpiece of human science and technology, it had a hull that blocked out all radiation and an independent navigation system that needed no guidance from the magnetic field. Humans had long ago predicted and prepared for the coming Era of Calamity, it was just that nobody knew exactly what the effects of these predictions and preparations would be.

And he also finally knew why the base's roads were all made to be so smooth, sturdy, and wide. The military base that was tightly linked to the city center, the massive buffer strips, the tarmacs and runways that were everywhere to be seen... The humans of a hundred years ago gave everything they had to build them. All of this was not because of beauty or regularity, but because everything about this human base's Main City was for responding to possible war.

Another gate opened, and a few officers in black combat uniforms walked out.

Amidst the handful of people, An Zhe saw Lu Feng with only a glance—this person's figure was imposing and upright, his figure neat and tidy. Unlike the lofty grace and coldness of the Trial Court's uniform, although the shape was similar, the combat uniform seemed more casual, which magnified his bastardly characteristic.

But tonight, An Zhe had no plans to call him a bastard. Lu Feng was a very good human.

Lu Feng walked over towards him, his original uniform coat draped over the crook of his arm, and Seraing accepted it.

"Follow Seraing. Don't run around," Lu Feng said as he looked at An Zhe.

Then he said to Seraing, "Keep an eye on him."

Clearly it was a very simple handful of words, but An Zhe felt that he heard a threat from them, as if once he ran around, he would suffer punishment.

Frowning, he looked up at this man.

Lu Feng reached out and tousled An Zhe's hair.

His gaze wasn't as cold or malicious as usual; An Zhe even thought that it was a bit gentle.

He’d had made up his mind to go to the Underground City Base on the other side of the world. An Zhe felt that he ought to say something, such as telling him to stay safe or to take care of himself... Those sorts of things.

He opened his mouth, then felt that the Colonel was probably accustomed to this kind of life. He seemed able to take care of everything, so there was no need to tell him.

In the end, An Zhe only said, "... I made mushroom soup tonight."

No matter how good the thermos was, having left it until now, it wouldn't be as tasty as when it was piping hot.

There was a slight smile in Lu Feng's eyes.

"Thank you," he said. "Make it for me again when I return."

That pair of eyes—those eyes with the same color as firefly glow in the deepest parts of the jungle—looked at An Zhe.

He seemed to lean down slightly, and for a moment, An Zhe felt that Lu Feng wanted to get close to him, but that feeling was fleeting.

"I may not be able to return," Lu Feng said, his voice slightly hoarse. "Take care of yourself."

An Zhe responded with an affirmative sound. He watched Lu Feng turn around and leave without looking back, walking into the makeshift boarding bridge.

How many times had he now watched Lu Feng's figure depart? He couldn't remember. He didn't know why this person was always able to constantly move forward. He could shoot his compatriots without the slightest hesitation and also sacrifice his own life at any given moment.

Outside, a sandstorm arrived with the great winds, and the night covered them, making the flying dust and grit seem like a boundless night fog—in precisely this boundless darkness and moonlight, the engines buzzed to life, and

the pitch-black PL1109 fighter plane smoothly took off.

Its spread wings were like a massive bird. In An Zhe's sight, the further and higher it got, the smaller it became, turning into a black speck that was difficult to see before finally disappearing into the resplendent Milky Way that spanned across the skies.

There was a distant roar, which was a sonic boom, as the fighter planes accelerated again.

An Zhe couldn't find it at all anymore.

Everyone looked up at the boundless night sky. Within the hall, there was a respectful silence, and only after a long while did the people disperse.

An Zhe still stood there, and soft footsteps came from behind him. It was Seraing.

"Sometimes I'll think, why did the Colonel choose me as his successor? What kind of characteristics and guidelines does he think an Arbiter should have?" Seraing said. "Now I think, contrary to what people believe, it's not coldness, but mercy."

"Humankind's interests take precedence over all else. It's not kindness to a single person, it's kindness to the fate of all of humankind. This is the source of unwavering conviction." Seraing's voice was very soft and slightly raspy. "I sincerely hope that the people a hundred years from now won't have to face everything we are currently facing, if humans still exist at that time."

An Zhe said nothing. He lifted his head to look at the star-studded night sky, a boundless resplendent sea.

Seraing draped the military coat over him.

"When the aurora lights up again, the Colonel will return."

# 27

## “THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOU TWO IS VERY COMPLICATED.”

## "ALTHOUGH WRONG, IT IS STILL CORRECT."

On the walls of the corridor connecting the work hall of the Trial Court and the training area, one side had "Humankind's interests take precedence over all else" while the other side had this sentence written.

Beneath the sentence was a row of silver picture frames. The first picture frame was blank, but further along, the second picture frame held a black-and-white photo depicting an officer around thirty years old with handsome and symmetrical features. He was dressed in the Arbiter's uniform, and the dates of his birth and death were engraved upon the wall beneath the picture frame. He died seven years prior, at the age of thirty-six.

At the next picture frame, there was also a black-and-white photo with dates of birth and death. An Zhe walked forward, and the next photo and birth and death dates were similar. The years in which they lived gradually went back in time. Thus, An Zhe knew that these were photos taken to commemorate successive Arbiters, and the blank picture frame on the very end was undoubtedly left for Lu Feng.

With that thought, An Zhe's pace slowed slightly, and an indescribable weight pressed down upon his heart. If it was possible, he hoped that Lu Feng's photo wouldn't be hung up so soon—just like how tonight, the moment Lu Feng boarded the plane, he hoped that this person could remain here in a safe place.

But Lu Feng had his own choices to make.

Following Seraing, he continued walking forward, and at the end of the photo gallery, a strange spectacle appeared.

On the light gray wall, there was a rectangular area that was whiter, the same size as a picture frame. There were nail holes at the four corners of the white area. It looked like this place also had a picture frame once, but it had been taken down. And below it, the place that originally was engraved with the name and birth and death dates had also been scraped off, leaving behind only a few mottled marks. An Zhe tried to make it out, but he could only see that it was a string of letters beginning with a capital P.

Seeing that he had stopped here, Seraing explained, "It's said that this was the first Arbiter and the person who proposed the 'Arbiter's Code' and established the Trial system."

An Zhe asked, "Was his photo taken down?"

"Mm-hm," Seraing said. "In the end, he questioned the rationality of the Arbiter system and betrayed the base."

An Zhe nodded. Human minds were difficult to figure out. He didn't inquire more deeply.

Seraing got him settled in a break room. The geomagnetic field had disappeared, and everything had become chaotic. The Logistics Division and Emergency Response Department were presumably in great tumult, and the base's other residents were panicking, only able to sleep and wait for the military's upcoming shelter arrangements.

There were numerous footsteps upstairs. Next door, Seraing was contacting someone, seeming to be arranging the Trial Court's follow-up work.

In the pitch-black room, the outside wasn't visible. An Zhe could only hear his own heartbeat. Strangely, as if having some odd feeling, he lifted his head and looked into the depths of the darkness. That feeling was strange to describe—he seemed to have felt some massive wave. He, Seraing, everyone, the entire human base, along with everything in this world were all trivial parts of that indescribable wave, trembling and changing in its wake and generating minute ripples. In the younglings' textbook, there was a saying called "the current of fate", and he thought it was very fitting. The only part that wasn't fitting was that the wave seemed to exist around the entire world and wasn't an empty metaphor or imagining.

Right at that moment, his communicator rang. It was a call from the doctor.

The doctor asked him, "Lu Feng has taken off. Where are you?"

An Zhe truthfully told him.

"As long as you're safe," the doctor said. "I just finished the Lighthouse's emergency meeting, so now I'll be heading back to the laboratory to rest for a night. You get some good rest as well."

"Okay," An Zhe replied.

The doctor seemed to be climbing a set of stairs. Only after a while had passed did he say, "I was thinking about Si Nan's behavior this morning. He warned Lily to go back to the Garden of Eden. Could it be that he predicted the disappearance of the magnetic field? Different species have different sensory organs, and some organisms are sensitive to magnetic fields."

An Zhe said, "Perhaps."

After some thought, he said, "But it's so far."

Of course he knew every single species was different. In the Abyss, some monsters had extremely keen hearing, and some could detect the scent of prey from thousands of kilometers away. But if they were to say Si Nan sensed the xenogenic invasion of the Underground City Base all the way on the other side of the globe from the Northern Base, it seemed a bit unreasonable, for xenogenics did not have long-wave communication technology.

The doctor did not respond to him. From the other side there only came uneven breaths, and An Zhe thought that perhaps he was walking.

But three minutes later, the doctor still did not respond. There was only the sound of his breaths speeding up. With this sound playing in the darkness, An Zhe felt an inexplicable uneasiness.

"Doctor?" An Zhe called out.

Still no response.

He frowned. Right at that moment, he heard the doctor quickly say from the other end, "Have Seraing pick up."

An Zhe swiftly walked out of the break room. Seraing accepted the communicator, and after calling out "Doctor", he frowned deeply and swiftly said, "I'll be right over."

Then he immediately picked up the gun on the table, called a few men, and strode out!

An Zhe took a look at the direction he went in and chose to follow. But their speed was too quick, and his own speed climbing the stairs was too slow, so he was a step behind.

By the time he arrived in the corridor where the doctor's laboratory was, he heard a gunshot from the depths, immediately followed by the sound of a body falling to the ground.

The doctor was standing in the middle of the corridor, and An Zhe walked over to him.

"I... I saw that his walking posture wasn't quite right from far off." The doctor gasped for breath, his pupils dilated and face pallid, the very picture of someone who was badly shaken. An Zhe looked forward and saw Seraing put away his gun. The person who fell to the ground was the doctor's assistant. Just this afternoon, he had been working with the doctor, helping him repeatedly check the footage of Si Nan.

Seraing said to the doctor, "Infection confirmed. Was it exposure to an experiment?"

Infection?

An Zhe promptly thought of this place's sole source of infection, Si Nan.

"Impossible," the doctor said. "He didn't have the authority to open the glass cover, so he couldn't come into contact with the xenogenic."

Seraing said, "I'll go inside and take a look."

"Don't." The doctor abruptly raised his voice. "Don't go over there."

Seraing stopped walking and looked at the doctor.

"Do you remember how I once said if there was a day where we wouldn't need to come into contact with xenogenics at all to be infected?" The doctor's

voice shook. "It's too abnormal... We must prepare for the worst."

Seraing frowned. "How will you prove your view?"

"There's no way to prove it." The doctor shook his head. "However, you all also know that after injecting a monster's interstitial fluid into the test animal's tail, genetic changes can be observed in the animal's head at the same time. Those interstitial fluids haven't participated in body fluid circulation at all, yet the genes throughout the animal's body have already changed. Since even this kind of thing can happen, then why can't infection occur even without coming into contact with a monster?"

With those words, a shudder ran through his body.

"Seraing," he said, his voice completely hoarse, "do-downstairs are all live xenogenic samples, and there are at least a hundred staff members there."

Seraing's expression was heavy. "I'll go down right away."

"Protect yourself," the doctor said. "Within the effective range, the further away you can stay from all the living things there, the better."

He didn't say xenogenics, nor did he say humans, but rather "living things".

Seraing nodded. With speedy movements, they dispersed downstairs.

In the silent corridor, only An Zhe and the doctor remained.

Seeming to have lost his strength, the doctor leaned against the ice-cold wall, and An Zhe supported him.

After a silence, the doctor suddenly spoke.

"You aren't afraid?"

He shook his head.

The doctor looked at him.

"On you, there seems to be a kind of... something that people of this era don't have." the doctor said.

Saying nothing, An Zhe quietly listened to him continue.

His gaze lingered for a long time on An Zhe, and then he took a soft breath,

lips trembling slightly, as if he obtained some extraordinary inspiration. Then he said, "You're so innocent... that it's like you're a bystander."

He said, "Everyone lives in terror, but you're very calm, standing out from everyone else."

With those words, he seemed to smile. "I know why Lu Feng likes being with you."

An Zhe looked at the doctor. The doctor's youthful face showed a faint haggardness. He seemed to be a bit tired. An Zhe asked, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Thank you." The doctor looked into his eyes, and there was a slight quiver at the end of his sentence. "Just... live safely, that's enough."

An Zhe thought for a while, then said, "I'll try my best."

He didn't say anything else. In the corridor, the doctor's words echoed as he talked to himself. "No physical contact, and no aerial transmission. Can such a thing truly happen?"

Nobody replied to him.

However, a clear gunshot came from downstairs.

Then there came a second sound.

A third sound.

The sounds didn't stop, reverberating for a long time in the building.

In the wake of one gunshot after another, the theoretical framework humans used to explain the world was declared to have utterly collapsed.

The doctor's hand clutched An Zhe's arm, and his fingers were trembling.

"... Why?"

---

The gunshots stopped, and a scattered few people walked upstairs, with Seraing bringing up the rear.

"These are the ones who haven't been infected?"

Seraing replied, "Yes."

An Zhe heard the doctor ask the survivors about their whereabouts today. There were no issues with eating, drinking, or breathing, for everything was uniformly supplied by the Lighthouse. Even the air was brought in by the ventilation system. If there was an issue with any one amongst these three things, the entire Lighthouse would fall. But they had one thing in common. During this period of time since the magnetic field disappeared, none of them had been in close contact with the experimental subjects. Some had been in the office sorting records the entire time, while some had gone to other floors to participate in meetings and just returned—such as Dr. Ji himself.

And the staff members who had been infected also had one thing in common. They were all people who had been in close contact with the xenogenics—though this kind of contact was not necessarily true contact, but rather spatial proximity with monsters or xenogenics. For example, one researcher's assistant had spent the entire afternoon in a small office immersed in writing code, adapting a certain data model, but he was still judged to have been genetically infected—the only suspicious thing was that two reptile monsters were being raised in the laboratory on the other side of the wall from him.

Seraing requested guidance from the military. Using the floor where the xenogenic research center was as the axis, closed-style checks had to be carried out on the three floors above and below, and all personnel were prohibited from entering.

"Water, food, and air may all be the sources of infection." In the Trial Court's break room, An Zhe and the doctor shared a room. The doctor said to himself while facing the white wall, "If only that was it, but it just isn't."

"Is it radiation?" he then said. "If every monster was a source of radiation, at the very beginning, the radiation was very weak, so only those who were heavily injured would get infected. Later, infection would happen with even minor wounds, and then the radiation strength gradually increased... So long as one stays near a monster, their genes will experience instantaneous change because of the radiation."

An Zhe thought that what he said made a lot of sense, but right away, he saw the doctor bury his face in his palm and take a deep breath, his bearing that of a man on the verge of a breakdown. "But our instruments cannot detect it."

An Zhe thought that the doctor was about to go mad. Putting himself in the doctor's shoes, he understood the source of his madness.

Regarding the research—the research of monsters—what made researchers suffer wasn't how complicated it was, how many resources it needed, or how dangerous it was, but rather that even now, they didn't know exactly what they were facing. Like a man walking in the dark, having lost even his last crutch, he knew that the cliff edge was not far away, but he didn't know exactly when he would lose his footing.

He saw the doctor slowly lift his head, his blue eyes slightly unfocused and the muscles in his face trembling. That was a kind of despairing dread and terror, as if he were facing some massive, frightening, and indescribable existence—in front of him was a blank white wall. The scariest thing in the world was the unknown.

An Zhe poured out a cup of water for him. The doctor drank it and forced a smile.

"Thank you," he said. "I don't know how many more days the base's water supply can last."

The doctor's words weren't wrong. From the night when the aurora disappeared, the entire base entered a state of emergency shelter. Outside was the solar wind and radiation, so nobody could leave the buildings, but the heat outside traveled in through the thick walls. The temperature indoors was at least 30 degrees Celsius, and there were no methods of temperature control. It was frighteningly dry, and electricity was only used to keep the basic equipment running. Every day at 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., the base would regularly distribute a piece of hardtack or a packet of nutrition tablets along with a bottle of drinking water.

Three days later, bottles of water were distributed only in the mornings.

And this was the Twin Towers, the place where the military command center and scientific researchers were. Sometimes, An Zhe would think, if the Twin

Towers' resource supply had already been reduced to this point, what would it be like in the ordinary residential buildings outside?

"The 1109 fighter planes need twelve hours to fly from the Northern Base to the Underground City base, and the return trip likewise needs twelve hours. A hundred and twenty hours have passed, and we still haven't received any news whatsoever," the doctor said to him while calculating some complicated formulas with paper and pen. "Emotionally I believe in Lu Feng, but now we must prepare for the worst."

Five days later, the nutrition tablets were gone as well.

The elevators stopped. An Zhe quietly slipped out of the Trial Court, and when he climbed up the stairs, he encountered at least three couples kissing in various corners—perhaps they weren't lovers either, but at least they were difficult to tear apart now.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil."

"For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

"Certainly goodness and faithfulness will follow me all the days of my life."

"And my dwelling will be in the house of the Lord forever."

On the thirteenth floor, he passed a meeting room inside which over a dozen white military officers and researchers had gathered and were reciting the Bible. Inside, at least half of them had tissues stuffed up their nostrils, for the high temperature and dryness made humans get nosebleeds very easily.

Actually, high temperatures and dryness were even more unsuitable for a mushroom's survival. These days, An Zhe hadn't ever slept well. Sometimes he would feel himself bobbing up and down in the current of fate, and sometimes he would feel like he was being laid out in the sun, about to be baked dry. It was difficult to wake up, and he would also feel very hungry.

But he could wait, for it didn't matter. Just this morning, the doctor had said to him, "Although the situation is becoming more and more dire, you seem to be becoming more and more calm."

An Zhe was indeed not terrified. He was a calm mushroom. These past five days, he quietly stayed in the Twin Towers, going in and out with the doctor and Seraing, so many people got accustomed to the sight of him.

He observed the dim red light that indicated the operational status of the surveillance cameras and pricked up his ears to listen to each announcement.

Just yesterday, that light dimmed.

And just this morning, the doctor was informed that because of insufficient energy, all research activities were terminated.

An Zhe softly took a deep breath as he stood in front of the door to the laboratory D1344. It was silent on the other side of the door, with even the beeping sounds of the machines' operation having stopped. He had finally waited until those researchers had left.

The laboratory door was tightly shut, and the sensor at the entrance flashed with a weak light.

He took out Lu Feng's ID card.

---

The Underground City.

Upon the open ground, the upper half of the artificial magnetic pole stood. On a patch of sandy yellow soil, it resembled a grand tombstone.

This place's geographical location was excellent, for there were tall mountains on all sides that blocked windstorms and cold waves. In the middle was a flat plain, and the geological structure was stable and solid, sufficient to support the construction of unimaginable underground fortifications. The underground city's surface area and volume was comparable to the metropolises from the time when humankind was at its zenith.

In the beginning, when humankind's four bases were taking shape, some people predicted that if there came a day where humans could not hold out, then the Underground City Base would definitely be the last one to fall.

But right now, this open plain was covered with blood. Blood from monsters,

from xenogenics, and from humans. On top of the bloodstains were dismembered limbs, cut-off hands, and the remains of heavy weaponry.

A black fighter plane flew over the ground, dropping several powerful bombs. Dull explosions sounded, and the monsters howled deafeningly, but they were soon drowned out in the billowing smoke.

The fighter plane increased its elevation and steadily circled in the air. Lu Feng, holding a walkie-talkie in his hand, said, "The monsters on the ground have been eliminated."

Next to him was Hubbard. This legendary mercenary team captain from the outer city looked at the nearby entry passageway to the Underground City and said, "The inside will be difficult to deal with."

Lu Feng looked over there as well. He didn't say anything, tacitly agreeing with Hubbard's viewpoint. Over these past few days, he and the captain had coordinated command of the aerial operations and established sufficient tacit understanding—moreover, they were originally the kind of people who went the deepest into the frontlines of the Abyss, so nobody understood better than they the habits and lethality of those things.

The Underground City was easy to defend and difficult to attack. It was a sufficiently safe and formidable bastion, and it naturally had the advantage of guarding against radiation. But its structure also destined it to one thing: once xenogenics breached it, the interior would inevitably be a field of chaos.

And now it had been breached.

"What they're most lacking in is firepower. Their birthrate can't keep up and so they are short of soldiers. Thus, they can only increase their expenditure of armaments. They overdrew in advance, so now they have no way of effectively defending." Hubbard's hawk-like eyes narrowed slightly. "We've brought enough and arrived on time, so we have a decent chance to win."

Right at that moment, a voice came from the walkie-talkie.

"The Underground City thanks you for your generous support." The operator's voice was trembling. "However, out of the principle of humanitarianism, we must inform our compatriots from the Northern Base: at present, contactless

infection has already been observed within the base, and unpredictable infection may occur at any time and place..."

"The Northern Base has received it," Lu Feng said, interrupting the operator. "Please prepare for ground support."

Hubbard frowned deeply.

Lu Feng said, "Have the flight formation hover for now. I'll lead some men down."

"I'll go," Hubbard said. "By the sound of what they're saying, the inside is more dangerous than we imagined, and there may be no coming back after going down."

"You don't have this obligation."

"But I don't really have any worries."

Lu Feng's tone was flat. "I don't either."

But Hubbard smiled and asked in return, "You don't?"

Lu Feng met his gaze. No emotion whatsoever could be seen from his cold green eyes, but this time, he said nothing.

"Sometimes you'll look out the porthole, and when you do, you look for a very long time," Hubbard said.

"I left behind a person at the base." Lu Feng leaned against the porthole, his arms crossed. "A bullet I killed someone with hangs around his neck."

"What person of his did you kill?"

Lu Feng didn't reply.

"Putting it like that, he bears enmity against you," Hubbard said, but he seemed to recall something. "I met a boy who had one of your bullet shells and asked me if I knew its origin."

The corners of Lu Feng's lips curved up.

Hubbard said, "Then the relationship between you two is very complicated."

"Perhaps." Lu Feng walked towards the exit. "My relationship with everyone

is very complicated."

His voice was cold as he said to the pilot, "Prepare to taxi."

Hubbard didn't stop him this time. He looked at Lu Feng's back, deep in thought.

Under the massive and blood-red sunset on the western skies, the flight formation landed and the cabin doors opened. Lu Feng walked out of the PL1109 and towards the sprawling and blood-soaked city under the ground.

---

The Northern Base.

Right when An Zhe was about to put the ID card up to the sensor, he heard footsteps behind him, and he turned around. It was soldiers on routine patrol, led by a familiar-looking Judge.

That Judge looked at him and said, "How come you're here?"

He dropped his gaze slightly. "I'm getting something for the doctor."

"The doctor is still doing research?" the Judge said.

An Zhe made a soft affirmative noise and said nothing else. That Judge didn't ask further. Instead, he said, "Go back soon, the military has work to do today."

He said, "Thank you."

They walked past, and An Zhe took a deep breath and pressed the ID card to the sensor. Fortunately, the access control system had not yet been shut off. With a click, the door unlocked.

An Zhe entered. The door hinge squeaked because of friction, and after he walked in, he promptly closed the door. In the dim lighting, the ark shadows of the massive instruments flickered, and in the center of the room, the cylindrical tank stood quietly. A faint light beneath the tank illuminated it, and a cluster of small bubbles had just emerged from below and was floating to the top.

An Zhe held his breath. Before opening the door, he had prepared for the worst: getting caught, the spore having already been transferred, other people

being present in the laboratory... Now, his heart just about stopped beating entirely.

Until his gaze passed through the glass tank and through the pale green culture solution, and he saw the small white mass suspended all alone in the middle.

H's breath trembled, the corners of his lips curled up, and his heart thumped hard. He wanted to throw himself over there right away, but because of his excessive mood swing, he was practically unable to move.

Within the liquid beneath the dim lighting, that snow-white little thing seemed as if it were wandering about on the deep-sea floor. An Zhe looked at it without blinking.

At that very moment, he saw the spore, which had been quietly floating, pause. Then the hyphae abruptly stretched out, or perhaps using 'exploded' to describe it would be more fitting.

Then—it floated towards him at a speed that definitely could not be considered slow before suddenly pausing at the glass wall, as if it had struck it.

An Zhe took large strides over to the glass tank, pressing his hands and then his whole body against it.

His spore was also firmly pressed against the glass wall, and the hyphae touched him uneasily through the layer of glass, the movement clearly showing that it wanted to get closer to him.

An Zhe couldn't resist smiling. When Lu Feng was near, it seemed just like this spore didn't see An Zhe, but now it recognized him. Reluctant to even blink, he watched the spore extend its slender and fragile hyphae towards him, yet due to the glass obstructing it, it could only try even harder to press itself in his direction, practically turning into a small white pancake on the inner side of the tank. Every single hypha was emphasizing how much it wanted to get close to An Zhe.

An Zhe leaned against it. A long-lost comfort surrounded him, but it was also separated by a layer of unbreakable film.

He had to rescue it from the tank. An Zhe tore himself away from the tank

with difficulty and came to the side, where there was a console. Based on the common rules of human machines, he tried pressing the biggest round button. The console screen lit up as expected, and the indicator light of the card slot on one side lit up. He swiped Lu Feng's card again, and the indicator light turned green. Throughout the entire base, this man's authority was virtually unchecked.

But right away, facing the buttons that were identically shaped and only had some complex symbols on them, An Zhe fell into a daze.

How could he open the tank?

His fingers hovered over the console. At last, he steeled himself and pressed the button in the very center.

Three seconds later, the water in the tank began to surge, and the spore was helplessly swept here and there by the current before finally spinning in the middle of the tank. Looking at that helplessly-spinning little mass, An Zhe felt his own head also tumbling around and around. He clutched at his heart and pressed the first button.

A red laser lit up at the very top of the tank. Even An Zhe, who was standing nearby, felt the heat. The spore's hyphae exploded, and then it feebly sank down, seeming as if it'd be dried out in the next second, and then it exploded again after a while.

He suspected that it was silently screaming. He frowned in distress—was this sort of torment what the spore underwent in the human laboratory every day? But he had no time to think about anything else, and he pressed another button.

The red glow changed into pulses of light, and the spore helplessly exploded again and again.

An Zhe swiftly pressed a button far away. This time, the red light disappeared, and he sighed in relief. But in the following moment, a buzzing noise sounded, and blue ion sparks flared to life in the tank. Then the surface of the water began to tremble slightly—and the spore also trembled in the water as if it had gone mad.

He was taken aback.

He had electrified the water.

Flustered, he pressed one button after another, and finally with a loud noise, the pale green culture solution slowly drained out of the container. An Zhe pressed a button next to it, and with a click, the lid on top of the tank opened.

The tank was too tall, so he moved a chair over and stood on it, then finally reached the top of the tank.

But more than half of the culture solution had drained out by then, and the spore had no way of floating to that height.

Then he saw the spore press against the glass wall and slowly crawl upwards along it. It slipped down as it climbed, and after sliding down a bit, it continued climbing up.

The little thing was not yet fully mature, yet it had inherited his ability to move independently. An Zhe reached out, and his arm and fingers turned into fluttering snow-white hyphae that descended along the container's inner wall and came into contact with the spore.

At that exact moment, it was like an electric current ran through his body and he had been reborn. He had taken back a part of himself, so there must be a strange wave enveloping him.

Holding that mass, he carefully fished it out, and all of the spore's hyphae that were scattered outside were obediently tucked back in, and the spore rolled over amidst his hyphae.

An Zhe's eyes curved as he smiled at it. His hyphae connected to its hyphae, and he carefully fitted it into his own body. The spore's body also relaxed completely and melded with his body. A euphoric emotion was transmitted to An Zhe's mind, for it had finally returned to the place where it ought to be. The humans' culture liquid was useless; only with the nourishment of the adult would it continue to grow until maturity.

This time, there were no bastards to dig it out again, although he didn't know why the spore would get close to that guy of its own volition.

In truth, the spore not getting close to him that day was a good thing, for once it expressed an inclination to get close to him, it would be promptly observed by the researchers, and then his identity would inevitably come under suspicion. Thus, An Zhe was one-sidedly convinced that his spore had uncommon intelligence.

With the return of the spore, the hollow in his body was finally filled, and all uneasy things instantly settled like dust. That was a feeling that could not possibly be described, like being reborn. An Zhe walked over to the window and pressed the button, raising the metal plate.

Eye-watering light shone in, and he squinted.

Outside, at the end of the wind-blown sands, amidst the first golden rays of the dawn, a resplendent red sun burst forth.

An Zhe slowly turned his head to look back at the silvery-white laboratory. Machines were arranged side by side, individual electrical cables were distinct from each other, and test-tube stands on top of the goods cabinet was arranged in a particularly neat manner. From this laboratory, he could imagine what the entire base looked like.

This was the humans' base. Its past, present, and future all had nothing to do with him.

His hand curled around the windowsill, his knuckles turning white, and he pushed open the transparent three-layered glass window with a burst of strength.

A gap the size of a finger's width opened, and scorching hot winds carrying grit blew in, followed by a prickling pain in his fingers. Within the wind and atmosphere outside was ubiquitous intense radiation from the cosmos. That colossal wave contained countless tiny ripples. He seemed to hear the Abyss calling him back.

He could leave now, depart from this place, go outside, and return to the Abyss. The outside was likewise cruel. He didn't know if he would be able to survive, but he had gotten his spore back, so he wasn't afraid of anything anymore.

... He wasn't afraid of anything anymore.

An Zhe gently pressed his left hand to his abdomen, rested his forehead against the windowsill, and closed his eyes. A slight shudder ran through his entire body.

He took back his right hand that was curled around the windowsill and exerted his strength in the opposite direction. With a gentle "thunk", the window closed again, and then the radiation-proof metal layer closed immediately after. He took a few breaths, his forehead pressed against the metal sheet, and his fingers slowly curled up at his side, as if he had made a difficult choice.

As the radiation was blocked out, the prickling pain on his body also gradually receded, just like that night when Lu Feng held him and used his own body as a shield before rolling away from that area with the radiation. In truth, if it had been anyone else, Lu Feng would have done the same, but it was precisely because that was the case that he deeply remembered the image, as vivid as each memory of Lu Feng's departing figure.

He walked out through the laboratory door, and right as he did, two soldiers walked past in the corridor. The pair of patrolling soldiers from earlier had walked away, and now it was other people.

An Zhe met their gazes and gave a close-lipped smile in greeting, then turned and walked towards the staircase.

On the dim staircase, he could only hear his own heartbeat, one thump after another, faster than usual. When humans felt fear, their hearts would beat faster, but what exactly he was fearful of, he didn't know either.

He couldn't keep it hidden for long, he knew. Once order was restored and research began anew, it would definitely be possible to figure out the sequence of events of the humans' important laboratory losing something. He had to leave—the earlier, the better.

But he couldn't keep himself from taking a sharp, cool object out of his shirt pocket. It was the badge that Lu Feng had pinned to his coat, which An Zhe had taken off.

He held it in his hand, thinking that once the aurora lit up and he heard the news of the PL1109 returning, he'd leave then—if such a day came.

There wasn't anything good in this city. Only potato soup was quite nice.

If it weren't—if it weren't for his spore always wanting to get close to Lu Feng, he would have left long ago.

Shisi's
Little Mushroom
REVELATIONS
translated by: Xiao

# LITTLE MUSHROOM

VOLUME TWO

SHISI

TRANSLATED BY

XIAO

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# BOOK THREE: REVELATIONS

# 28

"REGARDLESS OF WHETHER IT WAS THE OUTER CITY OR THE MAIN CITY, TRIALS WERE CONSTANTLY TAKING PLACE."

THERE WERE VIRTUALLY no people on the stairs, or perhaps there were only a handful of people rushing about—fewer than usual. Traversing the stairs was something that took up energy. An Zhe took a deep breath, still straining a bit. When solar winds directly struck the earth, the atmosphere would be blown away at a frightening rate and disperse in the cosmos. Although it had only been a few days, the oxygen levels in the air provided by the vents were clearly not enough. The military announcements also reminded people every day to cut down on going outside along with unnecessary physical exertion.

At the first-floor corridor, the atmosphere was even more solemn, with not a person in sight. An Zhe recalled the words "go back soon" the patrolling Judge said to him, so he increased his pace and returned to the Trial Court's territory. The doctor was typing away at a computer in the main hall. Upon seeing An Zhe, he said, "You've finally returned. Where did you go?"

"Out for a walk," An Zhe said.

He sat down next to the doctor. Dr. Ji was a very warm person; over the past few days their relationship had become quite good.

"Don't run around," the doctor said. "At least not today."

"Did something happen?" An Zhe asked.

The doctor's gaze moved away from the computer screen to look at him, his complexion containing a hint of fatigue and his lips pale. In his azure eyes was a fathomless and deep emotion that was by no means positive. He pushed a bottle of water toward An Zhe. "Are you thirsty?"

An Zhe shook his head, for he was fine—although mushrooms were

organisms that needed water very much, today his spore returned to his body, so he felt very secure; his need for water did not seem so pressing.

"All supplies are in critical states. Never mind food and water, there's not even enough oxygen," the doctor murmured. "Today at the very latest, the military will have to transfer personnel. If you returned late and missed the transfer, you'd only be able to remain here."

An Zhe was slightly confused.

"Transfer to where?" he said. He thought the Lighthouse was the final refuge.

The doctor's gaze was fixed on the blank white wall in front as he said, "The Garden of Eden."

"That place is the crop breeding center, with a stable food supply and vast reserves of clean water. The base's resources are all there," the doctor said.

After saying that, he smiled. "The Garden of Eden's name was chosen well. Now it truly has become the final Garden of Eden."

"When the Garden of Eden was initially built, there were voices of opposition. The breeding and cultivation of crops, drinking water supply, the raising of children… With the cores of so many resources essential to the existence of humankind concentrated in one place, even if it is extremely beneficial to the Garden of Eden, would it bring greater risks?" The doctor lowered his voice. "But the facts invariably proved that the base's capabilities had limits. When facing great catastrophes, all of humankind's resources could only be supplied to the Garden of Eden alone. We must keep it even if we sacrifice everything. If the Garden of Eden does not exist, then humankind will likewise be lost."

An Zhe understood what the doctor meant. The Garden of Eden was where the mothers and children were.

As he looked at the doctor, he asked, "Will everyone go?"

The doctor glanced at An Zhe, who found it very difficult to describe the meaning of that gaze. It was like that of a Garden of Eden dormitory teacher looking at a wayward and naive student, but in addition, there were also hints of mournfulness and sorrow.

So An Zhe knew the answer, and he said nothing.

The morning thus went by in silence. Seraing returned once, but he was in a rush, for his work was very busy.

"I have to stay here until evening." He looked at An Zhe. "The Emergency Response Department doesn't recognize you. Follow me."

The doctor said, "You can just leave it to me, I won't leave him behind."

Seraing thought for a moment, then said, "Okay."

Outside, the gusting winds did not cease for even a moment. This inexorable force from the cosmos rocked the entire human city, and the cyclones whipped up on the earth by the solar winds surpassed all disasters in recorded history. When An Zhe put his fingers to the wall, he could feel its slight tremors that were akin to a dying animal's final struggling breaths. In fact, for human creations to be able to endure for so long in such a tremendous windstorm, An Zhe felt that it was a miracle.

At one o'clock in the afternoon, someone knocked on the large door. It was a group of heavily armed officers led by three civil service officers with Emergency Response Department badges pinned to their chests. Upon seeing Dr. Ji, the officer standing at the very front gave a slight nod. "Doctor, please come with us."

The doctor asked, "Have the transfers begun?"

"Yes. It's estimated that five hundred people will be transferred," the officer said. "The military will do all in its power to ensure your safety. We've already made arrangements for your accommodations in the Garden of Eden."

"Thank you," the doctor said.

But a moment later, he looked at An Zhe. "But he has to come with me."

"According to the transfer plan, you may bring one assistant." The officer then said to An Zhe, "Please produce your ID card so that we can verify your identity."

"My assistant is no longer with us." The doctor draped an arm over An Zhe's shoulder and smiled as he said to An Zhe, "It seems that your ID card is not on

you."

An Zhe said, "I only have the Colonel's."

The doctor said, "Give it to them."

An Zhe obediently took out Lu Feng's ID card. The officer took it and swiped it on the portable machine—then he clearly was stunned.

"For the base, Lu Feng went to the Underground City, and there is still no news even now." The doctor raised his eyebrows and said in a leisurely manner, "If his kid can't receive the right to asylum… I believe that isn't very appropriate."

The officer frowned. Only after walking to one side and dialing a number did he return and say, "An exception can be made for his transfer. His status will be your assistant."

The doctor said, "Thank you."

"See?" the doctor said to An Zhe as they walked through the corridor. "If you ran around in the morning and came back late—"

An Zhe pursed his lips, catching sight of the state of affairs in the main hall.

Tens of researchers in white coats formed simple lines, with military soldiers nearby guarding them. A woman was saying very agitatedly, "My assistant must come with me. I refuse to accept such a transfer plan."

The officer said, "In the transfer plan, you do not have an allowance for an assistant, Dr. Chen."

"My research can't do without my assistant, for those tasks cannot be completed alone. Moreover, his achievements are by no means inferior to mine. He can independently manage large-scale projects as well." The woman referred to as "Dr. Chen" said loudly, "Please request instructions from the higher-ups."

"If you believe there is no way to continue your research after losing your assistant," the officer said, his voice ice-cold and merciless, "you may have to remain here."

After a brief stupor, she fell silent.

An Zhe followed Dr. Ji in another direction. There seemed to be disputes upstairs as well, for he heard the sounds of heavy objects falling to the ground.

An exit had been opened up on the first floor of the United Front building. There, An Zhe got into the military's heavy armored vehicle. When he got on, he caught a brief glimpse of the scenery outside. The sunlight was so glaring it could almost burn his retinas, the parched and scorching air rampaged through his lungs, and grit got all over him. The formerly smooth ground was covered with deep ravines, as if it had been torn up in a frenzy by the claws of huge monsters.

All around were the sounds of people breathing. This vehicle left with thirty people on board. According to the people nearby, for this transfer, the Lighthouse had a quota of only five hundred people in total, which was less than one-tenth of all the staff members.

Someone asked, "What about our equipment and materials?"

"After we leave, power will be cut off to the entirety of the Lighthouse, the laboratories will be rated based on importance, and the important samples will be transferred to the Garden of Eden for continued preservation," someone replied.

With a "bang," the vehicle doors dropped, and the armored vehicle started up. The interior of the vehicle was dark and silent, and the doctor held his hand.

An Zhe suddenly felt that this scene was incomparably familiar. One month ago, within the overwhelming insect swarm, he had also boarded the military's truck in this manner, arrived at District Six, and accepted the Judgment Day trial. It was just that in the dark vehicle back then, the one who held his hand was Poet. Now it was the doctor. And back then, the standard for whether or not people could enter District Six was if they had not been infected. This time, the standard for whether or not people could enter the Garden of Eden was if their past, current, and future contributions to the base were sufficient.

Regardless of whether it was the Outer City or the Main City, trials were constantly taking place.

The distance traveled was very short. Coincidentally, he and the doctor were

placed at the end of the sixth floor, where he had once taught children to recite poems. At the Garden of Eden, he had his first proper lunch in recent days, a bowl of potato soup. Although it was not as delicious as his own cooking, after eating hardtack and nutrition tablets for several days, it was practically a rare delicacy.

The doctor seemed careworn. In the evening, An Zhe went out to get water for him.

There were people in the break room. The woman who had clashed with the officer from earlier in the day was sobbing while facing the wall, and next to her was another researcher who patted her on the shoulder. "Perhaps the Lighthouse can endure."

"It's impossible." Her voice was raspy. "The oxygen content of the earth's air is less than half of what it originally was. After the air filtration system is started up, fresh oxygen will be preferentially delivered to the Garden of Eden only. The residential areas, military bases, and even the Twin Towers all come second in terms of oxygen supply. They won't be able to endure."

Then she lifted her head and spotted An Zhe. She asked softly, "Who are you? Are you also one of our people?"

The researcher next to her said, "It's said that he's the assistant of the testing center's Dr. Ji."

"Dr. Ji could bring an assistant…" she murmured. "It's because his achievements are superior to ours."

"Those are just the facts," the researcher said. "Don't be sad over him. If we can survive this calamity, we can train new assistants."

The tip of her nose was red, and her eyes were watery with tears. Upon hearing those words, she let out a "hah," then covered her entire face and trembled all over.

"You think…" she said, "that I'm merely… merely sad because of just my assistant?"

"The Main City's residents were thankful that they were not part of those who were abandoned when the Outer City was bombed," she said brokenly. "But

they were still abandoned. We're able to stand here today in exchange for the sacrifices of everyone else in the Lighthouse… But perhaps we'll lose our qualification tomorrow. When the sea floods an island, the exposed portion will only decrease more and more. Time's almost up. What… What exactly are we holding on for? For the interests of all humankind?"

"For the interests of all humankind."

She bent double, violently panting as she said, "This age is killing people, but humankind itself has also been killing people."

"But you must accept it, Dr. Chen Qing," the researcher said. "As the ones benefiting, we don't have the right to mourn for them."

"I know… It's just that, as humans just like them, it's emotionally difficult to accept." She made one last swipe at her tears and forced a smile. "Or are you going to say that we also don't have the right to have feelings?"

"… I don't know."

They spoke no more. An Zhe had finished getting the water, so he walked out of the break room with cup in hand. Upon lifting his head, he saw Seraing's figure flick past at one side of the corridor, opening the door to the room he and the doctor shared and entering—so he picked up his pace, wishing to greet Seraing.

The door hadn't been closed; a thread of light shone from within. An Zhe put his right hand on the door handle and was just about to push it open when he heard Seraing say, "Where's An Zhe?"

"He transferred together with me," the doctor said. "Are you looking for him?"

"Was he with you the entire time?" Seraing asked. "I just received a call from the Emergency Response Department. The important sample from Laboratory D1344 that was to be transferred has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" the doctor said. "That sample with a connection to Lu Feng? It was a very strange thing. If it died and then evaporated into the air, I would not be surprised."

An Zhe's heart rate skyrocketed. With fingers trembling, he swiftly turned and walked to the other side of the corridor.

"Not necessarily," Seraing said. "The reason why the Emergency Response Department looked for me was because the instrument recorded some operations at 6 a.m., and the operator was the Colonel. Where is An Zhe? I must find him."

"He went to get water," the doctor said.

"Thank you." There was a sound from the door, and Seraing walked out.

Standing behind the wall around the corner, An Zhe tightened his grip on the water cup.

He knew he would be discovered someday, but he didn't know that the day would arrive so quickly.

The two researchers in the break room had seen him, and very soon, Seraing would come this way. He could not let himself be found.

After becoming acutely aware of this, An Zhe looked all around the corridor, searching for a vent he could use. But then he realized that once he turned into hyphae, his clothes and ID card could only be left here to serve as damning proof.

With his chest heaving, An Zhe made the split-second decision to turn and run to the utility room at the end of this auxiliary corridor. There was a half-open small door there that led to an emergency exit corridor. There, he wouldn't be so quickly found, for up the stairs was another exit on the twenty-second floor that he and Lily had traversed once. So long as he found the same balcony as before, he'd be able to leave this building—or, find a hidden place to conceal himself. But he had to leave the sixth floor, and the further away he got, the better.

An Zhe found the small door without any difficulty. He went in, arriving at that dark staircase, and began to climb. This place seemed to be very close to the building's exterior. The wind was loud, generating drawn-out and ceaseless echoes, and the air was hot—the kind of damp heat that would suffocate humans.

In the dark, he could hear nothing save for the wind when he ran into something small.

An Zhe's initial reaction was to assume there were some inhuman monsters lurking here, but then his fingers touched smooth human hair, and he heard a child's violent gasp of fear.

He hesitated a moment. "Lily?"

"An Zhe?" Lily called out as well.

"It's me." An Zhe said.

"You've come!" Lily said. "I… I heard that the Twin Towers began the transfers, and I was just thinking of going to find you. Where's Si Nan? Was Si Nan transferred?"

"I don't know," An Zhe said. "They said that important samples would also be transferred here."

In the following second after these words were spoken, he suddenly recalled that xenogenics and monsters could now infect without making contact, so the Lighthouse might not let Si Nan enter the Garden of Eden.

But Lily seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Si Nan is definitely very important."

Barely recovered from her shock, she leaned against the stairs for a good while before saying, "Did you come to find me too?"

"No." An Zhe mulled over his words. "I came here to hide."

"Is someone trying to catch you?" Lily asked. Then she said, "It's very safe here."

An Zhe knew that Lily was a child who was different from other humans.

"I'm going to stay here for a few days." He stroked Lily's hair. "Can you not tell anyone else?"

The very next moment, the stairs were lit up bright as day, and glaring white light landed on Lily and him. Lily unconsciously screamed and pressed herself against him. He reached out a hand to protect this little girl, then raised his

head.

In the bright white light stood Madam Lu, who was clad in a long white dress. They had previously met once before at the Lighthouse.

At Madam Lu's side were two Garden of Eden staff members with powerful flashlights.

"Lily." Madam Lu's gentle voice carried a hint of reproach. Although she was clearly speaking to Lily, her gaze was directed at An Zhe as she said softly, "Why are you still running around now?"

# 29

## “BUT HE WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO GET WHAT HE WANTS.”

LILY SAID IN A SMALL VOICE, "I'm sorry, Madam, I'm just a bit worried about Si Nan."

"What is there that you can't talk to me about?" Madam Lu held out a hand to Lily, who obediently left An Zhe and allowed Madam Lu to hold her by the hand.

When they met last time at the Lighthouse, Madam Lu was wearing a mask, so An Zhe could only see her eyes. This time, he finally saw all of the Madam's facial features with all of their soft lines. Her eyebrows were curved, but when she was not smiling, her slightly thin lips were pursed a little, adding a trace of steadfast heroism to this gentle appearance. Lu Feng didn't look like her.

But inexplicably, An Zhe felt that her facial features bore some similarities to Lily's. If all of the base's people grew from the Garden of Eden's embryos and all the embryos came from the Garden of Eden's women, then Lily may indeed be Madam Lu's daughter by blood.

From this viewpoint, Lily decisively leaving him after seeing Madam Lu and holding her hand was understandable—after all, she was the Madam's youngling rather than his. In this world, only his spore would never voluntarily leave him.

An Zhe looked at Madam Lu. He didn't know what measures Madam Lu would take regarding him.

He only heard Madam Lu ask, "Is he your friend? Did you come to this passageway to find him?"

Lily and An Zhe locked eyes. Her crafty gaze shifted, and she said to Madam Lu, "He doesn't want to go back. Can I invite him to be my guest?"

"We can invite An Zhe to dinner. What they have is very yucky," Lily said.

An Zhe understood that this little girl wanted to help him hide from the people searching below, but he didn't think that Madam Lu would agree to it. After all, his abrupt appearance here was too strange.

But to his surprise, Madam Lu said, "All right."

"Wow, Madam, you're so nice today," Lily said.

Madam Lu bowed her head and stroked Lily's hair. "I have always loved you very much."

Lily affectionately rubbed against her palm. "I like you too."

So this was how An Zhe was taken to the twenty-second floor of the Garden of Eden, where the atmosphere there was peaceful. Speakers in the corridors were playing soft music, and the snow-white walls were covered with pictures of things like flowers, butterflies, bees, clouds, or the Virgin Mary. Compared to the outside, this place seemed like another world.

In the spacious corridor and main hall, An Zhe encountered other women. They were all dressed in pure white long dresses, wore their jet-black or chestnut brown hair loose, and had tranquil expressions on their faces. Upon seeing Madam Lu, they amicably nodded toward her and gave their greetings.

In a small annex of the communal dining hall, An Zhe ate the twenty-second floor's dinner. It was sweetened milk, half of a roast chicken, and a bowl of vegetable and corn soup.

After eating, the Madam said, "You should send your friend away now."

Lily wheedled, "Let him stay a while longer."

The Madam indulged her request, saying, "Then let's go water the flowers together."

Thus, holding An Zhe by the hand, Lily passed through the snow-white main hall and came to a round room somewhere else. An Zhe saw at a glance the luxuriant red and green within the room. The center of it was built into a flower bed several square meters in size, inside of which deep red roses were profusely blooming.

"My lover used to bring back seeds from the wilderness for me," Madam Lu said to An Zhe. "Later, Lu Feng would do so as well. I remember you were together with him that day."

An Zhe nodded.

"He's very rarely willing to get close to others." Madam Lu picked up the silver watering can that was on the flower stand.

Right at that moment, something suddenly flashed in An Zhe's field of vision, and he unconsciously turned his head—it was the room's TV screen. Nobody pressed the remote; it had turned on automatically.

"News from the Emergency Response Department." The rate at which the announcer spoke was much faster than usual. At the same time, a photo of An Zhe appeared on the screen. "It is critical that this suspect be arrested. If there are any witnesses, please immediately provide information on his whereabouts."

An Zhe's body tensed up slightly. The one-hour-long peace earlier seemed to be just an illusion; to him, this world was still full of dangers at every turn. He looked at Madam Lu.

But he heard Madam Lu say softly, "Don't be afraid."

Madam Lu's actions were always outside An Zhe's expectations. At first, he thought the Madam was a staunch advocate of the base's rules, but now it looked like that wasn't the case.

"You…"

"I will not help you escape, but for the time being I won't hand you over either." Madam Lu smiled.

An Zhe asked her, "How come?"

"They always have many reasons to arrest a person." Madam Lu's gaze moved away from the screen. Bowing her head, she watered her rosebushes. A crystalline drop of water rolled down the edge of a crimson petal, then fell from the dark green leaves and into the soil. "For example, forty years ago, they arrested my mother."

An Zhe didn't know what she wished to say, but she seemed to strongly want to tell a story. He had met many people who all wanted to tell him stories, as though hidden inside every single person's heart were pasts worth looking back upon.

So he said nothing and only listened quietly. The roses' fragrance surrounded them, and Lily plucked one. She peeled the petals away from the sepals, held them in her palm, and then tossed them into the air. Just like a shower of rain, the drifting petals fell, landing on her hair and body. One petal landed on the tips of Madam Lu's hair.

"The 23,371 women of the four human bases passed the following manifesto with zero rejection votes: I'm willing to devote myself to the destiny of humanity, accepting genetic experiments and all forms of assisted reproduction, to strive for my entire lifetime for the continuation of the human race." In a very soft voice, Madam Lu repeated the Rose Manifesto that An Zhe had once heard from Lily's mouth, but compared to the little girl's crisp and lively voice, her tone seemed somber.

"Deleted from this manifesto was one phrase, a prerequisite," Madam Lu said. "Under the premise of having fundamental human rights, I accept genetic experiments and all forms of assisted reproduction. Furthermore, the ones who initiated the manifesto also reached an accord with the base to have women manage women."

Her finger touched the soft edges of the roses. "However, that was something from nearly seventy years ago. At that time, it seemed that there was still hope for everything. The fate of humankind was laid out before us. So long as we could last, things would improve… If I were one of the twenty-three thousand women from that time, I would have also agreed without the slightest hesitation. Everyone is making sacrifices, so I'm willing to contribute my utmost for humankind's interests."

"Back then, the technology for in vitro culturing of embryos had not yet matured, so children had to stay within the mother's body for at least seven months. The base hoped that, for the sake of increasing the population, the rest time of their wombs would not exceed fifteen days." Madam Lu tilted her head back to look at the steel-hued ceiling. "The duty of childbirth was excessively

heavy. Their entire lifestyles were devastated, and their lives were also ebbing. They had hoped for the base to loosen the requirements, but nobody agreed."

"For the women who voluntarily enacted the Rose Manifesto and all the girls who were born since then, dedicating themselves to this manifesto was a matter of course—moreover, our need for people was too great. The Lighthouse and military thought so, most of the people of the Main City and Outer City thought so, and even the women managing the women thought so."

Her tone of voice contained a gentleness that seemed capable of eliciting emotional resonance. As An Zhe silently listened, he saw Lily also quietly sitting at the edge of the flower bed.

"To fight for the protection of fundamental human rights, they initiated a protest movement. That was forty years ago, and my mother was among those who initiated the protest movement—she seemed to also be one of the earliest initiators of the Rose Manifesto." Madam Lu smiled. "But all of the pictures and written materials were destroyed. At that time, I was too young, so I don't remember much. I can only recall that one night, the soldiers of the United Front Center broke into our home. She locked me in my room, and then there was a gunshot… I saw blood flow from under the door into my room. And after that, I was sent to the Garden of Eden."

"They had finally discovered that having an iron grip on the control of reproductive resources themselves was the most effective method, so they deleted that phrase from the manifesto. When a new generation of girls was gathered, they grew up with the teachings of the Garden of Eden, so they learned their duty by heart from a young age and received no other education. This way, the base did not have to worry about the decline of the birth rate, and no girl would feel the pain of losing her human rights because of the ceaseless childbirths."

She looked at the surrounding walls, but it was like she was looking at the entire human base through the walls. "I feel pain because of this, but I also know that my pain is just a trivial portion. In this place, people die every single second. In this age, the only way for humans to survive is to turn themselves into an aggregated creature. People with different duties are this creature's different organs. The Lighthouse is the brain, the military is the claws and fangs,

the people of the Outer City are the flesh and blood, the buildings and city walls are the skin, and the Garden of Eden is the womb.”

An Zhe looked at her. Seeming to understand his gaze, she said, "I've never resented this place."

She leaned over and picked up Lily, who buried her head on her shoulder.

"I'm just often perplexed about one thing," she said as she gently stroked Lily's hair with her fingers. "We resist monsters and xenogenics along with the contamination of human genes by foreign genes for the sake of preserving the will that is specific to humans and avoid being ruled by animal natures… But to achieve this goal, all of our actions run counter to the norms of human nature. And the community we collectively form—all of the things it does, such as obtaining resources, strengthening itself, and producing offspring—can only embody the nature of animals. In fact, humans are no different from the monsters of the outside world. It's just that because of the brain's flexibility, they give their various actions self-deluding meanings. Humans are just one kind of ordinary animal. They are born like all other lives, and they are also on the cusp of extinction just like all other lives."

Madam Lu's eyes had a dead look. "Humankind's culture and technology are both all but worthless."

Saying nothing more, she lifted her head to gaze for a long time at the ceiling. An Zhe saw that her palm was resting against a dark-colored knob—and then she gently twisted it.

The metal plates on the ceiling that guarded against radiation noisily opened. This was the Garden of Eden's top floor, so outside the glass was the boundless light from the skies. Nighttime was when the solar winds temporarily ceased, so the silent twilight and the Milky Way poured in together.

An Zhe murmured, "There will be a day when it gets better."

Perhaps there truly would come a day when the Arbiter did not need to kill their fellow citizens, soldiers did not need to sacrifice themselves in the wilderness, and the girls of the Garden of Eden regained their freedom.

"No, there won't," Madam Lu said. "The time when this world is going to be

utterly ruined is almost upon us."

"Lily," she said, turning to the little girl in her arms, "do you wish to fly?"

As An Zhe looked at her gentle profile and heard this sentence, a chill shot up his spine.

He heard Lily ask in a crisp voice as she hugged Madam Lu's neck, "Can I? Just like Si Nan?"

"Yes, you can."

Right at that moment, An Zhe finally understood Si Nan's purpose in having Lily return to the Garden of Eden.

It was the polar opposite of their earlier conjectures.

To return to the Garden of Eden was by no means because the place was safe.

Lily lifted her head from Madam Lu's shoulder and looked at An Zhe with those jet-black eyes. In her eyes, there had always been a peculiar cloudy-looking luster that reminded An Zhe of the creatures within the Abyss. In fact, every single woman and girl on the twenty-second floor had this sort of innocent demeanor. If a Judge were here, perhaps he would conclude that they were not real humans. If a person stayed within the Garden of Eden from birth and could not leave for the duration of their life, this person would definitely be different from the humans outside.

An Zhe felt a sudden slight pain in his head, for that wave occurred in his mind again, but it was far from the immensity and terror he felt in the late night. It was much more specific and much closer, as if the source was right at his side.

As he was watching Madam Lu, the lighting changed, and he saw within the Madam's eyes a hint of an illusory rainbow. "You…"

An Zhe took a few steps back. Behind him was the red alarm bell each room was equipped with. "You don't want to be human anymore?"

Madam Lu looked at him blankly, and a single tear rolled down from the rims of her eyes.

"There is no longer any hope for humankind," she said.

An Zhe said, "When Lu Feng returns…"

Before he finished speaking, Madam Lu suddenly began to laugh. At the same time, tears continually fell from her eyes, and her entire body was trembling like a leaf in the autumn wind. She covered her mouth firmly with her right hand, only letting out broken laughter.

"Humankind… has brought too much pain to my children and me." An Zhe finally heard her speak. Perhaps she was feeling tender affection for Lu Feng, but in the following moment, Madam Lu's voice turned frighteningly hoarse.

"Lu Feng… He is more steadfast than me. He is just like this base, able to sacrifice everything for the interests of humankind, but he will never be able to get what he wants." The Madam reached out and crushed a bright red rose. The thorn pricked her hand, but the pain made her voice calmer. "All of the things he wishes to protect will be destroyed. His beliefs are like castles in the air, and he will die a miserable death. Being unable to personally see the day when he goes mad and being unable to see the day when this base meets is doom are my only regrets."

The despondent and sorrowful emotions concealed within this voice made An Zhe open his eyes wide. With no idea what had happened, he looked at her in disbelief.

The rose petals slipped out of Madam Lu's hand, and her voice became softer. "What I wish to do is leave this place. For what purpose did you come to the human base and come to his side, little xenogenic?"

An Zhe looked at her, unable to say anything.

But it seemed that Madam Lu did not necessarily wish to hear his response. Her neck lengthened, and her entire body changed, stretching out and bending into a strange arc, then swelling and expanding—

Brown and jet-black lines appeared upon her. Her body became an oval pupa, her arms became the slender limbs of an arthropod, and two pairs of transparent wings tore through the pure white dress as they emerged from her back. Within a scant minute, she had become a monster that was half-human and half-bee.

That strange wave became even more fierce, but it simply enveloped Lily. Within this wave, Lily's body was undergoing the same changes.

"It's almost time. Humans' genes are too weak, so they are unable to perceive the changes currently happening in the world, and they are also incapable of enduring mutation and selection. But other organisms are not necessarily strong either," she murmured. "We will all die. I don't hate humans. I have worked for the base for thirty-five years, alleviating much pain for women and increasing the number of newborns born in the base each year."

She smiled. "But in the face of this calamity, all work was futile. It only proves the insignificance and powerlessness of humankind. I merely wish to experience those things I've never received before in this final peaceful age."

Her forewings shimmered beneath the moonlight. The queen bee's body was huge, slim, and beautiful.

Lily's transformation completed before hers did. She had already turned into a smaller bee and was darting around Madam Lu. The way she flew was so skillful that it seemed innate. From this bee, An Zhe could not find the slightest similarity to humankind.

As An Zhe looked at Madam Lu, he saw her frown slightly and close her eyes.

There was a somewhat pained expression on her tranquil face, but then her head underwent indescribable changes. Iridescent compound eyes bulged out, antennae burst forth, and the human bones twisted and transformed into hard, honey-colored chitin. This creature's size and beauty far surpassed all the other insect-class monsters An Zhe had seen before. Within this hexagonal beehive, she was like a queen bee.

A rustling started up, which was the sound of wings vibrating. Like flowing white gauze, the transparent insect wings shook a few times, then began to vibrate. Her body took flight, slowly rising toward the dome before abruptly accelerating once she had almost reached it!

With a dramatic shuddering noise, spiderwebbing cracks appeared in the solid glass dome. An Zhe felt that the dome's materials ought to be very strong, but with the second and third impacts, there was a bang, and countless tiny fragments of glass went flying. They landed on the ground and in the rose

petals, seeming just like dewdrops.

The alarm was triggered. The entire room lit up with red, and the sound of the alarm was deafening. Numerous footsteps could be heard as staff members in white shirts broke in, but upon witnessing the scene before them, they were all stunned.

A huge hole had been created from the impacts. The bee Lily had transformed into flew out, soaring upward, and her figure swiftly disappeared in the boundless night.

The queen bee was somewhat slower. As she stood atop the dome, her head rotated, and she looked downward. Perhaps she still harbored fondness for this place. Then she slowly turned around, her wings twitching as though she had decided to fly upward.

But right in the following moment, the vibration of her wings stopped, and there was a deathly silence. The stilled wings were like an ominous rest in a piece of music. Bathed in the moonlight, the massive queen bee unexpectedly made a gradual turn, and a pair of golden compound eyes looked straight down, at An Zhe below—along with the entire Garden of Eden.

The queen bee's right forelimb poked in, the tip of its claw suffused with a cold and sharp silver light. This claw tip gradually increased in size, and a whole pair of forelimbs entered, followed by the massive head.

A feeling of strangeness suddenly arose in An Zhe's heart. This movement was too strange. Madam Lu, who had decided to leave this place and obtain freedom, would not come back again unless the one in control of this queen bee was no longer Madam Lu. Unless the monster's instinctual consciousness predictably and easily overcame the human mind.

When facing the humans of the Garden of Eden, what would a perfect xenogenic do?

All of this happened in just a few short seconds. As An Zhe looked at the staff members who were rooted in place, he said in a hoarse voice, "Hurry and go."

But in the very next second after he finished speaking, the queen bee lifted her head. A wave unparalleled in strength and difficult to describe, with the

queen bee as the center, came rolling toward all of the people present!

A violent pain shot through An Zhe's head, and some blurry images unfolded before his eyes.

Prior to An Ze's death, when An Zhe absorbed all the blood and tissues from his body, An Ze's past memories had appeared in his mind like a series of pictures.

In the Outer City, on the day the insect swarms arrived, a bug had bitten his finger. When he dreamed that night, he had also seen what the insect had seen while flying in the wilderness.

Right now, facing the fragments of chaotic memories gushing forth before his eyes, An Zhe realized what was happening.

The queen bee was performing contactless infection.

# 30

## “EVERY GUN WAS POINTED AT HIM.”

"WE ARE the ones most closely linked to the fate of humankind."

When Madam Lu was still but a little girl, her mother had told her this. At that time, her mother's lower abdomen was slightly swollen, for a new life was gestating within it.

"We are the ones most closely linked to the fate of humankind."

After she grew up, she told this to other girls as well. Back then, she was simultaneously bearing the responsibility for producing successive generations for the base while devoting herself to the research of embryo development technology. This research was extremely valuable, so she was the only fertile woman who could freely come and go from the Garden of Eden and the Lighthouse. One day, in a corridor of the Twin Towers, she met a handsome green-eyed officer.

And after that, she had a child. The birth of this child had nothing to do with her duty.

Because of both parties' work, she could not often meet her child's father, only converse through the communicators on occasion.

"Sometimes, I'll think… that I betrayed the Rose Manifesto," she said.

"Why do you think so?" At the other end of the communicator was a steady voice. "Aren't you growing a life right now?"

"To have children with their lover was a right women possessed only before the manifesto came into existence." She gently draped her fingers over her lower abdomen. “Having the freedom to control my uterus without violating regulations or causing losses to the base's resources makes me… very happy,

although this way of thinking is very dangerous."

The memories were patchy, with only a few key points.

"He's going to the military," Madam Lu said. "I previously suggested that he go to the United Front Center, but now the assignments have been made. Once you come back to the base, you'll meet him."

"Does he resemble me?"

"A little. The resemblance isn't very strong, and his character isn't like yours either. The base does not allow anyone to know their blood relationships, but as soon as you see him, you'll be able to know who he is."

"I really look forward to seeing him."

"You will see him," Madam Lu said. "Stay safe out in the wilderness."

"I will," that person said. "This time, we've retrieved very important scientific research materials, some of which are also related to your focus."

She smiled. "You've worked hard. My research has also been going very well recently."

"I miss you." The male voice on the other side suddenly lowered. "Last night, I dreamed of the day humankind completely survived the calamity. We were still alive, and our children were as well. We were eternally happy just like all other ordinary people."

Her voice was equally gentle. "Come back soon."

Everything was full of hope, but the limited memories of happiness from her life ended there.

Ten days later, she could no longer call her lover, nor could she get any news about him, so she had prepared for the worst-case scenario.

On the day she had decided to go to the United Front Center to inquire about her lover's whereabouts, she met her own child in the corridor.

She didn't see him often. As if in the blink of an eye, the child who would sneak up from the sixth floor to the twenty-second floor to see her grew into a capable adult, a handsome young officer.

Although her heart was full of anxiety, being able to see him nevertheless made her feel somewhat comforted. "You're here too."

Lu Feng said in a low voice, "Mother."

At that moment, she saw the ornamentation on his black uniform and the silver badge on his chest.

"Didn't the base assign you to the United Front Center?" she asked, slightly puzzled.

"I'm at the Trial Court," he said.

"Why did you go to that place?" she asked, looking at him anxiously. If not compelled to, very few people were willing to join the Trial Court.

"I volunteered." The young officer's cold green eyes seemed to contain complicated emotions, but in the end they returned to the calm of rationality. "At the Trial Court, I can be of greater use than at the United Front Center."

She wished to say something, but finally she shook her head in resignation. Everyone knew how the Trial Court was an insane place where everyone inevitably came to a terrible end.

But when it was time for them to part, Lu Feng called out to her from behind. "Mother."

Madam Lu turned around and looked at him. Lu Feng gazed at her, his voice seeming slightly hoarse as he asked, "What are you going there for?"

"Nothing." With no intention of letting her child know such things, she only smiled. "Take care of yourself."

And so she went and opened the office door of the United Front Center's Information Management Office.

"This is the Information Management Service. What do you wish to inquire about?"

"Commanding officer of the First Combat Order, Lieutenant General Gao Tang. Is he still in the wilderness?" she asked.

From the other side came the sounds of a few keystrokes.

"My apologies," the staff member said. "The Lieutenant General has already been confirmed to have died."

Her fingers were ice-cold, but she was still able to maintain her composure. To give one's life for the base was every soldier's fate.

"In… the wilderness?"

"At the entrance to the city," the staff member said. "The Trial Court's records show that Lieutenant General Gao Tang was judged to have been infected."

Her vision blurred, and she was almost unable to stay standing.

"Madam?" the staff member called out to her.

"The Trial Court…" she repeated in a murmur. "Are their judgments accurate?"

"They're generally accurate. The accuracy of every generation of Trial Court trainees can be controlled at eighty percent. The average accuracy of the trainees who officially joined the Trial Court this year is ninety percent… Madam, do you require assistance? Madam?"

As she dazedly stood there, Lu Feng's hoarse call of "Mother" from that time they were in the corridor suddenly echoed in her ears. Her body trembled.

Perhaps frightened by the Madam’s inaction, the staff member added, “Your authority level is high enough to view a detailed report. If you need to, I can request to view the exact data and ID number of the Judge in charge at the time… Madam?”

“No.” Her eyes widened as if she had seen something horrifying in midair. “Don’t look it up… don’t look it up.”

The memories were like a blank tide, their features blurry. Not only had she lost her lover, but from that day on, she had also gradually drifted apart from Lu Feng. She had come close to losing him as well.

In fact, she was losing her children every single day.

On the day the Outer City was bombed, while listening to the distant rumble, Lily squirmed into her embrace.

"Why did they blow up their own city?"

"So humankind can be more safe."

"But the people there are also the Garden of Eden's children," Lily said. "If children aren't important, why must we be shut up in here?"

"They have their own reasons. For more lofty goals, they have to make some choices," she said softly as she held Lily. "The Main City and Outer City are both our children. Sometimes the child will be selfish and sometimes hurt his mother and his fellow citizens. Only when we understand them will we not feel pain."

As she spoke, the blood seeping under the door from her childhood, the Trial Court badge on Lu Feng's chest, and the mushroom cloud rising in the distance all overlapped in front of her eyes.

Lily asked the same question. "So do you understand now?"

She did not answer the question. Pressing her own forehead against Lily's forehead, she closed her eyes. "I truly hope you all will never again experience this kind of pain."

As though a sorrowful piece of music had come to a close, An Zhe slowly opened his eyes.

He found himself lying next to the rose bed. Looking upward, he saw the deep red and dark green flowers and leaves, glass shards twinkling amongst them. A dark shadow swept through his field of vision, so he looked further up. The hole in the dome that originally could only accommodate the queen bee had gotten bigger, now taking up three-quarters of the dome. Its broken edges were glimmering with light, and a bee as long as a human arm was flying out through it.

The wave had disappeared, and there was no trace of the queen bee above the dome, but the glass bore signs of having been broken. In the night sky outside, gunfire exploded like fireworks. The humans' armed forces had begun fighting, although whether they had killed the queen bee or not was unknown. But it was very difficult to hit a bee in the vast expanse of the night. An Zhe saw the small bee flying higher and higher before it disappeared beneath the silver light of the moon.

Then there were several more dark shadows. With the buzzing of vibrating wings, five, then ten, then countless bees came flooding over from all directions. Some of the bees still had scraps of white fabric on them. An Zhe looked at where they came from and saw that the twenty-second floor was completely deserted, with not a person in sight. Everyone had turned into bees and were flying outward.

Bees—

Another flickering image appeared in An Zhe's mind.

He was a bee, a normal bee who did not eat people and only gathered from flowers.

It was a summer day, the reproduction season for bees, but it had flown into a human city by mistake. This city was impenetrable, with people's doors and windows tightly shut. The bee simply wanted to find pollen it could eat, but from start to finish, it was unable to do so.

At last, the bee saw it—behind some glass, there was a bright red rose in full bloom.

A woman was taking care of this flower. Standing next to the windowsill, she looked at the rose with a smile. After a long time, she then listlessly gazed at the sky outside, seemingly wishing very much to push the window open and touch the sky.

So this bee waited a very long time, until the woman left and came back, until she looked outside and dazedly shed a single tear.

Seeming as though she had finally made some sort of decision, she pushed the window open and the wind outside—the unrestrained wind—poured in. She closed her eyes as though she could take flight with the wind.

The bee had been hungry for a very long time. After it landed on the rose's stamen, pollen covered its fuzzy hind legs, and it inserted its slender proboscis into the center of the flower.

But it was very quickly discovered.

The woman reached out a hand toward it, her fingers trembling slightly, and

her eyes trembling as well. There was even some slight madness, as if this was the first time she had ever seen such a life. She moved very slowly, by no means seeming as though she wanted to brush the bee away, but the bee's instinct preordained what would happen next.

When her fingers were but a few millimeters away from touching it, the bee unconsciously stung her.

The bee died, and when its body left the woman's finger, a portion of its viscera were pulled out and left hanging at the end of the stinger. A bee could only use its stinger once in its life.

But it also seemed to have not died, for while its body fell into the rose, its consciousness seemed to become a portion of this woman's consciousness. Just like that, it went dormant for a long time, and nobody knew of its existence. Even the woman herself thought that she had merely been stung and not infected.

Until the bee's portion of her consciousness was gradually activated by the strange waves coming from afar.

The bee's memories were very basic. After removing this experience, it could even be described as unremarkable. When An Zhe opened his eyes once again, those things gradually faded from his mind, and the roses in front of his eyes were still as vibrant as before. Who had given the flower from back then to Madam Lu?

Only two people would give her flower seeds, her erstwhile lover and Lu Feng. Their reason for sending her flowers was no more than to make her a little happier.

So in the season when the roses were blooming, the beautiful sight moved her heart, and she then wanted to bathe in the sunshine and air outside. That was how she met the bee that had come in pursuit of flowers.

The outside wind poured in. An Zhe's head gradually cleared, and he got up from the ground. The surroundings were deserted. Shredded clothes, communicators, and the various things that people always carried around lay fallen all over the ground. He could imagine that when he was affected by the strong wave and fell into the sights within the Madam's and the bee's

memories, all the people present had also been infected by the wave. The hundreds of people had turned into hundreds of bees, all flying through the hole at the top of the dome into the sky.

But he was an exception, still maintaining a human body. Just like that time he was bitten by an insect, he had not mutated.

Right at that moment, a sense of danger arose in An Zhe's heart. He lifted his head and looked at the top of the dome. Three small military helicopters were hovering there, where they had just now opened fire on the bee swarm. An Zhe squinted in that direction, but he discovered that at this very moment, a black gun muzzle was extended out from a helicopter window and pointing directly at him.

At the same time, there were disorderly footsteps from outside the door, alarms going off in the background, and emergency lights and red alarm lights flashing madly. The floor trembled, and the heavily armed soldiers of the Emergency Response Department flooded in, securely surrounding An Zhe. Every one of them bore heavy weaponry, and every gun was pointed at him.

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Underground City Base, core area.

"Thank you for providing assistance." The white officer removed his service cap. "We assumed the Northern Base would not come."

The most chaotic time had ended.

The sounds of gunfire and explosions were dying away, only echoing in the distance, and the ground was covered with shattered glass and instruments.

An officer was saying rapidly, "The prerequisite for contactless infection is being in close proximity with monsters! Clean up the bodies first!"

Then there was a gunshot, and the officer fell. The one who opened fire was an officer of the Underground City Base.

"This is our Judge," the white officer next to Lu Feng said. "After the fall of the Virginia Base, we followed your example and set up a Trial Court. Over the years, the Trial Court has been like the base's guardian angel."

Under the protection of soldiers, a team of engineers passed through the half-collapsed steel archway and went inside the magnetic pole to perform emergency repairs.

As Lu Feng looked in that direction, he asked, "How did this invasion happen?"

"Brute force attack. They came from the giant rainforest three hundred kilometers away, their sole purpose to obtain human genes and occupy the underground base—you know, the Underground City is both warm and safe, making it the most suitable place for creatures to survive."

"What about their purpose in destroying the magnetic pole?"

"Humans' genes, thinking ability, and knowledge are constantly leaking. We can only make the guess that they already know a little. By destroying the magnetic pole, humankind will fall into confusion, which is beneficial to their assault."

"They are too numerous and powerful. Our armaments are insufficient and our research and development capability is on the decline, so we were unable to perform suppressive fire. We had no choice but to seek help from you." The officer rubbed his gun's shoulder stock. "Why does the Northern Base still have such plentiful ammunition and reserves of thermonuclear weapons? Do you have some sort of technological breakthrough?"

"For now, no." Lu Feng took off his bloodstained gloves, voice flat as he answered the officer's question. "The Northern Base has sufficient numbers of troops. When fighting on the frontlines, we can use the numeric advantage to reduce the depletion of armaments."

"Conversely, the reason for our base's huge consumption of armaments is precisely because of our shortage of troops." The white officer frowned as he thought hard.

"I got it… It's because of that heavily criticized Rose incident." Before Lu Feng

could reply, the officer had an epiphany, but the expression in his eyes was very complicated. "The Northern Base seems to always make these kinds of choices."

"I really admire the willfulness you lot have," he finally stated.

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The Northern Base.

When An Zhe was escorted away from the twenty-second floor, he passed the main hall. One hour ago, this was a place with soothing music and a gentle atmosphere, but now it was a mess. Nobody was walking around, and a tea table was toppled over in one corner. Glass cups lay on their sides, and milk was spilled everywhere, soaking a white dress that lay flat on the ground. On this white dress were some shining honey-colored things resembling the fluff on a bee's limbs.

"How many people were infected?" the commanding officer of the Emergency Response Department shouted into his communicator.

"The twenty-second, twenty-first, and twentieth floors!" A grating voice came from the communicator. "All the women in the Garden of Eden who meet the Rose Manifesto's standards, all the staff members, and the vast majority of the embryos in the culturing devices on the twentieth floor. There are some on the other floors as well, and they are currently being culled!"

The commanding officer's fingers tensed up, nearly crushing the communicator.

The second-in-command asked, "What do we do now?"

"Clean the place up! Have you gone soft in the head?" The furious commanding officer whirled around and the second-in-command shivered, but the one whom he turned to was not the second-in-command, but An Zhe.

Beneath the pale lamplight, his visage was as cold as a stone statue.

"What happened on the twenty-second floor?" His voice was like a thunderclap in An Zhe's ear, making his head ache. The soldiers escorting him pushed him forward, and he felt that the bones of his shoulders were on the verge of being crushed.

The pain made An Zhe tremble slightly. He lowered his eyelashes.

"Madam Lu mutated," he said.

"At that time, where were you?"

"… In front of her."

"Why would she mutate?" he roared. "The twentieth and higher floors of the Garden of Eden are watertight, so how could the women here mutate?"

"Many years ago… she was stung once by a bee," An Zhe replied truthfully, and the officer in front of him became so frighteningly violent that he unconsciously stepped backward and was pushed further forward by the soldiers escorting him.

"If she could mutate, she would have done so long ago!" The commanding officer yanked out the pistol at his waist.

"Senior Colonel, calm down a little. The current situation—" the second-in-command said shakily.

The ice-cold muzzle of a gun was jammed against An Zhe's temple.

"You're going to speak for him?" Veins bulged out on the senior colonel's neck. "I saw him during the transfer! He's someone from the Lighthouse, not a worker of the twenty-second floor—didn't the Lighthouse have a bee sample before? I've said ages ago that those science lunatics were raising xenogenics in the Twin Towers and accidents will happen sooner or later! Just like that old Fusion Faction, they want the base to die!"

The second-in-command asked, "Do you want to contact the Trial Court?"

"There's no need for the Trial Court." The senior colonel pressed down on the trigger, his voice cold. "He's linked to the infection."

An Zhe gently closed his eyes.

He knew the meaning that the recent event held for the humans. The disappearance of the mothers and children meant that the human base had completely lost its future. Under this sort of circumstance, no matter what the senior colonel did, he would not be surprised.

Right at that moment!

"Senior Colonel!" A familiar voice rang out from the end of the main hall.

It was the doctor.

An Zhe looked in that direction.

"He is from the Garden of Eden and currently assisting the Lighthouse with a study," the doctor said. "Please hand him over to me."

"Everyone was infected, and only he lives. Plus, his arrest was ordered tonight because of a sample." The senior colonel's voice was deep. "Does the Lighthouse intend to shield him? Exactly what research have you people been doing? Why is infection possible without contact?"

"Regardless of whether this matter has anything to do with the Lighthouse or not, you must hand him over to me," the doctor said. "At least I know that if he is killed, all will be lost."

The senior colonel let out a sardonic laugh. "And then you will continue your dangerous experiments?"

"What happened tonight has absolutely nothing to do with the Lighthouse's experiments," the doctor said in a calm voice. "On the contrary, we will investigate why things are this way."

"Since more than a hundred years ago, you people have said you can figure out the cause of infection, but right now you're still ignorant, unable to obtain even clues," the senior colonel said. "How can the Lighthouse guarantee that it

won't be more dangerous to keep him around?"

"I have no way to guarantee it"—the doctor looked directly at the senior colonel—"but I know that the base's situation will not be worse than it is now."

After a brief silence, the senior colonel's gun-wielding hand trembled. The doctor’s words seemed to make him lose all strength at that moment.

He said slowly, "After an hour, there must be some progress."

The doctor said, "All right."

With a bang, the interrogation room door came slamming down, and the escorting soldiers stood guard outside.

Through a layer of glass, An Zhe and the doctor looked at each other. The soldiers' actions were rough, practically hurling him in, and his back and shoulder blades were still throbbing with pain.

But the doctor did not exchange greetings with him. There was no time, and perhaps he wasn't in the mood.

His first question was identical to the senior colonel's. "Exactly what happened tonight?"

An Zhe told him the truth. Unlike the senior colonel, after a brief period of contemplation, the doctor believed him.

"What you're saying is that there had always been xenogenic genes incubating in her body, and they expressed themselves only now?"

An Zhe nodded.

"She killed the base's women and offspring. Was it because she hated the base that she made this choice? Are you saying that while she was lucid, she initiated contactless infection within a certain range?"

"That's not it." An Zhe shook his head. "Right when she had just turned into a bee, she only wanted to leave this place, but the bee later returned."

"Do you believe her consciousness had already been taken over at that time?"

"Yes."

The doctor suddenly laughed, but the sound of it was very raspy. His brows

were furrowed and the corners of his eyes were downturned. It was a smiling expression that looked even more ugly than crying. "She could not be spared either."

An Zhe silently looked at him.

"Don't look at me with that sort of expression." The doctor took a deep breath. "It's like you don't know anything, yet also like you know everything."

An Zhe said, "I don't know anything."

"Si Nan… Si Nan being able to maintain occasional lucidity is already a one-in-ten-thousand possibility," the doctor said.

"Do you know of the Fusion Faction?" the doctor asked.

An Zhe shook his head.

"A hundred years ago, the base's scientific research strength was tremendous. Many scientists believed that other organisms could obtain larger bodies and greater strength via mutation, and then through mutual infection and variation obtain the ability to adapt to the environment. Humans could as well." the doctor said.

"They first observed the changes radiation made to the human body, but the more complex an organism's genes are, the lower the probability of favorable mutation. When human beings are exposed to cosmic radiation, they can only get multiple cancers all over their bodies or other genetic disorders."

"Later, they believed that genetic infection was a means by which humans could evolve, so as a result they were known as the 'Fusion Faction.' They performed many crazy experiments, infecting monsters with various monsters and infecting humans with monsters. They created countless xenogenics with the aim of observing how human genes change and how to preserve human will in their memories. They discovered the fragility of human will and that human intelligence is very easily acquired by xenogenics, but there were indeed individuals who could maintain lucidity and control their post-mutation bodies with human thinking—although it was for limited periods, sometimes long and sometimes short."

An Zhe silently listened, but he saw the corners of the doctor's lips curl up in a

self-mocking smile. "This was a piece of good news. They applied for more samples and finally eliminated all influencing factors, but they reached a certain conclusion. There is no external method whatsoever that can help a person maintain his will, and whether or not a person can remain lucid after being infected does not depend on the tenacity of his will. When a person is infected, there is a one-in-ten-thousand chance he'll retain his consciousness, and the other 9,999 will forfeit their will. This is just a question of probability. Everything is random, everything is irregular, everything is uncontrollable. Randomness is the most fearsome thing for science. The day this conclusion was reached, at least three of the Fusion Faction's scientists committed suicide."

"But there were also some people who did not lose heart and continued their research. They believed that the reason why this matter presented random results was because we had not yet found the decisive factor or that the decisive factor was beyond the scope of what could be understood with human technology."

"… And then?" An Zhe asked.

"Then there was no more Fusion Faction. All samples were killed, and all research was urgently stopped." The doctor's voice fell lightly. "In that year, a humanoid leech xenogenic contaminated the water source supplying the entire Outer City, and the entire city was exposed. The ten days over which the Trial Court was set up and blood flowed like water… That xenogenic was a Fusion Faction experimental subject that had acquired human intelligence."

An Zhe thought hard, digesting the implication of the doctor's words.

But then he heard the doctor abruptly say, "I've said enough to him. Have you made your judgment?"

An Zhe was stunned. Lifting his head, he saw a door on one side of the room open and Seraing and another Judge walk through it to stand behind the doctor.

He suddenly looked at the side of the interrogation room he was in. It was a smooth mirror.

"It's a one-way mirror," the doctor said. "Seraing had been watching you the whole time."

"According to the Trial rules," Seraing said, looking at An Zhe, "I still believe he is human."

"I thought as much." The doctor seemed to finally let out a sigh of relief. "Even Lu Feng could comfortably place him by his own side."

"Lu Feng…" With those words, the doctor's eyes flew wide open. "If Madam Lu had been infected long ago and it was gradually stimulated over recent days, and she could even infect Si Nan without completely losing her sanity, why did Lu Feng not see it?"

"My apologies." Seraing's gentle eyelashes lowered. "The Trial Court has never been able to judge whether or not the women of the Garden of Eden have been infected."

The doctor was taken aback. "Why is that?"

"The environment in which they grow up is too different from that of ordinary humans. According to the Trial rules, every single woman does not meet the standards."

The doctor was stunned.

Five seconds later, he couldn't help laughing out loud. He bent double, body trembling, and his hands clutched the chair's armrests in a death grip.

It was only once a full three minutes passed that he finished laughing, after which his expression changed to one of loss. The color in his cheeks receded, leaving behind only a wan complexion.

"Do you still recall the source of the calamity that happened not long ago in the Outer City?" he suddenly asked.

"I do," Seraing said. "Insect-class creatures had reached their breeding season."

"Like that, why the Madam infected so many people can be explained," the doctor said. "She wished to leave the Garden of Eden, where the only goal was human reproduction. She wanted to obtain freedom, even if she had to abandon her human form and consciousness for that purpose. However… The moment she completely freed herself from her human body was also when she

was controlled by the queen bee's biological instinct… It's currently the breeding season for arthropods. What she was doing when she was human was something she still had to do after turning into the queen bee. She…"

The doctor continued speaking, his broken words making it difficult to form sentences. In the end, he closed his eyes bitterly. "She could never get free."

After a long silence, his voice was frighteningly hoarse. "It's inescapable."

An Zhe opened his eyes slightly wider, for he realized what the doctor was saying.

The instinct of a creature was to live, and the instinct of a species was to reproduce.

No person could escape it. Nobody could escape it, and the Madam had already fallen into it for eternity.

Perhaps, perhaps at that moment only, that fleeting moment—the moment she was about to turn into a bee but had not yet done so—she briefly obtained what she wanted.

Then the eternal and ignorant black curtain abruptly fell before her eyes.

"The Rose Manifesto was the inevitable choice for the base's long-term development, but it does indeed violate the standards of humanity. The Trial Court, the mercenaries, the emergency response system… Many systems were violated. If I was not seeing things from the base's point of view, I would support the Madam's resistance." His voice was extremely low. "But did her resistance have any meaning? She even… took away all of our embryos."

"Nobody had done anything wrong, but the ending is still the same." He looked at the blank walls, the look in his eyes approaching that of a breakdown. Seemingly on the verge of breaking, he could barely maintain his clearheadedness by mumbling to himself, "This… this fucking age."

To humans, this era of the geomagnetic field's disappearance was not a catastrophe, but rather a trampling upon.

It first made humans aware of their own bodies' fragility, then made them grasp the meaninglessness of the technology they were so proud of, then

denied the legitimacy of the entire base's methods of operation, and finally proved that the will that humans alone had was also all but worthless.

But putting it this way was also not quite right.

Because this world did not care about the existence of humans at all.

An Zhe placed his hand flat against the interrogation room's glass. He strove to get closer to the doctor, wishing to comfort him.

"All right." He saw the doctor take several deep breaths, forcing himself to recover a certain degree of calm. "Now it's time for you to answer two questions."

"First, since Seraing believes that you're human, why were you not infected by Madam Lu? Second, why did you enter Laboratory D1344 and take away the inert sample?"

An Zhe dropped his eyes and said nothing.

"You must tell me," the doctor said. "If I cannot get results, you still will only be able to land in the senior colonel's hands."

An Zhe silently shook his head.

"You haven't seen the military's interrogation methods." The doctor got up from his chair, stood in front of the glass wall, and met his gaze. "If you also don't know why you weren't infected, we'll just wait for Lu Feng to come back, restore power, and go to the Lighthouse to perform a full-body examination, but you must tell me where the D1344 sample is."

An Zhe still said nothing. In the end, the doctor said, "Is there something you cannot tell Seraing and me?"

An Zhe nodded.

"Why not? You're a good kid." The look in the doctor's eyes was complicated as he once again repeated, "That sample is of great importance. Exactly where is it?"

# 31

"HE HOPED THAT THE COLONEL WOULD ALWAYS BE THE COLONEL."

AN ZHE HAD NOT SLEPT for twenty hours. If he counted from the incident with the Madam, about five or six hours had passed, and it was now midnight.

He had revealed nothing to the doctor. Once the time limit was up, the senior colonel lost all of his patience and ordered a forced confession.

The interrogation room was very well equipped. Humankind's torture method was very civilized, for it would not cause blood and flesh to fly. It was a kind of electrocution.

The feeling of the electric current traveling through his body was like thousands of venomous ants all gnawing at the nerves throughout his body at the same time.

Pain.

Pain that he had never experienced before.

An Zhe closed his eyes, gasping for breath and trembling all over. Fine beads of cold sweat formed on his forehead, and every inch of his skin was twitching.

When his spore was in the laboratory, had it experienced this kind of treatment? Perhaps it had.

Amidst the immeasurable pain, he lost virtually all of his lucidity. His mind was a chaotic mess; it was as though he had thought a lot, yet he didn't know exactly what he had thought about. He just vaguely felt that it was something very important.

He also did not know exactly how much time had passed. This painful torment stretched the seconds out, making each one feel like a lifetime.

Amidst his grogginess, he suddenly heard a sound from the corridor outside!

"Doctor—the magnetic field frequency has risen again!"

Like a thunderclap, this cry made him give a start, and he abruptly came around. Likewise, the atmosphere in the interrogation room changed in an instant.

An Zhe's heart thumped a few times. The magnetic field frequency has risen again, the magnetic field frequency has risen again—

This meant that the Underground City Base had been saved. It also meant that Lu Feng was coming back, assuming he was still alive.

He heard the doctor's eager voice. "It's risen again? Is it a large extent? Can it return to the normal frequency?"

"I don't know," an unknown person replied. "But the aurora has already appeared, and the frequency's fluctuation indicates that the Underground City Base is manually performing frequency adjustments. They are safe."

"Good heavens…" The doctor's voice trembled. "They… they really were able to be saved. What about communications? Have communications been restored? Quickly get in touch with the military and open the emergency channel right away. What happened over here was too big, we must tell Lu—"

"Doctor," Seraing spoke up all of a sudden, saying in a low voice, "I just received an emergency message from the military. We're prohibited from making any form of contact with the Colonel."

After a brief silence, the doctor asked, "How come?"

"I… do not know," Seraing said. "Perhaps it is because of Madam Lu and An Zhe."

In an instant, An Zhe suddenly recalled what he had been mulling over the entire time.

He was the murderer who had stolen the important sample.

Madam Lu was the xenogenic who had infected the entire Garden of Eden.

And both he and Madam Lu were people who had direct connections to Lu

Feng.

He was still not yet clearheaded, but in that moment, with strength that sprang from an unknown source, he acquired an astonishing calmness. After coughing a few times, he said weakly, "… I'll talk."

The electric current disappeared, and his head became a little clearer. He was deeply regretting what he had said to the doctor just now about the Garden of Eden, Madam Lu, and the queen bee, but he believed that the doctor would definitely be able to understand what he meant.

But the effects of the electrocution were too severe. He could not speak at all, his head felt heavy, and his entire body was continuously spasming and retching. In the end, the doctor opened the interrogation room door and poured him a cup of sugar water.

An Zhe finally recovered a little.

"Everything I said before was untrue. I'm a xenogenic," he said. "There's a kind of wave that induces contactless infection, and xenogenics can feel it. Five days ago, I came into contact with Si Nan at the Lighthouse and was infected. I destroyed the inert sample because you people said… it was very important to humankind. Then, in order to avoid arrest, I went to the Garden of Eden, where Madam Lu was very friendly to me. Under the breeding season's influence, I infected the women there, using her as the center."

The doctor looked at him and asked with a frown, "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm a xenogenic who has already obtained human intelligence. I was infected five days ago." An Zhe's voice was very soft and certain. He knew that his lie was very shoddy, but with the doctor's intellect, he would definitely be able to understand.

The doctor was suddenly seized with terror, a slight tremor in his voice as he said, "You—"

All at once, snow-white hyphae fluttered in the air. The doctor's eyes flew wide open, but then the hyphae forcibly covered his mouth and nose. In the event of suffocation, people would reflexively open their mouths and breathe wildly, so the hyphae took advantage of the opportunity to feed themselves

into the doctor's mouth.

After a fit of violent coughs, the doctor's gaze instantly went unfocused, and then he pitched forward and fell unconscious onto the ground.

Seraing yanked out his gun!

"When Lu Feng comes back, or when the people from the military ask, tell them… what I said." While looking at Seraing, An Zhe's tone of voice carried a hint of an entreaty. "Then, just as I lost my mind and was about to attack the doctor, you shot me and my body evaporated. In this world, I never existed."

The muzzle of Seraing's gun was pointed at him. "… Why would you do this? Exactly what are you?"

"I…" An Zhe slowly tightened his grip on the Trial Court badge in his hand.

He was a mushroom, but he could not say it. He could not be a mushroom.

However, he was about to leave. This was something he had decided upon from the very beginning. After he left, no matter how other people viewed him, it would no longer have any meaning.

He knew how important the human base was to Lu Feng. As for why he was able to enter it, it was because the Arbiter had chosen to believe in him based on a strange intuition, and he knew how valuable this trust was.

If Lu Feng came back and knew the truth of everything, he would know the depth of his mother's hatred for and disappointment in the base's institutions as well as how she semi-voluntarily turned into a xenogenic and finally destroyed the entire Garden of Eden. And then, even the person he had always kept at his side and placed his trust in was a xenogenic who had always been harboring evil thoughts and designs against the sample—

What would happen to Lu Feng? Would he be able to accept it?

An Zhe did not know, but he did not wish to have Lu Feng face these kinds of things.

It was not necessarily because he was worried about how the base would look upon Lu Feng. He and Lu Feng could not be considered as having a deep friendship; in fact, he was bullied very badly by the man.

He just…

He just felt that Lu Feng was a very good human.

The Madam had said that Lu Feng would die a miserable death and that being unable to personally see the day Lu Feng went mad was her greatest regret. Then… Lu Feng being able to stay forever unwavering was his sole aspiration worth speaking of within this human base.

*The Madam has already left, so there remained nobody to tell the tale. Just let what happened tonight to be an ordinary accidental infection event,* An Zhe thought.

"I'm saying," he murmured, "that I'm already no longer human."

With a bang, Seraing's bullet fired toward An Zhe's right shoulder, but after the gunshot rang out, the bullet embedded itself into the wall opposite, while An Zhe himself swayed briefly. All of his clothes dropped to the ground, but the body inside them disappeared without a trace. There was only a white shape that abruptly appeared in front of Seraing before disappearing just as quickly, as if it were simply an illusion.

An Zhe dove into the vent in the corner behind him. Whatever Seraing thought, he was in no position to care. He entered the convoluted pipes at top speed, almost recklessly finding one room after another until he finally got out at a deserted office that had a window. Using his human form, he pushed the window open, and the aurora shone down on him. He braced his arms against the windowsill and leaped down. Swiftly turning into hyphae, he slid all the way down along the outer wall and landed on the ground.

The aurora had just appeared, and the power supply had not yet been fully restored, so there were no people outside nor any surveillance. He changed into human form and, clad in a robe made from hyphae, sprinted outward.

People could come chasing at any time; this was the most stressful journey of An Zhe's life. He crossed the entire Main City and returned to the Outer City. At the Outer City's abandoned supply depot, he picked up a backpack containing simple clothes, hardtack, and maps—maps were the most important thing. Holding the backpack in his arms, he traveled outward along the rail transit line. The journey was very long. He walked for a very long time in the night, but it

didn't matter.

When the aurora was fading little by little and the eastern horizon lit up with a hint of red, An Zhe had reached the Outer City's gate.

The examination office, the Trial Court… The buildings at the city gate were identical to when he arrived, but because the Outer City had emptied out, everything was locked up. An Zhe turned and came to the base of the wall. He climbed up onto the roof of an armored vehicle, then reached out, his fingers turning into hyphae before he started climbing up the city wall—perhaps because of the solar wind over the past few days, a strange sight appeared at the top of the city wall: it was covered with an even layer of sand, the fine grains seemingly fused with the steel wall to form an amalgamation. When the hyphae got there, fine white sand fell down, but the inner layer was sand as well.

After a slow climb, An Zhe stood atop the wall. Right at that moment, something next to him quivered. An Zhe instantly looked over to discover that there were two black bees the size of humans next to the heavy machine guns at the top of the wall and a few more not far away. One could imagine that they had flown out from the Garden of Eden not long ago and were temporarily resting here.

That gray bee had been awoken by his movements, and its trembling wings indicated that it was about to fly off. An Zhe pursed his lips. In the span of a moment, he made a decision—

In the following moment, part of his body transformed into softer, more flexible, and more weightless hyphae. He threw himself forward and wrapped himself around the black bee, and his body sank into the bristles on the black bee's back.

Frightened, the black bee's wings started vibrating with a buzzing sound, and it swiftly flew toward the sky, catapulting into the distance.

An Zhe stayed securely on its back. The cool early morning wind blew into his face, and he narrowed his eyes as he looked back at the entire human base. The sun had risen, and the glorious daybreak poured its magnificent golden light down, enveloping the foggy city. Suddenly, he heard a thundering noise travel

over from a distant place.

He opened his eyes slightly and saw a black dot gradually increase in size. It was the shape of a familiar fighter plane, the PL1109. Its jet-black body was plated with a golden shimmer amidst the dawn's sea of clouds, and on each side of it was a team of wingmen. Their flight speed gradually slowed, and the entire fleet slowly descended, appearing to be preparing to land.

Lu Feng had come back safely. Although going to the rescue of the Underground City Base was a nigh-impossible mission to complete, the Colonel seemed to have always been an invincible person.

Stimulated by the sound, the black bee flew even faster into the distance. The fierce winds lifted up An Zhe's sleeves, causing them to flap noisily.

As An Zhe looked over there, he didn't know why, but although the early morning wind made his eyes sting, he still smiled.

He recalled the scene when he first saw Lu Feng at the bottom of this city gate. That day, the humans' Arbiter had lifted his head to look at An Zhe from afar, and beneath the black hat brim was a pair of ice-cold green eyes.

The Madam's roses withered, but he hoped that the Colonel would always be the Colonel.

Goodbye.

# 32

## “I... HATE YOU.”

"MODULE A1 IS NORMAL."

"Module D3 is normal."

"The engine..."

The whole plane gave a jerk.

"Unknown engine breakdown!"

"Initiate emergency landing procedure!"

"Commander, the emergency procedure failed to initiate!"

"Switch to manual mode!"

The entire plane shook wildly, and the roar of the engine was intermittent.

Hubbard gripped his seat's armrests and checked that his seat belt was fastened.

"A breakdown?" Lu Feng asked. "Wasn't it checked once prior to takeoff?"

Next to him, Hubbard frowned slightly. "Were we attacked by flying xenogenics during the flight?"

Another officer said, "No, we've been safe the entire time."

Hubbard narrowed his eyes. "Speaking of which, one of our wingmen crashed three hours ago."

The cabin trembled continually, and the plane went up and down. In the end, it finally maintained stability and taxied to the ground.

The cockpit door opened, revealing the pale faces of the deputy commander

and navigator. The navigator knelt down next to the trash can and vomited.

"Good heavens…" the deputy commander said. "We were almost done for. There's definitely a problem with the engine. I've never seen this sort of breakdown before. This plane can't be used anymore. It must be completely overhauled."

However, although they were almost done for, they still landed safely.

The moment they got off the plane, Lu Feng lifted his head to look at this city that was bathed in the morning sunlight. In the Outer City area, a swarm of bees took flight, wings vibrating, and disappeared into the sky.

"Bees?" Hubbard asked.

But they had no time to continue their discussion.

A row of the United Front Center's officers stood neatly at the bottom of the boarding stairs.

"Welcome back." After saluting them, the leader had a serious expression on his face as he said, "On behalf of the base, I congratulate you."

Hubbard had no military rank and thus did not need to care about the military's ritualistic formalities. Without beating around the bush, he asked, "What's the matter with the base?"

The corners of that officer's mouth tightened. "Unspeakable disaster," he said.

Then he turned toward Lu Feng. "Colonel Lu Feng, please come with us."

Lu Feng looked around and, without saying anything, got into a car with them.

While looking toward the direction they left in, Hubbard's gaze was frozen in place. Next to him was a senior officer of the general staff. Right at that moment, the officer said, "The relationship between the United Front Center and Colonel Lu is not very good."

"I heard that on the very first day he officially became a Judge, he killed one of the United Front Center's lieutenant generals," Hubbard said, arms crossed.

The officer said nothing. In this situation, staying silent was approximately the

same as tacit agreement.

United Front Center.

"That's basically the situation," the admiral at the end of the long table said.

The base had a strict military hierarchy, but the Trial Court was an exception. It was initially just a joint organization formed by the Lighthouse and the military, with scientific research personnel heading it, so there were no predefined ranks that were too high up. Afterward, the Trial Court was stationed in the Outer City almost all year round. The Outer City's ranks were even more limited, with the directors of the City Defense Agency and City Affairs Office all being colonels. As a result, many years passed without anyone proposing to elevate the Arbiter's military rank.

But everyone knew that the Arbiter had the authority beyond all other ranks to bring others to trial, maneuver, and issue orders. His actual authority far surpassed what a colonel could have. Precisely because of this, the existence of this position seemed to make people be even more on guard and fearful, but the base was unable to part with it.

Lu Feng's voice was very soft, and no discernible fluctuations of emotion could be heard. "How many people does the base have left?"

"According to the preliminary census, there are 8700 survivors."

"At present, the United Front Center has dispatched a fleet to track the swarm's trajectory," the admiral said. "Colonel Lu, I must declare that the two immediate suspects in this calamity both have connections to you."

"I am deeply sorry," Lu Feng said. "But I personally am absolutely loyal to the base."

"The base believes in you," the admiral said. "You know what you ought to do."

"Yes." Lu Feng's voice was flat. "Unknown breakdowns have occurred with the PL1109 fleet, so there is no way of executing the flight mission. Requesting alteration."

"Request granted."

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Dusk had fallen. An Zhe did not know where his black bee wanted to fly to, but he was almost dried out by the wind. Thus, when the black bee landed for a brief rest, he changed into hyphae form again and covered its entire head.

Unsurprisingly, the black bee fell unconscious.

This place, a flat desert, was very dry and unsuited for the survival of mushrooms. From the backpack, An Zhe took out human clothes and put them on, then ate a bit of hardtack and drank some water. With the black bee's body blocking the wind, he planned to sleep for a night first.

The roar of a plane came from the sky. An Zhe tilted his head back and watched it fly south. Over the course of this day, there were more than ten southbound planes. On the black bee's back, An Zhe thought for a good while before finally coming up with a conjecture.

The black bee was also flying south. This swarm of bees definitely had a single destination, someplace suited for bees to live, whereas those human planes—they were pursuing the bee swarm. Their purpose was to kill the bees, because those were bees that had acquired human genes. Among the monsters in the wilderness, arthropods were a very weak group, so if they were not eradicated, human genes would spread throughout the entire wilderness by way of the food chain. If those monsters united to attack the base, it would be very dangerous.

As for why the humans were able to track those bees, he did not know. For the moment, it seemed that his black bee was not within the scope of the pursuit.

He looked at the plane, which was small and seemed to be some kind of fighter craft. It flew very unsteadily, shaking like mad in the air. With a frown, An Zhe quietly watched as the plane gave a violent shudder, burst into a ball of flame in the distant sky, and plummeted down.

He had seen the same spectacle twice during the day as well. Humankind's airplanes frequently had accidents, but he didn't know why.

An Zhe wrapped his clothes around himself tightly and closed his eyes. The roar in the sky was constant, but he was hidden beneath the black bee and it was nighttime, so humans ought to be unable to see him.

Just as he was about to awaken, a loud noise made him give a sudden start, and he opened his eyes.

The wind was very strong, and the roaring noise was loud as well, loud to the point of being strange. An Zhe strove to open his eyes and look at the source. A hundred meters away, one of humankind's small fighter planes suddenly shook in the air. Its nose dipped downward, and then it slammed into the ground with a loud crash. One wing snapped, and the entire plane tilted to one side.

The ground trembled, and thick smoke rose from the plane.

Frowning even more deeply, An Zhe got up and walked in that direction. Sometimes, it was very difficult for him to describe the motivation driving his behavior, just like the day he dragged the grievously wounded and dying An Ze back to his cave.

The cabin door was deformed, having warped and cracked. When An Zhe pushed open the broken cabin door with all his might, a human body rolled out. Clad in the dark blue uniform of a military pilot, he was covered with blood, and his eyes were closed. An Zhe bent down carefully to check for his breath.

He was already dead.

He climbed into the cockpit. In the cockpit's other seat, there was another dead person. An Zhe went inside, and behind were the passenger cabin and weapons cabin. He thought that the two people in front were already no longer breathing and thus beyond saving, but perhaps he could find some supplies here.

In this manner, he walked into the back cabin.

The very next moment, he became completely dumbstruck.

To one side in front of him, there was a person. He was completely still, his head resting against the back of the seat in front.

An Zhe's breathing was about to stop. He strode over to the person, then

lifted up his upper body and saw his face.

It was Lu Feng.

Lu Feng was also dead.

An Zhe was completely unable to describe his emotions at the moment. Lu Feng… was dead?

He had no time whatsoever to think about why Lu Feng would appear here. He could only shakily check for his breath.

The following moment, his emotions changed dramatically—he was still breathing. The cabin was in very good condition, and the seat belt had also been buckled very securely. Lu Feng had not been struck by anything, so it must have been that the force of impact during the crash was too big, causing him to pass out.

Within the entirety of the cramped space was the smell of something burning, and a wisp of smoke drifted over from the cockpit.

He knew they couldn't linger here.

Lu Feng's gun was clipped to his waist. An Zhe took it, then pulled Lu Feng up. Draping the man's arm around his shoulders, An Zhe attempted to move him out.

But it was too difficult. He could not budge Lu Feng, for the distance between the seat and front wall was too small. The acrid burning smell became increasingly strong. From a communicator came the hissing sound of electricity, and it was mixed with an operator's shouts. "United Front Center to Colonel Lu Feng, please respond."

"United Front Center to Fighter PJ103, please respond."

The smoke was getting thicker, and the engine roared. An Zhe gritted his teeth and yanked hard—

He saw Lu Feng abruptly open his eyes.

The world went spinning. Lu Feng reached out and grabbed him, then kicked open the emergency exit door on the side, and the steel debris went tumbling down with the thick smoke. Then he yanked An Zhe to himself, and the two of

them fell hard onto the ground below, but Lu Feng did not stop there. Holding An Zhe's wrist in one hand and clasping An Zhe's shoulder with his other hand, he exerted his strength outward, and together they fell into a slight depression in the ground nearby.

It was a little painful. An Zhe unconsciously held on tight to Lu Feng, and the very next second, there was the sound of a deafening explosion in his ears!

In the shallow pit, the ground trembled and rocks rolled down. An Zhe lifted his head and saw a brilliant and powerful firework explode in the night sky. A raging inferno burst to life around the fighter plane, its heat radiating against his face and its glow resembling perpetual golden lightning, and an explosion sent the wreckage of the plane flying like shooting stars in all directions. Someone's broken hand was thrown high into the sky with the firework, where it hung briefly at the peak before falling. The wrist landed outside, and the palm landed not far from them, stirring up a puff of dust.

The plane had blown itself up, just like the two accidents An Zhe had witnessed before.

The sound of the explosion ceased three seconds later, and the surrounding fields went quiet, with only the sounds of the wind and flames being blown by the wind remaining as thick smoke billowed up.

A narrow escape.

If he hadn't gone inside the plane, perhaps Lu Feng's life would have ended in that explosion, and he would have never known who had died in that accident.

Or, even if he did go inside the plane but Lu Feng hadn't woken up in time, the ones to have died would have been both of them.

Having barely gotten away with his life, his heart felt a little suffocated, his blood surged, and his ears rang. All he could hear was the sound of their breathing.

After a long while, he heard Lu Feng murmur, "… Thank you."

An Zhe gasped for a few breaths, his body aching all over. The places that got hurt when he rolled on the ground were no big deal; the residual effects from the electrocution and the soldiers' rough treatment were worse.

An Zhe lifted his head.

In this manner, he and Lu Feng locked eyes.

In the few seconds that they locked eyes, the pain of the electricity stabbing through his entire body arose from the depths of An Zhe's consciousness, and he seemed to have returned to that cramped and ice-cold interrogation room. It was just that this time, the interrogator became Lu Feng.

He felt a greater sense of danger and fear from Lu Feng than anyone else.

Lu Feng looked at him for a long time, but An Zhe could not understand his expression.

He only heard Lu Feng ask, very low and one syllable at a time, "An Zhe?"

An Zhe said nothing.

The name on his ID card was An Ze, but he called himself An Zhe. Even if it was commonplace in the Outer City to be dissatisfied with one's randomly assigned name and thus take the liberty to change it, it still could not cover up the fact that this in itself was a flaw.

That pair of eyes—those eyes that seemed able to see through everything—were exactly the same as the ones from the day they first met. The day he walked through the city gates, he had been prepared to die under the Arbiter's gun, but that day, Lu Feng had spared him.

But he could not escape. This Trial was merely two months late in its arrival.

He heard Lu Feng ask coldly, "Where is the sample?"

An Zhe could not answer this question, but the Arbiter's tone of voice and authority were more frightening to him than electrocution. He bit down hard on his lip. In the end, he said, "I ate it… It's gone."

Lu Feng's fingers gently pressed down on his abdomen. Through a thin layer of fabric, the feeling of the touch was frighteningly distinct, and An Zhe felt numb all over from terror. He understood beyond a shadow of a doubt that if Lu Feng knew that the spore could still be removed, he would cut open An Zhe's body without the slightest hesitation, just like how he had cut An Zhe's hyphae apart with a military knife half a year ago.

He was unable to think. With his mind blank, he could only watch Lu Feng. Beneath the light of the moon and the flames, the Colonel was expressionless, without a hint of warmth in his thin and long eyebrows or his cold green eyes, nor were there any visible emotions. He was forever perfect and cold-hearted.

An Zhe softly panted for breath. He had hidden Lu Feng's gun behind himself, and now he was continuing to surreptitiously push it further back, wishing to hide it even better.

In any case, without his gun, Lu Feng couldn't… couldn't do anything to him.

However, this movement made Lu Feng notice the gun instead, and his eyes turned chillier. With remarkably quick movements and inexorable strength, he securely restrained An Zhe in a one-handed embrace, and with his other hand he pried open An Zhe's fingers and snatched away the gun.

Gasping for breath, An Zhe desperately struggled against—

"Bang!"

A gunshot rang out.

An Zhe's mind went blank for a moment, but then he found that he was still alive. He heard the sound of something heavy falling to the ground in the distance accompanied by a monster's roar, and when he turned around, he saw a lizard-class monster that Lu Feng had squarely hit flailing about as it fell.

An Zhe felt cold all over. He knew that in this world, he and that monster were the same, whereas Lu Feng and they were eternal foes, forever unable to come to an accord.

Right at that moment, choppy and distorted noises came once again from Lu Feng's communicator amidst the sounds of harsh static. "Uni… Center to… 03, please…"

In a cold voice, Lu Feng replied to the call, "PJ103 has received comms. The fighter plane has crashed, and the pilot is confirmed dead."

"Please… mission progress. Send… coordinates."

The voice became increasingly distorted and choppy. If it was not because a problem had occurred with the communicator, then it was that the base's

communication network covering the wilderness had collapsed again. During the month that he was in the Outer City, An Zhe had learned from snippets of the mercenary teams' conversations that the signal out in the wilderness had never been good.

He heard Lu Feng say flatly, "The target is under control."

"… order. Confirm… xenogenic type. Get the lost… clues… shot dead. Please —"

"Do you hear me?" Lu Feng's voice was hoarse. At the end of his sentence, there seemed to be a bit of a tremble, but there was more of a tough coldness. "Answer me."

The ice-cold muzzle of the gun pressed against An Zhe's temple. For the first time in his life, he realized how close he was to death, and terror held firm sway over him. Trembling, he said, "I… I won't hand it over."

"PJ103, please immediately—"

The sound of the broadcast from the communicator pushed all emotions to their apex.

Then it came to an abrupt stop the very next moment.

"Bzz—"

The static grew louder. It started as a rustle, then it became a long buzz, and finally, after a high-frequency sound that shot up, it suddenly disappeared.

Taking its place was a soft female voice with a gentle frequency. "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the base's signal has been interrupted. This is normal. Please refrain from panicking and carry out all activities as usual. The communication signal will recover at some point. At that time, the public broadcasts will be sent to you, so please stay tuned."

"I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere…"

An Zhe was still being securely held. They were so close that it was a distance where the peril had reached its maximum. Lu Feng could kill him anytime and anywhere, and he could feel Lu Feng's heartbeat and breaths—his face clearly looked so calm, but the rate of his heartbeat was not at all slow.

The fingers Lu Feng was holding An Zhe's shoulder with tightened, coincidentally touching his injury. An Zhe gave a start, and his vision was covered with a layer of mist. With his body trembling, he let out a whimper.

The ice-cold muzzle of the gun was still pressed to his temple, having not been warmed up by his body heat in the slightest. Likewise, the terror and shadow of death had not retreated even a little. An Zhe opened his mouth, and in that moment, he was practically unable to even speak. He knew he had already fallen apart—if mushrooms could also fall apart.

Everything he had seen in his life flashed before his eyes, but he could not grasp anything nor obtain anything. Merely two nights ago, he was still thinking about how exactly to lie in order to protect the Colonel.

"I… won't hand it over to you." He protected his abdomen with his hands, his voice both trembling so badly that he could not form whole sentences and carrying the undertone of a sob. "I… hate you."

The muzzle of the gun suddenly trembled.

"… Please stay tuned."

The final sound of the broadcast played.

Everything went silent.

The fire of the wreckage went out, and the sound of the communicator stopped. All communications had been cut off.

Here, there was no trace of human existence, only open country all around and unbroken desert that connected directly to the night sky.

Just like humankind had never existed. No humans, no human culture, and no human base. All of the—all of the exhausting entanglements and all of the painful struggles disappeared along with the signal, suddenly dissipating like ashes and smoke.

Upon this ancient desert, only the two of them remained.

With a muffled thump, the gun fell to the ground.

Lu Feng closed his eyes and held An Zhe tightly in his arms.

# 33

## “SOMETIMES, HE WANTED TO PROTECT EVERYONE.”

THE MOMENT LU FENG wrapped his arms around him, An Zhe began to tremble violently.

Slumped against Lu Feng, An Zhe's forehead was pressed to his shoulder. He was completely unable to describe his emotional state in that moment, only feeling like a hand had curled around his heart and tightened its grip. Fierce pain inundated him, and fat droplets of a warm liquid gushed from his eyes. He knew that he was crying and that those were tears, something that only humans had, but this was his first time experiencing this sort of feeling—the feeling that his heart was being torn to pieces.

Why did things become like this?

He thought, if Lu Feng hadn't spared him two months ago, had his identity as a xenogenic been revealed and had Lu Feng taken him out, then he wouldn't feel so sad about betraying Lu Feng's trust.

If he and Lu Feng had not established something akin to friendship over these past several days, then when facing the muzzle of Lu Feng's gun, perhaps he would not have been so afraid.

And if, supposing Lu Feng hadn't held him in the end, perhaps he would not have felt… so hurt.

Why Lu Feng put down the gun, he did not know. He had never before experienced such intense emotions that he was even unable to take care of other matters.

He understood nothing at all, but just like that, he cried for a very long time. Even when no more tears came out, he was still sniffling sporadically.

The night deepened, and after finally calming down, An Zhe noticed that their surroundings were silent as well. It was like there was nothing left but the two of them in this world. He buried himself in Lu Feng's shoulder. Chest against chest, the slight tremor of heartbeats was transmitted through the fabric, though who it came from was indistinguishable.

They were both still alive.

He rubbed his eyes and asked in a slightly hoarse voice, "Why did you fall?"

"Engine breakdown," Lu Feng said. "I'm going to get the black box."

An Zhe hummed in response and let go of Lu Feng. This hug seemed to have lasted too long. When they separated, the wind of the wilderness filled the space that had been intimately seamless, and it was very cold. An Zhe gently shivered. Lu Feng draped his coat over An Zhe, then got up and walked toward the wreckage of the plane. It was a small fighter plane, so the wreckage was by no means large. An Zhe watched as Lu Feng pried open the tail of the plane with the parts scattered on the ground and fetched a bright orange box from within.

He thought about the various things that had happened today and said, "I saw many planes fall."

Lu Feng hummed flatly in response.

Even though An Zhe was only a mushroom, he also knew that it was very odd for engine failures to occur in so many planes at the same time. He asked, "Why?"

"I don't know. It can only be analyzed after getting back to the base." Lu Feng put the box away and walked over to him. "Where are you living?"

"On the ground," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng raised his eyebrows.

An Zhe promptly shut his mouth and said nothing more. This phrase "on the ground" was really not like what a human would say.

But Lu Feng very quickly noticed the only unusual things upon this patch of wasteland—the black bee and the backpack on the ground—and walked in their direction. An Zhe followed, but pain lanced through his lower leg, for he had

knocked it against something earlier.

Lu Feng turned back to look at him. An Zhe bit down on his lower lip, then limped after Lu Feng.

Then, Lu Feng picked him up in a piggyback carry.

Since this was the second time he was carried by the Colonel in such a manner, An Zhe comfortably settled in. They were very close, the distance unlike what humans and xenogenics should maintain.

But just for tonight, the Colonel did not seem to be the Colonel, and the xenogenic did not seem to be a xenogenic.

While hugging Lu Feng's neck, An Zhe vaguely felt the line of a thin cord. His fingers moved slightly downward and encountered something cool to the touch.

A hard pendant hung from Lu Feng's neck as well.

Escaping from death by Lu Feng's hand seemed to have given him a significant increase in courage. Moreover, the pendant's shape was also far too familiar. With his fingers pressed against Lu Feng's neck, he fished the object out, and Lu Feng himself said nothing, seeming to tacitly allow this action.

At the end of the silvery metal chain, a brass-colored bullet shell gleamed with a dull light beneath the aurora.

His own bullet pendant represented his lost spore, but why did Lu Feng also have one? An Zhe did not know what this meant, so he made a soft questioning noise.

He heard Lu Feng say flatly, "My father."

An Zhe said nothing. After approximately three minutes, he stuffed the pendant back beneath Lu Feng's shirt, docilely rested his head against Lu Feng's shoulder, and drew in his arms, no longer squirming around.

Through the clothes, Lu Feng felt the boy on his back initially tense up a little with anxiety, then gradually relax until his entire body was hanging off him. After the day's events, An Zhe was still able to lean on him without the slightest bit of caution. This boy would always act in ways that exceeded his

expectations.

An Zhe's warm breath puffed against his shoulder. On his back was the normal weight of a boy his age, but to Lu Feng, it was by no means heavy. He stuck to Lu Feng like cotton, lacking any vigilance whatsoever, as though the dangers and terrors of this world ought to have nothing to do with him.

Lu Feng remembered when he joined the Trial Court.

He did not have any particular reason for entering the Trial Court. Sometimes, he wanted to protect everyone.

But in reality, he had protected some people and hurt many others. Though he had not originally intended to, he had already become the target of everyone's hatred.

As he walked, An Zhe's breathing became lighter and more even; he had cried for a very long time today, so it probably tired him out. Just like all other innocent little things, perhaps this small xenogenic was about to fall asleep.

Lu Zhen also remembered that one month ago, on the afternoon when insects were wreaking havoc in the city, he had received An Zhe's phone call. His voice was soft, like he was afraid. That was his seventh year of being the Arbiter. In these seven years, it was the first time he had been asked for help. Nobody else would do such a thing.

In this kind of age, protecting everyone was nothing but a fantasy doomed to be broken, but he thought he could at least protect a certain person—at least, the moment he was asked for help, this fleeting hope arose in his heart.

When he was put down, An Zhe was on the verge of falling asleep. Lu Feng used his own coat as a blanket to cover him with, but he clearly did not know how to take care of others, for the badge on his chest scratched An Zhe again. Half-awake, An Zhe detached it and discovered that it was the exact one he had always been carrying around while at the base. When he escaped in hyphae form, everything on his person, including this badge, had probably fallen to the ground, but now the badge had returned to Lu Feng.

Grasping it, An Zhe became significantly more awake, and he cautiously asked, "Did the doctor say anything to you?"

Lu Feng looked down at him. "What is it that you want to say?"

An Zhe said in a small voice, "… Nothing."

Lu Feng did indeed plan to explain to him in all seriousness, but then he saw the little xenogenic curl himself up into a small ball with the backpack in his arms. In the moonlight, a pair of jet-black eyes looked at him earnestly, as though it were easy to produce surges of emotion.

So Lu Feng let out a scornful laugh and said, "You think you have such great capabilities?"

An Zhe rolled over, turning his back to Lu Feng.

An Zhe did not accept Lu Feng's evaluation. He thought that Lu Feng was emphasizing how weak he was again, for this was not the first time he had said such a thing.

Although he truly could not cause the infection of the entire Garden of Eden. He could not infect even a single person.

But he could not accept that the reason for his lie being seen through was because of his own weakness, rather than because the lie was not clever enough. He could only comfort himself by thinking that perhaps only Lu Feng did not believe his words.

Only Lu Feng was hateful.

He said, "You aren't allowed to sleep here."

"Hm?" Lu Feng said.

An Zhe mumbled, "You aren't allowed to."

"Why not?" Lu Feng asked.

With his back turned to Lu Feng, An Zhe buried himself in the coat. He had originally wanted to say nothing at all, only wishing to resolutely drive out the Colonel from his territory, but after internally debating with himself, he nevertheless sincerely explained the reason. "You may experience contactless infection."

"Oh." Lu Feng's voice was very low. "The bee is alive."

An Zhe was silent.

Then he heard Lu Feng ask, "It's alive, so why is it unconscious?"

This time, even if An Zhe was beaten to death, he would no longer say anything. With this Lu Feng person, provided that you revealed to him a scrap of information, he would be able to guess the situation with crystal clarity.

But tonight's Colonel did not give him a hard time. He said, "I'll take the night watch."

An Zhe made a small sound of acknowledgment, then asked, "Are you cold?"

Lu Feng said, "No."

Only then did An Zhe close his eyes. Holding the badge in his hand, he curled up. Tonight, his emotions had been overtaxed, so he fell asleep especially quickly.

However, midway through his sleep, he was woken up by the cold.

Over the past few days, the failure of the magnetic field led to the solar winds wreaking havoc. The atmosphere had thinned out, and the temperature differences between day and night had reached a frightening extent.

An Zhe felt cold all over. He opened his eyes, sat up, and unconsciously looked around, searching for Lu Feng's figure.

He very easily spotted the Colonel not far away. Lu Feng was leaning against a rock that had been eroded into a strange shape by the wind, and in front of him were some branches of shrubbery piled into a conical shape.

An Zhe rubbed his eyes. Then, holding Lu Feng's coat in his arms, he walked over. The Colonel had draped his jacket over An Zhe, so his own upper body was only dressed in a uniform shirt.

An Zhe held out the coat and asked once again, "Are you cold?"

Lu Feng was playing with a lighter in his hands.

"You can wear it," he said. "I thought you could still sleep a while longer."

"… Huh?"

Lu Feng tossed the lighter into his arms. "Come gather firewood with me."

In other words, the Colonel had already known that he may be woken up by the cold and had planned to start a fire.

And as for him saying "I thought you could still sleep a while longer"—An Zhe translated the Colonel's rare roundabout phrasing and finally understood that what the Colonel actually wanted to say was "How could you be even more fragile than I thought?"

An Zhe said nothing.

He followed Lu Feng. For a time, there was only their footsteps, the sound of the wind, and the faint howling of distant monsters in the air. They walked outward. In the wilds were sparse growths of shrubs that had been killed and baked dry by the solar wind's assault, making them suitable for burning.

An Zhe asked, "Have you been looking for branches the entire time?"

"No," Lu Feng said flatly. "There are monsters, so I couldn't go too far away."

"Oh," An Zhe said softly. He wanted to tell Lu Feng that in fact many monsters had no interest in a mushroom like him, but then he realized that Lu Feng was protecting him. At that thought, he felt a bit of happiness well up within him.

The sand of the desert was soft beneath their feet, and their footsteps produced only soft, subtle sounds. An Zhe's leg still made walking a little inconvenient. Lu Feng did not have him follow closely, but rather ensured that he stayed within his line of sight, then collected nearby branches and gave them to An Zhe to hold on to.

When the branches in his arms increased to the point where he was somewhat unable to hold them, Lu Feng said, "That's enough."

So they walked back side by side. In the moonlight, the rolling sand dunes resembled snowdrifts, and the distant airplane wreckage was rooted in the ground like an ugly tumor.

Suddenly, Lu Feng's footsteps paused.

An Zhe promptly stopped as well.

A strange instinct sent a chill up his spine, and he heard a noise.

In the quiet wilderness, there suddenly came a noise that was impossible to

accurately describe, and he knew Lu Feng had heard it as well.

"Rustle."

"Rustle."

"Rustle."

The eerie noise resounded irregularly in the wilderness. It was very low, yet also very clear, as if it were right in their ears. The first two intervals were extremely long, and the last one was very short.

"Rustle."

When the noise sounded again, Lu Feng pressed down on An Zhe's shoulder, and the two of them lay flat on the sand, hiding behind a shrub.

"Rustle."

Beneath the aurora, a massive black shape appeared at the boundary of the rolling sand dunes. It was roughly oval in shape, the structure of its body nebulous, and its skin was uneven, just like a mass of decaying meat that had been roughly pinched together. A smooth lump of flesh bulged out from the middle of its body, with eyeballs large and small covering its surface. That was its head. Beneath the body of this black shape were countless feet, some thick and some slender. Some of them resembled reptile legs, some of them resembled insect pincers, and some of them resembled human arms.

The legs swarmed, supporting it as it lumbered across the uneven ground and left a wavy trail more than five meters wide on the sand-covered ground. In this manner, its posture strange, it came to the wreckage of the airplane crash. Every time it moved a certain distance, the rustling sound was emitted from its body surface, diffusing evenly outward. Perhaps that was its vocal organ.

Holding his breath, An Zhe watched as a gap split open in the middle of the indescribable monster, revealing densely packed tusks and fangs within.

"Crunch—"

The piercing sound of metal being scraped came, followed by the chaotic sounds of metal being struck, fractured, chewed, and swallowed.

It was eating the wreckage. Even after having lived in the Abyss for so long, An

Zhe had never known that there were some monsters that could feed on metal. In the Abyss were many armored vehicles that had lost their owners, along with the fragmented parts of guns, but no monsters paid them any heed. Or perhaps the objective of this monster before their eyes was not the metal, but the bodies of the two pilots in the wreckage. One could imagine that, to a strange creature capable of biting apart and swallowing alloys, human flesh and bones were as soft and easily chewed as slush.

Instead of enjoying the giant explosion and burning wreckage, it just ate fewer than five bites.

"Rustle."

When that mouth closed, the sound was emitted again. It turned in a certain direction, and a hundred meters in front of it was the still-unconscious black bee.

“Crunch.”

The entirety of the black bee's head disappeared into its body. An Zhe opened his eyes wide and watched as one end of the monster's body stretched out. A pair of translucent, metallic wings dropped out and vibrated a few times, making the same kind of noise as leaves shaking in the autumn wind—the parts that once belonged to the black bee appeared now on its body.

"Rustle."

In the following second, all of the eyes on its head looked in An Zhe and Lu Feng's direction.

# 34

## “FOR YOU ARE WITH ME.”

"RUSTLE."

This sound wave seemed to set off a ripple in the air. In an instant, An Zhe realized that it did not rely on sight, but rather sound to determine locations.

Countless legs wriggled as it moved in their direction.

"Bang!"

A gunshot rang out in the night sky, and the wind blew past An Zhe. Lu Feng had climbed high up onto a rock at an unimaginable speed and fired his first shot.

The rustling ceased. *The eyes on its body slowly turned, and it emitted a low and dull intermittent howling. Its windpipe must be full of pustules*, An Zhe thought.

The second shot hit an eye in its upper right area.

The howling grew louder, and An Zhe's eyes flew wide open.

Blood.

Blackish-red blood was welling up from the wounded eye—not welling up, but spraying out instead.

Lu Feng fired several shots in a row. The opening gradually festered and increased in size, and blood burst out like a fountain. The monster's howls grew many times louder.

An Zhe looked up at Lu Feng and saw that his gaze was calm, as if everything was as he had expected.

He looked back at the monster. Its wings vibrated, but its body was too heavy to truly fly. It made a mad dash forward and squarely struck the rock where Lu Feng was. With a loud noise, the rock trembled, and dust and debris fell. Although Lu Feng was standing on it, he did not move an inch—he looked down, observing the massive glob of flesh.

Hitting the rock made it bleed out even faster; it was like an open waterskin. As An Zhe looked at this unimaginable sight, he suspected that the monster's body was simply composed of myriad fluids.

After the tenth impact, the sound weakened, and its colossal body slowly toppled over.

There was not only blood, for chunks of flesh and oddly shaped organs had also flowed out from the opening. The heart and lungs were fused together, a runny semi-solid mass, and an indescribable stench pervaded the entire area. Even the monsters of the Abyss did not have internal organs with such an indescribable structure.

"… Hm?"

There was a blank spot in An Zhe's knowledge. He looked up at Lu Feng, and Lu Feng's eyebrows lifted slightly before he jumped down and landed at An Zhe's side. "What is it?"

"… Just like that?" An Zhe asked.

"Just like that," Lu Feng said.

"It died so easily," An Zhe said.

"Mm-hm." Lu Feng put the gun away. In his cold white fingers, the gunstock gently spun in a circle before being tucked into the holster at his waist.

An Zhe was greatly confused, even beginning to wonder that if he were to be shot, what kind of circumstance it would be under. He felt a little afraid.

Lu Feng glanced at him, a slight smile in his eyes, and then turned and walked outward.

The monster's ugliness exceeded An Zhe's imaginings, and the speed at which it fell also exceeded them. There was no shortage of huge and ugly species in

the Abyss, but the pile of ruined meat before their eyes clearly did not conform to the rule that within the Abyss, the uglier a monster was, the stronger it was.

Just like that, the monster's carcass fell onto the sand dunes, and black and red pus flowed out from beneath its body, dyeing that patch of soil a dark hue. The same pus had also moistened the nearby shrubbery. First, it gradually hung like a drop of dew, but a minute later, it contracted back and integrated into the shrub's foliage—it had been absorbed.

Lu Feng cast a glance at his watch. Thirty minutes after the monster was confirmed dead, he approached it, and An Zhe followed—although he was still limping a bit.

Its grotesque body shone with a strange metallic luster beneath the aurora. Although all of the body's parts came from various creatures, they were all firmly connected, growing from within the body. Upon recalling how it devoured the black bee, An Zhe realized that if it devoured a creature's genes, it would immediately grow the organ governed by that particular portion of its genes.

After observing the monster for a long time, Lu Feng said to An Zhe, "Let's go."

An Zhe asked, "Go where?"

"There may still be many of these kinds of things here," Lu Feng said. "We're going to find a safe place."

An Zhe looked around, but there was nothing in his field of vision save for a dusty desert. He asked, "Where are we going?"

"There are ruins up ahead," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe thought, *How come I didn’t see any ruins when I was flying in the sky?*

But then he thought some more. He had been riding a bee, while the Colonel's means of transportation was an airplane, so of course the Colonel's field of vision would be wider than his.

He heard Lu Feng ask him, "Can you walk?"

"I can," An Zhe replied.

He actually was not a mushroom who feared pain.

Although he really was in a bit of pain.

The Colonel gave him a flat look and said, "Come here."

In the end, An Zhe went back to being carried. He hugged Lu Feng's neck, and with his head buried in Lu Feng's shoulder, he could feel Lu Feng's breathing along with the movements as he walked. In fact, the rolling hills were only suitable for four-legged reptiles to walk around on. When stepping upon it, the sandy ground would sink slightly; it was not suited to the exertion of force by bones and muscles. It seemed that only footless snake-class creatures could be at home in this kind of environment. Many places in this world were unsuited for human activity. Walking here demanded a greater expenditure of strength, and carrying a person by piggyback demanded even more. But Lu Feng seemed to not be stingy with it. In An Zhe's limited recollections, apart from not liking to talk, the Colonel did not seem to be stingy with anything.

Amidst a stretch of silence, An Zhe looked behind himself. Beneath the boundless black sky, he saw a line of footsteps of varying depths in the snow-white sand, seeming like some sort of profound symbol.

He suddenly recalled that day in the Garden of Eden. That day, when he was passing through the spacious corridor, several white officers had gathered in an empty room and were reciting a beautiful verse, and the one leading them was holding a silver cross. Back then, the magnetic field had disappeared, the power supply had been cut off, and everyone was gripped in the chaotic throes of fear, but their expressions were very peaceful, as though they had received some sort of strength that could support them in their movement forward.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." He repeated this tranquil verse for Lu Feng to hear. "For You are with me. Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

In the cold, Lu Feng's voice seemed to contain a hint of warmth. "Is there more?"

An Zhe strove to remember. "Certainly goodness and faithfulness will follow me all the days of my life."

"And my dwelling will be in the house of the Lord forever."

"They believed,"

An Zhe said. "In God?"

He remembered that in the manuscripts An Ze had written for the base, words like God or gods had appeared.

Lu Feng gave a flat "hmm" in response.

An Zhe asked, "Then what about you?"

Lu Feng did not reply.

He did not speak, and in the quiet night there was only the unnerving sound of the wind. An Zhe recited the poems he had memorized from the children's textbooks and other places to Lu Feng one line at a time, whether simple or complex, until he reached "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." After reciting them, he started from the beginning again. Neither he nor Lu Feng had much to say or any small talk to make. He wished to say something to make this still and deserted night a bit more lively, so he could only do this.

The wind was so strong that An Zhe's voice was quickly dispersed, but they were in such close proximity that he knew Lu Feng could hear.

By the time he repeated all the poems twice, they had walked for a very long while.

An Zhe did not know what kind of training the Colonel had undergone with the military, but he knew that this road and this night were both too long. So long that it seemed like they could walk for a lifetime and walk to the boundary of this world or the ends of their own lives. This process's consumption of physical energy also surpassed what the normal human body could hold.

He surreptitiously transformed part of his body into light mycelium, then feared that this slight change was trivial, so then he surreptitiously transformed some more.

At last, he heard Lu Feng ask, "Do you know why that monster died so easily?"

An Zhe did not know why Lu Feng would suddenly mention this. He stopped reciting the verse and said, "No."

"Low-level mutations are from genetic contamination, and high-level mutated monsters are divided into two types," Lu Feng said, "hybrid class and polymorphic class."

"After hybrid-class monsters consume genes, they will have a part of the original organism, and the genes and characteristics of many creatures can coexist in its body. But it has a buffer period." As Lu Feng walked forward, he continued talking. "There's a span of time in which the original genes and newly acquired genes conflict with each other. Within this time, its DNA strands are violently changing, conflicting with the original organs' functions, so the body's interior is a mess. Therefore, the intervals at which smart hybrid-class monsters consume genes are very long, for they need to establish stable genes. That one just now got greedy."

An Zhe asked, "What about the polymorphic-class ones?"

"The polymorphic-class ones are the highest-level mutations that have been observed for now, few in number and mainly concentrated within the Abyss. The way they mutate is not by genes coexisting, but rather freely changing. For example, changing from a bee to a type of plant… Sometimes they can also change partially."

"The gene sequences of polymorphic-class mutants are more stable than those of hybrid-class ones," Lu Feng said flatly. "But they also cannot take in too much at once, since it will affect their minds. The Trial Court once had a case in which an animal and plant polymorphic monster underwent an incomplete transformation, had fibrous tissue form in all its organs, and died on the spot."

Slightly afraid, An Zhe tightly hugged Lu Feng's neck in silence.

He always felt that the Colonel's words carried a deeper meaning.

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On the road, they once again saw another hybrid-class monster.

It was different from the monster who fell to Lu Feng's gun. Skinny and dark gray, it was like a stick insect that had been magnified some tens of thousands of times. On its back were huge, thin wings that only butterflies had, and

extending from its forehead were two slender antennae, but its eyes were not visible. Its whole body was five meters long, and it had six skinny feet. While they were climbing a high slope, it was consuming a two-meter-long lizard. Its glossy, chitin-covered body originally reflected the aurora's light, but as it ate, the chitin gradually turned into rough scales.

Its light and nimble body allowed it to move swiftly. After eating the lizard's head, the stick insect leaned its torso down, then sprang forward, the remnants of the lizard's body dangling from its mouth as it flew away, wings flapping. It had not discovered Lu Feng and An Zhe.

Perhaps it was one of those smart hybrid monsters Lu Feng spoke of, understanding that it needed to first find a place to hide after obtaining genes where it could get through the chaotic phase.

As An Zhe looked at its snow-white wings, he said with sincerity, "It's so pretty."

He himself was also white, and he liked the color of his hyphae, but he didn't have such outstretched and beautiful wings. Even if he changed completely into his original form, he would only be a soft mass. Ever since that rainy season from his early life in which he was snapped in half by rainfall and gales, he had lost the shape that a mushroom ought to have and had even been defined as a "xenogenic that had broken away from the basic form of its species," which made him feel ashamed.

He heard Lu Feng's cold voice. "You wish to eat it?"

An Zhe said nothing.

"That's not it," he finally said.

Lu Feng said, "Don't eat things willy-nilly."

An Zhe replied in a small voice, "It's not like I can beat them."

The corners of Lu Feng's mouth twitched upward slightly.

As a xenogenic, being prohibited from eating things willy-nilly by a human made An Zhe angry. He should have the right to eat freely.

Then his stomach gurgled.

Lu Feng asked, "Where are your things?"

An Zhe thought back to the amount of food, which was not enough for even a single meal. He said, "Wait."

After some thinking, he asked Lu Feng, "Are you hungry?"

Lu Feng said, "I'm all right."

An Zhe thought that this human was being stubborn. He easily dug out the remaining half a piece of hardtack from his backpack, broke off a piece, and fed it to Lu Feng.

The Colonel did not refuse it.

An Zhe continued to feed him. At the third piece, he thought of how the hardtack was excessively dry and ought to be eaten with water.

There was only half a bottle of water left as well. He took it out, but he did not know how he ought to feed it to the Colonel.

He could only say, "Stop for a while."

Thus, at daybreak, he and Lu Feng shared half of the remaining half bottle of water behind a large rock. Water was something that made mushrooms happy. An Zhe licked his lips, after which Lu Feng immediately stuffed a piece of hardtack into his mouth.

The cool fingers accidentally touched his lips. With the piece of hardtack in his mouth, An Zhe slowly swallowed it, unexpectedly feeling very at ease. They were clearly almost out of food and water, and he did not know how they would continue living tomorrow.

He said to Lu Feng, "You eat it, I'm not the one exerting myself."

As a result, he did not need to eat much.

Saying nothing, Lu Feng rubbed An Zhe's head, and An Zhe looked up and met his gaze. He felt that in the pale early morning light, the Colonel's perpetually cold eyes had been colored with a hint of warmth.

At that moment, An Zhe suddenly felt the delusion that although he and Lu Feng were completely different, although the two of them lacked any common

language—supposing the signals never returned, supposing there came a day when either Lu Feng and he were both xenogenics or he and Lu Feng were both human, supposing they were both still alive—if such a day truly came, perhaps he and Lu Feng could be very good friends.

Amongst humans, he himself was not a very outstanding individual, and could even be considered a worthless individual, but the Colonel was very good to him regardless. Therefore, if Lu Feng turned into a xenogenic, so long as he wasn't too ugly, An Zhe wouldn't dislike him.

However, such a possibility did not exist at all. Lu Feng was human, and he was unfortunately a mushroom. But supposing he had always been human, perhaps he would only have been an ordinary person of the Outer City and not known Lu Feng at all, so he then felt lucky that he was a mushroom.

They continued walking. An Zhe felt that after the night had gone by, his leg did not hurt so much anymore, so he wanted to walk on his own rather than be carried by Lu Feng. When he was put down, he saw Lu Feng frowning slightly while looking to one side.

Beneath a massive rock nearby, fragments of two human skeletons lay scattered. The skulls rested far from the broken spines, the hand bones were missing, and an ashen leg bone was stuck into the sand at an angle as though it were a flagpole or gravestone.

After they walked closer, Lu Feng bent down and wiped a thin layer of ash from the bones with his fingers.

"Fresh, within the last two days," he said.

With those words, An Zhe's gaze turned uncertain as he looked at the human bones. In this kind of circumstance, there should not be any humans who could move around in the wilderness, so there should not be any fresh human bones either.

He asked, "Is it one of your pilots?"

Lu Feng looked around. "There's no wreckage."

They carefully checked the bones again. There were traces of monster bites on the bones, and buried beneath the sand nearby was a raggedy piece of

clothing that was dark gray and not the base's standard dress. Lu Feng had a thoughtful look on his face, for this was absolutely not normal.

However, without any other clues, they could only move on.

After another half hour, within the morning mist, something faintly loomed in the distance. A thread of gray spread across the horizon, seeming like the edge of some giant city.

"I think I see it," An Zhe said.

Those must be the city ruins Lu Feng spoke of.

Lu Feng said, "I see it as well."

An Zhe asked, "Is it possible to find water and food in the ruins?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

Lu Feng said impassively, "I often stay in ruins."

"… Oh."

Colonel Lu was a man who could come and go freely even in the Abyss.

However, to not be starved to death was still something worth being happy about. Even his footsteps became more springy, and he took one step ahead of Lu Feng.

Right at that moment, the ground beneath his feet suddenly softened!

Then it sagged.

He started falling.

"Ah!!"

His heart thumped violently. He was about to turn into hyphae form from fear, but in a flash, a heavy force traveled down his left arm—Lu Feng had firmly grasped his hand. Hanging in midair, An Zhe let out a sigh of relief, after which Lu Feng hauled him back up. Just as his leg recovered, his arm began to hurt sharply, and he softly inhaled. Lu Feng reached out and ran his hand all the way down from An Zhe's shoulder to his wrist, then said, "It's not broken."

An Zhe looked down.

It was a perilous three-meter-deep pit concealed with some brittle, thin planks that had been covered with sand. There was nothing visible to distinguish it from the surroundings, but so long as one stepped onto it, they would fall into the pit.

An Zhe thought it odd.

He saw that Lu Feng was frowning slightly as well.

"A pitfall trap, newly made by the looks of it," Lu Feng said.

In this place, first human bones appeared, and then a pitfall trap—both human-related things.

Could it be that there were people living out here in the wilderness?

Right at that moment, Lu Feng jerked his head up and looked in a particular direction. "Who is it?"

There was a dirt hump rising from the ground, looking completely ordinary in the hilly land. After Lu Feng spoke, there was no response whatsoever.

However, Lu Feng pulled out his gun and said grimly, "Come out."

There was no movement.

Ten seconds, twenty seconds, half a minute.

A rustling suddenly came from that direction, followed by a dull squeak, and An Zhe looked toward the source of the sounds. Soil rolled down the dirt hump's surface as something akin to a lid opened up, and a figure climbed out. He initially thought it was a groundhog, but upon a second look, it turned out to be a human, a living and seemingly non-mutated human clad in raggedy denim similar to the clothing next to the bones from earlier.

After standing up, the person was a scrawny boy. His complexion seemed especially pale due to lack of sunlight, but a few freckles were scattered across his cheeks.

He looked at them, seeming completely dumbfounded as he stared.

An Zhe silently returned the look.

Two full minutes passed before the boy stammered, "You… you two… Humans?"

The way he spoke was very unskilled and his pronunciations very strange, dissimilar to the common accent of the people of the base.

Lu Feng said, "Take us out of here first."

The boy stared at them, and his hands that were hanging at his sides trembled before he abruptly ran toward them. "Wait!"

He approached them by way of a circuitous route, then turned around to guide them, leading them around many twists and turns. As they walked, he stammered, "I… I'm sorry. We were afraid… afraid of monsters approaching, so we dug a lot… a lot of pitfall traps. So they couldn't come, and we… we could keep watch… I… I didn't think anyone would come back. Are… are you okay?"

Seeing him hang his head, the very picture of remorse and self-blame, An Zhe said, "I'm fine."

Next to the dirt hump, the boy pushed some manner of device, and with a creak, a heavy iron gate unsteadily opened to reveal a pitch-black cave mouth.

"You're… you're people from the outside?" Seeming to have suddenly realized something, the boy turned toward them, tongue-tied. He had first looked at Lu Feng, but he seemed to have been frightened by Lu Feng's expressionless face, so he stiffly turned toward An Zhe and posed the question.

"We are," An Zhe said.

"I…" The boy took a few breaths, and the flush of excitement rose in his cheeks. If not for the half-meter distance between them, An Zhe suspected that he would be able to hear the thump-thump-thump-thump of the boy's violent heartbeats.

He asked, "Are you okay?"

"I…" The boy seemed to have finally realized what had just happened, and it looked like he was unable to catch his breath.

But then Lu Feng spoke. "Hello," he said. "Northern Base, Trial Court. Do you need help?"

"We… we do need help." The boy's eyes shone with a light like that of the rising sun, and he turned and dove into the tunnel, shouting as he ran into its depths, "Grandfather!"

Following him, Lu Feng and An Zhe also walked into the quiet and winding tunnel. After closing the iron gate, this place was cool and dark, but a weak flashing light was shining up ahead. The path underfoot was not clearly visible, so An Zhe carefully placed a hand along the wall. Lu Feng grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward.

This was a flight of steep stairs leading down, where it was very easy to fall. It wasn't until after another downhill stretch approximately a hundred meters long and around another bend that the space widened somewhat. Gas lamps cast their feeble white glow upon the walls, illuminating the cramped interior of the cave. Looking into the distance, it was so deep as to be endless, and the sound of footsteps set off unabating echoes.

Lu Feng asked, "Did you people dig this?"

"No." the boy said. "It's a mine from a very long time ago. Many of us hid in here."

"How many people?" Lu Feng asked. "How long have you lived here?"

"I don't know." The boy hung his head slightly. "I was born here, and afterward, many people… died. My uncle left, so now there's only my grandfather and me."

Before they reached the place where the "grandfather" the boy spoke of was, An Zhe first heard a harsh gasp for breath, like the sound a dying animal would make from its chest.

In a ten-square-meter niche, a bed of iron wire less than a meter across had been placed within it, and on the bed lay a grizzled old man. An Zhe walked closer and saw that he was covered with a grayish-yellow blanket, his cheeks were gaunt, his eyes were clouded, and he was trembling all over as though he was suffering some great pain. Even though they had arrived at his bedside, he did not react at all.

"He's sick," the boy said.

As he spoke, he sat by the bed, picked up his grandfather's hand, and said loudly, "Grandfather, people from the outside have come to find us! They said they came from the base! The base really exists!"

The old man's mind was no longer lucid. Rather than being affected by the joy and excitement in the boy's words, he frowned and turned his head, as if fleeing from the boy's clamor.

"We can go to a place with lots of people now!" Seemingly accustomed to it, the boy was not affected by the old man's negative attitude either. Instead, his tone of voice became more excited.

Right at that moment, the old man's wizened mouth moved as he spoke a few incoherent syllables.

His grandson said, "What?"

An Zhe listened carefully as well. The old man's lips moved, once again repeating those syllables.

"It's…" With his throat raspy and his mouth leaking air, his voice sounded like a decrepit wind. "It's… almost time."

The boy apologetically turned to Lu Feng and An Zhe. "Grandfather always says this. He thinks he's very sick and close to death."

After saying that, he told the old man, "We're going to the place where all the humans are. There will definitely be medicine there."

But the old man tossed and turned, still saying the same thing, so they could only give up. Up until they left, the old man was still mumbling "it's almost time." An Zhe thought this sentence sounded very familiar, but he could not recall where he had heard it before.

Then the boy took them to a slightly more spacious rectangular room. The room, connected to three pitch-black tunnels that forked off, was like a heartland that sprawled in all directions. Yellowing paper displaying a map of the mine and operating precautions had been pasted upon the rugged wall, and in the middle of the room was a small square table, next to which two old sofas had been placed. Excessive moisture had completely eroded the patent leather of the sofas.

Lu Feng was conversing with the boy.

The boy's name was Xi Bei, and according to him, when the unprecedented calamity had approached, the mine caved in. But because the radiation did not penetrate through the ground, some of the people within managed to survive and continued until now. They would go to the ruins of nearby small towns to gather daily necessities and would also be killed and devoured by the monsters outside. His mother gave birth to only him, and slowly, gradually, out of the original dozens of people, only he and his grandfather as well as a few older uncles were left.

"I just knew that there was no way everyone would have died. They must have built new homes somewhere, but we couldn't find you people. In the past, my grandfather said that when we found another exit and left the mine, the weather had changed and there was not a single living person."

"The radio couldn't receive any signals, there were monsters everywhere outside, and we couldn't go out. We could only stay here, but we knew there still must have been other people." Xi Bei's voice trembled with a thread of excitement, and from a cubbyhole in the wall he took out a few slim and worn-out books.

"Two years ago, we found a car outside. In addition to a dead person, these were inside it, so I knew there were still people outside. I've… always been waiting for you to come. Our… our fellow people must have always been searching in order to rescue us." He looked at Lu Feng, eyes shining, full of hope.

In a low voice, Lu Feng said, "The base welcomes you."

On the other hand, An Zhe reached out. Within that stack of slim volumes, the topmost one's cover was illuminated by the dim gas lamp. Its title was Base Monthly. The words jogged the scraps of memories stored in his head. This was a pamphlet that the base's Cultural Department distributed to the people.

In this manner, the pamphlet was produced by the distant human base, then taken along with pornographic novels and weapon handbooks by mercenaries or soldiers for a ride in an armored vehicle departing from the base. After a long journey, it had been abandoned forever in the wilderness. And after that, the

survivors of the Desert Age took it out of the vehicle wreckage and passed it around day after day in the mine. They knew it represented distant human homes.

The title page, already yellowed, had the words "May we have a bright future" written in small font. After a turn of the page, the table of contents appeared.

The hand An Zhe was turning the pages with suddenly trembled, and his gaze stopped at a particular line in the table of contents consisting of two words that could be no simpler.

"Winter Day."

The ellipses extended all the way to the right edge of the paper, and at the end were two other words representing the writer's name.

An Ze.

An Zhe's breathing stopped for a brief moment. Then he glimpsed in his peripheral vision the line underneath "Winter Day," an essay titled "A Day in 2059."

2059 was a distant time in history, so this title indicated that it was a sophisticated historical essay.

Its writer was named Poet.

These two names silently lay side by side on the page.

An Zhe's fingers landed on the paper. His fingers had once held An Ze's shoulder in that vine-filled cave and once been squeezed by Poet in a pitch-black car. Now they brushed over the two men's names, and their figures once again became vivid in An Zhe's mind. He flipped to that page—those two side-by-side pages. "Winter Day" was a short poem written about the snowflakes falling upon the supply depot square that winter. An Ze had said that the fallen snow was as soft as the wings of snow-white doves.

An Zhe was able to recall all of the details in An Ze's voice, and it was like he was hearing An Ze personally describe it to him. In that fleeting moment, An Ze seemed to come back to life, and Poet likewise stood before him with a smile,

insisting on telling An Zhe the base's history. This world still contained the records they left behind.

An Zhe's vision went blurry. Clearly he had not thought of the two of them for a very long time already, but their figures nevertheless appeared vividly before him, as though they had met only yesterday.

In this manner, he reunited with them again, just like how this boy named Xi Bei suddenly encountered the visitors from the human base.

"Originally there were also two uncles here, but they went out to find things to eat. It's been more than a day and they haven't come back. I think…" Xi Bei hung his head. "I think… they may not be able to come back."

"My apologies," Lu Feng said. "I've arrived late."

"Not at all!" Xi Bei shook his head vigorously, then gave Lu Feng an awkward, close-lipped smile. His voice was a bit raspy as he said, "There are monsters everywhere outside, so it must have been very difficult for you too. Just the fact that you've come makes me very… very grateful already. In this world, there are still other humans, and we still have a home. It's… it's great."

The glow of the gas lamp reflected off of his black pupils, where bright sparks danced in excitement. The sparks combined with the subtle expression on Xi Bei's face, presenting a pure joy mingled with sorrow.

An Zhe silently looked at Xi Bei's face and knew that it was an emotion he would never understand. He lowered his head. On the magazine's yellowing pages, An Ze's voice and face appeared before him once again.

His eyes misted over. Merely a few hours ago, he had still been internally criticizing the stubborn efforts the humans were making to retain their will and imagining that the day Lu Feng also changed into a xenogenic, he wouldn't dislike him. But at this very moment, the idea wavered slightly.

*Humans were humans after all*, he thought.

He knew that the base had no medicine, and he knew that humankind had reached its end.

But they were also truly everlasting.

# 35

## “LU FENG PICKED HIM UP.”

"LAST MONTH, one of my… uncles was bitten by a monster outside and died. Then a few days ago, another uncle went out to look for supplies. Over those few days, the temperature shot up, and there was a sandstorm. He hasn't come back either. And after that were the two uncles I just mentioned." Xi Bei's fingers scratched at the paint curling off the table, and he slowly said, "There's only me and my grandfather left, but his illness is getting worse and worse. He used to be able to talk to me, but these days, his mind is not clear."

"Sometimes he'll cry out in pain, and sometimes he'll say things that I don't understand." Xi Bei looked at Lu Feng with an earnest gaze. "Can you cure him?"

Lu Feng said, "Back at the base, perhaps they can find out the illness's cause."

He did not make the guarantee that they would "definitely be able to cure him." An Zhe looked down at the words on the Base Monthly pamphlet. This page bore an obituary saying that a certain gentleman who had always been contributing to Base Monthly had passed away from illness and that the serialized novel Mission was thus discontinued.

Within the base—or at least in the Outer City—very few could live to fifty or sixty. What people fortunate enough to enter old age faced were various illnesses that came in quick succession. The artificial magnetic field was weaker than the original geomagnetic field, so humans still received the effects of slight radiation exposure. Thus, the incidences of genetic diseases—primarily cancer—was still very high, taking away more than half of the elderly. Moreover, the lifestyle of licking blood off a knife's edge in the wilderness would make the survivors live in endless stress reactions and psychological trauma, which were

also chronic diseases that cannot be wiped out.

"Thank… thank you," Xi Bei said. "My grandfather raised me, and it was he who taught me to read. He was also the one who had always been repairing our generators. Everyone said that there were no other people in the world, and it was Grandfather who always had us wait. He said that the aurora in the sky meant that there were still human organizations somewhere out there."

Lu Feng asked, "Was he this place's engineer?"

"Yes," Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng narrowed his eyes slightly.

He asked, "Why did he know that the aurora represented human organizations?"

After some thought, Xi Bei explained, "This place is a magnetite mine, and Grandfather was an engineer in this respect. He said… said that his own teacher used to work at some research institute and that the research institute had always been studying the magnetic poles. Grandfather's teacher told him that the cause of this calamity was a problem with the magnetic poles, but the research institute was trying hard to find a way to solve it."

"The Highland Research Institute," Lu Feng said flatly. "The base of the research on the artificial magnetic poles."

Xi Bei nodded. "I think that was its name."

"We have temporarily lost contact with the base," Lu Feng said, not continuing the previous conversation topic. "When communications are restored, we will take both of you back with us."

Xi Bei forcefully nodded. "Thank you."

After that, they stayed in the mine. When communications would be restored was a mystery, so Xi Bei gave them a rough understanding of the mine's structure.

The place they were currently located at was the core area. When the great calamity had not yet occurred, it was the temporary rest area for the miners and engineers. There were rooms for people to live in, basic living facilities, and

some mining machinery that had been left behind, including generators and many tools. Because it was deep underground and surrounded by incomparably hard minerals, so long as the cave entrance was protected, this place would be a self-contained safety zone.

Outside the core area were several deep mine shafts, all products of the people who came before, that extended along the ore veins.

"Although it's dark, there are no monsters inside," Xi Bei said. "You can rest easy."

At noon, Xi Bei went to prepare food. An Zhe was curious about their kitchen, but he still did not know Xi Bei well, so he did not dare to recklessly intrude on other people's territory. Instead, he found something else to do.

Mushrooms liked water, and humans also needed to drink water. Water was something very important, sometimes even more important than food, so in order to gather enough water, the people inside the mine went to great lengths.

Whenever it rained outside, it was time to accumulate stored water. A large amount of rainwater could be collected each time, after which it would be purified with alum powder and stored in a large cement bucket. But the weather was unpredictable after all. Nobody knew when the next rain would come, so over the years, the people living in this place had also created a water collection system. Along the largest and deepest mine, they had carved out complicated lines all over the stone walls. The interior of the mine was extremely damp, and due to the temperature difference between day and night, fine droplets of water would condense on the walls in great numbers. Once the droplets reached a certain weight, they would roll down, then slowly accumulate along the man-made carved lines, and land drop by drop in the water collection bottle at the very bottom. After the hundreds of plastic water collection bottles were filled, there could be close to a hundred liters altogether.

According to Xi Bei, the most recent lot of water collection bottles were almost full and could now be gathered.

Thus, An Zhe and Lu Feng, each bringing a plastic water bucket and a gas lamp

for illumination, walked into the main path of the mine to help Xi Bei retrieve the water.

An Zhe first picked up the plastic bottle at the entrance and poured the water into the bucket, then put it back down and continued walking forward in search of the next one.

He noticed that Lu Feng hadn't moved, so he turned around to look.

This man was leaning against a stone wall, looking at him in a composed manner. Only after An Zhe gave him a look did he take a few steps forward and gather water with him. An Zhe was baffled by his attitude, but the Colonel's subsequent actions were all very earnest, so he did not ask.

The mine extended deep underground, with metal tracks laid down in the middle. He and Lu Feng each took one side, both focusing on filling their own buckets.

This was a magnetite mine, rough all around and covered with dig marks. The main part was a wet dark gray hue, and the glow of the gas lamp had dimmed in the damp environment, turning the surroundings foggy.

Humans may not like this sort of environment, but the water vapor made An Zhe feel very comfortable. He even felt his spore do a relaxed roll inside himself, which amused him. With his eyes slightly curved, he gently gave his stomach a rub as a response to the spore—putting the spore in this place made him feel safe.

As he traveled along the mining track, the amount of water in his bucket continued to increase, and once he finally walked to the end of the water collection system, the water-filled plastic bucket had become the heaviest thing in the world.

After the last bottle of water had been poured in, An Zhe turned around with difficulty, water bucket in hand.

In front of him was a long, dark cave, and the place he had started from had turned into a point of light as feeble as a spark.

The water bucket in his hand was so heavy, and the road was so long. He had to walk back, but he was already on the verge of being unable to carry it. To

haul the bucket back was practically an impossible task.

An Zhe was suddenly dumbstruck.

Footsteps rang out in the cave, for Lu Feng had walked over to his side.

The Colonel asked, "You aren't walking anymore?"

There was a lilt at the end of his words, seemingly containing a mocking laugh.

Silently, An Zhe looked at the end of the mine and felt his IQ being extinguished little by little.

Lu Feng cast him a glance and said dryly, "If you had walked here first and then started filling it with water—"

An Zhe said nothing. He was not in great shape.

If he had come here first with an empty bucket, then collected water as he walked back, he would have only needed to make one trip with the water bucket. Whereas right now—not only had he carried the increasingly heavy water bucket all the way here, he also needed to carry it back.

He also finally knew why Lu Feng did not move after seeing his actions.

This man, this man—

This man clearly predicted the aftermath from the very beginning but chose to watch him carry on as though nothing was happening.

An Zhe decided to get angry. He was a self-respecting mushroom, so with the incomparably weighty water bucket in hand, he started walking back and even strove to speed up his pace.

But Lu Feng had long legs and thus could effortlessly keep up with him. After walking more than ten steps, this man even reached out and stopped An Zhe with a hand on his shoulder.

"Look over there," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe looked to the side.

There was a cart two square meters in size parked on the metal track containing a few chunks of ore. It was clearly a mine cart used to transport

rocks.

The weight in his hand suddenly lightened. Lu Feng had taken his water bucket and put it in the cart, then put his own in the cart as well.

Just as An Zhe thought that the Colonel was merely intending to save his energy with the help of this means of transportation, he heard him say flatly, "You get on too."

An Zhe looked at the mine cart, somewhat hesitant. He felt that the expression in Lu Feng's eyes contained some interest, as though he wished to play some strange games.

In the end, because he neither obeyed nor refused, Lu Feng picked him up and put him in the cart.

The inside of the mine cart was very spacious. With his back toward Lu Feng, An Zhe sat down, arms wrapped around his knees. Lu Feng hung the gas lamp at the front end of the cart. The small mine cart was pushed forward slowly along the track, and the trundling of its wheels echoed gently in the mine.

Surrounded by mountain walls, this place was isolated from the world, and there were no lurking dangers. The gas lamp's yellow light softly illuminated a small portion of the area in front, and sometimes, specks of fluorescence glinted within the ores. It was like a place that would appear in human fairy tales.

An Zhe looked forward and reclined against the back side of the cart, feeling relaxed. It was a mushroom's natural character to relax and dislike moving, so he did not dislike being pushed along. And although he could not see Lu Feng, he somehow felt that the man was currently very happy as well. A mushroom's joy was obviously based on idleness, but as for what the Colonel's joy was based on, he really did not understand.

As he looked forward, he internally gave a scornful snort.

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Unexpectedly, lunch was mushroom soup.

Xi Bei said that he had planted them in the mine himself, so they were clean. Oyster mushrooms grew quickly, and the remainder was still sufficient for several more days.

Upon hearing Xi Bei's words, An Zhe silently shrank into a corner. Xi Bei looked so gentle and friendly, An Zhe did not expect him to also be a mushroom-killing murderer.

But he had no choice but to become a mushroom-eating accomplice.

Before they began eating, An Zhe noticed Lu Feng cast a look toward him, and he believed the Colonel must have remembered that bowl of mushroom soup he could not drink before leaving the base. It seemed to be a type of regret, and humans did not like having regrets. Eating it today could be considered making up for before.

After the meal, Xi Bei showed them the food reserves. There wasn't much—some mushrooms, a few strips of air-dried meat, and a packet of salt.

"The meat was stored in the past," Xi Bei said. "The pitfall traps can catch some small monsters. They say that if you eat the ones that look too strange, you'll get infected. Only the ones that aren't too strange can be eaten like the animals in the past."

Lu Feng said, "Monsters with low mutation levels can be consumed once twenty-four hours have passed since their deaths."

"Then those uncles were more or less correct," Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng asked him, "What kind of monsters are here?"

"Birds, lots of lizards, and big rats," Xi Bei said. "Sometimes there are bugs, the spidery kind. We eat quite a lot of rats."

"But after the sandstorm, I've rarely seen them. I spotted two especially ugly things, though." At that point, Xi Bei's complexion paled slightly. "They were especially big. I was scared they'd notice me, so I only looked at them through a telescope. I've never seen those kinds of things before. Do you know what they are?"

"This place ought to be the Eastern Hills. The original degree of pollution was

not high," Lu Feng said. "But there was an accident with the magnetic field five days ago, which produced secondary mutations, and hybrid-class monsters started appearing."

"… Huh?" Xi Bei said.

Lu Feng's voice was slightly grim. "Through the food chain, the original small monsters aggregated into large hybrid monsters."

Xi Bei's complexion paled a little more.

As An Zhe listened to Lu Feng speak, he could imagine how the monsters fought against each other, their numbers decreasing but their mutation levels skyrocketing. Perhaps what was even more terrifying was that the same thing was happening all over the world, and each day was becoming more chaotic than the previous one.

Lu Feng looked at Xi Bei. The combination of his eye shape and color formed a keen and ice-cold outline. Xi Bei, clearly still unused to meeting the Colonel's eyes, picked off another piece of paint from the table.

Lu Feng asked, "Has anyone ever mutated within the caves?"

"Yes. An uncle was bitten by a monster, and then he bit others."

"How was it dealt with?"

"They were released."

The communications were still blocked, but the Colonel carried out his duties. In the afternoon, Lu Feng borrowed paper and a pen from Xi Bei and wrote down simple notes on their situation.

Nighttime was rest time. In the entire mine, there was only one usable generator, and the routes were damp and aging. In the entire mine, there remained only one empty room with electricity, so the two of them lived in there.

After bathing, An Zhe rubbed his hair dry and played with bits of magnetite. In this mine, magnetite could be found everywhere.

With one piece in each hand, he faced the same poles of the magnetite pieces toward each other, wishing to push them together. There was clearly only air

between these two black pieces of magnetite, but no matter how much strength he used, he could not put them close together. It was like there was an invisible force in the middle pushing them outward.

He frowned, not knowing why it would be this way. He could not understand a lot of human knowledge, just like how humans could not understand a lot of this world's knowledge. But he still stubbornly wished to put them together. He felt that so long as there was enough strength, there would not be anything that could not get close to something else.

With the sound of footsteps, Lu Feng entered the room. His coat, which An Zhe had washed, was now drying in a ventilated spot. Looking up, An Zhe saw that the Colonel's upper body was clad only in the military's standard black undershirt, revealing the graceful and sleek lines of his shoulder and arm muscles. The legs of his pants were tucked into his black boots, which made his figure seem even more imposing and beautiful. His offhandedly toweled hair was in slight disarray, and crystalline droplets of water hung from the stray locks over his forehead.

An Zhe looked at him. Without the Arbiter's uniform and without the badge, Lu Feng seemed to only be a promising and powerful young officer. Even though his visage was as cold as ever and the temperature of his chilly green eyes had not risen by any substantial degree, An Zhe had the feeling he was much more relaxed. He suddenly remembered that, according to how human age was counted, one's twenties were clearly when everything had just begun.

A certain person in his twenties was fiddling with the communicator, head bowed, but the communicator only repeated again and again, "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere…"

After turning off the communicator and putting it on the table, Lu Feng sat down next to An Zhe.

No matter what An Zhe did, he could not put the same poles of the two pieces of magnetite together. He looked at Lu Feng.

"It's mutual repulsion," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe frowned.

Lu Feng took the two pieces out of his hands. Because opposite poles attracted, with a change in orientation, the two pieces of magnetite snapped together perfectly. Then Lu Feng tossed them aside.

An Zhe picked them back up and once again played with them, but no matter how many times he tried, the results were the same. Between two of the same poles was an insurmountable resistance, and they could never be put together. On the other hand, the two opposite poles had an unimaginable attractive force. So long as they came even a little close to each other, they would automatically break free of his fingers and fly toward each other.

An Zhe asked, "What's in between them?"

He was a mushroom, and An Ze had never taken physics class before, so their combined knowledge could not explain this phenomenon.

Lu Feng said, "Magnetic fields."

An Zhe asked, "Is it the same as the artificial magnetic field?"

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe asked, "Can it not be seen?"

"No, it can't."

"Why not?"

Lu Feng stuffed him underneath the quilt. "Many things can't be seen."

"Oh," An Zhe said. It was a little warm under the quilt, so he uncovered his arms and shoulders.

Lu Feng looked at the collar of his soft white T-shirt, where a blue bruise was showing. Then he reached out and pulled the collar down.

Beneath the collar, upon the skin that was originally a smooth and flawless milky white, blue-purple bruises were everywhere and evenly spaced out, so evenly that one could not find which particular bruise was the source.

Saying nothing, An Zhe pried Lu Feng's hand off and silently pulled his collar back into place.

Lu Feng's gaze still lingered there. Of course he recognized this kind of mark.

When the base approached serious criminals whom they needed to extort confessions from via torture, they would use high-intensity electrocution. Nobody could get through it without confessing. The sequelae left by electrocution were varied, ranging from physical to psychological. Marks on the skin were but one of them, and still more people would never be able to cast off this painful nightmare in their entire lives.

But after An Zhe wrapped himself tightly in the quilt, he only dropped his eyelashes a little and said quietly, "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Looking at his peaceful expression, Lu Feng sometimes wanted very much to bully him and sometimes wanted to treat him well.

Then he saw An Zhe wriggle toward the inner side of the bed, making room for him to lie down.

The bed was not big. After Lu Feng lay down on his side, they were very close to each other. An Zhe also spotted a wound on his arm that seemed like it had come from being struck by a blunt instrument, but that wasn't all, for there were faintly visible bruises and scratches on his shoulder as well.

He reached out to touch the longest one, but halfway there, afraid of hurting the Colonel, he retracted his hand and docilely shrank back into the quilt.

The expression in the Colonel's eyes seemed gentle. "Sleep."

"Mm," An Zhe said, then closed his eyes.

His eyelashes cast faint shadows in the light, giving his expression a softer and quieter cast. He was also completely relaxed, something Lu Feng was very easily able to recognize. This little xenogenic seemed certain that Lu Feng would not hurt him—even after his body was covered with electrocution marks.

This was not the first time Lu Feng felt puzzled by his actions. When they had just met, on that disorderly night when he had left the city gates and had nowhere to go, An Zhe had also said to him, unguarded, "you can stay with me." At that time, he had thought either that this boy had hidden motives or that he was as pure as his exterior, as though he didn't know people did not often invite strangers to stay overnight.

Having had these thoughts, he voiced them as well.

"… You aren't afraid of me?"

At that question, An Zhe slowly opened his eyes. Beneath the dim glow of the gas lamp, his eyes seemed to be covered with a layer of soft, beautiful mist.

In this brief span, he seemed to have almost fallen asleep. Voice muffled, he asked, "Why would I be?"

Lu Feng said nothing. He lifted his upper body and looked down at An Zhe, gaze heavy, while his other hand picked up the gun that had been placed next to the pillow. Its ice-cold muzzle briefly touched An Zhe's cheek.

An Zhe gave him a clear-eyed look and frowned slightly. Seemingly angry again, he pushed aside the barrel of the gun, then rolled over to face the other way, yanking the quilt away with that movement.

Lu Feng looked at his slender neck along with his thin shoulders and back that rose and fell slightly in time with his breathing. A person like this seemed both very easy to hurt and very easy to protect. After a long while, he turned off the light and lay back down.

A slight weight settled over Lu Feng as An Zhe pulled back over him the part of the quilt he had yanked away earlier.

Like a dragonfly's tail tapping the calm surface of a lake on a summer night.

What the ripples disturbed was not only the previously calm water.

In the silence, it was unclear if Lu Feng was driven by some emotion or it was just a subconscious action when he hugged An Zhe from behind. Lu Feng's arm pressed down against An Zhe's, and An Zhe stirred. He had planned to move his arm downward but there was nowhere he could put it, so he moved it back up a little and rested his fingers on Lu Feng's forearm, just like how he used to curl his hyphae around nearby rocks or tree trunks.

Lu Feng felt his movement.

Very softly, An Zhe asked, "Aren't you afraid I'll infect you?”

Lu Feng did not answer An Zhe, just as An Zhe did not answer him earlier.

Between an Arbiter trusting a xenogenic or a xenogenic trusting an Arbiter, it was hard to say which was more absurd—no matter what reason they had.

Perhaps the day they met was the beginning of the world's most absurd story.

But in the darkness, neither of them could clearly see the other's face. In this place that was isolated from the world, in this moment that nobody knew of, it seemed as though regardless of what one did, it would not matter. Everything would be forgotten, and everything would be tacitly agreed to.

While listening to An Zhe's soft breathing, Lu Feng closed his eyes.

# 36

## “YOU TWO HAVE A GREAT RELATIONSHIP.”

### AN ZHE HAD A DREAM.

The pitter-pattering sound of rain.

Water droplets struck wide leaves, flowed down along crisscrossing leaf veins, and fell from the edges to land in the shrubbery, then trickled down the roots of old trees and seeped into the damp soil. It was a wet rainy season, a sight he seemed to have experienced many times before. His memories started from there, when the entire world was composed of rain.

He floated down from a mushroom's cap and, before the rain began to fall, was borne to the soil by the wind. He seemed to have been sleeping all the way up until he smelled the damp water vapor after the rain.

Everything was out of his control. In the moist soil, the hyphae stretched out, grew long, split, extended outward, and aggregated. He grew from a spore smaller than a speck of sand into a mass of hyphae, then drew out a stem and grew a cap.

Everything followed a clear and orderly pattern. Unlike humans, mushrooms did not need to pass down teachings from generation to generation. He did not have the slightest recollection of the mushroom that had produced him, but he clearly knew what he needed to obtain from the soil, as though this was his own experience. He also knew in what season he ought to be born, what he ought to do, and in what season he ought to die. His life's mission was to produce a spore.

Then he once again grew and died, while his spore continued to grow. Amidst the timeless sound of rain, countless spores drifted down in turn.

In that manner, the soft rainfall sounded in his ears. All around him, and within his body, mind, and memories, it was omnipresent, as though hastening the occurrence of something that was about to happen. In its wake came the waves that came from distant skies. Infinite emptiness, infinite terror—until his eyes flew open.

The quartz clock hanging on the wall had ticked to nine o'clock. There was nobody next to him, and he was securely wrapped in the quilt. But the feeling of being held in Lu Feng's arms seemed to still remain. The heat lingered on his skin, burning him bit by bit. Lu Feng had originally been holding him around the upper body, somewhere below his shoulders. In the middle of the night, though, An Zhe had started feeling discomfort in his arms from the weight and pulled them out. The man's arm had thus shifted downward a bit and settled on his waist, his palm just happening to lie flat against An Zhe's abdomen.

When he was being held in Lu Feng's arms, it was like he could isolate himself from all the dangers outside. He felt very safe, but this man himself was also the greatest danger. An Zhe could no longer remember what kind of mood he was in before he fell back asleep.

An Zhe looked at everything in front of him, his mind utterly blank. He wiggled his fingers. Softness permeated even the nooks and crannies of his bones. As though he had taken too long of an afternoon nap, he had no strength all over.

The surrounding air was so damp, just like right after a bout of rain.

He thought back to that strange yet seemingly prophetic dream, then sat up from the bed and held out his hand. Taking the spore from his stomach was too cruel of an act. Only a certain officer named Lu would do so. He controlled the movement of the spore within his body. Three minutes later, a mass of white hyphae stretched out, appearing upon his right palm while clustered around his spore.

When he had placed it in his body, it was a little spore only the size of half of a palm, but now it was the same size as his fist.

He carefully scrutinized it by the glow of the gas lamp. At the ends of the spore's hyphae were minute antler-like bifurcations, and with its white and transparent luster, it was like a snowflake. Its shape had begun to change.

He touched it with his left hand, and it reached out with its hyphae to affectionately wrap around his fingers. He could feel its fresh and flourishing life; it was close to maturity.

He did not know precisely when the spore would reach maturity, but it would not be long.

Their hyphae would no longer be intertwined. It would become a mushroom capable of surviving independently. The moment it matured, it would automatically leave him, just like when he had been blown down by the wind.

Planting its spores was a mushroom's instinct. Where did he want to plant it? Would it grow up in the distant future? An Zhe did not know. He only felt the faint wistfulness that came before a parting. It seemed that all tangible things in the world would eventually be separated.

Just then, there was the sound of movement in the passageway. His spore first pricked up its hyphae, seemingly listening to the sound, then spiritedly rolled toward the sound's source like the pole of one piece of magnetite leaping toward another pole. An Zhe brought his hands together, clasping it tightly, and just barely managed to recall the traitorous little thing back to his own body before Lu Feng entered.

Standing at the doorway, Lu Feng raised his eyebrows at An Zhe.

"Get up," he said.

An Zhe obediently got out of bed and went to eat. They spent the following few days in the same manner, with An Zhe helping Xi Bei cook and tidy up the mine. Lu Feng frequently went outside. Each time, An Zhe worried he wouldn't be able to come back, but each time, the Colonel was unexpectedly safe and sound. Sometimes, he would even bring back a small bird and toss it to them for roasting.

More often, they stayed in the cave with nothing to do. An Zhe had finished reading all of the books, and at the Colonel's request, he read out loud to him a romance novel and an entire weapons handbook—the man could not be bothered to flip through them himself.

Finally, they began to play board games with small stones. They were all very

simple games such as five-in-a-row or airplane chess. Lu Feng first taught him, and then they played together. An Zhe lost more often than he won, and he secretly suspected that those few wins were from the Colonel secretly throwing the game because every time he won, a hint of a smile would appear in Lu Feng's eyes.

When they were eating, Xi Bei said, "You two have a great relationship. There used to be people who would fall in love in the caves as well, and Grandfather would be the witness for their marriages," he sighed softly, putting down his chopsticks. "I also want to fall in love, but there are no other people left here."

Lu Feng said nothing. An Zhe comforted Xi Bei, saying, "There are people at the base."

Although there were only eight thousand of them.

Seemingly comforted, Xi Bei spiritedly picked his chopsticks back up.

Seven days later, communications had still not been restored, and Xi Bei told them the unfortunate news that their stores of food were no longer enough for two days' worth. They had to go to the city ruins that were thousands of meters away to search for supplies.

So they left some dried food for Grandfather and put the remaining mushrooms and dried meat in their backpacks along with several bottles of water. Xi Bei brought out a small alcohol burner from the kitchen. Before the people of the mine died out, they often went to the city to search for supplies, so they were well equipped.

"We made a dirt road, so we could get there by bicycle." Xi Bei's tone of voice was slightly despondent. "Now it's turned into sand, so bicycling is impossible."

Thus, before An Zhe left, he longingly looked at the bicycles piled in a corner. He had never seen bicycles before.

Lu Feng rested his elbow on An Zhe's shoulder and said languidly, "I'll take you to ride them after we get back."

Just as they had prepared everything, when they were getting ready to open the lid at the top of the cave, heavy and sluggish footsteps came from the depths of the mine.

An Zhe turned back. In the dim lighting, a withered old man approached from around the corner while using the wall for support. His hair was grizzled and unkempt, and the corners of his mouth trembled constantly like the flame of a pale candle flickering in the wind.

Xi Bei walked forward. "… Grandfather?"

The old man stared at him with cloudy eyes, devoid of expression and not seeming to recognize him. He opened his mouth, saying, "I'll go too."

Xi Bei hugged the old man by the shoulders. "You can just stay here. We'll be back in a day or two, and we'll bring food back with us."

In the same hoarse voice, the old man said, "I'll go too."

No matter how Xi Bei tried to dissuade him, he only had that sentence to say. Because of this persistence, his dull face unexpectedly showed an unusual lucidity.

Left with no other choice, Xi Bei turned to Lu Feng with a pleading gaze.

Lu Feng examined the old man for a long time before saying, "Let's bring him."

Xi Bei gave his assent and helped the old man out—his tottering gait was unsteady, and anyone who looked at him would know that this elderly life was drawing near to its end.

At the cave mouth, Lu Feng said, "I'll take him."

Xi Bei shook his head. After picking up his grandfather on his back, he said, "Grandfather is very light."

An Zhe looked at the old man's withered body. Illness had already consumed his body to the point where only a loose skeleton remained.

They arrived aboveground where it was daylight, the sun shining down on them. An Zhe squinted, getting accustomed to it only after some time had passed.

He looked at Grandfather being propped up on Xi Bei's back, eyes closed. His face was covered with the kind of brown spots that would appear in a human's old age, but in the sunlight, his expression was very peaceful.

His mouth moved as he spoke a single sentence.

"People live on the ground."

This was the only thing An Zhe heard from Grandfather over the past few days that didn't sound like gibberish.

He looked up at the pale gray sky. At the moment, faint ribbons of pale green were drifting across the sky. Even though it was not nighttime, it was possible to see the aurora, unlike before.

Lu Feng said, "The magnetic field's frequency has been adjusted."

An Zhe nodded. He did not know the meaning of that sentence, but so long as the magnetic field was still fine, then everything was fine.

Upon the sand, their footsteps were sometimes deep and sometimes shallow. As they crossed the vast wasteland, it was like they were the only living things. The wind blew from an unknown distance. Whether it was over ten thousand years or a hundred million years, it blew in this manner. The creatures walking on the ground would be renewed and replaced, with some dying and some being newly born, but the wind would not change. When it blew into the crevices in the rock, a strange and drawn-out noise that resembled wailing would sound in the wasteland.

Amidst this distant wailing, An Zhe spontaneously latched onto the hem of Lu Feng's sleeve and walked with him.

Lu Feng gave him a flat look. "Shall I carry you on my back?"

An Zhe shook his head. He could walk on his own.

Saying nothing, Lu Feng once again looked forward.

After walking for another stretch, An Zhe had become tired from latching on, and his arm was a little sore. Over the past few days, as his spore gradually matured, his physical strength seemed to worsen. He wanted to let go but also did not really want to let go.

Lu Feng flexed his wrist, and An Zhe understood his meaning. He had annoyed the Colonel with his hold, so he obediently let go.

Then his hand was grasped by the Colonel's.

On the road, they spotted the wreckage of a plane. The plane's shape was identical to that of Lu Feng's plane. An Zhe roughly estimated the direction. This plane should be the one before Lu Feng's crash. He had witnessed its fall.

After three or four planes crashed in succession, he never again saw the base's planes appear in the sky. Most likely the base had also noticed this strange change and no longer dispatched its fighter planes.

But this plane's condition was better than that of Lu Feng's. It hadn't exploded, so apart from the damage to its appearance, everything else was well preserved.

Lu Feng walked over and detached the plane's black box. After hesitating briefly, he climbed through the cracked plane cabin door. There were bite marks at the edges.

Monsters had eaten the pilot's body. The bloodstained clothes had dried, and the picked-clean bones lay scattered about in the cockpit. The skull had tumbled underneath the console, only half of it remaining and with sharp teeth marks along the edge.

An Zhe climbed in with him. For a moment, Lu Feng wanted him to leave so that he wouldn't be frightened by this hideous sight, but then he saw An Zhe's calm gaze and realized that he would not feel fear because of human remains.

Below the console was a flight manual lying face down. The flight manual was a pilot's reference book, containing records of basic operation steps, the purposes of instruments and how to use them, and the solutions to various extraordinary circumstances.

Lu Feng pulled the flight manual over to himself. An unknown change had occurred to the manual. The black writing had deeply, deeply seeped into the paper. The color diffused outward as fine black tentacles, making the printed characters all over the pages warp and twist strangely, resembling some sort of evil symbols.

An Zhe looked at the paper as well and struggled to recognize the words.

What this page talked about were the various possible kinds of engine breakdowns.

Thus, he knew that this plane crash had occurred because of an engine breakdown, and until the very moment the plane crashed, the pilot had been searching the manual for possible solutions.

Then—at that moment, the plane crashed, the manual fell, and the people died.

After Lu Feng carried An Zhe down from the plane's accommodation ladder and put him on the ground, An Zhe heard Lu Feng say, "The plane I was in also crashed because of an engine breakdown."

An Zhe frowned.

Lu Feng continued, "But problems occurred with the other parts as well."

"Was it because there were problems when they were made?" An Zhe asked.

"The fleet of PJ fighter planes has already carried out many flight missions, and they had also been serviced prior to takeoff." Lu Feng said.

They continued walking. Xi Bei and Grandfather were waiting up ahead for them.

An Zhe could not understand the reason for the plane breakdowns. He asked, "Then why?"

"I don't know." The Colonel very seldom spoke these three words.

As though he recalled something, he said flatly, "An engine breakdown occurred when the PL1109 was landing as well, but it still descended safely."

The PL1109 was the base's most advanced fighter plane. What Lu Feng meant was that there was now the risk of accidents occurring with all planes. Not long ago, when he had left the human base and was looking back at the Main City, he had also seen the PL1109's slowly descending silhouette. It turned out that at that time, Lu Feng had already made a trip along the edge of life and death.

"Then…" An Zhe said in a small voice, "will you not ride planes anymore?"

Saying nothing, Lu Feng simply ruffled his hair.

After meeting back up with Xi Bei, they gave a simple rundown of the situation there and continued walking forward.

Within their lines of sight, everything was wasteland.

Xi Bei looked around. "There really are fewer monsters now. There used to be quite a lot before."

An Zhe knew what these words meant. Whether big or small, many creatures had died and become nothing but parts for and of the hybrid-class monsters. Because the total number of monsters decreased, this place seemed much safer. But each monster by itself was more dangerous.

But all of these changes were completed in less than a couple of weeks, and the small and weak monsters were wiped out. The process was still too fast. An Zhe thought back to the monster that was desperately greedy to consume genes. Its actions truly seemed overly hasty.

In truth, there were similar images within his memories. He remembered the late autumns in the Abyss.

In the winter, the Abyss would become wet and cold. After a snowfall, there would be frost everywhere on the ground and the trees. Many monsters would no longer come out and move about. Instead, they would search for warm caves to hide in. In order to live through an entire winter, they would madly fight each other, desperately consume more flesh and blood to store nutrition for the winter, or drag the carcasses of their enemies into their caves to serve as food reserves. The month before winter arrived was the Abyss's most dangerous and most bloody time.

Now, the same kind of slaughter was happening outside as well.

This stretch of road was not long. The entire way, they were sufficiently cautious, choosing hidden routes to travel over. Perhaps also because of luck, they did not encounter any terrifying hybrid-class monsters.

They had set out at eight o'clock. At half past nine in the morning, a city half-buried by the wind and sand appeared in front of them.

It was very large. When they got closer, they could not see the end of it at a glance. Amidst the unbroken succession of buildings, they could faintly see the

vestiges of the road. Unlike the standardized buildings of the Northern Base, they were scattered about and devoid of any patterns. Tall and short buildings stood together, and round and rectangular buildings had been placed at random. The roads twisted and turned, and a dark red tower stood in the center of the city. Half of the overpass had collapsed, and thick profusions of vines hung from it as it lay across the middle of the road up ahead. There were buildings in every color, but precisely because of the excessive number of colors, they became one in An Zhe's field of vision and gradually blurred into a misty gray.

An Zhe looked into the boundless distance. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, he would not have been able to imagine that the world still had this kind of complicated city within it. If he were one of its residents, getting lost would have been a common occurrence.

Dark clouds covered the sun, the sky was overcast, and a faint mist hung in the air.

"Come with me," Xi Bei said. "Those of us from the mine often came here to look for supplies, so we have a stronghold in the city. Actually, living in the city is fine as well. We're just afraid that there are monsters. Grandfather doesn't know why either. He just insists that the cave is the safest. In the past, three of the uncles thought that living in the cave was too difficult and came to live in the city. Afterward, there was no more news from them."

After following Xi Bei through the streets with numerous buildings, they arrived at a residential area where big gray buildings were crowded together. There was a public square in the distance, and in the center of the public square, a white sphere was faintly visible. In the silent city, apart from the wind passing through the buildings, there was only the sound of their footsteps.

Lu Feng was responsible for keeping watch over the surroundings. Because Xi Bei was carrying his grandfather, he had his head down the entire time. He said, "It's right past that public square. We'll get there very soon."

At that same moment, a coughing sound came from Grandfather's throat.

His vocal cords vibrated as he continually uttered a regular syllable. There was phlegm in his throat, so his voice was unclear. They could only just hear him

say, "Gu…"

"Gu, gu…"

"What?" Xi Bei asked.

Lu Feng's footsteps came to an abrupt stop.

An Zhe looked at him, but saw that he was staring at the public square up ahead.

Then he spat out a curt word. "Run!"

There was no time to think. An Zhe felt a fierce yank on his arm, and he unconsciously followed Lu Feng in turning around and running toward the nearest building. Xi Bei did not know what had happened, but he swiftly followed while carrying his grandfather on his back.

The residential building was an architectural structure that An Zhe was familiar with. Right inside the corridor entrance, they were met by a pale, clothed skeleton. It was leaning against a corner and seemed to have fused into the pale wall. But he was in no position to look more closely. His body already lacked strength in the first place, so he fell a step behind when going up the stairs. Lu Feng simply picked him up and swiftly climbed the stairs. The staircase was very roomy, and each floor had three residences. At around the eighth floor, one door was wide open, and Lu Feng charged straight in with An Zhe. Xi Bei followed close behind, and as soon as he came in, Lu Feng shut the door. All of the furniture inside was covered with dust, and there was a skeleton lying on the living room sofa.

This was a place with three bedrooms and two living rooms, and it had windows on both the south and north sides. A part of the living room extended out from the building; it was a gigantic French window.

Lu Feng put An Zhe down. He was breathing hard from running too fast just now. An Zhe had never seen him in this state before.

But in the following moment—

He saw Xi Bei looking outside the French window, his face pallid and gaze unfocused.

He looked ahead.

White.

A white, spherical, half-a-story-tall monster was moving with some strange gait—almost floating, ghost-like footsteps—as it slowly approached. It was the thing in the distant public square that An Zhe had initially treated as a white decoration. It was a gigantic monster.

It came straight towards them. While it was still two streets away, An Zhe got a clear look at it. Beneath an indescribable body grew wriggling feet like those of an octopus or snail. The front half was responsible for walking, and the back half was dragged along. Its body—its nearly circular body—was covered with a translucent membrane that was a color somewhere between white and pale gray. Underneath the membrane, within its body were countless black or flesh-colored shapeless things or in other words organs. Densely concentrated tentacles or limbs, or other things, wriggled constantly.

The closer it came to the residential area, the more clearly visible the details on its body were. It was a hybridized shape completely beyond the scope of human understanding. Wherever its eyes were, they could not be found. Xi Bei stared straight at it, seemingly about to die from terror.

It came closer.

Everyone in the room held their breaths.

# 37

## “BUT HE WAS NOT SUCH AN EVIL MUSHROOM.”

CROSSING the road that was covered with yellow sand, it came to the front of the community. Still a few hundred meters away, the soft thing's feet made rustling noises as they rubbed against the road.

On the surface of the slick, pale membrane, neither eyes, ears, nor antennae or breathing holes could be seen. How did it perceive the world? Hearing, sight, or sound waves? This would determine how they ought to escape.

Xi Bei asked, "What… what do we do?"

Lu Feng said nothing. He walked over to the window and pushed it, but the window seemed like it was frozen or rusted. With the first push, it unexpectedly didn't budge in the slightest. His arms tensed, and only after exerting some more force did the window let out an ugly-sounding screech of metal breaking and grinding. With difficulty, a small triangular gap was pushed open.

The jet-black muzzle of the gun stuck out through the gap, but what the Colonel aimed at was not the monster, but rather the opposite street.

There was a soft "bang." It was the sound of a silenced gunshot, unable to be heard from beyond ten meters away.

The bullet left a fleeting silhouette on his retinas, and then it was right in the window of a building next to the street.

The bullets he used when he went out into the field were different from the ordinary bullets he used when he tried humans. They were bullets of depleted uranium alloy, possessing the power to penetrate armor and crushing strength.

With a loud noise, a whole sheet of glass shattered and fell to the ground.

The monster's movements clearly paused.

Lu Feng lifted his gun again. In the direction he fired, broken glass crashed to the ground.

Sure enough, the monster had heard it, and the wriggling feet changed direction. It seemed to hesitantly stop for a moment, then move slowly toward the source of the noise, but it stopped again three minutes later, gave up its original direction, and continued to move toward the residential community where they were.

Xi Bei unconsciously stepped back, his face deathly pale. "It… It… Can you hit it?"

Lu Feng slightly pursed his thin lips, and he looked in that direction, his gaze cold and expression frighteningly calm.

Then he reached out, and there was a click as he detached the silencer.

He continually pressed down the trigger!

"Bang! Bang! Bang!”

A string of blasts exploded violently in the street around the monster! In the too-silent city, this sound was no different from deafening thunderclaps.

The monster once again lingered on the spot, wavering, but at the same time, a shrill cry suddenly came from the other end of the city.

Then a massive black shape launched into the air from that direction, and a massive hawk-like bird flew across the sky. It spread out its wingspan that was dozens of meters wide, and its gliding speed was even faster than bullets as it dove straight toward the similarly shaped white monster!

The monster emitted a high-pitched scream. Its white membrane split open, and countless soft bramble-like tentacles extended outward and wound around the eagle's beak like a tidal surge.

With a dull "pfft," the eagle's steel-armor-like wings pierced its body. At the pain, the monster's tentacles shrank back like they'd been electrocuted. The flying eagle took the opportunity to get away. After one strike, it immediately flapped its wings and flew up. Far outside the attack range of those plentiful dark gray tentacles, it circled once in the sky. The next moment, wrapped in the

piercing shriek of the wind, it swooped down again. The sharp beak stabbed straight into the center of the white monster's body.

In an instant, white and flesh-colored liquids splashed everywhere. The razor teeth in its sharp beak bit down on something. The white monster's body was too enormous. As it madly writhed and struggled, the surrounding houses trembled and collapsed while the ground buzzed. In the gray human city, two unimaginably enormous monsters continued to fight—

An area of the ground hundreds of meters in circumference was stained with dark mucus. The battle concluded with the white monster destroyed beyond recognition, its internal organs dripping all over the ground. The eagle held its dripping-wet organs in its mouth. Without any reluctance, it turned and flew into the distance.

An Zhe breathed a soft sigh of relief. It was only then that he had understood Lu Feng's purpose in firing so many shots. There was not necessarily only one monster in this city. He had exposed its location with the sound of gunfire and attracted another monster.

Xi Bei asked, "How… How did you know that bird was there?"

Lu Feng pulled his gun back, reinstalled the silencer, and turned around, the series of actions fluid, neat, and well-practiced.

"I didn't," he said. "It was a gamble."

An Zhe looked in the direction where the eagle had disappeared. Under this current circumstance, flying-class monsters seemed to have shown unparalleled advantages.

Having escaped from the jaws of death, none of them said anything. In the silence, an elderly voice suddenly spoke up.

"It's almost time." Grandfather's voice was hoarse. "I've lived until age sixty. It's enough."

Lu Feng looked in the old man's direction.

He asked, "Time for what?"

The old man opened his mouth. As he stared at the distant sky, there was a

hint of madness in his expression. "The time… the time of arrival."

"The arrival of what?"

"The unspeakable, unimaginable…" His voice was filled with the hoarseness of one on their deathbed. "Bigger than everything, cannot be seen, in the world… will be arriving soon."

Lu Feng's voice was very low. "How do you know?"

"I'm almost dead… I can feel it. I can hear it." His words were as slow as sleeptalk that had been stretched out countless times.

"What can you hear?"

"I can hear…" The old man continued, "Chaotic—"

As he spoke, the old man looked up at the gray sky above the city. An Zhe followed his gaze and looked up as well. The sky was so low as to be frightening, heavily weighing down on the upper part of his field of vision. The aurora was so bright, its green glow also lowered and mixed with the dark gray cloud cover. Lu Feng said that the reason why the aurora was so bright was because the base had adjusted the frequency of the artificial magnetic field to be stronger in order to resist distortion.

"People live on the ground and die on the ground. The sky…" The old man's expression was peaceful, and his voice became softer and softer. "The sky will only get lower."

After he spat out the last word, he slowly folded his hands.

His eyes slowly, slowly slid shut.

Xi Bei's knees went soft, and he knelt in front of the old man and put both hands on his knees. "Grandfather? Grandfather?"

No response.

The old man's chest stopped rising and falling. He was gone.

His death occurred in the span of only a moment.

Two streams of tears flowed from Xi Bei's eyes, and he buried his face against the old man's knees.

When he finally lifted his head back up, An Zhe softly asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm… okay." Xi Bei blankly looked at his grandfather's face and mumbled, "In the past, Grandfather said he wasn't afraid of death. He said that when people live, they each have their own mission, and his mission was to protect everyone in the mine. Having been able to see the mine live up to today was… was enough for him."

He lifted his head to look at the old man's face, the haggard and dusty face. His white hair was unkempt, with some parts tangled together. In the dark underground, nobody could live with dignity.

He said, "I… I'll go find a comb."

He dazedly got up and walked toward the other rooms.

A dwindling life had passed.

In this place, there was also another life that had passed a long time ago. An Zhe turned to look at the living room sofa, where a skeleton lay.

Its flesh must have naturally decayed, because with the skeleton as the center, the sofa was covered with green, yellow, or brown splotches, which were the traces of where mold had grown.

"Initially it was superbacteria, fungi, and viruses. They propagated in the human cities, indiscriminately infecting all people and leaving corpses everywhere in the cities. Those who have been to the ruins in the wilds all know about this." What Poet had once said sounded in An Zhe's ears.

He lifted his head and looked out the window. This was a building that had passed away, a city that had passed away. The buildings were full of skeletons, and every skeleton was a life that had passed away.

Lu Feng saw An Zhe's eyes, which were still so calm, as though it were the gaze of someone completely uninvolved. But in the lighting of the gray sky, the subtle movements on his quiet and beautiful face combined together, yet his face also showed an indescribable sorrow that was like a wisp of smoke.

After looking away and at the city instead, he said, "When the human base was completed and the comprehensive search and rescue carried out, the

base's strength was insufficient, so many small cities did not receive a timely rescue."

An Zhe looked at the boundless ocean-like stretch of buildings. To walk from this end of the city to the other end, it would take at least several hours. He softly asked, "Is this a small city?"

Lu Feng said, "Yes."

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

What seemed to him to be a city unmatched in vastness, to the once thriving and glorious humans, was unexpectedly just a small city that had not received a timely rescue.

Then before the Age of Calamity, exactly how magnificent was the humans' world? He did not know.

And since there were handfuls of people around the city who were clinging to life amidst the calamity, then in countless places, were there also countless unrescued people struggling, despairing, and dying? This city was full of skeletons, the base was by no means safe and calm, and the human world was full of crying, weeping, and screaming.

The gradual fall of such a grand whole—while imagining this sight, he seemed to see a huge sunset gradually, gradually sinking into the black horizon, a protracted death.

"Clunk—"

Amidst the dead silence, from the next-door bedroom suddenly came the sound of something falling to the ground.

Lu Feng asked, "What is it?"

There was no reply, only the sound of Xi Bei's trembling breaths.

Frowning, Lu Feng took the gun, turned, and walked over, with An Zhe following him.

The room was empty, devoid of both monsters and enemies, but as Xi Bei faced away from them, his back trembled violently. At first, An Zhe thought he was crying. Then, after walking over to him, An Zhe saw that he was staring at a

comb in his hand.

For a while, An Zhe found it difficult to describe the wooden comb because it was not only one, but rather two combs fused together. It was the most common kind of brown wood comb, with a handle ten centimeters long and fine teeth. The handles of the two equally common wooden combs were perfectly joined together, as though they had been carved from the same piece of wood. The teeth were tilted forty-five degrees, one to the left and one to the right, like a two-headed snake spitting out its tongues.

But if they were initially just two ordinary combs, how could they have fused together?

Wood, the product of a tree, was the most ordinary and safest thing, but because of this strange appearance that went beyond common sense, it brought about the most unrivaled terror.

Lu Feng strode to the dresser where Xi Bei got the comb. This was clearly a woman's room before the great Calamity Age. Upon the ivory-white dresser rested countless bottles, jars, and tools of various sizes.

Lu Feng reached out to wipe away the dust on the mirror, but after wiping away one layer, there was another layer underneath. The dust seemed to be forming inside the mirror, and the mirror was always clouded over, distorting their figures into a blob of black.

While looking at all of this, An Zhe suddenly recalled that when he was climbing the wall of the Outer City, one layer of sand fell, but inside was yet more sand, as though the city wall had become an aggregate of sand and steel.

Lu Feng no longer looked at the mirror. With brows furrowed, he glanced over the variously sized makeup tools, then finally pulled out a rusty long tweezer—although it also wasn't a tweezer, because this metal tweezer was stuck to a plastic eyebrow trimming knife, and the X-shaped part in the middle connecting them was fused together seamlessly. It was hard to say whether it was steel or plastic, or a brand-new material unknown to humans.

Xi Bei's fingers trembled, and, with a clack, the comb fell to the dusty floor.

"Does this city… have some strange thing about it?" he asked. “Let's… Let's

hurry and go."

"It's not just this city," Lu Feng said.

As he looked at the fused tweezers and eyebrow trimmer, he spoke only two words.

"The engines."

These ordinary two words sounded in the room like a thunderclap.

There were complex mechanical structures inside the engine. Once those precise structures were damaged—

If strange fusions and changes occurred inside the insides of the engines like this comb, then the plane crashes were inevitable.

An Zhe bent down and picked up the comb. No trace of a join could be seen, but the carvings on the handle were chaotic, both chaotic and mad. It was impossible to imagine how they were fused together, just like the flight manual's writing with the inky tentacles that reached out every which way.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly. Suddenly, the words that Madam Lu spoke after transforming into a bee and before flying into the boundless sky sounded in his ears.

"Humans' genes are too weak, so they are unable to perceive the changes currently happening in the world. We will all die. All work was futile. It only proves the insignificance and powerlessness of humankind."

The thought crossed his mind like lightning slicing across the sky.

If, if… when people and monsters or monsters and monsters physically overlapped or got close, genetic contamination would occur—

No, that was wrong, that was completely wrong.

"Genes…" he mumbled. "It's not genes…"

The problem was not genes at all.

Humans believed that alterations in genes were the fundamental cause of the contamination. But contamination was the fusing and recombining of the flesh and blood between one organism and another. Their own attributes had

changed, but these alterations were completed by genetic changes.

If, if something like mutual contamination could occur, if a living creature's qualities could instantly change, why couldn't other things do the same? And what was the difference between the bodies of living things—those DNA helices—and the world's other inanimate materials?

Therefore, paper and wood would also contaminate each other, and steel and plastic would as well.

In that case, all tangible things in the world would as well.

It was just that this process was taking place gradually, not immediately. The flood current had only just begun to surge; with the contamination of organisms' genes as an omen, it had only just appeared before humankind.

Over the period of time when the geomagnetic field had disappeared, those hybrid-class monsters madly ate, madly acquiring the forms of other creatures to strengthen themselves just like humans hoarding food for the winter.

Had they felt something humans had not?

Had they known what was coming?

Xi Bei's voice trembled. "Exactly wh…"

He could no longer speak.

Exactly what kind of age was this?

Exactly what kind of disaster were they faced with?

Exactly what was happening right now?

What was it?

What was it?

A streak of lightning cut across the sky. The windows vibrated, and the primeval wind made drawn-out howling noises as it poured into the room through the crevices. The hems of their clothes flapped about, blown by the wind.

An Zhe lifted his head, and he and Lu Feng locked eyes. Those cold green eyes were as dark and gloomy as the sky outside.

Right when they looked at each other, a peal of thunder sounded in the sky. The sky lowered even further, and between the vast heavens and earth, torrential rain came pouring down.

In the sheets of rain, nothing outside could be seen nor heard—boundless darkness, boundless emptiness, boundless terror.

Madam Lu's gentle and mellow voice and Grandfather's withered and raspy voice overlapped as they sounded abruptly in An Zhe's ear.

"It's almost time."

Then they found even more proof in the room.

The difficulty in opening the window was because the steel edge of the window had adhered to the sill.

The skeleton's leg bones, upon more careful examination, had fused with the couch beneath them. The ugliest existence was a chandelier in the form of an inverted cluster of lily-of-the-valley flowers on the ceiling of the second bedroom. Its lampshade and metal stand had fused together, melted, and flowed down like a candle that had burned to the end. The formerly snow-white lampshade was filled with pitch-black dust, and each speck of dust was a pinprick-sized black dot. They densely clustered together, as though in the very next moment they would creep forth.

All of these things that were strange, should not have happened, and exceeded the limits of human understanding and science combined, giving An Zhe a certain impression—just like wax being melted by fire, the world was gradually blending together.

Xi Bei returned to the living room. He dumbly sat on the floor and picked up Grandfather's body, lifting it from the chair before getting far away from that place with Grandfather, as though the chair was the most frightening monster, as though in the very next moment this body would be one with the chair. After getting far away from the chair, he put Grandfather on the floor, but the muscles in his cheek immediately twitched with nervousness—after all, the floor was a monster, too.

He gave a start and suddenly took a few rapid steps backward, for his own

existence was also a source of contamination.

Seeing his panic-stricken and helpless appearance, An Zhe stepped forward, but just as he took one step, Xi Bei looked at him with terrified eyes and retreated a few steps.

Supposing everything in the world would pollute each other, then only by staying far away from everything would one be able to preserve oneself.

An Zhe could understand his fear, and he distanced himself, unbidden, from Xi Bei again.

"Sorry, I…" Xi Bei's teeth chattered. "I have to… calm down a bit."

Lu Feng led An Zhe into the bedroom.

After stepping into the bedroom and seeing the flowing chandelier once more, he stopped in his tracks. An Zhe looked at the Colonel and saw that his green eyes seemed to have frozen over.

The next moment, Lu Feng took out his communicator from his coat pocket and held it tightly, his knuckles white.

An Zhe simply watched from the side. Xi Bei had already fallen apart, and as a human, he knew that Lu Feng's state would not be much better than Xi Bei's. In fact, the Colonel had experienced even more things than Xi Bei. While enduring the fear brought about by this mad world, he still needed to think about the distant human base.

He needed to stay strong, for the human base if for no one else.

If the engines in the plane had broken down due to the mutual contamination of substances, the communicator would as well. There was a screwdriver in the drawer of the bedroom nightstand. Lu Feng picked it up and loosened the screws on the communicator's chassis.

The chassis, intricately lined chips, crisscrossing circuits, and countless small parts were laid out on the bed. Lu Feng picked them up one at a time and examined their minute structures in the light.

The communicator had many parts. After looking for a while, An Zhe also picked up a few components with relatively simple structures from amongst the

pile of parts and checked whether they conformed to the clear-cut standards of humankind's machinery.

After closing the bedroom door, it seemed like only the two of them were left in the world. Neither of them spoke. In the rain, apart from the sounds of them going through the parts, nothing could be heard. Lu Feng's speed was very fast; those parts seemed all very normal.

But An Zhe was suddenly stunned.

He looked at a small chip board in his hand. Upon it were two parallel red copper wires, both consisting of several dozen strands of fine copper wire twisted together. They originally should have been parallel to each other, with a few millimeters of distance in between. But now they were all loosened up and bent into strange arcs. The two copper wires had gotten close to each other and were mixed together, which was definitely not ordinary.

At this moment, at least for a brief moment, An Zhe suddenly thought that if even the communicator was thoroughly broken due to the distortion of matter, if Lu Feng could never return to the base, what would they do?

But he was not such an evil mushroom.

As he looked at the chip in his hand, he bit his lip. Amidst the slight pain, in the end he still tugged on the edge of Lu Feng's sleeve.

On the inner side of Lu Feng's military boot, there was a hidden buckle, and tucked inside was a sharp dagger that was now removed. An Zhe lit the chip with a flashlight that had been taken from the mine, then watched Lu Feng pick apart the tangled copper wires with the tip of the dagger bit by bit. Signs of adhesion had already appeared between the copper wires, but fortunately it had been discovered in time, so they could still be separated.

When it was finally cleaned up, however, An Zhe's mental state was slightly strained. But he also felt a slight dizziness in his head, as though he were sick. Ever since the spore started showing signs of maturity, his body had weakened more and more.

Lu Feng examined the remaining parts one more time, then assembled them in the proper order and pressed the button to turn on the communicator.

But what came out was not the "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the signal has been interrupted…" that An Zhe was accustomed to.

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

"Beep—"

The rain got louder again. Thousands of big raindrops pelted the window like bullets, making ceaseless thudding noises. This was a rainstorm that would only occur in midsummer, and outside the window, it had become a gray waterfall.

The raindrops seemed to strike An Zhe's very soul.

In a trance, he vaguely heard the soft mechanical female voice come out of the communicator, but the dizziness became more severe. Before his eyes, the world turned into colorful lights—and in the following second, he pitched straight forward.

Before losing consciousness, he had only one thought.

*I hope the spore won’t fall out so soon.*

# 38

## “BUT I MET YOU.”

LASTLY, he saw Lu Feng's face. He had never seen such a perturbed expression on the Colonel's face before. He wanted to say something, but no words could come out—

His vision went black, and his body was an empty hollow.

Gently, a thread of something broke inside his body.

It hurt so much.

Then the second thread broke.

He strove to understand what had happened. At last, his consciousness seemed to turn into a pinprick of light in the void, and he finally saw what was happening.

The slender and snow-white thread gradually elongated until it was almost transparent, fragile to the point of being frightening.

Snap.

With a pain like that of a needle stab, it broke.

His spore.

The hyphae from his body were connected to every single strand of the spore's hyphae, and now, these strands were snapping one after another. It wasn't that he was letting go of his own accord, it was the spore taking the initiative to leave—no, that wasn't it either.

It was the time of maturation, and the power of life was separating them.

An Zhe could stop nothing. It was difficult to say what sort of deep sentiments

there were between a mushroom and its spores. Their relationship was by no means like that of human parents and children, but he still did not want the spore to leave him so soon. It was still so dangerous outside. If the spore left him, no matter what it encountered, it would meet a premature end—especially if it was Lu Feng.

But he had lost all his senses and could say nothing. He could only desperately speak to the spore in his heart.

Don't come out.

Don't come out.

It's too dangerous.

When there were only three strands of hyphae left, his fear of death reached its peak.

Don't come out—I'm begging you.

As he dripped with cold sweat, his eyes flew open.

Before his eyes was the ceiling. He slowly blinked, then gave a sudden start.

It was still there.

He could still feel the spore inside his body, the three strands of hyphae tenuously holding it. Fortunately it appeared to have settled down, seeming to have finally decided to obey his request.

Then, the doctor's voice unexpectedly came to his ear, and at first he dazedly thought he had returned to the base. Only in the next moment did he realize that it was the sound of the communicator.

After fixing the distorted copper wires, Lu Feng contacted the base as expected. He felt a sense of loss, although it was not right.

"… I'm telling you with certainty that humankind is coming to its end." The doctor's pessimistic view came from the communicator. An Zhe moved a little and discovered that he was lying in Lu Feng's arms and that Lu Feng's coat was draped over him. Lu Feng saw that he had woken up.

He seemed to want to say something. An Zhe signaled with his eyes for Lu

Feng to focus on continuing the call, then weakly rested his forehead against Lu Feng's chest.

"This isn't some predictable disaster at all. This is a mass extinction. I can tell you, it's the mass extinction of all of the living things, non-living things, and all laws of physics."

Lu Feng said, "I've seen the fusion of materials."

"It's not called fusion. Our latest definition is distortion, the distortion of the whole at the microscopic level. Did you know? Underneath the microscope, a silicon atom changed into—changed into something we don't know. This is not genetic contamination at all, it's a change at the quantum level, something we can never observe. According to the uncertainty principle, we can't overcome it, ever. Even if technology advanced another ten thousand years, we could only accept death," the doctor said. "We… We… We currently only know that the magnetic field can protect the earth from the effects of this change. After the two bases increased the strength of the magnetic field, the distortion stopped temporarily. But you know, the situation is always worsening."

It seemed that his nervousness made him chatter away. "In the past, infection only occurred with serious injuries, but afterward, infection occurred with light injuries as well, and after that, infection occurred with mere touch, and finally, infection occurred without any contact. I thought this was the worst-case scenario, but you know what? The basic structures of the world are in chaos, and it's obvious that the process is gradually strengthening. The world is becoming more and more chaotic. Our magnetic field can stop it for now, but what about later? What about when not even the highest strength of the artificial magnetic field can ward it off? The maximum intensity of our magnetic field is level 9, and it's currently at level 7. We're almost at the end. Tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or in half a year at the latest, our artificial magnetic poles will break because of the distortions."

"The base hopes you can come back, but in fact if you want to find a place to spend the rest of your life, I absolutely won't stop you," he said. "The end is coming."

Lu Feng said, "I understand."

"If you haven't found An Zhe, there's no need to keep looking. Spare him, spare yourself, and live well. In any case, you'll die soon," the doctor said. "Even If you bring the sample back, we can't get any research results. This isn't something science can do—although the base still wants to fight for the last glimmer of hope."

After a pause, the doctor said, "I've fallen apart, sorry. I've been infected by the pessimism of the base. Don't listen to a single one of my words. The sample must be brought back. Since the sample is inert against infection, it may also be inert against distortion. This is the last breakthrough point, the final hope. Either you die out there, or you bring it back. But according to An Zhe's actions when he suddenly disappeared, he may be a kind of xenogenic with very strange abilities and form. You must be careful."

The doctor's resigned tone and erroneous estimation of his strength made the corners of An Zhe's lips curl up, but at the same time, he understood that the base was still fixated on his spore.

"Rest well," Lu Feng said to the doctor. "I've already sent the coordinates to the United Front Center."

The communication line was cut off.

Lu Feng looked at An Zhe.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm okay," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng asked, "What happened just now?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"You don't know either?"

An Zhe said in a small voice, "That's not it."

Then he said, "I can't tell you."

He suddenly found that Lu Feng's eyes were frighteningly cold.

"Mm." Lu Feng's fingers gently smoothed his hair, and his voice was flat as he said, "So you can't tell me about the sample either."

An Zhe hung his head. Regarding the spore, he had nothing to say. It was like this before, and it was like this now.

In this world, peaceful times were illusory. Like a dream coming to an end, he and Lu Feng ultimately returned to a few days ago.

Arbiter and xenogenic, pursuer and pursued. He wouldn't hand over the spore, and Lu Feng wouldn't spare him.

He was unwilling to look into Lu Feng's eyes, so he could only change the topic. "Is the base in very bad shape now?"

"Mm-hm."

"Then are you still going to go back?"

"Yes," Lu Feng said.

"But the doctor said… there's no more hope," he said in a small voice.

Then he realized the stupidity of his sentence. Even if the base was about to perish, it was impossible for Lu Feng to not go back.

After a long silence, Lu Feng said, "I am a person of the base."

An Zhe pursed his lips. Lu Feng belonged to the base, just like how he belonged to the Abyss. It was impossible for them to peacefully coexist. Lu Feng had already sent the coordinates to the United Front Center, and he refused to divulge the spore's whereabouts. He couldn't imagine what would happen to him next.

He looked at Lu Feng. In the sheets of rain outside, the light was dim. He could neither clearly see nor understand Lu Feng.

As the world's changes became more and more mad, even the doctor said the words "humankind is coming to its end." In the final moments before humankind's extinction, what was Lu Feng thinking? He did not know. He just quietly looked at Lu Feng.

"Sometimes I think that if the base is bound to perish in my lifetime," Lu Feng said, his voice very low, "everything I've done before…"

He stopped and did not finish his sentence. This fluctuation in mood was like a

ripple on the water, very swiftly frozen.

"Maybe a miracle will happen." An Zhe could only softly say that sentence. It was the only thing he could think of that might comfort Lu Feng.

Lu Feng looked down at him. "Do you think there's a possibility?"

"I guess. Just like… Just like how this world is very big, but when something happened to your plane, you just happened to fall near me," An Zhe said. "If that wasn't the case, you would have died."

Supposing Lu Feng had died, there would also not have been the current An Zhe who had once again appeared in the human city either. Everything would have been different.

But Lu Feng only looked at him. As he lay in Lu Feng's arms, he simply—simply looked down at him. In that pair of green eyes that were devoid of warmth, there was only a hint of a chill. "Do you have any idea how big the world is?"

An Zhe thought back. In his limited memories, he hadn't walked many roads nor seen many things. He was just an inert mushroom. But this world must be very big, for only then could the fall of Lu Feng's plane and subsequent landing in front of him be called a miracle.

So he slowly nodded.

He wanted Lu Feng to be a little happier, but the current Lu Feng was so frightening. Looking at Lu Feng's expressionless profile, An Zhe could not help cowering a little.

"You don't know," Lu Feng said, his voice icy. "I couldn't possibly have landed in front of you by coincidence. As for why, it's because I had originally come to capture you."

"No." An Zhe couldn't bear his gaze. He wanted to leave, but he was held in Lu Feng's unyielding embrace. His voice went hoarse. "There were many planes that day. You all were going… going to kill the bees. It was only… only after accidentally encountering me that you wanted to capture me."

"She's already been killed," Lu Feng said calmly.

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

He asked shakily, "… Who?"

Lu Feng said, "Her."

An Zhe only heard a single syllable. He didn’t know if that was him, her, or it. When this syllable was spoken from Lu Feng's mouth, there could only be one possibility.

Madam Lu.

He personally killed Madam Lu.

An Zhe could hardly breathe. His chest heaved violently.

Lu Feng looked at him and put his fingers to the side of An Zhe's neck. Together, his index and middle fingers pressed down on An Zhe's fragile and warm carotid artery. There wasn't the slightest hint of emotional fluctuation in his voice. "The final mission is to kill you. Did you not hear the command from the communicator?"

An Zhe did.

The pressure made his neck hurt a little, and he reached up to move Lu Feng's hand aside, but he could not push him away. With a sour lump in his throat, he said, "But the world… the world is so big. You didn't know at all that I was there."

Lu Feng looked at An Zhe.

In his arms, An Zhe was so small. The doctor had said that he could instantly escape the base and may be an unusually powerful xenogenic, but Lu Feng knew him. As such a frail and little thing, it seemed that anyone could harm him, whether physically or mentally.

Lu Feng did not clearly hear what he was saying. He only saw that the rims of An Zhe's eyes had reddened, as though he was desperately trying to prove that it was an accident, a coincidence. He seemed to be striving to deceive himself into believing something, so as to excuse Lu Feng.

He took something out from his uniform pocket.

It was a thin glass bottle as long as a thumb and filled with light green liquid. There was a label on the middle of it, and on the label, a bar code and string of

numbers had been printed.

As An Zhe looked at it, he asked, "What is this?"

Lu Feng said flatly, "Tracking agent."

An Zhe had heard that name before. He remembered that Lily had once said she'd been injected with a tracking agent. Humankind's nomenclatures were always brief and to the point. One would know this drug's usage as soon as they heard its name.

"The Lighthouse said that by irradiating the tracking solution with a special-frequency pulse, it can acquire a characteristic frequency. After being irradiated, the tracking agent is split into two parts. One part is injected into the body, and the other part is preserved. By injecting the preserved tracking agent into the analyzer, the direction of the tracking fluid with the same frequency can be indicated," Lu Feng said. "No matter how far."

An Zhe curled his fingers around the ice-cold little tube and held it in his hand.

"Did you inject me with a tracking agent?" His voice trembled slightly. "When did you do it? I… I didn't know."

As he spoke, a thought suddenly crossed his mind.

His voice lowered, and there was a sour lump in his throat that made him almost unable to speak. "Did you suspect that I was a xenogenic since long ago?"

"You were able to pass all the judgment criteria, so I didn't kill you." Lu Feng's voice grew more icy. He pried An Zhe's fingers off, took the tracking agent, and put it back into his pocket. "But I must be responsible for the safety of the base."

An Zhe stared dumbly at him, and a single tear slid from the corner of his eye. He thought Lu Feng would wipe it away, but he did not. The wet trail quietly cooled on his cheek. Just now, Lu Feng had said very little, but it was enough to show his character. He had already mercilessly killed Madam Lu, the queen bee.

He knew what kind of person the Colonel was from the very first day. Perhaps it was the Lu Feng of these past few days, the Lu Feng who was good to him,

who was the fleeting facade.

After he had resumed communication with the base, where did An Zhe get the self-confidence to believe that Lu Feng had been giving him special treatment and that he would spare him?

In that manner, Lu Feng looked at An Zhe, who was still in his arms, as his eyelashes slowly drooped. In the end, he leaned against Lu Feng's chest and closed his eyes. Thus the soft wet glimmer in the little xenogenic's eyes was covered up as well. He seemed to have become heartbroken after that honest explanation of all his actions, Lu Feng thought.

Just like all the people who died by his hand.

But An Zhe opened his eyes again, and he tilted his head back to look at Lu Feng. His voice was very small, so Lu Feng had to lean in closer before he could hear it.

"When Madam Lu became a queen bee, she had completely lost her human mind," he said. "She said to me… She didn't hate the base, she just wanted to experience new forms of life. She didn't hate you."

In the death-like silence, Lu Feng said nothing. The time passed minute by minute and second by second. When An Zhe reached up to touch Lu Feng's cheek to confirm that he was still alive, he saw the corners of Lu Feng's thin, cold lips curl up.

His voice was very soft yet certain.

"She hated me."

An Zhe looked into his eyes.

Madam Lu had said that Lu Feng would never get what he wanted, that he would die a miserable death, and that he would eventually go mad.

He asked, "Why?"

"After I was born, her relationship with my father was discovered by the base, and she was never able to freely meet him again. I killed my father and killed many of her children. When her little daughter escaped from the Garden of Eden with her help, she ran into me. In fact, the day you and I ran into Lily, her

friend who had come to assist was standing on the other side of the road."

Lu Feng seldom spoke at such length, and An Zhe had long ago gotten accustomed to hanging on his every word. When Lu Feng finally finished speaking, he was nearly out of breath.

The silence lasted three seconds.

"The happy things in her life were very few, but I destroyed all of them," Lu Feng said. "Just like everyone else in the base, she hated me."

While looking at him, An Zhe opened his mouth.

In the end, he finally knew what he wished to say.

"I don't hate you," he said.

A long silence.

"Why?" Lu Feng's slightly raspy voice suddenly sounded in his ear.

"What… do you mean, why?" he asked.

"Why can you…"—Lu Feng looked at him—"always forgive me?"

An Zhe looked up at him, but what he saw this time was not that frosty Lu Feng.

The Colonel's voice trembled imperceptibly as he asked again, "Why?"

An Zhe wanted to say it, but he couldn't. He didn't have as high of an intellect as humans, nor did he know that many of their words. He thought for a very long time.

"I understand you," he said.

"You aren't even human." Lu Feng's fingers clamped down on his shoulder. The look in his eyes was still as cold as before, but in his voice, something seemed to fall apart, and he asked almost shakily, "What do you understand about me?"

He still wanted to ask.

But An Zhe could say nothing more. He desperately shook his head.

An Zhe could only be driven into a corner one step at a time by Lu Feng. He

wanted to cry again. He did not know why this man would be so evil. Today, this man did not hesitate to cut open all of him. He himself was like a court justice who wished to acquit the criminal, but the criminal below the bench kept making declarations aggravating his own misconduct. This person insisted on being tried, insisted on being sentenced to death.

That was how much he wanted An Zhe to hate him.

An Zhe did not know why things had reached this point. Clearly, at the very beginning they had only been talking about whether the base could survive or not, about how this world was so big, and about how Lu Feng landing in front of him really was a miracle or not.

Lu Feng had said that it was not, that all of this was premeditated, inevitable.

But it wasn't, it really wasn't.

"But…" As he faced Lu Feng, he lifted his own arm, and those distinct human fingers gradually changed.

Snow-white hyphae climbed up Lu Feng's black uniform and crawled over the Arbiter's epaulets and silver tassels.

Tears kept flowing from his eyes, and he could not clearly see Lu Feng's expression. He only knew that the hand Lu Feng was holding him with was trembling, and he held him even more tightly.

He knew that Lu Feng would be able to recognize him as the mushroom that had been rolling around in the Abyss. He tearfully choked out, "But I met you…"

The world was so vast, and Lu Feng had insisted on going to the Abyss. The Abyss was so big, and he had insisted on going to those open plains to roll around.

They were originally not meant to meet.

He had never hurt any person or any creature. He only wished to quietly raise his own spore. Had he been able to do so, he thought, he might've been spared so much heartache and pain.

But why would there be a human like Lu Feng in this world?

This human held him with such great strength, it was like he wanted to kill

him. With his back pressed against the bedpost, he desperately struggled. The struggle was utterly fruitless, but he was unwilling to turn into hyphae form to escape, reluctant to admit that he was outmatched.

He recklessly bit down on Lu Feng's neck with all his might.

It was only at the moment the taste of blood rushed into his mouth that An Zhe was dazed.

*What am I doing?* he thought

But his chance was gone, for the brief daze was enough for Lu Feng to regain the upper hand.

His shoulder was pressed down, his back hit the bedpost, and a hand forcibly lifted his jaw.

Lu Feng forcefully kissed him.

# 39

## “I'M GOING NOW.”

HIS KISS WAS FIERCE, inexorable, and tinged with blood. An Zhe couldn’t breathe at all. He turned his head away but was then made to turn back.

He had just been feeling sad for Lu Feng mere moments ago, but now he was trembling all over with anger, and his hyphae spread out in big clumps. With only an instinctual resistance remaining, he thought to completely restrain Lu Feng.

But his eyes suddenly went blurry, and a vision appeared before him.

A figure fell over in front of him, and his heart clenched suddenly. He caught him and held him tightly in his arms. "An Zhe?"

Suddenly, An Zhe realized that this was a fragment of Lu Feng’s memories. He had drunk Lu Feng’s blood, so he would acquire some things. What had occurred just now was the scene from earlier in which he had passed out.

"An Zhe?" Lu Feng called his name several times in a row. However, the person in his arms gave no response at all; he only frowned a little and trembled all over, as though he was enduring great suffering.

Why he would suddenly become like this, Lu Feng did not know. He could only hold him tight.

He seemed to suddenly be on the verge of death—just like this volatile world.

In a daze, An Zhe experienced the feelings from that moment. Right now, his feelings and Lu Feng’s were overlapping.

Lu Feng was afraid.

He was actually afraid.

What was he afraid of?

He was afraid of losing this person in his arms, as though… as though by losing him, he would lose everything.

An Zhe began to tremble violently.

This man—

Why was it that he could be so good to him, yet also treat him with such fierceness?

The force on his shoulder made him wake up briefly from the vision, and his awareness was divided in two. One half of him was being kissed by Lu Feng in such a way that it was almost a punishment, while the other half of him was submerged in the memories of the past, witnessing this man holding him in his arms and repeatedly calling his name.

But he couldn't be roused. He looked to be such a sorrowful, docile, and frail person, yet he was enduring such intense suffering.

Lu Feng wiped away the sheen of cold sweat from his forehead, and he unconsciously grabbed Lu Feng's wrist like a drowning man clutching at a straw. At this moment, what was Lu Feng thinking?

He was thinking, *I can suffer in his place, I can do anything, just so long as he wakes up again*.

An Zhe closed his eyes. He was still resisting, but with less strength than before—as though he had instantly lost heart. In the end, he could only give up all resistance and let Lu Feng seize his lips and his spirit, his everything.

It was like an endless war.

Amidst this endless stalemate, the intense emotions gradually became spent.

When he was finally released, he leaned against Lu Feng's chest, having no desire to say anything.

And Lu Feng held him, equally silent.

The blank span of time was drawn out indefinitely. In the first place, there wasn't much to say between an Arbiter and a xenogenic.

In the long silence, Lu Feng suddenly spoke up.

He asked, "How did you turn into a person?"

"Because of An Ze," An Zhe said.

He leaned into Lu Feng’s arms, the two of them having come completely clean to each other. In that impulse-driven kiss, they had both cut the other open.

Thus, he no longer had anything left to hide.

In fact, he wasn't a xenogenic.

He was very useless, unable to infect anyone. He was actually a mushroom who had been infected by a human.

Lu Feng looked at his hyphae. The snow-white hyphae were still stained with blood, blood that had been drawn when An Zhe bit down. It turned out that when this little mushroom became angry, he would also be very fierce.

The blood was disappearing bit by bit as it got absorbed by the hyphae.

An Zhe looked at the same spot.

He suddenly said, "You should just die."

Lu Feng tightly held his fingers and asked, "Why?"

"I'll grow on your body," An Zhe said expressionlessly, "and eat all of your blood, organs, and flesh, then grow on your bones."

With his other hand, Lu Feng slowly gripped An Zhe’s wrist, and his fingertips slid over the white skin, leaving behind a pale red mark. It was like he had damaged a white mushroom that had popped up after the rain, its juices flowing out. He asked in a low voice, "Do you know what you're saying?"

An Zhe shook his head, a lump forming in his throat. With tear-filled eyes, he looked up at the walls that were covered with deep green traces of mold and at the distorted flowing chandelier. The strong winds had broken the window, and rain poured in through the radiating crack, accompanied by the wind's mournful whispers.

He thought that he didn't know how to define his emotions either, but if he wanted to peacefully stay together with Lu Feng, there truly was no other path

to take.

In this manner, he looked at the unreachable sky.

Lu Feng said, "You're crying again."

An Zhe turned his head back to look at Lu Feng. At this angle, he needed to tilt his head back slightly.

So they locked eyes.

For some reason, while looking at Lu Feng, An Zhe smiled again.

The corners of his lips were slightly reddened, and the corners of his beautiful eyes were still damp.

So Lu Feng smiled as well.

He held An Zhe's face in his hands. "… So silly."

An Zhe only looked at him. After a very long time, he asked, "Is the base already coming to fetch you?"

Lu Feng said, "Yes."

An Zhe said nothing. Lu Feng asked, "Do you like the base?"

Just as the word "base" was spoken, the pain of being electrocuted once again spread throughout An Zhe's body. He started trembling and forcefully burrowed into Lu Feng.

Lu Feng caught him and gently stroked his back. "I'm sorry."

An Zhe shook his head.

It wasn't until three minutes had gone by that An Zhe once again calmed down.

He tilted his head back to look at Lu Feng and tightly held his hand.

*He seems to be waiting for something*, Lu Feng thought.

He had that thought and acted on it. As though possessed by something, Lu Feng leaned down slightly and kissed An Zhe again.

No violent movements, no resistance, just a deep and quiet kiss.

An Zhe’s soft lips no longer resisted. During the break when they were catching their breaths, Lu Feng looked at him—softly panting, slightly-lowered eyelashes strewn with glimmering droplets, hands gently resting upon his shoulders. It was a timid ingratiation, a gentle innocence, so pure that it bordered on compassion. Within that compassion was divinity; it was like the alms offered up by a spirit, and right now he was demanding everything.

But he was still crying.

Lu Feng kissed away his tears, as if by doing so he could erase all the sorrows between them.

By the time they were done, the rain outside had gradually come to a stop, and the evening sky was glowing with a cloudy, pale light.

An Zhe knelt on the bed, his fingers trembling as he held Lu Feng and slowly, slowly laid him flat on the bed.

Lu Feng’s eyes were shut, for he had fallen asleep. His breathing was even, and now nothing could wake him. Achieving this was very simple; during the kiss, An Zhe only needed to transform part of the tip of his tongue into soft hyphae. Not even the Colonel could tell.

The sleeping Lu Feng could not catch him. He could not do anything to him.

An Zhe smiled. In fact, Lu Feng had never been able to do anything at all to him, he suddenly realized.

To leave or to stay.

He had to decide for himself.

Suddenly—

An Zhe's vision went black, and violent pain tore through him. The last hypha broke.

Something was separated, like a human losing an arm or an eye—but no, it wasn't those trivial things. The spore's existence was far more important than limbs or organs.

His body suddenly became empty. It was a deeper and hollower emptiness compared to losing the immature spore. Like a rest in a piece of music, his

connection with the world was abruptly cut off. The most important things were stripped out, leaving him with only a broken and declining body.

A body.

An Zhe was suddenly stunned.

At that moment, he was sure that he heard fate whispering like a devil into his ear.

He blankly looked forward and shakily lifted his hand.

Right before this moment, he had assumed he still had a choice.

He truly thought he could choose.

But when it happened, he discovered that he had never had the leeway to choose.

He was completely dumbfounded.

The spore swam out of his body, and he held it in his hand. An Zhe blankly looked at the little white thing and finally forced himself to smile at it.

"… I'm sorry," he said.

"What…" he said. "What should I do? Do you wish to come with me? I may not be able… to raise you."

The spore's hyphae only rubbed against his fingers. It couldn't understand him, An Zhe knew. But the very next moment, the spore's hyphae began to slowly move in a certain direction all of a sudden. They left An Zhe's fingers, dropped down until they landed on the surface of Lu Feng's black uniform, and continued crawling forward.

An Zhe observed this sight. This wasn't the first time the spore took such an action. Smiling, he asked, "Why do you like him so much?"

The spore stopped at one end of him and rubbed against his fingers again. It couldn't speak.

An Zhe softly sighed and put it on Lu Feng.

After being put down, it crawled to Lu Feng's chest with its newly born soft hyphae and spontaneously burrowed into his pocket. It was obviously so happy,

as if it had wanted to do this for a long time.

An Zhe watched this sight. Just as he did not understand why the spore was so close to Lu Feng, he did not understand why things had suddenly reached this point.

From the backpack he took out a sheet of paper. He lay on his stomach in front of the tea table and wrote down a line of words on the paper.

"It's mature now, unlike before. Just put it in a place that's always damp and it'll grow up."

"It needs a lot of water and fears rodent-class animals and bugs."

"If you wish to do research, please don't hurt it too much or let it die."

"Thank you for always taking care of me."

"I'm going now."

After putting the note to one side, he reached into Lu Feng's chest pocket, took out the bottle of tracking agent, and unscrewed the bottle.

"Crash."

The pale green liquid poured out and flowed away along the crevices in the floor. Finally, he let go—with a clear sound, even the bottle was broken on the ground.

As though he had made one of the most crucial decisions in his life, he reached out, removed the badge on Lu Feng's chest, and put it in his own pocket.

Lastly, he picked up the backpack that was lying to one side. He took one final look at Lu Feng, then walked out of the room.

As Xi Bei looked at him, he asked, "What are you doing?"

An Zhe said, "I'm going outside to look at the situation."

"Okay." Xi Bei looked like he had calmed down a little. "Stay safe."

An Zhe nodded. "Okay."

He pushed open the room's rusty security door and took one step outside. At

that moment, he looked back into the room, and his line of sight passed the skeleton on the sofa to arrive at the door Lu Feng was behind. That pale door seemed to hold a silent attractive force. If it were possible, if he had no worries whatsoever, he also would have wanted to stay at Lu Feng's side just like the spore, but he couldn't.

After closing the door, he walked upstairs. The stairs were so high, and his body seemed to have lost all its strength again. Only after climbing for a very long time did he reach the top floor. Following the openings at the very top, An Zhe arrived at the roof.

After a bout of rain, the atmosphere outside was frighteningly cold.

Over the few days that the artificial magnetic field disappeared and the atmosphere thinned, when he was still at the Lighthouse, he had heard the scientists predict that the weather this year would be extremely unusual and that winter would arrive at least three months early.

And the winter of his life was about to arrive as well.

The moment the spore matured, the instructions from life's instincts flashed before him, and he thoroughly received fate's mysterious instructions.

Just as how he had never again seen the mushroom that had raised him to maturity from the moment he landed on the ground, he was destined to be unable to protect his own spore so that it could safely grow up.

It was dry outside, with gale-force winds blowing at any given moment, and monsters lay in wait. Even in the Abyss that was free of rodent-class and arthropod-class monsters, it may be unintentionally trampled by giant monsters or affected by conflict. At the last moment, he unexpectedly could only choose to believe Lu Feng.

Because he was dying.

A mushroom's lifespan was not very long in the first place. He was already considered one of the most outstanding amongst them. Everyone had their own mission. Once he completed that thing, he had fulfilled the purpose of living. To a mushroom, raising its spores to maturity was its only mission.

In the cold wind, An Zhe shivered slightly, and he hugged himself. Without

feeling it, his body tottered. He had seen dead mushrooms before—when its spores fell, its cap would gradually crumble and curl up, then shrivel and wither, and finally all the tissues—the stem, hyphae, the roots in the soil—would all melt into a pool of inky liquid, and then be consumed by the other things in the soil.

Now, he was also about to experience the process he had witnessed countless times before. He did not know how long this process would take, but it would definitely be very fast, before humankind went completely extinct. When he left, he indeed wished to return with Lu Feng to the base, no matter what he would encounter next.

However, he thought that he should just let Lu Feng assume he was living in the wilderness. The Arbiter had personally witnessed far too many deaths already.

On the roof was a dilapidated garden. Hugging his knees, he sat behind a flower bed and faced the east to watch the night fall and the sun rise. This place wouldn't be too far from the base—it was merely the distance a bee covered in one day's flight.

In fact, just as he had expected, when the sunlight penetrated through the thin morning mist and shone upon the city, the humans' armored vehicles had stopped at the public square in front of the residential community. Lu Feng must have already told them about the situation here—they brought sufficient heavy weaponry, and to a certain degree, they did not need to fear assaults from monsters. It was safe. For example, that massive eagle circled in the sky, covetously eyeing them, but it didn't dare to make any further moves.

Gray clouds, eagles, sprawling ruins of cities, and motorcades of armored vehicles seemed like things that would appear only in dreams. The sound of the wind started up again.

An Zhe watched Lu Feng’s and Xi Bei's figures walk out from the building, and after a simple interaction with the military, they got into the vehicles—An Zhe faintly glimpsed the doctor's shape. After the vehicle doors closed, the motorcade immediately started up and left the dilapidated ruins. When Lu Feng left, would he turn back to look through the car window at this city? He

wouldn't know. The place he should return to was the Abyss. He had to return to that cave and find that set of white bones. Everything started from there, and everything would end there as well.

In the face of everything that was destined to go extinct, Lu Feng had Lu Feng's destiny, and he had his own destiny.

And now, it was all over.

# 40

## “THE MOST MEMORABLE FEW DAYS OF HIS LIFE.”

### ARMORED VEHICLE.

"Congratulations on making it back. We'll return to the base after a fifteen-hour drive. ”

Lu Feng asked, "How is the base?"

"The distortion has caused widespread panic and confusion, and some of the precision instruments can no longer be used. Fortunately, the artificial magnetic pole can operate normally."

"Do distortions appear when the magnetic poles don't work?"

"Yes."

Lu Feng said, "Over the past few days, some survivors and I were living in a magnetic iron mine, and no distortions occurred there."

"It's because of the magnetic field, which can resist distortion to a certain extent," the doctor said. "At the time, the Lighthouse fell into chaos. With the last glimmer of hope, we and the Underground City Base exchanged all the research results from over the years, but we got nothing at all. All of their research was also grounded in biological genes."

"Then I once again illegally accessed the communication channel that's connected to the Institute."

Lu Feng raised his eyebrows slightly.

"After joint discussion and the combination of some clues such as the point in time when the distortions occurred, we believe all of this may be related to the magnetic field, so we've temporarily increased the strength of the artificial

magnetic pole," the doctor said. "It's effective for now, and only by doing this have we gained some time to cling to life."

The doctor leaned against the vehicle seat. "But according to the calculations, the distortions will gradually strengthen, then defeat us within three months."

He paused and looked at the distant mist-adorned sky as well as the circling brown eagle, then said, "However, to know that all efforts humankind have put forth to survive from ancient times until now were futile and become a witness to humankind's complete extinction is actually also a kind of unimaginable honor."

He looked at Lu Feng again. "To be honest, you're a little calmer than I had imagined."

"What, did you get hit?" The doctor said. "I don't know what kind of species that An Zhe thing was, all slippery like a fish. He could even escape from defenses as tight as the base's, so it's normal to not have been able to capture him. Even if he was captured, we wouldn't be able to keep him, so don't take it too much to heart."

Lu Feng said nothing.

He held out his hand.

A soft snow-white thing rolled out of his sleeve.

He looked at it.

Strangely, a soft train of thought flooded his mind. It was like he'd returned to some moment when An Zhe was quietly staying at his side. After night fell, they slept together. At first, An Zhe had his back turned to Lu Feng, but as he slept, he would always roll over and gently rest against his chest. When morning arrived, after waking up, not even An Zhe himself knew why this would be the case—at that moment, he would furrow his fine and beautiful eyebrows, then turn back again. Then Lu Feng held him from behind.

Surprisingly, those turned out to be the most memorable few days of his life.

The snow-white and soft hyphae affectionately wound around his fingers.

The doctor was stunned. "You got it back? You were actually able to get it

back?"

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

"Then what about An Zhe?" The doctor spoke extremely quickly. "Did you kill him?"

The spore seemed to have been startled by this person's suddenly raised voice. After shrinking a bit, it dove back into Lu Feng's sleeve.

But a while later, it reappeared at his collar and affectionately rubbed against his neck.

Lu Feng said flatly, "He left."

"How could you be willing to let him go? What exactly is he?" The doctor's eyes widened. "Can… Can he protect himself?"

Lu Feng touched the spore's soft hyphae with his fingers and did not reply. Beneath the gloomy daylight, the profile of his face was a silent silhouette.

The doctor examined him, but then he suddenly frowned. "Where's your gun?"

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An Zhe stood on the rooftop.

As he watched the motorcade disappear into the distant sky, he moved his stiff body, standing up from behind the flower bed. Yesterday's rainstorm had filled the flower bed with water, and some thread-like creatures were currently wriggling in the water, newly born as of yesterday.

But after the weather cleared up, the accumulated water would soon be dried out. After a brief new life, they would face eternal death.

All creatures were like this.

Would his spore live longer than these ephemeral creatures? He hoped this was the case.

An Zhe waited patiently for an opportunity. When the eagle landed, he climbed onto its back. The eagle paid him no heed, perhaps because he was too

light and too lacking in nutrients. An Zhe found a place to stay on its wide back. What really covered the surface of the eagle's body were not feathers, but scales, and in the crevices between the scales were intertwined translucent feelers. The eagle foraged for food in the city. After it devoured a meat-like vine and struggled for half an hour against a giant monster with bat wings, it lost the struggle and left the place.

An Zhe marked its flight direction against Polaris and his map. After discovering the departure from that trajectory, he surreptitiously slipped away, and after taking root in the soil and absorbing a night's worth of nutrients, he hesitated for a long time before removing from his backpack a pitch-black gun and a dozen or so bullets.

The gun was Lu Feng's, but it was only after Lu Feng had left that he discovered it in his backpack. The Colonel would often make use of his belongings as though it were completely natural, including his backpack, so An Zhe guessed that it led to him leaving the gun behind.

Using the sounds of gunfire, he successfully attracted a monster with butterfly wings to serve as a means of transportation.

Three days later, he landed again. When looking for the next target to hitch a ride on, An Zhe encountered an extremely ugly monster with a centipede-like body. It had many characteristics of ants and arthropod-class monsters, and it fed on mushrooms. An Zhe wanted to escape, but his body was already in very bad shape. Just as he was about to be completely eaten, Lu Feng's gun protected him. He had accidentally struck the monster's soft belly, and when it briefly paused, he took advantage of that moment to roll into a muddy brook and escape.

The weather was getting cold, and those creatures who feared the cold began to travel south. Of course, they also preyed on each other in the process. Sometimes, across the boundless plains, there wasn't even the slightest trace of any living thing save for the occasional one or two extremely massive victors, and sometimes, social animals migrated southward like a black torrent. An Zhe blended in and drifted down the stream.

Ten days later, he finally got an indomitably southward-flying bird. After more

than twenty additional days, from atop the bird's soft back, he saw a massive, long, and narrow shadow on the horizon, like a scar on the world.

According to humans, the Abyss's core was a long and narrow fault zone created by a magnitude 8 earthquake during the Great Calamity Age. The radiation there was extremely abnormal, which gave rise to countless fearsome monsters. Further out from the core's fault zone, to the north of the Abyss lay a vast plain that was densely covered with vegetation, full of various kinds of mushrooms, and a hibernation place for countless monsters, and to the south stretched a belt of rolling highlands and mountains.

The bird came to the edge of the Abyss and, tired out from flying, rested on the branch of a huge dead tree it found.

The tree branch suddenly began to tremble. The bird's feathers bristled, and it flapped its wings and screamed—

At some point, masses of black vines had appeared on the branch, and they had securely bound the bird's feet. Amidst the sound of fluttering wings, the snow-white bird was dragged to the center of the branch-laden tree. Its graceful neck arched high and its long pointed beak reached out toward the gray sky as it struggled, but a vine wrapped around its neck. Then the sturdy vine split open, and a fanged mouth bit its neck in two.

Blood went spraying, and the five-or six-meter-long bird's body was split into two. Tiny feathers and bits of down fell all over the ground.

Holding the backpack in his arms, An Zhe fell to the ground together with the feathers. He got to his feet, stepping upon the rotting ground that overflowed with black water. After staggering a few steps, he looked up and watched as the bird was devoured by thousands of vines.

Satisfied, the vines scattered.

The dense vegetation, vines within the forest, and giant mushrooms blocked out the sunlight as well as the sounds of combat.

This was the Abyss, a place where a human could be eaten and the bones wouldn't be regurgitated. There were no rodent-class or arthropod-class creatures here because they were too weak. But those creatures that were

hundreds of times stronger than them were by no means invincible either—the soil of the Abyss was rich in nutrition because it was saturated with flesh and blood, which may have been the reason why mushrooms could flourish.

Across uneven terrain, An Zhe walked in. The ground that was covered with moss, dead branches and fallen leaves was too soft and close to the swamp, so when animals moved over it, they made no noise.

He clearly felt that the Abyss's atmosphere had changed. Usually, slaughter and fights happened at any given moment and powerful monsters often roamed the jungles to inspect their territories, but throughout his entire journey today, he only ran into a silently slithering python.

They seemed to have all gone into hibernation.

But An Zhe paid no heed to the comings and goings of the monsters.

He blankly stared at this boundless place where not even sunlight could shine in.

To his left was a dark red mushroom ten meters tall, settled amidst several massive rocks. Mucus that smelled like blood continually oozed from its cap, and its giant body seemed to breathe, rising and falling in the air.

An Zhe laid a finger against its stem and felt it get wrapped up by the mucus.

He had never seen a mushroom like this before.

Fear suddenly filled the expression in his eyes, and he averted his gaze to look elsewhere. Just then, his pupils dilated, his body went cold, and he began to tremble.

He didn't recognize where he was.

He did not recognize this place.

Then, heaving for breath, he sprinted pell-mell through the jungle. This was the Abyss. The blood-soaked soil, the waterlogged swamp, the monsters lurking in the dark—the Abyss was still the Abyss, but it was no longer the familiar place from his memories.

The Abyss was so big, just what did he have to do to find the place from before?

He strove to think back, but he could only remember those distinctive mushrooms. Back then, he relied on them to remember his route.

So he kept walking and searched constantly, using both his legs and his hyphae. Night came after day, and after night came morning again, but every single plain seemed familiar, and every single cave was utterly empty.

There were no clues and no familiar places whatsoever. He didn't remember how many times he'd seen the sun set or how many times he'd been disappointed by empty caves.

After some time had passed, he could not walk any further. His hyphae, no longer as soft and dexterous as before, were dissolving and breaking off, and his human body was likewise weakening apace with the depletion of his life.

At a quiet lakeside, a withered vine tripped him.

A sharp stone sliced open his palm. He knelt on the ground and buried his face in his hands as he trembled all over.

He couldn't find it. He couldn't find that cave.

A mushroom's life had only one season. They would die when they got old, and new ones would grow again. The face of the Abyss changed constantly with the intergenerational replacement of mushrooms. The original road, the road he had firmly committed to memory—was no more.

Surrounded by mushrooms and dead trees, he looked at the sky in despair. He didn't know. He didn't know that things would be so—so merciless.

Lu Feng was right. He had no idea how big the world was.

He couldn't possibly find it, unless his life was as long as eternity itself. But he was a mushroom, his existence ephemeral.

He was destined to die while searching for that cave.

Nothing in the world lasted forever.

Not even the very first promise.

Salty tears trickled over the tiny bramble-inflicted cuts on his face. It hurt all over, but it was far from covering up the despair and collapse in his heart. He

took a deep breath and blankly looked at the pool to his side.

He fell into a daze.

In the water, there seemed to be a voice, an indescribable frequency calling him to leave. The entire world went out of focus.

Jump, jump, everything is over.

Happy things, painful things, they're all no longer needed.

Under the bewitchment of the voice's call, he walked one step at a time to the lakeside, where the water was so clear that his reflection showed. He and An Ze looked so alike, when the ripples blurred the lines, it seemed like it was An Ze in there calling to him.

However one was born in ignorance was likewise however one would die in ignorance.

In the Abyss, in this… sorrowful place.

As though a switch in his memory had been flipped, a voice suddenly sounded in his ear. That was his own voice.

"There on the sad height," the voice murmured, "Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray."

"… Do not go gentle into that good night."

"What is the meaning," he asked, "of 'do not go gentle into that good night'?"

Lin Zuo, the teacher of the Garden of Eden, replied, "Do not meekly accept destruction."

After a short pause, it changed again.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." He softly recited verses to someone. That day, they had walked a long way together, not knowing what was up ahead.

On that day, in the wilderness, bringing him along in the night, what had that person been thinking while walking amidst the sounds of the primeval wind?

Facing the impending strange fate, did that person also have the same despair in his heart? How did he continue walking?

He…

An Zhe hung his head and discovered that he had once again gripped the Arbiter's badge in his hand at some point. The badge's points and edges pricked his already bloody hand.

The illusory daze instantly fell back, and he backpedaled a few steps.

He thought, *What was I doing just now?*

Sharp pain traveled up from his ankle, for the rock that had just cut his palm now struck his ankle.

He bent down to remove the sharp gray stone jutting from the flat ground so that it would trip no other creature, but then suddenly noticed something.

There was a jet-black scorch mark on the stone that seemed like it had been made with a burned branch, forming a crooked ugly arrow that pointed southeast.

He fell into deep thought. According to his limited knowledge, the Abyss did not have creatures that could draw arrows.

And as for these kinds of strange gray rocks, he seemed to have seen them once or twice before in other places within the Abyss, but he had been single-mindedly searching for the cave, so he had paid them no heed.

He looked around and finally chose to go in the direction indicated by the arrow. He walked for a very long time, and yet another gray rock appeared, jutting out from the flat ground. Half of it was buried in the dirt and half of it was exposed, and there was an arrow on the exposed portion.

An Zhe continued walking. Not only gray rocks were marked. Sometimes, there would be marks on tree branches or white bones as well. After five days passed, he discovered that he had been continually heading to the southern part of the Abyss, approaching the highlands, where the environment was dry and harsh and where few creatures would go.

But on the same day, he could not find any other rocks.

He stood blankly under a tree and put great effort into scanning the surroundings, wondering whether he had gone the wrong way.

Suddenly, a pebble struck his shoulder.

"Are you lost?" A smiling male voice sounded behind him.

An Zhe turned around. Unexpectedly, he heard a human's voice again.

A willowy and handsome black-haired man was standing next to a tree, a gray rock in his right hand. He blinked at An Zhe and said, "The guidepost is here with me. I hadn't put it down yet."

While looking at him, An Zhe slowly frowned.

"Tang Lan?" He called out a name.

"You recognize me?" The man's smile contained nonchalant and carefree undertones as he examined An Zhe. "I haven't seen you at the base before."

"I haven't seen you before either." After double-checking this person's appearance, An Zhe said, "I know Hubbard."

The moment he spoke Hubbard's name, the laid-back smile vanished from the man's face.

# 41

## “HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE FUSION FACTION?”

"HUBBARD," Tang Lan repeated the name in a mutter. "He…"

He seemed to have lost his ability to speak. It wasn't until after more than ten seconds had passed that he spoke up again, and his voice was a little hoarse when he asked, "… Is he doing well?"

An Zhe recalled the visuals concerning Hubbard.

The insect swarms had been wreaking havoc in the Outer City. When District 6 was bombed, Hubbard had been on a mission outside of the city, which was a very brilliant move. He had not only avoided the devastation of the Outer City, but also avoided being arrested by Lu Feng under the charge of "illegally stealing the Arbiter's information." Afterward, he safely returned with his team and was welcomed by the Main City. And after that, this renowned mercenary team captain had still run into Lu Feng. Together, he and Colonel Lu had boarded the PL1109 to go rescue the Underground City Base. While in the mine, he and Lu Feng had occasionally chatted. According to Lu Feng, Hubbard and Lu Feng had completed the rescue mission and safely returned together.

He said, "He's doing very well."

Tang Lan dropped his gaze slightly and seemed to smile for a moment. He did not ask anything else and only said, "That's good."

An Zhe looked at Tang Lan.

The first time he learned of this person was in Mr. Shaw's shop, where he saw a mannequin so exquisitely made that it bordered on the real deal. Mr. Shaw had said that that was something Hubbard spent more than half of his life's savings to order—Hubbard was the most renowned mercenary team captain in

the whole Outer City, and this man was his vice-captain with whom he shared a sworn friendship. After an expedition, he had never returned, and not even his body had been found.

Next to the mannequin had been labels marked with various bits of data, and the first one was his name, Tang Lan.

But now the living Tang Lan was standing before An Zhe and completely unharmed, like he hadn't been injured in the slightest—surprisingly, he had survived in this danger-ridden Abyss and was living quite well to boot.

"You survived," An Zhe said. "You won't go back?"

A hint of a helpless smile showed in Tang Lan's eyes.

"I can't go back," he said.

As he spoke, he buried the marked rock in his hand in the soil.

"I have a map, so going back is possible," An Zhe said. "… Do you need it?"

"I don't," Tang Lan said. "You aren't human, are you?"

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

Then he saw Tang Lan smile, take out a gleaming dagger, and carve an arrow onto the nearby tree branch. As he carved, he asked, "Do you know what I'm doing?"

"I don't," An Zhe said.

"After being infected, the vast majority of people unfortunately turn completely into monsters. But there's also a minuscule number of people who are rather lucky. Sometimes, they'll still seem like a human," Tang Lan said. "I'm guiding those lucky ones—I was originally guided in this manner."

An Zhe said nothing. He found that he had a special gift, which was the ability to recognize when a person wanted to tell a story.

However, Tang Lan's story was very short.

"That day, Hubbard and I got into a little spat. He wanted to continue going deeper, while I felt it was time to go back. In short, it was very unpleasant. That night, I didn't see him again and kept the night watch in another vehicle

according to the rules."

"The Abyss has all sorts of things. At midnight, a powerful monster found us. I'd never seen something so dangerous before." Tang Lan finished carving the mark and put away his dagger. His voice was as clear and crisp as the person himself. "I warned them, then led the thing away in a different direction. Afterward, I died, and it must have been a very miserable death."

"But somehow, I seemed to have woken up again and also changed into something very strong. I merged with the monster, but I'm still lucid." Toying with the dagger, he asked An Zhe, "What about you?"

An Zhe thought about how to word it.

Just then, Tang Lan whipped his head around, and his gaze shot like a sharp arrow into the middle of the jungle—where rustling noises were coming from.

He said in a low voice to An Zhe, "Go!"

The moment he said that, a massive black shadow sprang out of the jungle!

An Zhe's arm was grabbed, and Tang Lan slung An Zhe over his shoulders with unhesitating strength. Then there came the loud sound of the air being rent as a pair of massive filmy black wings unfolded from his back!

An Zhe suddenly left the ground. Behind them, the mountain-like monster's claws swiped down, but the ghostly speed at which Tang Lan took flight was faster, leaving the jungle almost instantly.

An Zhe looked down. Everything on the ground got farther and smaller as they rose, and the tall mountains in the south got closer.

Amidst the oncoming wind, he asked Tang Lan, "Where are we going?"

The wind in the sky was getting stronger and stronger, dispersing his voice. In a loud voice, Tang Lan asked him a question.

"Have you heard of the Fusion Faction?"

Having spoken those words, he soared higher with An Zhe and gradually approached the peak of the highest mountain. As they approached the sky, that stretch of the highlands was dyed reddish gold by the sunset, and white buildings at the top of the highlands gradually emerged where the sky met the

summits.

What initially caught An Zhe's eye were two smooth-looking cylindrical white towers, between which was a path linking them. Between the two white towers was the building's main body. It was an oval-shaped three-story building, and on either side of it were auxiliary buildings and other scattered constructs. The open space in front of the main building was dotted with all kinds of strange apparatuses, and behind the building was a piece of flat ground where more than a dozen tall wind turbines stood. The snow-white three-bladed turbines were spinning quickly in the howling wind.

A massive deep green vine that was split into more than a dozen strands surrounded the entire group of buildings, and its branches were draped over the fencing and white towers. When Tang Lan and An Zhe landed, a vine slithered over to them, sniffed them both, then left.

The massive black wings on Tang Lan's back gradually retracted into his body —while they were being retracted, Tang Lan trembled slightly and clenched his fists, a slightly pained expression on his face. An Zhe watched him without blinking until he opened his eyes again.

When their eyes first met, Tang Lan's eyes were completely jet-black, which was an inhuman look, but fortunately he recovered in three seconds.

"The transformation process is a bit messy and not very pleasant," Tang Lan said, "but I'm already very lucky."

He looked at the vine. "This fellow can't become human again."

An Zhe looked at the vine. "Does it have a human consciousness?"

"Somewhat." Tang Lan started walking, and An Zhe followed him. The strong winds on the mountaintop blew up their clothes, and they gradually approached the slightly old-looking white building in the very center.

Six o'clock in the evening was when twilight was the thickest.

In the southwestern part of the sky, clouds billowed. The huge red sun burned as it sank, its reddish-gold light illuminating the wide-open front door where a figure was standing in the very middle.

An Zhe actually couldn't really distinguish humans' ages. He only knew that that person was at least like Mr. Shaw, around sixty or seventy years old by human reckoning. But by no means did he show any sign of a stooped posture due to his age. Once they got closer, An Zhe saw that he was wearing a stiff black suit with a meticulously tied bow tie beneath the silver-gray shirt collar and that his snow-white hair was neatly combed back. Upon that face, which seemed all the more composed and kindly due to the passage of time, was a pair of gentle gray-blue eyes.

Those eyes gave An Zhe the impression that he had already seen all of the world's disturbances and changes.

"Sir." Standing before him, Tang Lan said in a very respectful tone, "I've brought back a new member."

That person looked at An Zhe with a smile. Those gray-blue eyes made people feel close in spite of themselves. An Zhe tilted his head back to look at him, and he held out his right hand to An Zhe.

After a brief hesitation, An Zhe shook hands with him in a slightly awkward manner. The other party's palm was warm and dry, and his handshake was gentle yet strong.

"Welcome to the Highland Research Institute. We've taken the liberty of calling ourselves humankind's fifth base," that person said. "I am Pauli Jones."

"You may call me Pauli or Jones, either way is fine," Pauli Jones said. With polite words, an amiable tone of voice, and gray-blue eyes that were like a gentle ocean, he was the type of best elder from humankind's stories.

An Zhe gave his own name.

"You're very young. Are you from the Northern Base?" Pauli Jones said.

An Zhe nodded.

"How did you become what you are now?"

Pauli Jones asked as he took An Zhe step by step into the white building.

The floor was very smooth, obviously well cared for. Tang Lan stepped forth and held out an arm to help Pauli, but the latter waved his hand.

"I…" There was a fluctuation in An Zhe's field of vision, and he slowly looked around.

Inside the white building was a spacious main hall. It had three floors altogether, but the middle portion of the three floors were not divided into separate floors like ordinary buildings, but connected instead. A spiral staircase wound its way up the floors. From the main hall, one could look up and directly see the translucent dome. Currently, on the railings of the second and third floors, some creatures were slowly gathering and silently looking at him from above, their gazes curious.

Altogether, the creatures numbered around forty. Most of them had human characteristics, or in other words they could be considered human-shaped—amongst them, one-third had appearances identical to humans, and one-third had the characteristics of other creatures on top of a human foundation, such as a gentleman on the second floor whose face was covered with dark gray down or someone on the third floor whose hair was like tiny curled vines that were subtly wriggling. As for the remaining one-third, they were entirely like the monsters outside or some grotesque things, such as the mass of rotting meat hanging from the second-floor railing.

"They won't hurt you," Pauli Jones said. "If someone amongst them loses their will, loses control and goes mad, the others will control them."

The facts were as he had described them. An Zhe met the eyes of those changed humans, which were indeed not the unfeeling eyes particular to beasts. He could see the meanings within them—curiosity or examination, devoid of any malice.

"We're all infected individuals, or xenogenics, but fortunately we've retained a portion of our wills. Mr. Pauli brought us together." Tang Lan patted his shoulder. "We'll strive to keep from killing each other, then confront the monsters outside together. There's no Trial Court here either, so you can settle in without any worries."

Pauli Jones softly coughed, then said, "There is no hierarchy among the research institute's members. We look after each other, and the strong protect the weak. Welcome to our home."

An Zhe slowly retracted his gaze.

"Thank you," he murmured.

Tang Lan asked him how he became a xenogenic.

After hesitating for a while, An Zhe said, "I went out with my friend's mercenary team…"

This was a place where xenogenics lived together, he knew. But he was still different from the people here. They were humans who had been infected by monsters, whereas he himself was originally a mushroom. He had no choice but to hide his true identity. So he spoke of An Ze's life, coming to the wilderness, getting hurt, and then—

"After I woke up, I became like this." Combined with Tang Lan's story, he made up this falsehood.

"Do you have any places that differ from humans?"

"No."

"Then what you've obtained ought to be some kind of complete polymorphic mutation." Pauli gently examined him, then asked, "Do you know what you're fused with? Or can you control your transformation?"

An Zhe thought for a while, then still shook his head in the end.

"This isn't common," Pauli said. "How did you survive in the Abyss?"

An Zhe answered truthfully, "Nothing attacked me."

Pauli went silent for a moment. Just as An Zhe assumed he was about to be given a hard time, he said, "That can also be explained."

An Zhe asked, "Why?"

"The creatures in the Abyss, along with some other powerful species, seem to have another kind of sense. Sometimes they judge other monsters' racial affiliations, but not through appearance. A strong polymorphic monster may change itself into a mouse, but other monsters can still sense its tremendous attack power and will stay far away."

After a pause, Pauli Jones continued. "If they truly had no interest in you, this

proves that you either fused with some kind of powerful gene or that you aren't part of their diet."

He said, "You're very special."

An Zhe murmured, "I don't know about that."

He truly did not know. The mushrooms in the Abyss were just as dangerous as the animals in the Abyss. They were either highly toxic or their bodies were suffused with hallucinogenic mists that could make animals go mad. The emergence of a weak and harmless mushroom like him in the jungle of poisonous mushrooms was already a kind of miracle—and he even had his own independent consciousness.

Pauli said, "The mutation circumstances of every research institute member is different. If you're willing, I may do some research on you. I won't utilize any experimentation methods that will harm you."

An Zhe agreed to it. There wasn't much he couldn't agree to.

Then, Pauli Jones asked him some more questions. Rather than asking further about the process of his mutation, he asked how he had lived in the wilderness, whether he had suffered, if there were any animals he was afraid of, and if he had any new behaviors after his genes changed—he seemed to purely show concern for him as an elder. But after An Zhe got a clear understanding of his own non-human identity, he was still fearful of human researchers. Afraid to get on good terms with Pauli, he just truthfully answered each question one at a time.

He also got a preliminary understanding of the research institute's status. The first floor of the research institute was the main hall, laboratory, and instruments room, the second floor was inhabited by humans with animal mutations, and the third floor was inhabited by vegetals. Each person had their own work to do. Some helped Mr. Pauli record experiment data, some maintained the facilities, some grew potatoes in the patch of land out back, and some were in charge of hunting trips—these people were infected by those extremely fierce monsters and possessed formidable strength, such as Tang Lan. In addition to hunting, they would also put down guideposts everywhere. Apart from humans, no other creatures could read the guideposts. The

directions on the guideposts indicated the way home for the xenogenics wandering around outside. The scope of the guidepost placements was not limited to the Abyss alone.

Tang Lan had said that this place was connected to the Fusion Faction, but the people here were not the results of deliberate fusion, but rather xenogenics who had been killed in the wilderness and luckily retained human consciousness and then followed the guideposts to the research institute—a one-in-ten-thousand chance, the doctor had said.

The addition of new members was something to celebrate. The research institute specially prepared a welcome banquet for An Zhe, and the main dish was a soup of potato and cured meat, cooked by a short male tree xenogenic.

"Do you like potato soup?" The man scooped a serving of soup and handed it to An Zhe. His voice was slightly hoarse, resembling the sound of coarse bark rubbing together.

An Zhe held the bowl of steaming soup in his hands. He blew on it, and warm white vapor covered his face.

"I do," he said. "Thank you."

"Then I'll make it tomorrow as well." The man looked at him. "How old are you?"

An Zhe said, "Nineteen."

"Then you should call me 'uncle.' My son is about your age, and he lives in District 7. Where did you live?"

An Zhe said, "District 6."

The man said, "I haven't seen him in five years. His name is Bai Ye. Do you know him?"

An Zhe gently shook his head.

"I hope he's living a better life."

Their conversation stopped there.

At mealtime, the people of the research institute sat down in a circle, the

seating arrangement disregarding rank. Pauli Jones sat in the middle, and everyone acted very familiar with him.

They acted equally familiar toward An Zhe. In the span of a single meal, at least ten people took the initiative to talk to An Zhe. Amongst them, some were mercenaries of the Outer City and some were soldiers from the base. They were either curious about his mutation process or asked about the base's current situation or asked if he had met their erstwhile family or friends. An Zhe did not tell them the fact that the Outer City had been abandoned, only replied with "I haven't met them" or "I don't know them." He felt a sort of listlessness. It was still a complete lack of news, but this type of answer seemed more capable of comforting humans' hearts than the real answer.

After the meal ended, Tang Lan took An Zhe to an empty room.

A feathered youth delivered a quilt to the room.

"It was dried in the sun just yesterday." He helped make the bed of his own volition. "It's cold at night, so remember to close the window."

"Thank you," An Zhe said. Just like the uncle who served him food today, this young boy's kindness made him feel both grateful and a little bewildered.

After making the bed, the boy took out a bright red fruit from his clothes and smiled. "For you to eat."

After saying that, he also took out a portion of dried meat that had been wrapped up. "This is from everyone to you."

An Zhe accepted it. The dried meat was very heavy. He didn't know what the living standards at the research institute were like, but in this age, no matter where, so much dried meat was very precious.

"Thank you," he said. "It's too much, I can't finish it."

"Take your time eating." Tang Lan, who was standing behind him, seemed to smile as he reached out to straighten An Zhe's shirt collar.

"We give gifts to all newcomers. I found this place a year ago, and everyone was very good to me too," the young boy said. "Being a xenogenic in the wilderness is too hard. You have to avoid monsters and find things to eat on

your own. You remember that you're human, and you miss home but don't dare to return to the base. Once you come to the research institute, everything's fine."

As he spoke, he smiled at An Zhe.

An Zhe returned the smile.

The room had no wind and was very warm, and the tube light on the ceiling shone with a penetrating glow. As An Zhe held the dried meat, he recalled the month he had spent trudging through the Abyss's jungles and bogs. Unexpectedly, it was like a dream.

"Don't cry," the boy said. "In the future you'll have a home."

His tone was so certain and warm, it was like he had a boundless attachment to this research institute.

This was something An Zhe had never seen in the human base before.

He asked, "Has this place always been like this?"

"Huh?" The boy was stunned at first, but then he understood. With a smile, he said, "You'll get used to it soon."

But the moment he said that, he abruptly froze.

A keen howl suddenly came from the corridor.

Then came the sound of objects shattering.

Tang Lan furrowed his brows and strode out.

The keen howl continued, and sounds of fighting traveled over.

The boy abruptly cowered. He grabbed An Zhe's arm, seemingly seeking protection, but he said, "Don't be scared. Someone changed into a monster, but Mr. Tang can beat them."

Through the open door, they saw a human figure writhing on the central open space, densely packed feelers and lumps bulging out of his back. His facial features were distorted, turning into a gray-colored swollen mass, and his limbs attacked wildly. Part of someone else's body turned into vines as they fought. Tang Lan threw himself into the fray as well, and before long, the figure was

subdued.

"Lock him up," Tang Lan said.

The thing was taken downstairs, and Tang Lan returned to the room.

"We have human consciousness now, but we don't know when it will disappear," the boy said in a small voice. "That's why I deeply treasure my time as a human."

A sound came from outside the window. An Zhe looked down and saw that on the open space in front of the main building, a large instrument was lighting up.

"Mr. Pauli seems to have been working on that these past few days," the boy said. "It looks different from his previous research."

As An Zhe looked in that direction, a glaring red light shone from between the machinery. He asked, "What is it?"

Saying nothing, Tang Lan looked out the window. At the top of the mountain, the aurora and the starry sky had become so low and so clear that it was like one could touch them if they just reached out.

Inside the room, all was silent.

After a long while, Tang Lan suddenly spoke.

"Mr. Pauli is a scientist of the Fusion Faction," Tang Lan murmured. "The Fusion Faction believes that there will be a day when they can find a way for human and monster genes to peacefully fuse. People won't change into monsters that only rely on instinct, and they'll have powerful bodies and be able to adapt to the current harsh climate."

"Just like this." He showed An Zhe his arm, which had faint impressions of black scales. "Human bodies really are too fragile."

"Later, before success was achieved, the Fusion Faction's experiment ran off. The giant leech infected the base's water supply, and half of the base died because of this—from that point on the base prohibited any similar experiments from taking place, and the Fusion Faction scientists became sinners to the base," he said slowly. "However, other research has also yielded no fruit. It's only with fusion that it sounds like there's still a glimmer of hope.

So the Fusion Faction scientists defected. They left the base, wishing to find a place where they could continue experimenting."

"They wanted to research fusion, so they had to do live experiments, and once they performed the experiments, they would have created those intelligent monsters that have obtained human thought yet are not human. The base would not allow this to happen, so they constantly dispatched soldiers to intercept and hunt them down. In the end, they finally found this place." Tang Lan tilted his head back and looked at the vast starry sky. "The Highland Research Institute is a set of ruins. Originally, it was a place where the artificial magnetic poles were studied many years ago. This place lies behind the Abyss, and the terrain's elevation is high, so armored vehicles can't drive over here. There're also many existing devices, some of which can cause magnetic interference in the surrounding area and cripple the military's aircraft and radar. Only with this did the research institute settle down. They've been taking in xenogenics while doing research all the way until now."

An Zhe asked, "Have they found a way to fuse?"

Tang Lan shook his head.

"They can't find any patterns," he said. "At first, they thought it had to do with will, and then they thought it had to do with the type of foreign gene, but it was neither. People with weak wills could wake up in confusion, or plants with weak pollution capabilities could devour people's wills. One would not necessarily lose consciousness after being infected by a very powerful monster either. The reason for retaining will is just luck. And after that, the failure of the magnetic poles and the overall pollution proved that this may have nothing at all to do with genes. Gold and iron can also pollute each other. Beneath the microscope, an iron atom inexplicably changes into something we can't understand. Mr. Pauli said that all previous research was wrong and that we must search for new ways of analyzing."

An Zhe had heard the doctor mention the exact same view. He said, "The base thinks so too."

Tang Lan didn't speak for a long time.

"An Zhe." Tang Lan suddenly called his name. "Can you feel a sort of wave?"

An Zhe nodded. He'd always been able to feel it.

"After turning into xenogenics, many people can feel it," Tang Lan said softly. "And it's getting stronger."

Early in the morning, An Zhe opened his eyes as he lay on the bed. He had a splitting headache. His dreams were all about the wilderness, with howls that shook his eardrums, the sounds of animal paws stepping in sludge, and crying—crying from a source unknown to him. From the jungle came the faintly reflected glow of animal eyes. As though he'd gone mad, he was fleeing from something, searching for something, but he could never escape, could never find it. That massive and formless wave was still winding around him with the closeness of a man and his shadow. It seemed to be present in every nook and cranny of this world, with even the dewdrops on the tips of leaves its embodiment.

An Zhe strove to prop himself up with his arms. He sat up, but it was very arduous. It was like his bones had rusted. Not only were they unable to nimbly move, they had also become thin and brittle. Every time he moved, he wondered if he was about to stop forever, so he knew that he was another step closer to his inevitable death.

An Zhe sat on the bed for a very long time with the quilt in his arms before he felt that he'd recovered a little. He stared blankly at the warm room—what happened yesterday still felt like a dream, and only today did it have a sense of realism. In a sense, he had come to another human world. The people here were very good to him—but his original intent in leaving Lu Feng was so that Lu Feng would not personally witness his death.

Then what about the people here who were friendly to him?

An Zhe's nose prickled a little. He felt guilty, but before he could make any further choices, someone knocked on the door.

It was the boy from yesterday. He was holding a tray containing breakfast, and on the tray were a steaming enamel cup and bowl.

"You didn't wake up in the morning, and we didn't call you," the boy said. "Uncle Shu made potato soup again. You must drink it."

An Zhe gave his thanks.

With that, the boy put the tray on the table. An Zhe looked down at the bowl of rich soup. Small pieces of potato bobbed up and down in the soup, giving off a tender fragrance together with the shreds of cured meat. The fragrance, mixed in with the white steam, spread throughout the room in curling wisps.

Strangely, he no longer thought of leaving.

Life at the research institute was by no means as orderly as that of the base. The people had no fixed duties or positions, but they had spontaneous divisions of labor. The research institute took him in, so he knew he had to give back. He wanted to work hard and do a bit of something, and the people of the research institute were all very welcoming.

At the very beginning, he would go out and gather edible plant roots with the boy in a relatively safe area. Later, his body could not withstand the cold wind, so he could only remain at the base and help plant things or cook. And even later, he couldn't do even this kind of work. The people of the research institute all thought he suffered from some sort of unidentified illness. This was a common occurrence. In this world, all kinds of illnesses could occur, and even the whole world itself was incurably ill.

That day, Pauli came to see him. From that day on, An Zhe started living with Pauli Jones in the white building to the west of the main building. Although his body was gradually weakening, his mind was still lucid enough that he could be a competent assistant. In Pauli's laboratory, there was also a quiet Indian man working as an assistant. He was good at maintaining the various pieces of equipment, and his name was Kedar.

This was a high-security laboratory, with machines all around. Screens were connected to the machines, and the largest one—its optical cable ran from the laboratory into the ground and was connected to a device called a "Simpson cage" outside.

The main components of the Simpson cage were four five-meter-high mechanical towers that were just like miniaturized versions of the two white towers outside the research institute. And as for the shape of those two white towers—after looking at them for a long time, An Zhe confirmed that they had

many similarities with the base's massive artificial magnetic pole. He then recalled that the Highland Research Institute was the place where the artificial magnetic poles were first developed.

The four towers formed a rectangle more than ten meters long and twenty meters wide. When the Simpson cage started up, the cuboid space they enclosed would be flooded with a scorching red light similar to high-frequency lasers, and it'd resemble a scarlet sea of flames. Everyone at the research institute knew to not walk into the activated Simpson cage, or else they'd die a horrible death.

From the laboratory's manual, An Zhe learned that the Simpson cage was the most cutting-edge masterpiece in the field of high-energy physics from when human science was at its peak. It directly contributed to the success of the artificial magnetic poles.

"To this very day, we don't know the cause of the geomagnetic field. Some people have speculated that it's because of the circulation of molten iron in the earth's liquid core while others believe it's the spinning of the electrical layer in the earth's mantle, but there isn't strong enough proof for either one. We don't know the reason for its existence, so we are also unable to learn the reason for its disappearance. It exceeds the boundaries of our knowledge. Likewise, we are also unable to replicate the electromagnetic field unless we create a magnet half the size of the earth," Pauli explained to him. "But one of the laws of physics we know is that magnetism is generated by electricity. The movement of electric charges produces a magnetic field."

“One of the Simpson cage's contributions was that it could show the fluctuating force fields between elementary particles, thereby analyzing how they interact and then reproducing some phenomena. As a result, we obtained inspiration for the artificial magnetic poles—you lack physics knowledge, so I can't explain more deeply. To put it simply, the two artificial magnetic poles emit pulses with special frequencies, leading to the resonance of charged particles in the solar winds. It's like we're holding a loudspeaker and telling them 'please go that way.' As a result, the resonance and motions of the particles produce a magnetic field, and the earth is thus protected."

An Zhe nodded. He understood, but only just. His work did not require him to

master advanced physics knowledge. He only needed to look after the instruments.

Sometimes, Pauli would be outside adjusting the Simpson cage's frequency with the other assistant following him, which left only An Zhe in the white building. As he sat there, the night sky loomed outside the window. The machines hummed monotonously, and the spectrometer connected to the Simpson cage drew intricate curves. An Zhe did not know what it was recording.

The curves were messy and tangled together, lacking any patterns whatsoever. For no reason, he thought of the chaotic and horrifying lines Si Nan had drawn on his paper in the Garden of Eden. Upon closing his eyes, he felt the increasing intensity of that formless wave and the day-by-day passing of his own life. He was afraid, but sometimes he also felt that he was gradually approaching eternity.

Pauli came back and began to analyze the chaotic curves. An Zhe exerted great effort to pick up a nearby thermos, then poured a cup of warm water for him.

"What are you doing?" he finally asked.

"I wish to find that thing," Pauli said.

Looking at the screen, An Zhe asked, "… What thing?"

"The thing that led to this world changing."

"It must be omnipresent. If it is in this world, then it must also be in the Simpson cage," he said.

An Zhe frowned slightly.

"A month ago, I also believed that the cause of infection and mutation had to be searched for starting from biology. It wasn't until the distortions occurred that I realized the root of the problem lies in this world's physics laws. Thus, I restarted the Simpson cage." Pauli picked up a nearby compass. "We'll never be able to see the magnetic field, but the direction of the compass can tell us that it exists. It's the same with the other invisible things in the world. Our knowledge is too superficial, so we can only pursue the facades they project onto the world."

"Look here." Pauli highlighted a steady curve. "Everything in the world is interacting, and there's a lot of information in the traces of these interactions, such as this line. Just like the compass, it represents the magnetic field."

"We assume that the changes currently happening in this world are because of some massive thing that is slowly approaching… But the magnetic field can resist it to some extent—since the magnetic field can resist it, then it must have a similar representation to the magnetic field." Pauli's gray-blue eyes avidly gazed at the scribble-covered screen. "It's vast, surpassing our knowledge. What it's changing is the very essence of this world, but it's right in here. I think there must exist a specific receiving frequency that can see the shadow it casts on the real world."

An Zhe asked, "And then?"

Pauli slowly shook his head. "We must first know what it is before we can think of ways to respond to it."

But could it really be found?

Perplexed, An Zhe looked at the screen.

As though he knew what An Zhe was thinking, Pauli spoke.

"It's very uncertain, but…" His voice trailed off, and he sighed softly. "After all, we have also created many masterpieces that defied humankind's imagination in the past."

An Zhe sensed the fluctuation in his tone of voice and echoed his last sentence. "Masterpieces that defied humankind's imagination."

Then he saw the faint glimmer of light in Pauli's eyes gradually dim.

Pauli Jones looked out the window at the infinite wilderness and the haze-filled sky. The howls of wild animals came from all directions, and within those sounds were strange waves that could not be deciphered by the human sound spectrum.

"Only with regard to humankind," he murmured. "Before we were shattered, we believed that we had comprehended the entirety of the world."

At that moment, An Zhe saw in his eyes a loneliness that transcended time

itself.

# 42

## “THEN YOU DISAPPOINT ME EVEN MORE THAN AN ZHE.”

"I CAN'T BELIEVE that the magnificent Arbiter can only remain confined in my laboratory." Dr. Ji put the stack of materials in his arms onto the table. He asked sarcastically, "Do you need me to bring you food?"

The one sitting on the armchair originally belonging to Dr. Ji was not the doctor himself, but the Arbiter, clad in a black uniform. With a nonchalant bearing, his arms were folded and his long legs were crossed. A silver badge was missing from his chest, but the silver trimmings on the uniform itself filled in the blank space, rendering his attire and appearance as impeccable as always.

Frosty eyes scanned the silvery-white laboratory. "Do you think I'm staying here willingly?"

"I recommend that you be a little nicer to me. I'm not asking for much, just that we recover one percent of the friendship we had when we were younger," the doctor said. "You need to clearly recognize and understand the situation here. The Trial Court cannot even protect itself. If even I—your sole friend in this base—hadn't taken you in, you would've promptly been torn to shreds by the people outside. I heard that the United Front Center held three meetings in a row on the subject of whether the Arbiter's qualification to surpass all other authority and kill people, as laid out in the Arbiter's Code, should be abolished or not."

With those words, he winked slyly. "You chose to come back from the wilderness. Do you regret it now?"

He had intended to stir up Lu Feng's emotions, but failed to do so. When compared to before Lu Feng heard those words, his expression had not changed in the least.

Ever since contactless gene pollution and the composition exchanges between inanimate matter were discovered, the base had fallen into an atmosphere of desperate unease. Perhaps the magnetic poles would be defeated by distortion in the very next moment and they would become monsters, become objects, or become one with this base of iron and steel. These eight thousand people were the elites and the leaders of the military and the Lighthouse, the most exceptional of the existing humans. Precisely because of their exceptional intelligence, they were better able to sense the horror of the inexorably approaching doomsday. The dying base maintained a tense peace that was like a lake surface covered with a thin layer of ice; it appeared solid, but in fact, a single tossed stone was all it would take for everything to come crumbling down.

The cause was a shooting that occurred ten days earlier.

"If it had been anyone else, it would have blown over. You…" The doctor looked at the Arbiter, who was completely indifferent to anything he said, and gritted his teeth.

The person killed was a respected scientist of the Lighthouse. In the areas of trajectory calculation and ammunition improvement, he had made remarkable contributions—and thus was a luminary within the realm of military projects. Naturally, all the researchers within that realm supported his juniors, and the people of the military also revered him.

Ten days ago, Lu Feng and Seraing ran into this scholar in a corridor of the United Front Center, and they had even greeted each other by way of nodding.

However, right as they passed each other, Lu Feng pulled out the gun clipped to Seraing's waist. His marksmanship was as precise as always, and his pull of the trigger was both swift and decisive. The bullet squarely struck the back of the ammunition expert's head, and blood sprayed like a firework as his corpse pitched forward and toppled to the ground.

This incident alarmed almost the whole base.

Students and friends of the deceased existed throughout the base. Claiming that the deceased had a sharp mind, polite bearing, gentle disposition, and no signs of infection whatsoever, they demanded that the Trial Court give an

explanation.

But a living person had died, and because the wave of substance fusions two months ago had ruined the core components of the gene testing instruments, their operations were completely halted, so no proof to support the Arbiter's judgment could be found. In this regard, the Arbiter's only statement was that he acted in full accordance with the rules and regulations of the Trials.

Many old matters were dug up, and the calls demanding that the Trial Court make its rules public reached their peak during this time. However, limited to the power granted to the Trial Court by the Arbiter's Code, they had no way of sending Lu Feng to the military court, so the controversy over the Code also reached its climax at that time as well. A young man named Colin, who claimed to be the pioneer of the original Outer City's anti-Trial movement, escaped the calamity that left only eight thousand people alive in the Main City because he himself was a teacher working in the Garden of Eden. Now, this hot-blooded young man was once again shouting the slogans that had once resounded throughout the Outer City. At the same time, he attacked the merciless trampling of human nature by the military's other institutions with all his might, and he swiftly garnered a large number of faithful supporters.

In response, after a long silence, the United Front Center chose to do all in its power to suppress him. However, the humans at the base were mainly members of the Lighthouse and the Garden of Eden. Their strength was limited, and they could not be merciless. Now, if a single person died, humankind would lose one out of eight thousand. A riot occurring in a chaotic society of eight thousand people seemed to be an unsolvable quandary.

In the midst of this tempest, a piece of little-known historical data was unearthed from the Lighthouse and spread throughout the base like wildfire.

It was a top-secret file belonging to the "Fusion Faction" from many years ago. People were very secretive about the faction's existence, but they truly did have undisputed scientific research capabilities. Over ten years of experiments and observations, they came up with an estimated probability—of the living people who had been genetically infected, they had a one-in-ten-thousand chance of retaining a certain degree of their human consciousness while obtaining monster characteristics, and one in sixty-five hundred may recover a

certain degree of their human consciousness within three years of completely becoming a monster.

To make matters worse, the data was accompanied by a dispassionate remark. One in ten thousand and one in sixty-five hundred were only theoretical estimates. In reality, the true probabilities may be slightly higher.

The day this data was leaked, the entire base went into a furor.

In response, Colin wrote a lengthy essay, the topic of which was "A Hundred Years of the Trial Court—Unverifiable Sins."

At the same time, a crazed soldier hid outside the Trial Court and fired at the Arbiter. It was said that his beloved commanding officer and comrades all died to the Arbiter's gun, but unfortunately, in every aspect, the Arbiter was an officer a hundred times better than him and the bullet failed to strike true. But this action inspired others. Instantly, the Trial Court became a target in various meanings of the term.

Until Jibran submitted an application to the Lighthouse.

Dr. Ji brought up that the spore sample from the Abyss showed an unprecedented inertia against infection and being infected, against distortion and being distorted. If they could understand the mechanism via research and apply it to the human body, humans may also be able to acquire this valuable characteristic. However, this strange and lively spore displayed an extraordinary closeness with the Trial Court's Colonel Lu. When it came into contact with the Colonel, its growth speed and cell activity would both increase.

Therefore, Colonel Lu had to cooperate with this research project, and the base also had to guarantee the Colonel's personal safety, for this may be where the last hope of humankind lay.

Only then did a certain Colonel named Lu appear in Dr. Ji's laboratory.

"The estimated three months are almost up. Although there's a lack of definite proof, the destiny of humankind is counting down." Dr. Ji sat down next to Lu Feng. "The Main City never cared about the Arbiter system before, but now, just like the former Outer City, they are about to face trial. You must understand, once the magnetic poles are vanquished by the distortion,

everyone will be at risk of being infected, and everyone will be faced with a trial. All of them might die at the end of your gun. Although the Trial Court has done nothing yet, it has already become the enemy in their minds. Full-scale distortion will come eventually. They hope to achieve the one-in-ten-thousand or one-in-sixty-five-hundred, and taking you down will allow them to live a little longer. It has nothing to do with your own actions, fear of death is a biological instinct."

With those words, he frowned slightly and murmured, "Over all these years, no matter how much the Trial Court had been pressured, not even a single word of the Trial rules has been divulged. I believe that you people must have reasons that compel you to be like this. But actually, I've always wanted to ask you a different question. Regarding the Fusion Faction's data, did you previously… know about it or not?"

Lu Feng looked past him and at the spore floating in the green culture solution.

Because he was in the room, the spore's hyphae were loosely unfurled. It had grown bigger, its core now the size of a person's palm.

"Any results?" he asked flatly.

"Unfortunately, no. It's a fraud, just like that wretched little An Zhe. Its only function now is to serve as your shield, and how long it can shield you for is a mystery." Dr. Ji looked into Lu Feng's eyes.

Those eyes—those green eyes. The Northern Base was a place where Asians dominated and other people lived mixed in. Black eyes were undoubtedly ordinary, but as for other colors—even blue and brown were not uncommon, but this frosty green was really too peculiar. Sometimes he would get the impression that this was some sort of emotionless inorganic matter, just like this man's usual gaze.

It was as though no matter how many people he killed, no matter how others treated him, he would remain unmoved. There was no need to understand, much less forgive. All along, he had maintained this aloofness.

A weak frustration suffused the doctor's mind.

"I shouldn't be concerned about you, much less try to comfort you. You don't care at all." He took a deep breath and spread his hands in a shrug. "Every time I try to convince myself that you're a good person, you tell me with your actions that in terms of being emotionless, you really are… really are a fucking prodigy."

He examined Lu Feng's face—the man's facial features were so elegant and strong that it was like he was a sculpted mannequin, but unfortunately the material was ice that would not melt for ten thousand years. The situation outside was so tense that the doctor feared someone would smash the laboratory door and hurl rocks at the Arbiter in the very next moment, but from the expression of the man himself, no signs of internal pain or torment could be seen. On the contrary, the man's slightly drooping eyelashes possessed a sedate calmness, like a ghostly black butterfly stopping to rest on the dignified window lattice of a temple.

The abolition of the Arbiter's Code had not yet been decided, so in the electronic system, the limit of Lu Feng's authority was as lofty as before. Currently, the computer screen next to him was still playing the real-time surveillance footage of the base's crowded areas, confirming that no one was infected.

In resignation, the doctor did not hold back with his sardonic words. "I'm really curious as to what expression you will have on the day you get sent to the gallows by everyone at the base."

With that, he stared straight into Lu Feng's eyes, trying to catch the shift in his mood, but unfortunately Lu Feng's attention was not drawn to this fierce gaze at all. What he'd been looking at the entire time was the spore, or the entire culturing instrument, or perhaps something in the empty space within it.

"Thank you," that cold voice said. "I deserve it."

The doctor relaxed and then once again clenched the fist he was resting on the table. At last, he dejectedly leaned against the back of the chair and said, "I should just push you out there. You've gone mad ages ago."

"I'm very lucid." Lu Feng finally turned his gaze back to him. "Does the laboratory have anything I can help with?"

"Watch over your little fungus and make it grow faster," the doctor said. "If

you can, keep an eye on the research institute's communication channel for me."

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The Arbiter was confined in the Lighthouse, but this fervent riot did not conclude with compromise between both parties. Instead, it worsened.

People stopped working to hold demonstrations against the base. The site for their collective demonstration was at the entrance to the artificial magnetic pole apparatus.

According to deceptive rumors, the base's policy-makers were incandescent with rage. But during this time when everything was in chaos, they no longer had absolute control. In the end, they made a great concession—the Trial Court's right to kill was temporarily removed. Although the members of the Trial Court still conducted inspections, the suspected infected individuals discovered during their inspections were not immediately killed, but taken to a military training camp at the other end of the base and imprisoned apart from each other for observation. Secondly, denied possession of firearms, the Arbiter himself remained in the Lighthouse's laboratory to cooperate with their research, unable to go out—it was difficult to say whether this was the base's protection for the Arbiter, or perhaps a precaution against him.

The atmosphere in the base finally relaxed. After all, their primary target was Lu Feng himself. As this generation's Arbiter, Colonel Lu's arbitrariness and bloodthirstiness astounded everyone. Supposing the Trial Court executed five thousand people in a year, forty-five hundred of those people would have fallen to his gun—the remaining five hundred's executions at the hands of the other Judges were because the Arbiter was not present at the Trial Court due to forces beyond human control.

After a brief calm, people began berating the Lighthouse for not producing any notable progress for many days, and Jibran, who was in charge of this project, was Lu Feng's old friend. "The last hope of humankind" was clearly a misleading lie, a one-sided shield. They demanded that the Lighthouse either produce sufficient results to convince the public or hand over Lu Feng.

"By relying on how the human population cannot lose even one more life, they can do anything." The doctor poured himself a glass of water. "Their words are deeply flawed, but this is the only way for them to give vent to their terror now."

As he spoke, he put the cup up to his lips, but his hand was trembling. Water splashed from out of the cup and landed on the table. The doctor forced down a mouthful, but then his face promptly showed a pained expression, and he bent double and retched continuously.

"I also live in great… great terror. I want to vomit," he said in a trembling voice. "A cold wave has already invaded. Winter is coming. The time when monsters are the most frenzied and most in need of nutrition has arrived."

"We all know that in the eyes of monsters, humans are but a piece of meat dripping with fat. Even when the base was at its zenith, monsters continually tried to attack," the doctor murmured with a smile. "Can you guess… when they'll discover that the human base has weakened to our current state? When will they assemble and storm the human base? … Just like how they grouped up and stormed the Underground City Base."

Lu Feng said, "Calm down first."

"Do you think everyone is emotionless like you? The essence of humans lies in their capability for empathy. Panic spreads exponentially in a crowd, like a virus. At this sort of time, the fact that you are able to keep calm instead proves the… the fearsome extent of your inhumanity." The doctor took a few deep breaths. Sometimes, harsh language could allow people to relax. He looked like he had finally recovered a little. "Please pass on this quality of yours to me through infection. When you can no longer continue working, what are you thinking?"

Lu Feng nonchalantly looked at him. "Humanity's interests take precedence over all else."

The doctor let out a resigned laugh.

After he finished laughing, he took a deep breath. Seeming to have finally calmed down, he came over to the large Petri dish that held the spore.

"They actually think that a little white fungus can save all humankind. This is

the funniest thing I've ever heard. In fact, the composition of that fungus is no different from what we use to make mushroom soup." With clear articulation, the doctor repeated the words of outsiders. He resembled a strict teacher who was scolding students with failing grades. "Do you hear me? If things continue like this, they will cook you into a bowl of mushroom soup sooner or later. You must take the initiative to show how you are different from all the rest."

The snow-white hyphae trembled in the nutrient solution, and the spore slowly drifted in Lu Feng's direction. It pressed right up against the inner wall of the glass, as if by doing so it could get closer to Lu Feng.

Lu Feng said in a low voice, "Don't scare it."

"It understands, I bet it understands. Over the past several days, we've fed it countless monster extracts, and it ate them all. An Zhe is a little monster with a polymorphic-class mutation, so it must be the same for his spore as well," the doctor said. "If it didn't have its own consciousness and intellect, it definitely wouldn't escape its imprisonment and sleep with you every night."

"So what about your progress?" Lu Feng frowned slightly.

"It ate so many monster genes, but it's still the same spore. It's absolutely stable. Those gene extracts definitely didn't disappear. I surmise that it can subjectively control the transformation of its own shape, like how An Zhe could change into a human," the doctor said. "If humans can also have this kind of quality, we wouldn't be afraid of the distortions."

"You people wish to use it to infect humans," Lu Feng said. "Are you not afraid of all the infected individuals being taken over by the mushroom's consciousness?"

"We haven't yet reached the point of thinking about this problem yet." The doctor rested his forehead on the glass. "… The key point is that this damned little thing won't infect others at all. An Zhe and it disappoint me equally."

While he was talking, the spore once again floated to the surface of the nutrient solution of its own volition and climbed up slowly, then flowed out from the crevice between the lid and main part of the Petri dish. It fell down and was caught in Lu Feng's hand, where it lazily lay just like a carefree… little fellow.

Its various actions showed that to a certain degree, it was indeed a creature with subjective awareness.

"It is capable of movement and can think, but it doesn't even have a nervous system," the doctor said. "Do you know what this means? I'm a biologist. The phenomenon of distortion made the physicists' body of knowledge collapse, and the existence of this spore destroyed my body of knowledge."

The Arbiter had no interest or need to pay attention to how a biologist's knowledge was destroyed. As he held the soft mass of hyphae in his hand, Lu Feng asked, "How did An Zhe disappoint you?"

"He didn't have any infectivity to speak of, either." The doctor pulled himself together and sighed. "The bed-sharing relationship between you two—you're still a human, without any indication whatsoever of being infected. Your will also hasn't been influenced by him to become kinder, not even by an iota. Just like his spore, he can't infect people."

Lu Feng gave him a flat look, seeming to be contemplating something. Just as Dr. Ji assumed he was about to say something of value, the Colonel said, "I haven't bedded him."

The doctor stared straight at him. "Then you disappoint me even more than An Zhe."

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An Zhe woke up from a comfortable dream.

In the dream, he didn't have eyes, a nose, or any of the other organs that all humans sensed with. He seemed to have gone back to a very, very far-off past, a time when he was deeply buried in soft, damp soil. But it was by no means soil. He seemed to be somewhere not far from Lu Feng. His proximity to the Colonel's breaths was even closer than his proximity to death.

After opening his eyes, he dazedly looked at the gray ceiling. This entire time, he had been trying hard to avoid thinking about the people and things in the Northern Base. He could feel the fading of his memories, having almost forgotten the appearances and mannerisms of Poet, the doctor, and Colin.

Everything that had happened in that city was gradually disappearing, but Lu Feng appeared with increasing frequency in his dreams.

Sometimes when he opened his eyes, in his disoriented state, he would feel that the man was right at his side. The deep green vine leaves hanging next to the window had not yet withered when they were covered by a layer of white frost, turning them a crystalline color. It was like Lu Feng's eyes were looking at him.

But the icy chill of the outer world swiftly enveloped him again.

Outside the window, leaden clouds hung low over the mountaintops, and the hard ground at the summit bloomed with frost. Winter had arrived.

The people of the Highland Research Institute took extra care of him as always. Ten days ago, he received a knitted woolen scarf and a pair of rabbit fur gloves. Every day, he left the main building while bundled up in these warm things and went to stay in Pauli's laboratory in the white building.

The Simpson cage consumed vast amounts of electricity, while the capacity of the wind turbines was limited. Every day, it could only be turned on for two hours. The rest of the time, Pauli did other things. Sometimes, he taught An Zhe some physics or biology concepts, such as how everything was made up of molecules and atoms, and atoms could be split into electrons, protons and neutrons. However, that was far from the end. As for what exactly made up the basis of the world's matter, nobody could see it.

"If a blind man wants to perceive the world, he can only reach out and touch things, but what he feels is obviously not the thing's entirety. Our understanding of the world is as shallow as the blind man's, doomed as we are to only see the facades. We have a lot of assumptions, but we're unable to verify whether they're correct or not," Pauli said.

As he spoke, the howling north wind on the mountaintop pushed open the laboratory window. The brown-skinned Indian man got up to close the window, and Pauli Jones gave An Zhe's scarf an upward tug.

The scarf wrapped around An Zhe's entire neck. Buried in the soft and warm fabric, he asked Pauli, "Are you not cold?"

"At my age, many parts have become dull." Pauli Jones looked at him with those warm gray-blue eyes, and An Zhe could see his own reflection within them, all wrapped up in white. But he didn't look for too long before he bowed his head and started coughing. Although it was so cold outside, it was like a fire was burning painfully in his lungs.

Pauli stroked his back, then held out the warm water that was on the table to him.

"Do we have any antibiotics left?" he asked the Indian man, whose name was Rum.

"We still have some."

After An Zhe finished coughing, he took the medicine while trembling. A charcoal brazier had been lit in the room, but he still felt very cold.

"I can't find the cause of your illness." Pauli wiped away the fine layer of cold sweat from the side of An Zhe's forehead with his fingers. With pain evident in his gray-blue eyes, he murmured, "And there aren't any advanced instruments here… I apologize."

An Zhe shook his head. "It's all right."

Pauli had said that humankind's understanding of the world would always be shallow, and sometimes An Zhe also thought that his own understanding of humans was only a facade. When he had returned to the Abyss, he never expected to receive such hospitality from humans.

For example, Pauli was no medical expert, but because of An Zhe's body that was weakening day by day, he began to read the medical literature contained in the database. Rum helped with the search as well.

Sometimes An Zhe felt guilty because of their sincerity since he was not human. It was like he stole these acts of kindness while draped in a human skin. He began fearing the exposure of his original form on the day of his death.

He once told Pauli that there was no need to take such troubles. At the time, Pauli felt the temperature of An Zhe's forehead with the back of his hand and murmured, "You're like my own child."

When Pauli wasn't around, he asked Rum in a roundabout way why Pauli would be so kind to him.

Rum's reply was that Mr. Pauli loved everyone here.

"Before I came to the research institute, half of my body was broken and mildewed, and I was not lucid." Rum rolled up his pants legs, revealing sturdy lower legs that were covered with hideous scars and earthworm-like protrusions. The usually taciturn man spoke a lot. "Regardless of day or night, Mr. Pauli treated me for half a year. In the past, I did not believe there could be such a person in the world either."

Then he said, "I used to not be a good person. When I was a mercenary, I hurt my teammates. Now I've saved three compatriots from the outside, which counts as my atonement. It's not bad to be a good person, and it's better to be a person than a monster. Many people in the research institute are like me. No one disrespects Mr. Pauli."

An Zhe clearly remembered that at that time he had suddenly thought of Lu Feng for no reason—an inexplicable association. He was thinking about how Lu Feng was doing now. Then he shook his head, driving the shadow of that guy who was Pauli's polar opposite out of his mind.

Rum was an amateur music lover. When he had nothing else to do, he would practice playing the harmonica while looking at an old music score. Sometimes he taught An Zhe as well, and the sound was pleasing to the ear. But Rum said that humans used to have instruments that were thousands of times more wonderful than the harmonica, and together, they could perform symphonies of unparalleled grandiosity.

When he said that, Pauli came over to them and said jokingly, "If Rum had been born a hundred years earlier, he would have definitely been an outstanding musician."

The always reticent Rum smiled. Then he would take out a shabby old radio, turn the tape over, and press the play button, and intense or gentle rhythms would come out from the rusty machine. It was the sound of countless types of instruments being played together, each with their own timbres and melodies that combined together to form another magnificent sound. The music flowed

and reverberated in this laboratory with the burning charcoal. At the bottom of the white building, a man whose left arm had transformed into a beast's paw waved in their direction, and Rum hung the radio on the handrail outside and turned up the volume.

Airy and flowing music traveled through the window that was covered with blooms of frost. On the tape, there was an announcement before the music played. This was Beethoven's Spring Sonata. With cheek resting in hand, An Zhe listened. Springtime in the Abyss was also very beautiful, but he probably could not see it anymore.

It was at this time that he received a short message from the Northern Base.

The communication channel, which had long been silent, flashed with red light—in the address list, there was only one anonymous party.

An Zhe pulled up the communication interface. The short message sent by the anonymous party contained only two lines made up of ten or so words.

"Winter has come."

"The monsters' behaviors are different. Stay safe."

An Zhe enlarged the words and turned back to look at Pauli. "Sir."

"A message from the Northern Base's Dr. Ji," Pauli said. "Over the past several years, only he has been constantly communicating with me in secret."

The words "Dr. Ji" sent An Zhe into a daze. He asked, "… Do you want to reply?"

"Yes," Pauli said warmly. "Please reply for me."

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The Northern Base.

The communication channel lit up. It was a short reply from the Highland Research Institute.

"Message received."

"Thank you for the reminder. Please be sure to stay safe as well."

The doctor walked past the communication screen.

"Colonel Lu, tsk." The tone of his voice lifted up. "It's hard to imagine that the Arbiter would do such a thing. You're unexpectedly still a good person."

Lu Feng's gaze was flat as he looked at the words on the screen.

"Who is the other party?" he asked.

"Someone you definitely couldn't have thought of," Dr. Ji said. "Pauli Jones."

# 43

## “THAT'S BECAUSE YOU ARE OF NOBLE CHARACTER AND HONEST.”

THE EARLY WARNING from the Northern Base was succinct.

Pauli said, "They've discovered it too."

An Zhe looked outside.

The Highland Research Institute lay on the top of the highest mountain. Looking down, all of the Abyss was visible. The fault zone was like a hideous wound on the earth's pale gray skin, and the dense forests and bogs were the wound's blood, plasma, and pus. In the distance, the faraway east bank was the sea, or a huge lake. All in all, the end of it couldn't be seen, spread far beyond the horizon. During times of utter silence, whispers were mixed in with the sound of the wind, and the vast roar of the surf was faintly audible in the fog.

In short, it was like a monster silently entrenched on the ground.

This was not the Abyss that An Zhe was familiar with. He had realized this earlier as well. In the past, the Abyss was a place full of blood and pillaging. There had never been such a calm moment in it before.

A shadow appeared in the distant sky, and it became bigger and came closer before finally stopping in the sky above the white building.

With a whoosh, Tang Lan folded his wings and landed directly on the corridor outside. Then he pushed open the laboratory door.

"I've returned, sir." Then he turned to Rum. "Have there been any attacks recently?"

Rum said, "No."

Pauli Jones lifted his head and examined him from head to toe, seemingly

confirming whether his condition was normal or not. If the person performing this action was Lu Feng, An Zhe would have thought that he was judging the person and deciding whether to shoot or spare them. But as Pauli's warm gray-blue eyes looked at Tang Lan, An Zhe was sure that this was only a case of a kindly elder showing concern over whether or not Tang Lan had gotten hurt outside.

As expected, Pauli asked, "Did you run into danger outside?"

"Yes, but I didn't get hurt," Tang Lan said. "I'm quite experienced when it comes to that place."

Pauli said, "You have always allowed me to rest assured."

Tang Lan smiled. His eyes were sharp and beautiful, with a faint biting chill to them. An Zhe remembered that Hubbard was the most exceptional military team leader, so his lieutenant was most certainly not an ordinary person either.

Pauli Jones asked, "How was it outside?"

"About the same as what you expected," Tang Lan replied. "They've reached equilibrium."

As he spoke, he pulled out a data cable from a drawer and connected the miniature camera that was in his hand to the computer. Up to a hundred photos were uploaded and tossed onto the big screen nearby.

At first glance, there was nothing in those pictures save for the indescribably strange scenes unique to the Abyss. It was like they were just landscape photos taken by novelty-seeking tourists. But upon closer look, they made people involuntarily hold their breaths.

The most eye-catching one was a photo of a massive lake that was taken from above. It had frozen over, the white ice having frozen the brown algae, floating remnants of limbs, and fallen leaves on the lake surface. However, beneath the vacant span of ice, a huge irregularly shaped shadow was visible—it was an aquatic organism's back, and it was quietly staying in the water, its shadow like an abstract painting.

Right on the shore of this lake, the jungle's withered branches were enveloped in giant clumps of dull red vines. The next photo was a close-up of a

vine. Its exterior was smooth like an earthworm, and underneath its skin were star-shaped radial patterns. Crowded black blood vessels seemed to be pulsing. An Zhe immediately realized that this was no ordinary plant. All the vines in the entire jungle belonged to the same tentacle monster.

"I only took one photo here. It noticed me," Tang Lan said.

Pauli took the remote control and went through the photos one at a time.

"After three months of slaughter, the ones alive now are all large monsters, and the few remaining small creatures are nowhere to be seen," Tang Lan said. "I had a few fights with them. Sir, I'm certain that right now, out of everyone in the entire research institute, only my strength is enough to escape from them. But I'm completely unable to fight them head-on. Furthermore, the vast majority of the monsters in the Abyss are polymorphic-class, and I'm not sure exactly how terrifying they are right now."

"I understand." Pauli nodded slowly, a solemn expression in his gray-blue eyes. "Supposing genes are a type of resource, they've already finished consolidating what's in the Abyss. Now the monsters have reached an equilibrium of strength between themselves, and their intelligence has also greatly increased during the consolidation process. They understand that fighting may result in damage to both sides, threatening the whole. If this conjecture isn't wrong, there must be some monsters that have already started leaving the Abyss to hunt outside of it. Humans are certainly one of the targets of their hunts as well, but it's just that they haven't noticed for the time being. We must defend against the monsters' combined attacks at any given moment."

"It is indeed the case," Tang Lan said. "But there's one thing that differs from your conjecture."

Pauli asked, "Did you discover something?"

Controlling the computer, Tang Lan pulled up an image. It was difficult to imagine exactly how ugly this image was—by no means did An Zhe have a frame of reference for aesthetics, but he was certain this image could be described as "ugly" because it assaulted people's senses to the greatest possible extent. On the crowded surfaces of two mollusks grew all of the organs that the

human language could describe and the ones that couldn't be described, and they had reached out with mucus-covered tentacles to interact with the other. In the next photo, their tentacles had separated, and in the photo after that, one of the two had gone off in another direction.

"I've observed six cases of similar situations. Unlike your initial prediction, the monsters have not been each occupying their own territories and refusing to budge. They've been moving around in the Abyss, feeling each other out, and then separating." Tang Lan's tone became solemn and grim. "I suspect that the worst has happened, sir. They seem to be communicating, but I don't know what the content of those messages are. Whenever contact occurs between them, I can feel that the waves on their bodies become stronger."

He continued, "I suspect that they are feeling each other out and probing to see whether or not the other party has the genes they need."

"It's very possible," Pauli said. "As for the 'wave,' you're one of the ones with the most acute sense of it within the research institute."

"Lately, I've been more and more sensitive to it." Tang Lan's face was slightly pale. "It's everywhere in the air, and every monster's body has it as well. Sometimes I feel like even the rocks on the ground are vibrating. It's getting harder and harder for me to keep thinking. I wasn't supposed to come back so soon, but I felt the waves of my own body being integrated into them. Sir, my… my consciousness is a bit abnormal."

Pauli held his hand and said calmly, "Don't be afraid."

"A hundred years ago, in the age when biological gene sequences were the most stable, there were already some species that were particularly sensitive to changes in the magnetic field. You just happened to fuse with such a creature," he said.

"But it's not the magnetic field. I can feel it. The magnetic field is a different kind of wave." Tang Lan closed his eyes. Getting down on one knee, he rested his forehead against the back of Pauli's hand. His voice was hoarse as he asked, "Sir, have you already realized something? When I was talking, you weren't surprised at all."

He continued, "But you won't tell us because the truth is something we're

unable to handle," he said. "But I truly…"

His voice became more broken and hoarse the more he spoke, and in the end he could not continue.

"Don't be afraid, don't be afraid… child," Pauli said in a voice that was like a gentle and vast ocean as he slowly clasped Tang Lan's shoulder with his right hand, "I will protect all of you up until my final moment."

Tang Lan lifted his head and looked straight at Pauli Jones. As though he were making a solemn oath, he said, "We will also protect you and the research institute up until the final moment."

"I've never made demands of any of you, but supposing the day comes when the research institute no longer exists," Pauli said slowly, "I beg you all to not join the torrent of xenogenics and monsters, but rather to go north and protect the human base."

Tang Lan said, "But the Arbiter will shoot all xenogenics. The base won't ever accept us."

Pauli looked at the boundless twilight outside.

"But even during our final moments, I'm still willing to believe to the greatest possible extent in humankind's kindness and leniency," he said.

The corners of Tang Lan's mouth twitched, and he looked up at Pauli Jones. "That's because you are of noble character and honest."

Pauli shook his head with a fond smile.

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After Tang Lan left, the Simpson cage's power reserves also reached a critical value. The wide platform at the bottom of the white building shone with a harsh scarlet light and radiated waves of heat. If it was not clear that this was a high-energy field produced by machines and used to capture the vibration frequencies and interaction trajectories of elementary particles, An Zhe would have thought that it was a raging sea of fire downstairs.

The large screen in the laboratory was the Simpson cage's terminal and

console, but due to defects in its design, sometimes it was necessary to go downstairs and manually adjust the levers of certain precision instruments in order to adjust its parameters.

On the big screen, the lines were still a confused mess, but they were by no means unchanging. Every time Pauli adjusted the parameters, the tangled lines would change from one kind of mess to another kind of mess.

But in the end, it was still all a mess.

Just as before, Pauli repeatedly analyzed the lines, calculated the functions, adjusted the parameters, and changed the receiving frequency. Just like that, the shifting lines danced on the screen.

Music interrupted An Zhe's thoughts. In the corridor, the old-fashioned tape recorder was playing the tempestuous Symphony No. 5. Rum stood by the window, a book of sheet music propped up in front of him. He played the harmonica while facing the score, imitating the symphony's melody. After some time, he stopped.

"Do you understand music?" he asked.

An Zhe shook his head.

Rum pointed to the tape recorder. "After listening to one piece, are you able to know how to play it?"

An Zhe shook his head a little more quickly. For such a complex symphony, it was all he could do to appreciate one-ten-thousandth of its rises and falls, much less reproduce it.

"You have to have a score," Rum murmured as he turned over a page of the sheet music.

But at the word "score," his gaze was directed at the screen in the middle of the laboratory.

As though a formless string had been gently plucked, his chaotic and complex thoughts instantly became clear. All of a sudden, An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

"The wave is a symphony," he said. "Mr. Pauli wants to work out its score. Then… then it will be possible to do many things."

Rum looked at him with his deep, dark gaze. "You're smarter than me."

An Zhe looked at the screen as well. Was it possible to obtain the secrets of the distortion calamity by analyzing these lines? His eyes had a perplexed look to them.

Or perhaps this endless chaos was the truth in another sense of the word.

A heavy silence enveloped the laboratory. An Zhe bowed his head. The fate of humankind was as vague as that wad of lines. Perhaps all of this had nothing to do with mushrooms, but sometimes he would also feel that breathing was difficult.

It was difficult to explain the reason, but as he faced the communication channel linked to the Northern Base, he placed his fingers on the keyboard.

The movements of his fingers were no longer dexterous, just like how his hyphae could no longer extend. When he tapped the keys, his fingertips trembled uncontrollably.

Without fiber optics or base stations, the cost of communicating was very high. As though he were using humankind's undersea telegraph communications from centuries ago, he had to be sparing with his words.

He sent it.

"How's the situation at the base?"

Like an absurd coincidence, the communication channel lit up at almost the same time. A similar message had come from the Northern Base.

"What's the status of the research institute?"

The Northern Base could sacrifice everything for the purity of human genes. They despised monsters, and the Trial Court showed it absolutely did not tolerate xenogenics. It seemed that only the kind scientist Dr. Ji tolerated the Fusion Faction's existence and cared about the status of things at the research institute.

An Zhe replied, "Everything is fine."

Pretending that all was well seemed to be a skill unique to humankind, and he had learned it.

A few seconds later, the other party replied, "Likewise with the base."

Facing the communication interface, An Zhe was deep in thought for a long time before he slowly typed, "Is the Arbiter doing well?"

After some contemplation, he pressed the backspace key and made a few revisions.

Right as he was revising his message, one came in from the Northern Base.

"Has the research institute discovered any new types of xenogenics recently?"

An Zhe thought for a moment, then replied, "Not yet."

After replying, he sent the revised sentence.

"Is the Trial Court doing well?"

The other party replied, "The Trial Court is operating as normal."

An Zhe relaxed.

"Wishing you all the best." He politely sent a closing remark. "Goodnight."

The other party's reply was also only one word.

"Goodnight."

While looking at that word, An Zhe lifted his fingers from the keyboard and took out the silver badge. His body's decline was speeding up, and it had already reached its final moments. With stiff finger joints, he tried hard to hold the badge in his hand.

The sound of movement came from the stairs, for Pauli had come up. Rather than returning to the room, though, he silently stood by the corridor railing, his back toward An Zhe.

An Zhe got up and walked over to Pauli. The music stopped. Downstairs, the Simpson cage was burning fiercely, and the night washed over them. From the dark remote skies came a long howl.

Pauli asked, "You aren't going to stay inside?"

An Zhe shook his head, thinking of Tang Lan's earlier words.

"Sir," he asked, "have you already realized something?"

Pauli looked at him.

"Sometimes I feel like your capacity for acceptance is higher than that of all other people," Pauli said. "You're very special. You seem to be more fragile than anyone else, yet you also seem to be afraid of nothing."

An Zhe slowly lowered his gaze.

"Mm," he said.

"But I haven't gotten the final answer yet." Pauli reached out and buttoned the first line of buttons on An Zhe's coat. "Would you like to hear me tell a very simple story?"

An Zhe said, "I would."

"It was a very long time ago, a scientist's imaginings." In the cold wind, Pauli's voice was warm.

"Supposing that you traveled through time today and arrived at a year from now. There, you traveled through time again and returned to one year ago, arriving here," Pauli said. "Then right in front of me would be two identical versions of you."

An Zhe thought for a while, then said, "Mm."

"You know that matter consists of units known as atoms, and inside atoms are electrons. In this world, no two leaves are alike, but all atoms are identical. In that case, how can you tell that two electrons are two different ones?"

After thinking some more, An Zhe said, "They're in different spots."

"But space is not necessarily a metric of location, nor is time. These two things hold meaning only for four-dimensional humans. In higher dimensions, time and space are likewise just the horizontal and vertical axes on a sheet of white paper, just like this." Pauli took out a piece of chalk from his pocket and drew a dot on the railing in front of them. "An electron moves freely through time and space. The left side is backward, the right side is forward. Now it passes through time, traveling forward by one second."

As he spoke, he used the chalk to draw a line on the right that slanted downward and add another dot. "After passing through time, it is here."

"Then it passes through time again, going one second backward, and stops here." The chalk drew a line to the left and downward, then added another dot.

Now there were three dots and two lines on the railing. They formed an acute angle that opened leftward, and the two dots on the left lay on a vertical line. Pauli drew the vertical line. "Our time is right here, at this second. At this time, what do we observe?"

An Zhe thought for a very long time.

In the end, he said, "Two electrons."

"Yes. We observe two identical electrons. But in essence they are actually one, and they're just appearing in two places at the same time." Pauli added more electrons next to those two, making them resemble countless stars. "Roughly estimating, our world has ten to the power of fifty-one identical electrons forming the matter we can observe. How can you prove that this is not the result of the same electron repeatedly oscillating and traveling back and forth millions of times on the axis of time?"

"Similarly, how can you prove that the existence of the entire observable universe is not the result of one or a few basic particles dancing through time and space?"

An Zhe frowned. He had no way of proving it, of course.

With his limited knowledge, he strenuously digested this sentence.

"So are you and I both the same electron?"

Pauli smiled warmly and wrapped an arm around An Zhe's narrow shoulders like an elder wrapping an arm around an innocent young child.

"This is but one of humankind's countless conjectures about the true nature of the world. It's not necessarily the truth, or perhaps it has absolutely nothing in common with the truth. It's just that it's difficult for us to verify it," he said. "I gave this example only to explain that within a greater metric, the brief existences of our bodies, minds, and wills as well as the existence of the entire world are even more insignificant than a single electron."

An Zhe looked into the distance. He was just a mushroom with a simple

composition. He didn't have a scientist's mind, nor did he have such rich knowledge and insightful dimension-transcending thoughts. Unable to understand such a system, he only knew that this world was authentically displayed before his eyes. He murmured, "But we're all real."

After he finished speaking, the expression on his face went blank for a second. His brows furrowed as pain lanced through his lungs.

He clutched the railing, body trembling violently, and coughed up a mouthful of blood before falling forward.

With trembling arms, Pauli caught An Zhe's limp body and held him in his embrace.

"Rum!" he shouted in the direction of the laboratory, anxiety in his voice.

An Zhe knew that Pauli wanted to treat him again or search for the cause of his illness by using warmth, antibiotics, defibrillators… those sorts of things.

He coughed up another mouthful of blood, and Pauli wiped it away with his sleeve.

Blood dyed the edge of the snow-white shirt sleeve red. An Zhe looked at Pauli and forced a smile.

"There's no need." He slowly grabbed Pauli's arm, panted a few times, and said softly, "… There's really no need."

Pauli held him in an iron grip. "Hang in there a little longer."

"I…" As An Zhe looked into his eyes, he seemed to catch sight of the boundless sea and sky.

He was actually fine, for he hadn't yet reached his weakest moments. At least he could still move, and his thoughts were clear.

But he was going to die. If not today, then tomorrow—he could die just like this. Pauli was the best elder in the world. He regarded An Zhe as a beloved child, treating him so well… At the end of his life, he could die with such a gentle love, something that the other people of this age dared not even dream of. But if he died like this, Pauli would accept his arbitrary death. Unable to find the cause of illness, he could do nothing to help. An Zhe knew that for

humankind's scientists, such unsolvable problems and inexplicable truths were the most profound frustrations.

He could also die as a monster. He wasn't afraid that Pauli would abhor him. What Pauli had given him was already enough, more than enough.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry." He looked at Pauli. After making that decision, he relaxed a lot. The pain in his body was nothing. He said again, "I'm sorry, Pauli."

Pauli gazed at him.

"I…" An Zhe smiled. He coughed a few times, and tears slid down, the exact same temperature as blood. Strenuously gasping for breath, he said to Pauli, "I… lied to you. I'm not a human infected by a monster. I was originally a monster. I'm not human, I just… just ate a human's genes. I just… look like a human."

Pauli seemed stunned for a second. Then a more gentle sorrow showed in his gray-blue eyes. "No matter what you are, hang in there a little longer, okay?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"I'm not sick," he said. "My lifespan… is just this long. It can't be changed… You don't need to help me anymore."

After he finished speaking, Pauli held him tight. As they looked at each other, they fell into a sorrowful silence.

Compared to illnesses or injuries, the fixed lifespan of a creature was something even more inexorable. The end was determined from the moment of birth. Nobody could step over that threshold, the threshold set by God—if God truly existed.

In the oppressive silence, the chilly wind howled, and An Zhe heard Pauli say something amidst the sound.

The moment the words reached his ears, his heart abruptly quivered. What he said was so familiar, familiar to the point where it was like he had returned to that night three months ago when he was facing Lu Feng. The wind was strong that day as well.

Pauli Jones asked, "What's that in your hand?"

Facing him, An Zhe had nothing else to hide. He slowly uncurled his fingers.

A silver badge lay quietly in his hand. This was the token that proved the Arbiter's identity.

Pauli's gaze landed on the badge, and An Zhe swore that he saw in those gray-blue eyes a distant grief.

Then Pauli Jones retrieved something from his own jacket's inner pocket and held it in the palm of his hand.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

It was also a silver badge.

A nearly identical badge.

"You…" An Zhe was stunned. "You're… an Arbiter?"

"Once upon a time," Pauli murmured. "I'm a defector."

# 44

## “THE AURORA LIT UP THE ABYSS.”

"I AM willing to take up arms for the safety of humankind.

I will grant a fair judgment to every compatriot.

Although wrong, it is still correct."

Pauli recited the words slowly.

"The Pledge of the Trial Court," he said.

An Zhe was stupefied. He had once heard the final line of this pledge.

After coughing up those two mouthfuls of blood, his body unexpectedly became lighter, and his senses gradually dulled. Winter's fierce wind blew into his face, but it no longer made him shiver with cold. It was a kind of ethereal airiness, as though he was about to scatter in the wind. He once again propped himself up. Leaning against the railing, he looked down at the two badges.

The hexagon-shaped badge was engraved with a design. The Trial Court's insignia was made up of two intersecting prismatic four-pointed stars, resembling the icon on a map that indicated directions. The star that pointed north, south, east, and west was slightly bigger, and the arm that pointed south was elongated, forming a cross-like shape. The star that pointed northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest was slightly smaller and hidden beneath the other star.

An Zhe had examined this distinctively pointed shape many a time. Its cold silvery texture, sharp points, and straight lines all displayed breathtaking severity and impartiality.

Pauli's fingers stroked the four-pointed star's surface. Perhaps he had traced its shape many a time, for the design on the badge bore deep traces of wear

and tear.

"Its artwork was drawn by one of my colleagues." In the howling cold wind, Pauli looked into the distant night sky. "We had hoped that the four-pointed star would point humankind in the correct direction like a compass."

"Weren't you… a scientist of the Fusion Faction?" he asked in a low voice.

"I was," Pauli said.

His tone of voice was soft, just like a sigh. "I was the leader of the Fusion Faction as well as the founder of the Trial Court. The Fusion Faction was the Trial Court's predecessor."

An Zhe suddenly remembered that in the Trial Court's long, long corridor, the portraits and birth and death dates of all the Arbiters were lined up in a row. The picture frame at the end, however, had been removed and the name and birth and death dates had been scraped off, leaving behind only a blurry "P." That was the record of the first Arbiter, but for some unknown reason it had been expunged by those who came after.

The Northern Base was a place where various ethnic groups mingled. He didn't know which language the word "Polly" was transliterated from, but he could vaguely spell out the similar word "Polly" with letters.

But his impression was that the ideologies of the Fusion Faction and the Trial Court were poles apart and completely incompatible. One hoped for humans and monsters to safely fuse, while the other mercilessly killed all fused xenogenics that tried to enter the base. The two sides were as far apart as the sky and the earth. He was so doubtful that he didn't know what he ought to ask about first. Pauli said, "It was a coincidental thing."

In the past, An Zhe had heard many people recount the history of the base. Those calm narrations were like limited rays of light, and he lifted the light to illuminate every corner of the dark room so as to piece together the full view of it.

"It seemed that the ability to maintain one's will post-infection only depended on chance. But we still believed that everything in nature had traces that could be followed. It's just that our capabilities were limited and that we hadn't yet

glimpsed the patterns within. We were constantly doing research, going deeper and becoming more frenzied in that area." At that point, Pauli had closed his eyes a little, and a faint pain appeared in his expression as he remembered. "An experimental subject's body divided into two for reasons unexplained, but the halves had a unified consciousness. One of the two escaped the laboratory while the other remained in the observation room. Because it looked like it had stayed there the entire time, we didn't discover the anomaly in time, and the half that escaped caused a tragic disaster."

An Zhe knew about the disaster. A leech had polluted the water source of the entire Outer City.

"The entirety of the Outer City was exposed, and the base had to distinguish humans from xenogenics and promptly eliminate the latter. The Fusion Faction was to blame for this calamity. However, the ones who researched infection and mutation and were the most familiar with the differences between monsters, xenogenics, and humans were us as well," Pauli said.

In an instant, An Zhe came to a realization. At the very beginning, the Trial Court was not one of the military's organizations. It used to be under the Lighthouse's jurisdiction.

"All the experimental projects were discontinued, the samples were destroyed, and the experimental subject was killed, but the base still gave the Fusion Faction the chance to atone for its sins. We set up the Trial Court overnight, drafted the Trial rules, and tried the entire city. Over those ten days, we killed half of the base's population," Pauli said slowly. "The infection was controlled, and the purity of human genes was preserved. And after that—the Trial system continued in that manner. The annihilation of the Virginia base served as further proof of its correctness."

"I was part of the Fusion Faction for ten years and the Arbiter for four years." Pauli spoke those words slowly. A shadow of a smile appeared on his face, but that smile seemed more like a soundless wail of anguish, a grimace of pain. "My original intent was to have everyone be able to achieve a peaceful life, but instead I slaughtered my compatriots every day. Over each day of those fourteen years, my sins became increasingly deep."

An Zhe said, "But you also protected the base."

"By no means was that the case," Pauli said. "I indiscriminately killed innocents every day."

"You drafted rules and followed the procedures, so you wouldn't have indiscriminately killed innocents," An Zhe said, defending him.

Pauli's reply landed like a thunderclap.

"There were no Trial rules," he said flatly.

An Zhe's expression went blank for a second, for he had a hard time digesting the information in that sentence. With difficulty, he asked, "There… weren't?"

"To be exact, there were no rules that would identify xenogenics with a hundred percent accuracy." Pauli sounded like he was sighing. "We drafted the Trial rules using the results of our lifelong research. From various aspects—appearance, movements, and thoughts—we could determine its species through the distinct reactions of creatures to external information, but there was no way to guarantee that it was absolutely correct. In truth, the rules could only identify eighty percent of xenogenics. For the remaining twenty percent, we could only rely on experience and intuition, along with… expanding the scope of execution. It was better to kill mistakenly than let a xenogenic through."

"The first ironclad rule of the true Trial rules was that under no circumstances were they to be shared with the outside world. By no means did we really follow those rules. For the sake of absolute safety, the Trial Court has always left room for mistaken kills." Pauli's voice gradually darkened. "When I guarded the gate to the Outer City, every time I executed someone, there was an eighty percent chance that it was a real xenogenic. For the remaining twenty percent, I knew full well that they were most likely a real human, but I shot them anyway just to be sure. And among those xenogenics, there was the one-in-ten-thousand chance of someone having human consciousness and the one-in-sixty-five-hundred chance of someone recovering their human consciousness many years later."

His voice grew hoarse. "To this day, it's difficult for me to recall those four years."

An Zhe imagined that sort of spectacle, and he imagined himself as a Judge.

He asked, "So you left the base?"

"I couldn't contend with my inner suffering. In the war between humans and xenogenics, I couldn't endure to the end." Pauli looked up at the night sky. After a long silence, he said, "At first, I suffered because I was killing my compatriots, but later, even the deaths of xenogenics were hard to bear. I had been interacting with them for too long, and I knew that every monster had its own life. My hands were drenched in blood. I was a guilty man. Later, I defected from the base with a handful of my colleagues and came to the Highland Research Institute, where we quietly continued the Fusion Faction's research and accepted xenogenics. Throughout my life, I've been atoning for my own sins. From then to now, a hundred years have passed. ”

A hundred years.

An Zhe looked at Pauli, his expression slightly doubtful.

As if understanding his doubt, Pauli smiled. "I've lived for too long."

"In the wilderness, the most unavoidable thing is infection." Pauli rolled up his sleeve. On the skin of his right arm, there was a patch of messy black lines. "I had been accidentally injured and infected by a member of the research institute. Before losing consciousness, I left them."

"However, perhaps because the person who infected me was lucid or perhaps because chance favored me, I woke up." With those words, Pauli smiled. "I thought that only a few seconds had passed, but it had actually been several decades. It was like my consciousness had instantly traveled through time and space. Can you guess where I was?"

An Zhe shook his head.

"I was still at the research institute," Pauli said. "They had brought me back. Even though I was a mindless monster at the time, they didn't abandon me. I had once protected them, so they protected me as well. The sentiments between humans are just like that. What you give, you will get. In this age, trust between humans is something even more precious than life itself, but I had received it."

An Zhe looked at the warm and peaceful expression in Pauli's eyes. It wasn't until now that he understood why there would be such deep bonds between Pauli and the other members of the research institute.

"I don't regret leaving the base back then, but I can also never forgive my own evasion or my powerlessness," Pauli finally said.

An Zhe said, "Because you are of noble character." After doing some thinking, he added, "Because you're too kind."

It was only because Pauli loved every single person that he would suffer like that. If they were in an age of peace, he would definitely be someone who could not bear to kill even ants—yet such a person had to raise a gun against his compatriots.

"Kindness… kindness is humankind's most notable weakness," Pauli said. "Kindness to oneself is the starting point of selfish desires, and kindness to others is the cause of wavering belief. I couldn't achieve complete indifference or true neutrality, so I was not a qualified Arbiter."

After he finished speaking, they were silent for a long time.

But while thinking on Pauli's words, An Zhe frowned slightly, for he had thought of someone.

"But a Judge once said something to me," An Zhe murmured. "The source of the Arbiter's beliefs was not indifference, but kindness. Kindness not to individuals, but to the fate of all humankind. If one were to steadfastly believe that humankind's interests take precedence over all else, they will not waver."

As Pauli looked at him, he asked softly, "How can one steadfastly believe?"

"And supposing one does not harbor kindness toward every single person," he asked, each word clearly pronounced, "how can they steadfastly give their whole life for the interests of all humankind?"

An Zhe was stunned.

His fingers, which were hanging at his sides, began trembling. He finally knew why he would think of Lu Feng, who was Pauli's polar opposite, every time he faced Pauli.

Pauli closed his eyes, his voice hoarse as he said, "This is the cause of all of the Arbiter's suffering."

"Abandon your humanity, indiscriminately kill innocents without restraint, and ultimately be executed by the base. Or maintain your clarity of mind and eventually fall into madness as a result of unbearable suffering. These are the only two fates for an Arbiter," Pauli said slowly. "The moment the Rules were drafted, they were all doomed to meet terrible ends."

An Zhe could not describe what he was feeling in that moment. Having difficulty breathing, he looked at the four-pointed star badge in his hand.

"If… If there was an Arbiter," he said, "who has always had clarity of mind and always guarded the city gates, and there have never been mistakes in his judgments…"

He suddenly came to a realization, and his voice trembled as he said, "There's nobody who doesn't hate him because other Judges only kill a few dozens of people each year while he kills up to a thousand. In truth… in truth, it's not because he particularly likes shooting. It's because there can be the greatest reduction in mistaken kills only when he shoots."

He understood. He finally understood. With a shiver, he asked Pauli, "What kind of a person would he be?"

Pauli's answer was simpler than he had imagined.

"He would be a lonely person," he said.

Something came plummeting down, striking An Zhe's heart with the force of a tumbling boulder.

For a long while, he could not speak, not until Pauli asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I…" An Zhe's vision blurred. "I'm thinking about… about…"

He was thinking about Lu Feng.

He had once thought that Lu Feng was cold-hearted, and he had also once admitted that Lu Feng's beliefs were steadfast. He knew that for the illusory fate of humankind, Colonel Lu could give his entire life. He also knew that Lu

Feng would suffer and be lonely, but it was only today that he knew exactly what sort of an internally rooted unimaginable colossus the man faced.

He once said that he understood Lu Feng, but it was only at this moment—when he and Lu Feng were many miles apart and would never meet again—that he completely understood Lu Feng.

"I know who the Arbiter you speak of is. Tang Lan mentioned him to me many times. If possible, I really would like to meet him," Pauli said.

"He…" While An Zhe clutched the badge, his tears finally began falling. "He's been the Arbiter for seven years and killed many people… Everyone hates him."

"But he was very good to me." He smiled, but the rims of his eyes felt hot and the tip of his nose was bright red. "In fact, he's very good to everyone."

"You said that you're a monster through and through," Pauli said. "But as an Arbiter, I haven't found any differences between you and humans. What about that Arbiter?"

"He couldn't be certain." An Zhe's fingers trembled slightly, and he looked at the unbroken chain of mountains in the distance. "The first time we met, he spared me."

"Sir," he said, "if the Arbiter spares a xenogenic for the first time, will he do it a second time?"

Pauli only gave him a warm look.

"He also spared me a second time. He spared me many times," An Zhe said. "Later, he knew that I was a xenogenic."

"But…" He wanted to say something, but nothing came out. His heart had been caught in a death grip. He wanted to free himself of this inescapable imprisonment, but he could not.

"I'm sorry…" He recognized that he was utterly incapable of forming a complete sentence. Brokenly, he said, "I… As soon as I think of him, I… want to cry."

Pauli took An Zhe into his arms. "Don't cry, child."

"Live on," he said. "You will see him again."

"I won't see him again." An Zhe grasped Pauli's arm like he was grasping his final lifeline amidst the tempestuous storm of emotion. He couldn't stop his tears from flowing, and in the end, he could only shakily close them and rest his forehead against Pauli's shoulder. "I wish… I wish I hadn't met him at all."

"Why?"

An Zhe couldn't say anything.

"With me, you can say anything, child," Pauli murmured. "There's no need to deceive me, nor is there any need to deceive yourself."

Choking, An Zhe cried even harder. He didn't understand human relationships, but facing Pauli, he seemed to have understood them. It was like he was facing a gentle father, a loving priest, or perhaps a lenient God. Kneeling in the temple of the Lord, he could confess everything, just like any other ordinary person—but in fact it wasn't to any other person or deity, but to himself.

"I…" He opened his mouth, his entire body trembling because of the severe pain and his mind completely blank. He finally crossed the emotional barrier and blurted out, "I want to see him…"

"I want to see him." He repeated the words almost despairingly. "I want to see him, sir. I want to see him. I don't regret leaving him, but I… I regret it so much."

"I know… I know." Pauli gently patted An Zhe's back, comforting him.

"You don't know…" An Zhe said, his words contradicting each other. His emotions were torn to shreds, and grief inundated his soul like an ocean. If the omnipresent pain of yearning killed him, he would not have felt the least bit surprised.

It might've even been a mercy.

"I've lived many decades more than you, child," Pauli said. "You're still young, and there are still too many things you do not know."

"I…" An Zhe blankly lifted his head. He could not make any retort, nor did he have any intention to argue. There really was something accumulating in his

chest, unable to be grasped or seen clearly. He couldn't describe it.

He looked past Pauli's shoulder at the boundless night sky and mumbled, "What do I… not know?"

“Ba-thump.”

In the brief silence, An Zhe heard his own heartbeat. He suddenly had the feeling that what Pauli was about to say might change his entire life.

He heard Pauli's breaths.

"You don't know." In the stillness, Pauli said, "That you love him."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

In the sky, the aurora fluctuated, its deep green light like a rolling tide. It traveled from south to north, dissipating before being reborn.

He began to tremble violently.

A fierce intuition struck his soul like a shooting star hitting the earth, its glow brightly illuminating everything in the world. He actually didn't know exactly what sort of meaning those three words held, but he knew they were correct.

He was completely dumbstruck, forgetting even his sorrow as he stared dazedly at the faraway aurora. Pauli let go of him and gently dried the tears on his face with a handkerchief.

"But why would I be like this?" he mumbled.

Without waiting for a reply, he was swept up in another, more pressing question.

"Then… then will he love me too?" He looked at Pauli almost pleadingly. "Will he love me too? I'm just a… a xenogenic."

"Has he said anything to you before?"

An Zhe shook his head. Their relationship was frighteningly short. He said, "But he kissed me."

But he was by no means clear on the meaning of the kiss. That day, the power of words was too feeble, so they could only do that.

"You're still alive," Pauli said. "Did he let you leave?"

"I left him. He has always been a qualified Arbiter. I know he wouldn't spare me," An Zhe said slowly. "At that time, I only wanted to leave him and find a place to die. But it was only because his gun fell into my backpack that I was able to return to the Abyss."

"His gun fell into your backpack?" Pauli repeated.

An Zhe made a soft sound of affirmation, and an unsteady smile appeared in his eyes. "He liked to randomly leave his things with me."

Pauli Jones slowly stroked An Zhe's hair.

"You must know, silly child," Pauli said, "the Arbiter's gun never leaves his side. This is an ironclad rule that was established a hundred years ago."

An Zhe silently met his eyes. In the end, he bit down on his lip.

"I don't know," he said. "I really don't know."

"No matter what reason it stemmed from," Pauli told him, "he definitely loves you too. That's what that means."

"Would an Arbiter like a xenogenic?"

"I don't know," Pauli said, "But I've also lived with many xenogenics for a hundred years—if you believe I still have the qualification to be called an Arbiter."

While looking into those seemingly all-knowing gray-blue eyes, An Zhe thought that Pauli definitely knew the reason why Lu Feng would like him, but he didn't dare to ask. Pauli must have had his reasons for not saying it.

Image after image appeared before his eyes. At the city gates, a woman who had lost her husband hoarsely cursed him to die a miserable death. At the supply depot's public square, a bullet traveled through the back of Doussay's head, but she pitched forward toward him. Countless silhouettes appeared before his eyes. Those hoarse shouts, the trembling dread, the bone-deep admiration. Countless shadows rose up and surged together, reaching up with their hands. With love, hate, and tacitly understood grudges and fears piled up, they pushed him to the mountaintop where the cold winds howled, making him

look down at these hordes of living things.

No one approached him, no one understood him, and his admirers would rather order a false mannequin using all their wealth than speak a single sentence to him of their own accord.

As for… As for the Arbiter's compassion and favor, it was something nobody dared to even dream of. What sort of bone-chilling fear and unimaginable honor was that?

He was a xenogenic, something diametrically opposed to humankind, but he faintly hoped to receive it. And unexpectedly, he had received it.

At least, the moment Lu Feng put his gun into An Zhe's backpack, within the eons, there was once such a second—in that second, the Arbiter left his pistol to a xenogenic, forsaking his lifelong beliefs to love him.

Then, just like the fairy tale in the children's textbooks, the midnight bell rang, and one returned to the Abyss while the other returned to the base.

Like a gradually stopping sandstorm, as the bell rang, the dust settled. An Zhe's heartbeat returned to its normal frequency bit by bit. He had received unimaginable gifts, but he was utterly calm.

He thought that it was enough. All of it was enough.

"If there comes a day when humankind is safe and you see him," he said to Pauli, "Please… please don't tell him that I came here."

Pauli said, "No one can lie to the Arbiter."

"Then say that I've come and gone," An Zhe said. "I've gone far away, and I may be anywhere in the world."

Pauli looked at him with a gentle yet sorrowful gaze.

"I truly hope God can favor you two," he said.

But An Zhe slowly shook his head.

"But I can't love him, and he can't love me," An Zhe murmured.

"Unless—unless the day comes when humankind falls. But I hope that day will never come." In that moment, an assured tranquility enveloped him.

Countless translucent white chips of ice were born in the gaps between the aurora and the clouds. They drifted down, and the silent mountain scenery and night came alive as a result of all the flying bits of ice. It was snowing.

An Zhe held out his hand, and a hexagonal snowflake landed on his finger. The beautiful shape gradually lost its form amidst his skin's warmth and drew in upon itself to form a crystalline droplet of water.

"I've known you all for only three months," he said. "But this is my whole lifetime."

The wind grew louder, and thousands of snowflakes blew into the corridor like willow catkins carried aloft by the spring wind. An Zhe looked up. He thought that everything from the forgotten past was unfolding before his eyes and dispersing into twinkling fragments.

The tempestuous storm subsided, the waves and undercurrents simultaneously ceasing to flow. He couldn't describe it as sad, nor was it anywhere close to being happy. He only felt that the snow was beautiful.

The joys and sorrows throughout his life, the meetings and partings, were just like the births and deaths of all the tangible things in this world. They were all ephemeral snowflakes.

"Are you cold?"

"Not anymore."

He memorized the shape of that snowflake, and in that second he obtained eternity.

The aurora lit up the Abyss.

From the laboratory suddenly came the sound of glass shattering.

# 45

## “IS THIS WHAT GOD WANTED TO SHOW US?”

THE AURORA SUDDENLY FLASHED.

“Crash.”

The sound of glass flying everywhere tore open the silent night. An Zhe turned to look at the laboratory.

Pauli also looked at the window in that direction. "Rum?"

Mist clung to the window glass, blurring everything inside so that all that was visible was a faint human silhouette.

"Sir!" Rum's voice was rarely so excited. He smacked the window with a hand, making banging noises. After opening the window lock, his voice became clear as well, but it carried a tremor. "The screen, the screen…"

Pauli shot a sudden look into the room. Just as before, the messy lines were dancing on the big screen.

But Rum said, "Just now—"

An Zhe coughed a few times, then said, "I'm all right."

After confirming that he was still clearheaded, Pauli strode toward the laboratory. An Zhe surreptitiously swallowed a mouthful of blood and followed. His body was in a strange state, weakened and in pain to the breaking point, but it was precisely because he'd reached those limits that it seemed like he was now completely relaxed.

In the laboratory, Rum had broken a glass bottle containing antibiotic granules. Glittering shards of glass lay all over the ground, but nobody thought to sweep it up.

Pauli came over to the big screen, and as the lines fluctuated like a ball of wriggling worms, he asked, "What is it?"

Rum's lips opened and closed. "It was clear… Just now, it was clear."

It was difficult for An Zhe to describe Pauli's expression in that moment, for it was like all sorts of excessively fierce emotions had mixed together but changed into blankness instead. Pauli's hands trembled, and he placed his right hand on the instrument's operating lever. "Are you certain?"

The expression in Rum's eyes seemed hesitant, or perhaps he was striving to remember—Pauli stared hard at him, and three second later, he said, "I'm certain."

Pauli Jones looked at the screen, An Zhe standing behind him. The research facility humans had used to study the artificial magnetic poles during the period when technology was at its peak—even if much of its equipment had been lost due to many years of neglect, it was still a functioning physics laboratory. Within the breathless silence, Pauli pulled the operating lever and adjusted the fluctuating lines backward.

He asked, "Around what time frame?"

Rum said, "Just now."

He went silent for a while, weighed his words, and said, "It was just the blink of an eye."

Pauli took a deep breath, adjusted the instrument's recording to three minutes ago, and began playing it back frame by frame on the small screen.

Those dancing and wriggling black lines varied in appearance. Some formed curves, while others were star-like scattered black dots. They tangled together in that manner, just like destiny. In every frame, their shapes changed, but these changes were irregular. After staying in the laboratory for almost half a month, An Zhe knew that what the Simpson cage captured was the interaction frequency between elementary particles—Pauli always used "frequency" to describe it.

But the complexity and disorderliness of this frequency were beyond the scope of what humankind's existing scientific knowledge could handle. Pauli

strove to find a way to receive and process them so that they'd clear up, just like a person hearing a piece of music and trying to write a score for it or perhaps continuously adjusting the radio frequency in anticipation of receiving a clear signal. But for a long time, there had not been the slightest progress in this work. Facing those disorderly lines, Pauli once said that he was like a mortal wishing to hear God's decrees yet also like an ant trying to decipher human language.

As An Zhe looked at the still-pulsing big screen, he occasionally turned his worried gaze toward Pauli, and he discovered that Rum was doing likewise. In this drawn-out experiment, there had already been too many failures. If it wasn't possible to replicate the moment of clarity Rum spoke of, he would rather that Pauli had never received the information in the first place.

One frame, followed by another frame. The fire in the fireplace burned with vigor, making the "crackle-pop" sounds of firewood splitting apart from time to time. In the silent laboratory, the sound was particularly dramatic.

A ghostly image suddenly leaped out onto the screen.

Even An Zhe could not help but hold his breath.

On the dark gray background, all the lines suddenly disappeared—then what appeared were countless faint white dots that were packed together, translucent, and gradually fading into the background. It was difficult to describe what sort of shape it was with human language. There seemed to be no pattern to them at all, gathering in certain parts and dispersing in others. There were no white dots scattered in the center of the diagram, but a circle like a volcanic crater had formed around it, and the irregular dark gray circle was reminiscent of a sinister and menacing eye. It was like—like humans in the civilized age had taken a picture of an incomparably grand nebula and then converted it into lifeless grayscale.

"I-it's this one," Rum said. "Did the machine break?"

"No…" Pauli slowly shook his head. Perhaps because his mood was excessively tense, his pupils were slightly dilated. "Such a pattern wouldn't appear for no reason. Something must have happened."

When Tang Lan pushed open the laboratory door, there were faint shadows

under his eyes. He was clearly somewhat listless.

"Sir," he said. "Did you need something from me?"

Pauli said, "Were you asleep? I'm very sorry to have woken you."

Tang Lan shook his head. "I was already awake when Rum shouted for me."

Pauli asked, "Were you not sleeping well?"

"I was just thinking of coming to find you," Tang Lan said. "The wave suddenly amplified—for a second, I felt a sharp spike, and then I woke up."

Pauli asked, "What about now?"

"It's okay now."

Pauli didn’t speak for a long time, not until Tang Lan asked, "What's wrong, sir?"

"There's nothing wrong with our methods. Right when you felt the wave's amplification, an abnormality occurred in the images captured by the Simpson cage as well." Pauli's expression was grave.

Tang Lan frowned. "Isn't this good news?"

"No." Pauli said. "I thought of a problem."

In the laboratory, nobody made a sound save for Pauli. His gaze turned from the small screen that displayed the captured image to the big screen where the complex lines surged. "We wanted to capture the wave's frequency and analyze the cause of the distortion, but what if what it's currently showing is the contest between the earth's artificial magnetic field and the unknown wave coming from the universe?"

"I understand what you mean." Tang Lan jerked his head up. "The magnetic field can resist the wave, but what the Simpson cage received at the same time was both of their frequencies. They're interfering with each other."

"Yes." Pauli said. "I've always been thinking, if the magnetic field could completely resist the wave, why would genetic infection still occur here on the earth? If they've always been in a deadlock, it would make sense. The wave has always affected the earth, but the magnetic field was also putting up resistance,

so we hadn't yet reached the point where matter would be utterly distorted. The frequencies of the two have always been tangled together."

"If that's the case…" Tang Lan furrowed his brows. "Sir, if you wish to analyze the wave with the Simpson cage, you'd have to wait for the wave to triumph over the magnetic field or for the artificial magnetic poles to no longer work."

"That's right," Pauli said slowly.

"But as soon as the wave gains the upper hand, matter will distort, and the Simpson cage's equipment will be affected as well."

"No," Pauli said. "There is a way."

Everyone looked at Pauli, not saying a word. In the quiet laboratory, Pauli continued, "The Highland Research Institute has multiple portable independent magnetic poles that can generate small magnetic fields with limited ranges, which is the fruit of past research. It was only because of those that we were able to survive the calamitous failure of the artificial magnetic poles a month prior."

"Supposing the artificial magnetic pole covering the earth disappears… We'll adjust the positions of the independent magnetic poles to protect the Simpson cage's core equipment and simultaneously expose the receiving area to the maximum extent—" Pauli narrowed his gray-blue eyes slightly as he looked at the raging sea of flames downstairs.

Tang Lan said, "Then we can analyze the pure wave frequency."

"That's right, that's right…" Pauli took a deep breath. The light of hope had just lit up in his eyes, but then it was promptly extinguished. "However—"

He stopped himself before he finished speaking, and the room suddenly quieted. Nobody made a sound.

At last, Tang Lan asked, "Can the wave only be seen… after distortion triumphs over the artificial magnetic field?"

He looked at the night sky outside, his voice bitter.

Pauli sat down slowly in front of the computer. Facing the communication channel linked to the base, he did not move for a long while.

"Only at our dying moment can we glimpse the truth," he muttered. "Is this what God wanted to show us?"

An Zhe stood in a corner as he quietly watched everything happen.

Pauli's conjecture was well founded. Supposing that the strange wave was all that remained in this world, the instrument may show it in its entirety.

In fact, this was feasible. Pauli was now facing the communication channel, and perhaps he was mulling over his words. So long as either the Northern Base or the Underground City base agreed to shut down their artificial magnetic pole, the truth would be revealed to them.

But what about afterward? What would happen to the two bases after the loss of the magnetic field? The calamity from one month prior directly reduced the Northern Base's surviving population to eight thousand.

He couldn't imagine the kind of struggle Pauli was now facing. This kind scientist had left the base precisely because he couldn't bear to watch the minority sacrificing themselves for the majority.

But the world seemed to be just like this. It made those who sought to survive die, made those who were kind commit massacres, and made those who sought the truth fall into despair instead.

Facing the screen, Pauli slowly closed his eyes.

Tang Lan said, "Allow me."

"No." Pauli said. "We cannot make such an unreasonable request."

"The bases have established emergency systems. Within a short span of time, so long as they have made preparations, they will be able to survive," Tang Lan said.

"And if the apparatus gets damaged because of distortion in the brief span that the artificial magnetic pole is shut down for, what then? In the winter, once the protection of the magnetic field is lost, the environment will be even worse than in the summer," Pauli said. "I can use the independent magnetic poles to simulate a reverse force field and cancel out the artificial magnetic field within the scope of the Simpson cage to create a non-magnetized space."

"I don't understand your expert knowledge," Tang Lan said, "but the artificial magnetic field itself is a very complex frequency, so it must be very difficult."

"Perhaps it will be much simpler compared to the work from before,"

Tang Lan said, "but the fastest way is to have the bases briefly shut down the magnetic poles."

"You can't do this."

"I…" Tang Lan looked at Pauli. "I know your research is correct. You've wished to investigate this calamity for decades already. So long as you can see the wave, you'll definitely be able to find a way to deal with it. You've always been excessively kind."

"Furthermore, we're only making a request. They may not agree to it. The Northern Base only believes in human interests, and we are xenogenics. Every year, they go so far as to dispatch troops to try to eliminate us." He put his hand on the keyboard and murmured, "This is my individual action. All… all the consequences have nothing to do with you, sir."

Pauli only watched him as though he were watching a willful child.

Pale fingertips rested on the keyboard.

One second, two seconds.

Hovering fingertips silently rested in the air above the keyboard.

Three seconds, four seconds.

He suddenly released a trembling breath.

"I'm sorry." His trembling fingers dropped, leaving a string of nonsense in the input field. As though he were facing something frightful, he took two steps back, and the rims of his eyes were red as he said, "I can't do it."

As though he had anticipated such a result long in advance, Pauli shook his head gently. "Silly child."

Tang Lan's eyes reddened.

An Zhe watched all of the proceedings from near the fireplace. The choices humans faced were often difficult, and sometimes their inner suffering would

exceed their physical pain. What Pauli said earlier was correct: kindness was humankind's most notable weakness. Under the ruthless world's weight, Tang Lan would suffer, and Pauli would suffer a hundredfold. Thus, he looked at Pauli for a long time, waiting for him to make a choice amidst his inner suffering. Destiny was so fickle that even a hundred years after he was relieved of his position as Arbiter, he still had to face such a difficult choice.

It was right during this silent deadlock that the aurora flashed one more time.

Rum looked reflexively at the big screen, and An Zhe followed suit. The ghostly image appeared on the screen again, but for longer this time, with a full three seconds passing before it disappeared. The strange scatter plot was branded onto An Zhe's retinas.

At the same time, Tang Lan pressed a hand against his temple.

"I heard it again," he said.

What did it mean?

Even An Zhe knew that this meant the unknown wave coming from the universe had suddenly strengthened. As it turned out, it was not gradually advancing as the humans had predicted; it was completely capable of advancing by leaps and bounds.

After five seconds of silence, the aurora violently flashed again, like the sudden contraction of some massive thing's heart, and the entire world fell into complete darkness.

On the screen, densely concentrated specks of light were everywhere.

"It's almost here," Tang Lan said, his voice hoarse. He closed his eyes and lifted his hand, burying his face in his palm. "It's almost here. I heard it. It'll exceed the magnetic field's strength very soon. Sir, you don't need to feel torn any longer. The distortion has arrived, and it can't be stopped."

"What… what…" He hung his head. "What… did we do everything for?"

With those words, he started to laugh, and the laughter was—was despairing. There was probably blood in his throat, An Zhe thought.

Just now, they were still being tortured by the question of whether they were

going to ask the bases to shut down the magnetic poles, still resenting this cruel world and cruel destiny that insisted on opposing them, and still drifting within their inner suffering—they thought that they still had the room to choose. But in the very next moment, they became aware of how ridiculous their struggles and resentments were. It had been an utterly purposeless struggle—of course, all of humankind's purposes were purposeless.

The world cared about nothing. It was neither cruel nor callous, only uncaring, indifferent. It didn't care about their happiness, and of course it didn't care about their suffering.

It seemed to only be undergoing a natural change, only progressing little by little. Of course it had no inclination to allow humankind to know the true reason. There was no need. The only ones who truly persisted in figuring out the root cause were humans themselves.

Humankind would be exterminated, all living creatures would die, and the earth would collapse.

But it didn't care.

An Zhe stared blankly at the sky outside.

After intermittent flashes, the aurora up above began to quiver madly. The green light shattered with terrifying speed into dazzling meteors that flew in every direction, and the magnificent meteor shower burned out, its remnants streaking through the pitch-black night sky.

"Beep—" In the laboratory, the machine emitted a drawn-out noise. An Zhe jerked his head up and spotted a flurry of snowflakes on the big screen.

Pauli gripped the chair's armrest with his right hand, and his age was apparent in his hoarse voice as he said, "Start up the independent magnetic poles—"

His voice was accompanied by a bone-chilling chorus of howls, none of which could be easily described with onomatopoeias from any human language. Vibrating together, they pierced eardrums. Outside the windows, down the mountain, in the Abyss—the monsters let out howls that transcended common sense.

"Flap—"

The tremendous sound of flapping wings came from the jungle, as though thousands of birds had taken flight.

They had been lurking in the Abyss for a long time, testing each other and refusing to budge.

But now that the magnetic field was finally on the verge of collapse, these horrific monsters had suddenly begun to stir.

Why?

He didn't know.

The first shadow flew through the sky above the Highland Research Institute.

Pauli went to the Simpson cage's console.

"Sir," Tang Lan murmured. "Do we still have any time left?"

Pauli said, "We don't."

"Then do you still want to continue?"

A brief silence.

"Humankind's aspirations are like the moon in the water," he dazedly said all of a sudden. "It looks like it's within reach, but in fact, it breaks as soon as we touch the water's surface."

"But when we thought that the broken moon also had value and reached out to scoop it up, we discovered that there was only water in our hands. What's even more absurd is that in less than half a minute, even the water had flowed away through our fingers."

He looked at the numerous specks of light as though he were looking at a remote dream. "But supposing I was given a chance, allowing me to still stand by the water, would I still be willing to go scoop it up?"

An Zhe asked a little hesitantly, "Would you still be willing?"

Pauli Jones's eyes were reddened, his gaze shaky, and his voice choked with sobs. In the end, he closed his eyes. "I would."

Tang Lan took out a black walkie-talkie from his pocket.

He looked at everything before him, then dropped his dull gaze and said flatly, "Prepare to defend."

# 46

## “COLONEL LU IS CONFIRMED DEAD.”

"WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT?" Dr. Ji walked up behind Lu Feng. Lu Feng stood in front of the laboratory window, and before him were the brightly lit Garden of Eden and Twin Towers.

It was only after he got closer that he discovered the Colonel was not aimlessly unfocused. He was playing with a communicator, and the still-lit screen was on the contacts list. Dr. Ji glimpsed an unfamiliar name.

"Hubbard—who is this?" Dr. Ji stood next to him, eyebrows raised. "You have a friend I didn't know about?"

Lu Feng did not answer, and Dr. Ji did not pursue it any further. In front of this Colonel, it was normal for questions to not be answered.

As he said that, the little snow-white spore emerged from Lu Feng's shirt collar, seemed to carefully examine the doctor, and then swiftly dove back in to hide.

"It's so small," Dr. Ji said with a smile.

Lu Feng pulled it out, then put it in the palm of his hand. The spore, which had originally grown to be as big as a human's palm, was now only the size of a jujube pit. It desperately tried to hide itself in Lu Feng's hand, seemingly terrified of Dr. Ji.

"I won't chop you up today," Dr. Ji said. "You've become too small. Be good and eat more of the nutrient solution, and once you get a bit bigger I'll chop you up again."

Lu Feng shot a cold look at Dr. Ji.

Crossing his arms, Dr. Ji drawled, "It's not like you're the one getting chopped

up. What're you being so pissy for?"

Over the recent days, the base had realized that there was no way of explaining the reason for the spore's inertia using existing biotechnology. They settled for the fallback option, or in other words, they could only go all in and have all the researchers focus on a different direction. Today, they had finally come up with a way to manufacture hyphae extract. After the extract was diluted, the base planned to sprinkle it on the surfaces of important equipment. They were going to use this method, hoping that the inert spore would produce inert extract and that the inert extract would create a protective layer or that it would simply infect the equipment with its inertia, either of which would make it so that there would be no more worries of the equipment getting infected. After all, ever since the distortion began, even glass and wood could infect each other. Since that was the case, the extract was also capable of infecting other substances.

They had even promptly sent twenty liters of the dilution to the Underground City Base by plane.

In this regard, the higher-ups of the Lighthouse had remarked self-mockingly that science had failed and that they'd begun planning to use incomprehensible witchcraft. However, they had no other option because all sciences seemed to have failed, and nobody knew what they should place their hopes in.

Dr. Ji reached out. "Let me play with it for a bit."

Naturally, he didn't obtain anything. Lu Feng didn't even spare him a glance.

But Dr. Ji still stared at the hint of the spore's white hyphae that were still showing. "Tomorrow we can manufacture another liter of extract. It's quite a lot now. The base demanded that we first ensure that the artificial magnetic pole's key apparatus is protected."

Lu Feng curled up his fingers, and not even a hint of the spore's hyphae showed anymore.

"Don't be like this," Dr. Ji said. "Although the relationship between you two is very good, it doesn't mean you need to go so far as to protect it like it were your own son. Colonel Lu, have you noticed that ever since you came back from the wilderness, you've become less devoid of emotion?"

Lu Feng still said not a word, so there was only Dr. Ji's endless chatter within the room. He would always become more talkative when he was nervous. Over the past month, the amount he had spoken shot straight up.

Three minutes later, Lu Feng asked, "When will you start using the extract?"

"The Lighthouse is still discussing it because we have no way of ruling out the possibility that all matter will begin to fuse together after the distortion begins. At that point, the most likely result would be that it has no effect, and the best result would be that it confers its inertia to us. In the worst-case scenario, it'll turn all of our equipment into completely useless mushrooms."

Lu Feng finally spoke, his cold voice sounding like it was frosted over. "If this possibility exists, why use it regardless?"

"Those of you at the Trial Court like to strangle all negative possibilities, but the situation is different now. You know that no matter what we do, the situation will not be worse than it is now. After one more meeting, the Lighthouse will be able to decide whether to use it or not."

"Exactly what is inertia?" Lu Feng asked.

"No infectivity."

The spore emerged from Lu Feng's hand, then climbed along the uniform fabric to just below the epaulet that was on the side farther away from the doctor.

Lu Feng turned slightly, and the subtle movement revealed the vestige of something on the windowsill.

It was a small bottle of liquid with a label pasted on it, and on the label was a handwritten "mixture-III." Next to the bottle was an empty syringe.

Dr. Ji's gaze turned apprehensive.

"That's the extract of a hybrid-class xenogenic. What are you planning to do with it?" he asked. "Don't mess around with the stuff in the laboratory, it's very dangerous."

As Lu Feng looked at him, he said something that really had no discernible connection to their current conversation topic. "When we were at the

Underground City base, there was no magnetic field, and contactless infections and distortions were occurring."

For a moment, the doctor didn't follow his train of thought, so he only nodded.

"Many of the soldiers who entered the Underground City together with me to provide assistance were infected, but I wasn't," Lu Feng said.

Seeming to have understood what he wished to say, the doctor didn’t speak and just quietly looked at him.

"If the spore exhibits inertia, then An Zhe would also exhibit inertia," Lu Feng said.

Dr. Ji nodded.

"But he could change between mushroom and human form. Furthermore, when he was in human shape, his genetic examination was devoid of abnormalities," he said flatly. "Therefore, if I've already been infected by him and acquired inertia, there's no way for you to tell."

"Yes, I acknowledge that. We thought of that from the beginning as well," Dr. Ji said. "But what's the point? It's precisely because we're unable to detect this type of infection that we made the decision to spray the extract over a wide range. Only when the waters ebb will the rocks show themselves. We won't be able to know whether the extract can protect humankind until the day that complete distortion arrives."

"But there's also the risk of everything turning into fungi," Lu Feng said.

"So what?" The doctor looked at him. As though he had some sort of ominous premonition, his tone of voice became more aggressive.

"Infect me with monster extract. If I'm still human after the half-hour buffer period, it'll prove that An Zhe has already passed on his inertia to me and that there are no adverse reactions. The extract will be usable."

The doctor looked at him without the slightest trace of surprise in his expression, as though he had guessed long before that he would say such a thing. As he looked at Lu Feng, his gaze gradually turned cold and weighty. With

a shake of his head, he asked, "Why is it you?"

"The amount of time I spent with him was very long, and I had stayed with him in the period of indiscriminate infection after the incident with the Underground City Base as well," Lu Feng said, his voice flat. "If he was capable of infecting others, then the one most likely to have been infected is me."

"It's me." Dr. Ji let out a grim laugh and looked straight at Lu Feng as he approached the other man and raised his voice. "After the incident with the Underground City, you only accompanied him for a little while before leaving. The one who was with him the entire time was me. We slept in the same room. He was as well behaved as a kitten, we were as close as a man and his shadow, and we've had a lot of intimate contact that you wouldn't want to know about —if you could be infected, then why couldn't I?"

"You still have much to do." Lu Feng was not at all provoked by his words. He said, "You can't take the risk."

"You clearly knew this was a risk, didn't you?" Exasperated, the doctor took a few breaths. In a loud voice, he asked Lu Feng, "I can't take the risk, which means you can? Is self-sacrifice something so commemoration-worthy to you?"

Lu Feng said nothing. Dr. Ji snatched the bottle, which had already been opened, from the windowsill. Then he savagely jammed the needle tip inside and pulled the plunger, swiftly filling the syringe barrel.

"If you insist on performing this experiment, then I'm the only one who can do it." He gripped the syringe, his azure eyes frozen over and his rate of speaking extremely swift. "You've done too many things already, so you better fucking live for me."

Lu Feng didn't hinder any of his movements. He merely looked on in silence, his cold green eyes like lakes that could not be disturbed.

He lifted his own sleeve.

On the vein at his wrist, a pinprick of blood indicated that he had already been injected with something.

"In half an hour, if I'm fine, you guys can use the extract."

The doctor stood in place, chest heaving, and stared at Lu Feng.

"You… you…" The rims of his eyes reddened with fury, and his voice was as hoarse and sharp as glass being ground. "You hopeless… self-harming dumbass."

"The loss of a single scientist will have no effect on the base, but the loss of an Arbiter? Have you not thought about it?"

Lu Feng gave no definite answer.

Just then, the harsh noise of a communicator sounded. The doctor's breathing had not yet evened out when he accepted the communication. After listening for three short seconds, his complexion changed.

"I'll head over right now," he said to the other party.

After hanging up, the look on his face was solemn. "Minor distortions have been observed again, and the base has raised the intensity of the magnetic field to its maximum. The moment when our line of defense collapses is upon us. I'm going to go hold an emergency meeting, and it'll take half an hour or so. You stay here and don't go anywhere unless everyone starts evacuating."

With those words, he hurried over to the door.

"Wait," Lu Feng called out. Dr. Ji's footsteps stopped, but in his lingering irritation, he did not turn back.

Behind him, Lu Feng asked, "Will An Zhe be unaffected by the distortion just like the spore?"

"Even if all of humankind dies, he will live."

"Thank you."

The doctor left, slamming the door shut behind him.

Still standing in place, Lu Feng turned to look out the window. Beneath the aurora, the dark gray city was an unbroken expanse of jungle. The aurora fluctuated, casting its mysterious gray-green light upon the buildings.

An animal's sharp howl rang out in the city.

That direction was the city's interior, the military's base. The howl that sliced

across the sky was only the beginning. A moment later, more bestial roars burst out from that place.

The military base's emergency light suddenly lit up, but it swiftly went out again. At the same time, there came the sounds of sharp whistles and explosions, followed by a high-pitched evacuation alarm that enveloped the entire base.

But Lu Feng's gaze lingered there only briefly. Then he looked at the immense wilderness outside the base.

With a fluttering sound, a massive bat-shaped winged monster took flight from the distant mountains, followed by the rising shadows of thousands of its kindred that blotted out the sky.

The communicator lit up.

Lu Feng tapped out the laboratory's number on the communication interface.

A few seconds later, a message from Hubbard popped up.

"Understood, I'll be there in half an hour."

The total collapse of the magnetic field occurred right in this half hour.

On the open country around the base, monsters suddenly appeared from the skies and earth. It seemed that they had been in hibernation for a long time, and now the moment they had been waiting for arrived. Like a tide, they surged toward the base.

The emergency lights in the corridors flashed wildly. Emerging from the conference room, the doctor hurried in the direction of the laboratory, followed by two servicemen.

"Doctor, please evacuate with us as soon as possible."

"The military cannot protect the entire base. At present, the unmanned drones have already observed that the tide of monsters is advancing toward us. Ultimately, we can only take the artificial magnetic pole as our sole defensive position."

"I need to bring something with me," Dr. Ji said quickly. "Give me five minutes. Colonel Lu is also in the laboratory."

"Please evacuate with us immediately." The serviceman with the United Front Center's logo on his chest started speaking more forcefully. "It's special orders. After all personnel take refuge at the Magnetic Field Center, Colonel Lu's presence would further aggravate the crowd's confusion and trigger unnecessary conflict. Therefore, we can consider—"

"Shut up!"

The emergency alarm sounded at a higher pitch, and the ear-piercing beeps and red light combined. This was the highest level of wartime alarm, reminding people to promptly withdraw toward someplace safe. The corridor was filled with turmoil. The howls of the monsters in the distant wilderness were clearly audible, and the experimentation staff in their white coats and the soldiers were in great confusion.

The laboratory door was near.

But there was suddenly a disbelieving look in Dr. Ji's eyes.

The laboratory door was wide open. Before he had left, he had forgotten to lock the door amidst his heightened emotions.

He strode in and saw a soldier with a black strip of fabric wrapped around his right arm carrying a sniper rifle, his aim trained on a figure standing in front of the windowsill.

His pupils contracted—black fabric on the right arm was the symbol of the anti-trial movement.

The communicator lit up, but he was in no position to pay it any mind. He shouted, "Lu Feng!"

His voice was accompanied by the crack of a gunshot.

The figure by the window swayed, then fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Dr. Ji's eyes widened incredulously and his lips trembled. "No…"

"Don't move!" The armed soldier was soon brought under control by the two servicemen who had come with him. Dr. Ji strode in. Unable to care about anything, he knocked over some lab equipment on the way over, and fragments of broken test tubes scattered all over the floor. He went around a reaction

cabinet and knelt in front of Lu Feng's fallen body while trembling. "Lu Feng? Lu Feng?"

The eyes had not closed, and the limbs remained unmoving. The doctor reached toward the blackened muzzle of the gun.

His communicator flashed once more. With one look at the sender, the doctor's gaze cooled, though he had been trembling all over merely moments ago.

One of the servicemen handcuffed the shooter, then walked towards the doctor.

"There's no need to come here." The doctor's voice rang out coldly in the laboratory. "Colonel Lu is confirmed dead."

The sound of military boots stepping on the ground paused.

"We regret to hear that."

The ashen-faced Dr. Ji gave a tiny smile.

"I'm not very surprised," he said, "with regard to how the Arbiter died."

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PL1109 cabin.

Hubbard leaned against the cabin wall. He and Lu Feng could not be considered very good friends.

But it seemed that their relationship also counted as one where they'd risk their lives for the other.

"It took no small amount of effort to get that thing from your neighbor's place. I'm surprised you still kept it, though."

"It was well made," Lu Feng said. "According to Shaw Scott's testimony, you provided the specific data."

Hubbard smiled and did not continue this conversation topic.

"How did it feel to be confined?" he asked.

"It was all right," Lu Feng said.

With those words, he glanced at the others in the cabin.

A nearby officer said, "We all came back from the Underground City Base together, Colonel Lu. We guarantee that we won't report you to the military."

"There's no need to thank them." Hubbard wiped the gun in his hands. "It was only a siege of monsters. We're about to partake in combat again, and your plentiful experience against the enemy in the Underground City was obvious to everyone. We don't mind working with you again, as it's quite a bargain for both parties."

The officer said, "Assuming that the Colonel is still willing to serve the base."

Lu Feng's lips curled up slightly.

"Start checking the equipment," he said.

To one side, Hubbard was cleaning his weapon, a semi-automatic gun that was entirely silver in color. His fingers rested on the gunstock, where there was a scuffed patch with "Tang" faintly etched into it.

His gaze lingered on the string of letters.

The nearby officer asked, "Who is this?"

"A friend," Hubbard said. "I've known him for thirty-three years."

"That's so long."

Hubbard gazed at the word for a long time before smiling. "It's a bit of a pity."

"How come?"

"We were born together, but in the end, we weren't able to die together."

"How could there be something so good?"

"Indeed."

Lu Feng observed their conversation with arms crossed. With his eyes half-closed, no emotion could be discerned, and the others naturally didn't expect the Arbiter to be able to empathize with their feelings.

Not until Hubbard noticed something.

"What happened to your gun?" he asked.

Lu Feng said, "I gave it away."

Hubbard smiled. He seemed to have understood everything. When compared against the military's standardized supplies, this mercenary captain was obviously filthy rich. He took out a black pistol and handed it to Lu Feng, and the moment it was handed over, he murmured, "It'll be okay."

"Thank you."

# 47

## “WHEN YOU WALK GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT.”

WITH ENGINES ROARING, the PL1109 gradually took flight.

It was accompanied by the entire fighter fleet. Together, they made up the base's aerial combat force.

Upon the vast flatland, waves of monsters surged toward the base.

Through the porthole, Lu Feng looked northwest of the base.

Amidst the monsters' howling, the closest ones came not from outside, but within the base, where the military base was located.

Earlier, they had demanded the abolition of the Trial Court's absolute power over life and death along with the transfer of suspected mutants to the military camp for supervision. For the sake of demonstrating the correctness and nobility of the move, Colin, the organizer of the anti-trial movement, and the other core members volunteered to become their observers and guards.

So when the distortion arrived, that became the first monster outbreak site. It was too far to see clearly, but one could imagine the scene of carnage.

But nobody was in any position to care. The xenogenics that humans mutated into were nothing more than the weakest type of monster.

A slimy and grotesque octopus as tall as the Twin Towers wrapped around the buildings of the Twin Towers with its tentacles. The lights inside the towers blinked wildly, and its tentacles pierced through the glass. As it devoured humans with its razor-sharp teeth, screams filled the air. It could be heard even in the air.

With a tremendous noise, the glass corridor bridge connecting the Twin Towers collapsed, and several black human shapes fell with the debris. They

were caught in the monster's gaping, toothy maw, and the sounds of the buildings toppling covered up the sounds of bones and flesh being chewed.

"Do we bomb it?"

"Yes."

No longer in any position to care about what kinds of serious consequences it would cause, all they could do was drop bombs. If the monster was allowed to continue attacking, humankind's final refuge would also turn into ruins.

Large uranium shells were dropped, and in the mushroom clouds, the monster's body broke into countless segments that slammed into the ground. The two lofty towers gradually tilted, crashed into each other, and collapsed.

Dust filled the air.

The frenzied assault and resistance lasted for an hour.

Then they could no longer continue bombing.

Apart from where the artificial magnetic pole was, the other parts of the base had either been occupied by monsters or razed to the ground. Perhaps they had been occupied first before getting razed to the ground. Only ruins remained in the thick fog of smoke.

The monsters' sole objective was living humans.

Now, they were all aiming for the entrance to the Magnetic Field Center, which was humankind's final wartime encampment. In order to protect the magnetic pole, the defenses there were of the highest standards, forming a virtual bastion of steel.

Thus, those hordes of massive and ugly creatures that defied description securely surrounded the Magnetic Field Center and rammed their way in.

The airborne fleet could not drop even a single more shell because the light shells they had been equipped with were depleted. Now, all they had left were a few heavy thermonuclear weapons.

If they wanted to wipe out the huge monsters around the Magnetic Field Center, the aftereffects of thermonuclear weapons would level the entire artificial magnetic pole. Even if they controlled the scope and didn't harm the

magnetic pole, the tremendous destructive power of the thermonuclear weapons would also directly destroy the base's power supply system and accelerate the deaths of the people in the Magnetic Field Center.

Now, all the ground combatants had sacrificed themselves.

The situation inside the Magnetic Field Center was unknown.

Except for the thousand or so people who had been temporarily transferred to the Magnetic Field Center, the base had no survivors.

And the airborne fleet could do nothing about it.

What was even more spine-chilling was that this was now the age of distortion, and distortion meant that substances would change at a fundamental level. Perhaps in the following second, the airplanes would crash, the magnetic pole would break down, or contactless infection would occur among the thousand people in the Magnetic Field Center, leading to the magnetic pole being compromised from within.

Compared to dying, personally witnessing the utter downfall of this city was even more cruel.

The aircraft fleet quietly hovered up above, like ghosts drifting away after the death of the entire base.

A communicator rang.

It was a message from the Magnetic Field Center's provisional commanding office.

"This is the Magnetic Field Center. The military is defending the entrance to the last. Half of our firepower has been consumed. Ruling out other unforeseen events, defense is expected to last three hours."

"Although we don't know why the base has become the target of a monster attack, the current situation is not something we can handle, nor is it something the airborne fleet can combat."

"Please cease the combat mission immediately, otherwise it will only burden the base's defense."

“Furthermore, we have detected that a large number of flying monsters are

heading toward the base. For the sake of preserving humankind's vital forces, please leave the base immediately and find a safe place to land."

"Although we do not know how long you can survive for, please live on."

"Please immediately withdraw from the base."

The aircraft fleet hovered for a long time.

"I repeat, this is an order. Please immediately withdraw from the base."

"The base gives you its blessings. Good luck."

The communication ended.

The channel was silent. In the cabin, all that could be heard were the sounds of suppressed and tense breathing. The officers fixedly observed the blighted land below, and it was difficult to say whether the expressions in their eyes were of hatred, despair, or perhaps something akin to cinders.

At last, another aircraft pilot's voice came from the fleet's communication channel.

"PJ143 to PL1109."

"Where are we withdrawing to?"

The PL1109's officer looked at Lu Feng.

"Colonel Lu has an abundance of wilderness experience," he said.

The implication was that Lu Feng would decide where to withdraw to.

Lu Feng took the communicator.

"Highland 7, the military's six-star refuge, has facilities to support life."

"Canyon 313 in the northwest region of the central basin is devoid of strong and deadly monsters, and there is water."

"If the fighter planes have enough fuel, we can consider the Underground City Base."

He mentioned the three places in a flat tone of voice, then said, "Please choose for yourself."

"PJ179 requests to know PL1109's destination."

Lu Feng paused.

His gaze swept over the people in the cabin.

"The Abyss," he said. "To aid the Highland Research Institute."

"The place where the Fusion Faction is?" An officer jerked his head up. "That's the xenogenics' territory."

"I am aware of that," Lu Feng said.

Similar questions sounded in the communication channel.

"Aiding the enemy?"

"Won't the area self-governed by the xenogenics be even more dangerous?"

"Requesting to know the reason behind this decision."

“It's my individual decision. The Highland Research Institute is the only existing human settlement outside of the bases," Lu Feng said flatly. "Please choose your destinations for yourselves."

The PL1109's crew commander raised no objections. After a brief hesitation, he manipulated the flight controls, and the engines roared as the fighter plane slowly turned to the south.

A voice came once more from the communication channel.

"Excuse me… You are—?"

"Trial Court, Lu Feng."

Silence.

The PL1109 climbed to a high altitude and flew through the boundless night in the direction of the Abyss, its wing lights glowing.

Above the base, within the hovering fleet, a fighter plane followed the PL1109 southward.

Then a second one.

Then a third one.

In the canopy of night, the wing lights and taillights converged into a flowing river of light.

Until only two remained.

"PJ254 and PJ113 have decided to stand by and await orders. We will survive or perish with the base."

"May you prevail."

PL1109's crew commander replied, "May we have a bright future."

"Take care, and good luck."

---

The Abyss, Highland Research Institute.

After the magnetic field failed, the image on the screen changed.

All of the chaos had disappeared, leaving behind only a screen full of evenly distributed image noise. By no means could it be said to have a pattern or no pattern. Because it was excessively chaotic, it instead exhibited a tidiness that was hard to describe.

Just like that, Pauli stared at his screen. He was clearly only looking at the screen, but An Zhe felt that he was looking through the screen at some massive and indescribable thing.

An Zhe recalled what Tang Lan had said to Pauli an hour ago. At that time, Tang Lan had asked him if he had already realized something and just wasn't willing to tell them because the truth was something they were unable to handle.

Now, facing Pauli's gaze, the same thought sprang up in his mind.

"Have you realized something?" An Zhe asked.

In the silence, Pauli said, "Perhaps not quite, but it's frequencies."

"Frequencies?"

"Atoms, electrons, and photons. Matter is composed of elementary particles, but what are elementary particles formed from? Strings. Strings are lines of energy in two-dimensional space. It's only when they begin to vibrate at certain frequencies that they become particles in our space-time."

"The Simpson cage is a masterpiece in the field of particle physics. In the beginning, people used it to verify the correctness of string theory. Now, it may indeed be correct."

An Zhe murmured, "I don't understand."

"That's all right, I'll give an example," Pauli said. "When you pick up a violin and pluck different strings, the strings will vibrate because they were plucked, and different vibrations emit different sounds. We call those units of energy that can be found throughout the universe 'strings,' and the strings' various vibration frequencies produce different particles, forming our world."

"The reason why our world's laws of physics have previously been stable is because our strings have always been playing an unchanging piece of music. Therefore, electrons were electrons, atoms were atoms, and physics equations have always been those equations. But now—"

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly. Through this metaphor, he understood what Pauli wished to say.

"The most terrifying thing is not that this theory is correct, but rather… It's now time to change to a different melody," Pauli said. "The strings of the universe are about to be played in a different way. Or perhaps the frequency of the universe was disordered in the first place and humankind just happened to emerge during a brief period of stability. Once the age of stability ends, everything will return to chaos and disorder."

The world's most fundamental components, those laws of physics, were a symphony played according to the sheet music. Now the old melody had taken its final bows, and a new prelude was about to begin.

There had never been immutable laws, only eternal and chaotic terror.

An Zhe looked blankly out the window.

An ashen glow slowly lit up the sky.

It seemed like only three or four hours of the night had passed, but dawn had begun to rise.

"All laws are falling apart, and matter is beginning to distort from its

fundamental properties. You, me, the earth, the sun, and the Milky Way. The rotation is speeding up," Pauli said.

An Zhe asked, "What will it be like in the end?"

"I don't know." Pauli shook his head slowly. "Living and non-living things will mix together, all tangible things will change, and all of time and space will bend. Everything will take on another appearance that we're unable to understand. There's only one thing that's certain."

An Zhe waited for him to finish.

"We will all die," he said.

An Zhe began coughing violently once more. It seemed like he was going to cough up all the blood in his body, with the deterioration of his body being faster than the distortion of matter. He curled up in a chair near the fireplace with his arms wrapped around his knees. Surprisingly, he was still alive. It seemed like he was destined to witness the extinction of humankind at the final moments of his own life.

Tang Lan went out. The research institute consisted of half-human, half-monster xenogenics. Some of them had a high level of combat prowess, while others were just ordinary animals and plants that were even slower and clumsier than humans.

Every arm of the massive vine that surrounded the entire research institute lifted up, its branches and leaves standing on end like the fine hairs on a human body, in a stance filled with aggression.

Rustling shadows climbed up from the Abyss like a rising tide of black water. The monsters that could only crawl were slightly slower, while the flying monsters had already circled their way up to the mountaintop and dived down. Why had they gathered to attack the human bases only after the wave had triumphed over the magnetic field? Was there something special about this timing? Or was it merely because human bodies were weak, making them easily preyed upon?

That shouldn't have been the case.

Pauli muttered to himself, "What do they wish to gain from attacking this

place?"

From the nearby walkie-talkie came the whistling wind and Tang Lan's voice. "Half of the Abyss's monsters are leaving the Abyss, and the other half are coming here. The ones that have come up first are the flying monsters."

"We can't hold out, sir. What do we do?"

The Highland Research Institute had its own small reserves of armaments. A gunshot rang out, and a bird plummeted into the center of the Simpson cage.

The glow of the Simpson cage was too bright, so An Zhe could clearly see what had occurred. Its wingtips had come into contact with the crimson lasers and flames first, instantly turning into glittering powder, and its neck arched up. It seemed to want to scream, but its body fell swiftly under the effect of gravity into the sea of flames.

Then its body completely disintegrated in an instant, and the glittering dust filled the Simpson cage like a springtime sandstorm with a crackling burst of sparks like that of firewood burning in a fireplace.

A life disappeared just like that, from its body to its soul.

An Zhe curled in on himself and took a few arduous breaths. This may not be a clean way to die, but it was better that time itself was killing him little by little.

Pauli helped him up and fed him a mouthful of glucose water, but the flow of the warm liquid into his esophagus was also like the cruel torture of being sliced open.

He leaned against Pauli.

“The Simpson cage is a strong force field and stream of high-energy particles. It is too energetic."

An Zhe nodded. Only after witnessing the bird's death did he understand why Pauli strictly prohibited the people of the research institute from approaching the Simpson cage.

Rum, who had been staring at the screen the entire time, chose that moment to speak up. "Sir."

An Zhe looked in his direction.

On the screen, amidst the image noise and chaotic curves, several distinct white lines suddenly appeared. In a strange yet orderly way, they intertwined and slowly rotated.

At the same time, the sparks in the Simpson cage went out, and the last traces of the bird also disappeared completely.

On the screen, the lines slowly disappeared.

Pauli Jones shot to his feet, his pupils sharply contracted and his voice tremulous as he muttered, "This… this is…"

"Let me think—" Pauli threw himself at the console. As he hit the buttons at top speed, he babbled, "We must lure all the other monsters into the Simpson cage."

He put his words into action. The people of the research institute had been provided with a dozen or so simple communicators to facilitate communication. The xenogenics led by Tang Lan temporarily obstructed the outside world's monsters a hundred meters away, and Pauli commanded the ones with no fighting capabilities to transfer into the white building, behind the Simpson Cage.

The monsters were aiming precisely at the people inside the research institute. After they did all that, the target of the monsters' attacks obviously shifted.

Pauli told Tang Lan to create an opening, and a monster that had a star-shaped arrangement of tentacles yet could still fly dove straight down toward it. But the raging blaze of the Simpson cage blocked the entrance to the white building. If the monster wished to charge at the white building, it had to pass straight through it.

Without any hesitation, it chose an angle that was minimally affected by the sea of flames and glided down.

Several clear curves suddenly appeared on the screen again.

They intertwined, appearing as distinct as the long ripples in a swimming duck's wake.

Pauli stared at those curves.

When the monster's body completely disappeared, the curves disappeared as well, once again changing into irregular snow-white visual noise.

"There had been other times when monsters or xenogenics were incinerated by the Simpson cage, but the curves back then were very disordered. It seems that that was also because of the magnetic field's influence," he said. "Therefore, these curves represent the monster's innate frequency. If different monsters enter—"

Before he finished speaking, there was a dull sound. The person on the ground who had sniped the monster shot a smaller monster, and it also fell into the Simpson cage's boundaries.

A similar burst of glittering dust scattered into the air, and several lines distinctly different from the previous creature's but still clearly visible appeared on the big screen.

Pauli's breathing quickened.

"In this world formed of elementary particles, every creature has its own frequency, and every substance—every element also has its own frequency," he said. "They are independent of each other in stable waves, and they infect each other in disordered waves."

As he looked at the dancing curves and calculated parameters on the screen, the expression on his face could have been described as manic. "The frequencies captured by the Simpson cage can be reproduced with the magnetic field generator. At the beginning, this was exactly how we simulated the geomagnetic field. If we transmit a captured monster frequency, then the creatures within the artificial magnetic field will be infected by this frequency."

He said blankly, "At the very end, God has finally allowed me to glimpse a fraction of the truth. Should I thank Him?"

It was like he had received some sort of divine instruction or had an illuminating epiphany.

"Are properties and even the classifications of species themselves also strings of numbers that can be expressed using parameters? Can we also use a few

words to summarize them in either a high-dimensional or low-dimensional world?"

"We had studied the geomagnetic field's frequencies, so we obtained the frequency that represents protection and resistance, which enabled us to cling to life for over a hundred years in this age. In fact, we have already come into contact with a portion of the truth ages ago."

He wrote and drew on the paper again and again. An Zhe quietly looked at Pauli from behind. Even though death was almost upon them, the truth was that important to humankind. But to him, it was meaningless. Humans used various complex theories to represent the world, but in his eyes, the world was the world. There weren't so many things to be analyzed or explained, only a complex manifestation.

But Pauli continued to talk.

"One frequency's wave covers another frequency's wave. There are strong waves and weak waves. There exist the strongest waves that can cover up everything, as well as the weak waves that have always been covered up. The wave inherent to humankind is weak, so it is easy for them to be infected by other creatures and lose consciousness."

As he watched the hordes of oncoming monsters, an almost neurotic look showed in his gray-blue eyes. An Zhe knew that it meant that his scientist's brain was spinning at a manic pace. He was handling and receiving too much information, so he could only sort out his thoughts by swiftly verbalizing them. Pauli muttered, "What do they wish to obtain? The most powerful frequency? Or have they sensed that the magnetic field generator can emit specific waves?"

"Or, or…" His eyes widened. "In that case, could there be an absolutely stable frequency?"

He seized a piece of paper that was within reach. "Jibran once told me that the Northern Base had found a sample that exhibited absolute inertia—"

He picked up the communication device.

An Zhe quietly watched.

He actually didn't understand much of what Pauli said.

But he understood some of it.

Long ago, how did he come to have his own consciousness? He didn't remember. It must have been a coincidental mutation, a trifling ripple in this vast wave.

So he came into being.

So his destiny came into being.

Then he met An Ze.

The destiny of humankind was also like a shifting and uncertain piece of music.

With a slight cough, he stood up from his chair. If he paid it no heed, the physical pain was actually a trivial thing.

Pauli heard him get up, and even though he was so excited, he still said in a warm tone, "Don't get up, there's nothing here you need to help with. Rest up."

But right away, he became utterly absorbed in his research and discoveries again.

After picking up a piece of paper, An Zhe wrote down a few words on it with a pen, folded it up, and handed it to Rum, then walked toward the door. Rum opened his mouth, but An Zhe gently gestured for him to keep silent.

Standing on the other side of the door, An Zhe gently and sorrowfully looked at Pauli through its translucent glass.

With a click, he locked the door from the outside.

The sound startled Pauli, who had been immersed in his research, and he looked up in the direction of the sound.

An Zhe turned and walked down the stairs, his footsteps slightly unsteady and his internal organs feeling like they were being scorched by an inferno.

Lastly, he threaded his way through the people on the first floor of the white building, descended the stairs in front of the building, and came to the Simpson cage's brilliant inferno.

He originally shouldn't have been here.

He was a member of the Abyss, and it was the ones currently attacking the humans who were his kindred.

But now the situation was reversed, for he stood together with the humans. They had acknowledged him and treated him well.

The curling flames heated his face, and he bent double and coughed out a few more mouthfuls of blood.

A xenogenic shouldn't have stood here in the first place.

*Have I felt happiness or suffering as a result of joining the human population?* he wondered.

The withering of a mushroom took time, for the dissolution of its hyphae was a gradual process. He had closed his eyes countless times, always feeling like they would not open again, but they still opened.

What was it that had allowed him to stay until now? Chance? Pauli had said that chance was destiny.

Then let it be destiny that brought him here!

The vine protecting the research institute thudded to the ground. Bleeding from one wing, Tang Lan rose unsteadily into the air and fought with an eagle that had dived down. Its sharp beak pierced his shoulder, and blood gushed out. He didn't even groan as he pressed down on the bleeding wound with one hand and transformed his other hand into gleaming claws that he used to stab the eagle in the eye.

Blood dripped onto the ground.

Humans had happiness and suffering different from other creatures, yet did he regret it?

Smiling, An Zhe took another step toward the Simpson cage. Tongues of flame licked his face, as hot as a scorching summer day.

The sounds of something thumping against glass came from the white building, but he didn't turn back to look.

Along with the Simpson cage, the sunset at the edge of the sky burned as well. The huge sun sank, and its magnificent red-gold light illuminated half the sky. The fighting at the research institute continued, with howling, explosions, blood, the sun's rays, and firelight mixing together.

Uncle Shu, who had once cooked potato soup for him, was picked up and hurled back down by a monster. His body hit the ground hard, and his gaze froze while blood flowed from the rims of his eyes.

On the blood-covered ground, death was everywhere.

In his eyes, everything slowed down. An Zhe took another step forward.

"Don't…" Uncle Shu rasped, and he let out a few heart-wrenching coughs. "Don't kill yourself…"

A creature's instinct was to live, and a species' instinct was to perpetuate itself.

Humankind had never gone gentle into that good night.

Facing the Simpson cage, An Zhe also felt the terror of impending death at last. He looked at Uncle Shu and softly asked him—though it seemed like he was asking himself, "But will you all still be able to keep living?"

Uncle Shu's consciousness was already fading. He slowly shook his head, then looked toward the distant horizon.

His gaze suddenly became fixed in place. After two seconds of silence, he suddenly broke out into a few wheezing laughs, and an excited expression showed on his face.

A low droning that was different from the monsters' howls came from the sky, and An Zhe suddenly looked up.

Above the resplendent golden horizon, a neatly arranged group of distant black shadows were coming smoothly toward the research institute, leaving behind long and feathery trails as they flew through the clouds.

"Air… airplanes," An Zhe heard Uncle Shu say.

He knew those were airplanes. Looking up at the familiar shapes, An Zhe suddenly felt a wholehearted joy.

They hadn't sent any distress signal to the Northern Base, but the Northern Base's fighter fleet had come to aid the research institute. In a conversation with Tang Lan not long ago, Pauli had urged them to disregard old grievances and go help the base when the research institute no longer existed. But now, it was the base who had disregarded old grievances and come to help the research institute.

Right at the time when everything was destined to end.

Pauli's words were correct. His species was both contemptible yet noble. You could make conjectures about humans' actions using the greatest ill intent, or you could believe to the maximum extent in humans' kindness and leniency.

But the artificial magnetic pole had failed, so what would happen to the base?

What would happen to Lu Feng? Or did the base no longer exist? Where would he be? He knew that Lu Feng would give up everything for the base until the day the base no longer needed him.

A trickle of tears fell from An Zhe's eyes. In this vast Judgment Day, his love and hatred seemed all but worthless. Lu Feng had his own mission, and he himself had his own destiny.

He took another step.

“Boom.”

A micro nuclear bomb was released from the PL1109's bomb bay, and with a tremendous noise, it cut off the upward trajectory of the monsters below. The mountain peak—such a mountain peak was bound to become a target, but it was also bound to be easy to defend and difficult to attack.

"Open the cabin door," a cold and calm voice said.

"Prepare your hang gliders."

"There's a bit of an issue. Please wait a moment," the flight technician said.

The fighter plane was nosediving, and the cabin door creaked as it opened mechanically.

Lu Feng accepted the hang glider that a soldier handed over.

"You're going down?" Hubbard asked.

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said.

"When aiding the Underground City, it was for humankind's interests." Hubbard looked at him. "What about now? Will the Trial Court come to help the xenogenics?"

Lu Feng only watched as this mercenary team captain also accepted a hang glider and started adjusting it. He asked flatly, "And why are you here?"

"I don't know." Hubbard murmured. "I just felt that I would regret it if I didn't come."

“Click.”

The cabin door sprang open.

"Good heavens." The flight technician backed up. "A fire? What is that?"

Fierce winds poured in from the outside, and Lu Feng looked down as he stood at the cabin exit.

Suddenly, he was stunned.

In front of the sea of flames, An Zhe lifted his head and looked at the visitors from the Northern Base.

At that moment, it seemed as if time had come to a standstill.

One looked at the other, and the other looked back.

An Zhe began to tremble violently as he directly met Lu Feng's eyes.

Their parting had been planned out long in advance, but their meeting was beyond all expectations.

But he hadn't expected to see Lu Feng here, and he knew that Lu Feng hadn't expected to see him here either.

The wind raised by the fighter plane clawed at the edges of his clothes. In a movement that seemed unconscious, he slowly reached out.

In that manner, those green eyes gazed at him. The Arbiter, whose mission was to exterminate xenogenics, had come to aid the Fusion Faction's base, and

a monster was standing in the exact center of the humans' research institute.

The whole thing was absurd, but the glorious morning sunlight came pouring down, and they suddenly became brightly lit in each other's eyes.

Indeed, Lu Feng was this sort of person.

An Zhe's eyes curved as he smiled at Lu Feng. In his limited memory, he had never shown such an expression to Lu Feng before.

They were separated by such a long distance, but he saw those green eyes slowly become suffused with a smile as well—seemingly containing infinite tenderness.

A gunshot rang out as Hubbard fired at a monster in the air. The fighter planes dropped uranium shells in the vicinity of the research institute in a fierce bombardment, and the sounds of combat, explosions, and howling combined into a grand noise that merged with this symphony from the universe's depths.

But the monsters from the Abyss continually surged forth.

The sandstorms that followed the magnetic field's disappearance were almost here.

The last human territory was falling.

Humankind—was on the verge of extinction.

They locked eyes for a long time, seemingly erecting the deepest mutual hatred, yet also seemingly dispelling past grievances in an instant.

On this day, they would once again be together and once again, freely—

Freely—

An Zhe slowly closed his eyes and leaned forward.

Like a leaf fallen from its branch withering in late autumn.

In the raging blaze of the Simpson cage, at the moment when the morning sun was slowly rising and the setting sun of humankind was slowly sinking, his body turned into swirls of glittering dust that dispersed, fluttered in the air, and ended.

In the laboratory, on the screen that was covered with visual noise, those

trembling and erratic dots suddenly gathered together and spun. The analysis program started up, and three seconds later, several slowly intertwining frequency curves appeared little by little on the screen.

As though it were destiny.

While looking at the parameters jumping on the screen, Pauli Jones switched the communication channel to the emergency channel connected to the Northern Base and Underground City Base. Without knowing if they could hear him, he suppressed the tremor in his voice and spoke.

"This is the Highland Research Institute."

"Please adjust the emission frequencies of the artificial magnetic poles."

"Channel A1, 2, 5, 2.7."

"Channel A2, 9.13, 5, 3, 1."

"Channel D3, 4, 0, 7."

"Runge wave, level 6."

"Adams property, lattice 3."

"Configuration complete, please activate."

"Repeat."

"Channel A1, 2, 5, 2.7."

"Channel A2, 9.13, 5, 3, 1."

"Channel D3…"

Behind him, Rum finished adjusting those parameters with near-trembling fingers and pressed the round button in the middle.

The tops of the white towers at either of the Highland Research Institute shone with glaring light.

Imperceptible silent waves radiated outward like ripples from between the two white towers.

In the east and west, the humans' two magnetic poles emitted grand waves.

Like the first bell toll of the new year.

Everything fell silent.

# 48

## “HE WAS JUST A... LITTLE MUSHROOM.”

"LU FENG!"

Hubbard shouted. He saw Lu Feng's fingers press down on the edge of the cabin door until they turned a bloodless white.

The slightly lowered eyelashes and blank expression seemed to strive to conceal their master's outburst, but the trembling fingers already revealed the entire truth.

Amidst the all-encompassing sea of flames, his voice was hoarse, yet still calm and forceful as he said, "Prepare to attack."

Unexpectedly, the attack was by no means difficult.

In that instant, the monsters' attacks seemed to have slowed greatly. It was as though they had stopped persistently and madly attacking people in search of something, and were just carrying out an ordinary hunt instead.

Amidst this ordinary hunt, some monsters turned around and went in the direction of the Abyss, while others continued attacking the research institute. Of the monsters that had already entered the research institute, more than half of them were killed by the Simpson cage. Then the Simpson cage ran out of power and gradually went out, but the research institute began its counterattack and effectively resisted the monsters' offensive.

As for the monsters in the periphery, they were solidly blocked off outside the line of defense by the PL1109's micro nuclear bombs and heavy weapons—this was the wilderness, so apart from the tiny courtyard on the mountaintop, there was no need to hold back for fear of harming innocents. Just like the time when they flew above the vast flatlands of the Underground City Base, the fighter

fleet was truly fulfilling its role here.

The monsters inside were gradually wiped out.

The heavy weapons had built up an insurmountable and smoky line of defense around the research institute. The monsters of the Abyss naturally had noteworthy intelligence. After doing a little thinking, the monsters in the back turned around, retreating in the face of unfavorable odds.

Their arrival was as abruptly tempestuous as a tsunami, and their departure was like the tide slowly receding. Atop this sorrowful mountain peak, two hours later, all was still.

Red, white, all sorts of liquids covered the open space in front of the research institute. At noon, when the sunlight was at its most glaring, the bloodstains glistened.

The PL1109 slowly landed. The human military officers paid Pauli Jones a visit at the white building.

Seemingly bearing no feelings of animosity resulting from the differences between humans and xenogenics, they eagerly asked what exactly had happened earlier. The Highland Research Institute likewise treated them as compatriots. After explaining the stable frequency, Pauli Jones, as the research institute's leader, thanked the Northern Base for its selfless aid.

"How is the base?" he finished by asking.

However, the response he got was silence.

In the suffocating silence, a voice suddenly came from the emergency communication channel.

"This is the Northern Base." Dr. Ji's voice was tremulous. "Hello. Requesting information on the situation."

"This is the Highland Research Institute. Hello," Pauli said.

"The Northern Base… The monsters are falling back." Amidst the crackle of static, Dr. Ji's voice was hoarse. "The people of the base have retreated to the Magnetic Field Center's core laboratory. The number of survivors… is 342, and 136 are seriously injured."

"Air strikes are ineffective, and thermonuclear weapons cannot be used. Requesting light weapons and troops." He gasped heavily for breath, as though he were suppressing something. "The monsters are no longer madly attacking humans, but they still have not given up on taking surviving humans as their prey. We… we are still desperately holding the core laboratory's line of defense…"

Pauli stared silently at the blank screen.

"Are you hurt?" he finally asked.

Amidst Dr. Ji's formulaic tone, his voice finally took on an additional tremor of emotion. "I'm hurt, Mr. Pauli. We've never met, but…"

He didn't finish his sentence. After a hurried gasp for breath, however, he changed the topic. "I have served the base for twenty years and pride myself on my outstanding intellect, but I have not helped the base achieve any breakthroughs whatsoever, Mr. Pauli."

"In the past, I've heard the people of the Northern Base say that you presided over the research and development of the genetic examination instrument. Now, they say that you've extracted a stable solution, which may be why the artificial magnetic pole still has yet to malfunction amidst today's storm of distortion."

"Thank… thank you," Dr. Ji said. "We will defend the magnetic pole until the final moment. But please also… prepare for the magnetic field to disappear… Please… please take care of yourselves."

What followed were only the sounds of disordered breathing.

Amidst the intermittent static, background noise, commands, gunshots, screams, and the sounds of goods being toppled and walls collapsing faintly came through.

It was silent within the Highland Research Institute.

At last, someone asked, "Then… will we still die?"

The PL1109 fleet had brought fire support, but it was limited after all. Supposing the Northern Base had already run out of strength to hold out and

the magnetic field that enveloped the entire world still could not escape its destiny of vanishing, how many days would the Highland Research Institute be able to last? There had been endless sacrifices and a stable frequency, but there was still no hope for survival.

Humankind's aspirations were still the full moon in the water.

Nobody replied.

In the deathly silence, the atmosphere was a lump of congealed rotted flesh.

Someone laughed softly, and it was like a knife sliding across the frozen rotted flesh and opening up a mocking cut.

But amidst this deathly stillness, the hissing static suddenly paused, and another unfamiliar voice came through.

"Hello." The other party's pronunciation was choppy, so the syllables could only be distinguished with difficulty.

"My deepest apologies. Our instruments broke down, so we were unable to successfully send anything to the emergency communication channel until now. This is the Underground City Base's command center."

The air was stagnant.

"This is the Highland Research Institute," Pauli replied. "How is the status of the Underground City Base?"

"Everything is well at the Underground City Base," the other party said. "After the collective monster attack two months ago, the base closed its ground entrance and adopted a full blockade mode. Today, the flatland was surrounded by a large number of monsters, but due to our geographical advantages, it was not invaded."

Pauli was slightly moved.

But the other party continued, saying, "The Underground City Base is thankful to the Northern Base for its selfless aid two months ago. We are especially thankful to Colonel Lu Feng, who made the decision to render assistance."

"After learning about the situation in the north, the supplies, weapons, and ammunition that the Northern Base had provided to us were all loaded onto

transport planes. The transport plane formation took off from the Underground City Base six hours ago, accompanied by a thousand lightly armed paratroopers, and is expected to arrive at the Northern Base in half an hour to render assistance."

He said, "Northern Base, please persevere for thirty minutes."

There was a noise that sounded like something sliding to the floor. Afterward, the doctor's voice came through, low but very resolute.

"It will be done."

---

Pauli Jones's voice came through the communication channel.

"The stable frequency has covered the entire world," he said. "Please do not worry about substances distorting."

"Roger." The Underground City Base's operator held back the excitement in his voice. "Although we do not know what you did—thank God, and thank you."

Information kept coming.

"The Northern Base is continuing to defend," a young voice said. It seemed as though someone else had taken Dr. Ji's communicator.

Then came information from the Underground City Base.

"The transport plane fleet has landed."

"To the Northern Base's survivors, please indicate your location."

"Commence the breakout."

In the end, they scooped out the full moon in the water.

The sun rose bit by bit. Amidst the howling cold wind, the winter sunlight was glaring and devoid of any warmth. On the test tube racks, glass sparkled. In the still atmosphere, there seemed to be the sound of one heartbeat after another.

Original residents, newcomers, xenogenics, military officers—they kept watch in front of the communication channel, waiting for information on the

Underground City Base's assistance and the Northern Base's condition. Even the vine that had always been guarding the research institute extended a single tendril through the window.

They also occasionally whispered to each other.

"How many of ours have died?"

"Uncle Shu died. His body is downstairs."

"What about Tang Lan?"

"Haven't seen him."

The breakout and counterattack had begun. Nobody reported on the situation through the communication channel, so everyone held their breaths as they waited.

Amidst this silent tension, Pauli Jones got up from in front of the computer.

Because of his age or his emotions, his footsteps were somewhat faltering. With a creak, he pushed the door open, and what he looked at first was the extinguished Simpson Cage—blood and bodies were everywhere outside of it, but the interior of the Simpson cage was spotless. Then he turned his gaze forward.

Outside the laboratory door, the black figure who had been leaning against the wall slowly lifted his head as well.

Those eyes seemed utterly vacant, age-old layers of ice covering a green ocean.

They only needed to meet to know who the other was.

Pauli Jones's gray-blue eyes were filled with grief.

"Child," he said gently.

Lu Feng did not respond to him, but his gaze traveled downward to settle on the sheet of white paper that Pauli Jones was holding in his hand.

Pauli's fingers trembled as he held the paper out. On the paper were several hastily scribbled lines. An Zhe's writing could not be described as beautiful. All of his strokes were plain and simple, so clear as to be reminiscent of a lake in

springtime.

"Pauli, thank you for looking after me. I am the Northern Base's inert sample. Perhaps my frequency will be of help to you, but if not, I'm sorry.

P.S. Please be sure to remember our agreement."

"Was he really that inert sample?" Pauli Jones asked.

"The sample was a part of him." Lu Feng took the snow-white slip of paper, and his voice was slightly hoarse as he said, "What was your agreement?"

"If there came a day when the Arbiter of the Northern Base arrives…" Pauli said, "I should say that An Zhe left of his own will."

The rims of Lu Feng's eyes reddened slightly.

From behind him came the sound of heavy footsteps, which belonged to a dark-skinned Indian man.

Holding An Zhe's backpack in his hands, Rum silently held it out to Lu Feng.

Inside it, a few objects had been neatly packed.

A copy of Base Monthly, a silver four-pointed star badge, and a black pistol.

Lu Feng gripped the edges of the backpack. He bowed his head and stared at the contents within, his expression difficult to make out.

"He was brought here from the Abyss by our people… He was a good child, and he led a good life here," Pauli murmured while looking at him. "I know that the base could not accept him. Did you know this entire time he was here?"

Lu Feng's gaze finally shifted from the backpack to Pauli Jones.

"I didn't know," he said.

The expression on Pauli Jones's face trembled violently, and he closed his eyes in anguish.

"I am deeply sorry," he said.

Their unexpected reunion was their final parting. It turned out that this sort of icy torture existed as well.

The bitterly cold wind blew through the mountain peak.

After a long silence, Lu Feng asked, "Where is he?"

"The Simpson cage is a high-energy force field and collider. Any matter that enters it will be bombarded and disintegrated into tiny pieces by its high-energy particle flow," Pauli said hoarsely. "I believe you saw for yourself."

The backpack thudded to the ground, and the muzzle of the gun rested against Pauli's temple.

Lu Feng stared at Pauli with an icy expression in his eyes.

"Where is he?" He repeated the question, articulating one syllable at a time. All of his emotions exploded at that moment, and his icy eyes contained a faint madness. He was like a convict who, despite having already been sentenced to death, still wanted to repeatedly confirm his sentence.

A sorrowful smile appeared on Pauli's lips, and he looked up at the limitless distant sky with his loving gaze. He was fully aware that what this man before him needed was only a white lie, even though they both understood everything.

"His frequency has been sent out to the entire world. He will deliver everything from the distortion," Pauli Jones said. "He's right by your side. There's no place where he isn't present."

Lu Feng only looked at him in the same manner as before, and they remained in that stalemate until Lu Feng's fingers shakily loosened and the pistol clattered to the ground. With a "bang," it struck the corridor's iron railing and triggered a drawn-out metallic hum.

"My apologies," Lu Feng said hoarsely. "I…"

He closed his eyes, clenched his fists, and did not finish his sentence.

"There's no need to be like this." Pauli looked at him with a tender gaze. "You can shoot me or vent your feelings however you please, child."

"Thank you," Lu Feng said hoarsely. "If he is still around, I will."

That was the most calm yet despairing sentence Pauli Jones had ever heard.

In that manner, they stood side by side in the late-winter corridor, all the way until the blood-like setting sun dyed the mountains and the Abyss and until the communication channel's volume was turned up inside the laboratory. Amidst

the static, there came excited shouts.

"They're falling back—they've fallen back!"

"The tide of beasts is dispersing."

"The breakthrough succeeded."

From the channel, the cheers of victory rang out. The fragmented scraps of celebration were mixed with bits of information, such as how the Underground City Base's paratrooper unit sacrificed more than six hundred people, how the Northern Base's actual number of survivors was a hundred or so, or how people were eagerly asking why the distortions were no longer occurring and what exactly had happened at the Highland Research Institute.

Grief and joy overlapped little by little, despair and hope existing together. Everything was fortunate, and everything had its price.

The sacrifice of countless people, the sacrifice of one person.

A trickle of tears flowed slowly from the corners of Pauli Jones's eyes.

Suddenly, a mass of white floated down from Lu Feng's shoulder, drifted on the wind to land on Pauli's clothes, and extended soft hyphae to touch him with.

"What is this?" Pauli asked as he held it.

"The inert sample," Lu Feng said. "The thing most important to him."

Pauli Jones naturally knew who Lu Feng was referring to. Between the two of them, there was only one "him."

He stared at the hyphae, then reached out to touch it, and the hyphae gently wrapped around his finger. Pauli asked softly, "Why did it approach me of its own accord?"

Lu Feng said, "I don't know."

"This is an asexual spore, a fungus's propagule." Pauli Jones had a slightly stunned look in his eyes. "He never told us what species he belonged to. So he was a—"

While looking at the spore, Lu Feng murmured, "He was a mushroom."

His voice was hoarse, but it seemed to contain endless compassion and tenderness. "He was just a… little mushroom."

# 49

## “HE IS THE ONE WHO JUDGES ME.”

THREE YEARS HAD PASSED since the final battle.

That day, the East Pole and the West Pole had emitted the absolutely stable frequency. Since then, monsters no longer persisted in attacking the human bases, substances no longer polluted each other, and humans found constancy in the distortion. Later, that frequency was called the "bell toll."

And the Highland Research Institute and Mr. Pauli Jones, who had discovered the "bell toll," were forever recorded within the milestones of human history.

Highland Research Institute, white building.

Green vines climbed all over the windows and railings. The vine that had always been guarding the research institute died naturally a year ago, and its seeds that had scattered all over the soil of the research institute sprouted and grew this spring. The distant mountains were covered with a layer of snow-white mist, and within the mist was a wild profusion of flourishing greenery. Everything was normal and everything was calm, as though it were a day in the spring of 2020.

In the corridor outside the laboratory, there was a wheelchair.

Pauli Jones was sitting in it. A primeval wind traveled through the Abyss, climbed up to the mountaintop, and stirred his head of white hair.

At his side stood Lu Feng.

"In 2020, I was fifteen years old and majoring in physics at university." An elderly voice sounded. "Later, I often dreamed that I had returned to that year and was standing at the podium, in the advisor's office, or in the middle of the sports ground. I'd loudly tell them that the geomagnetic field was about to

disappear and that we had to take precautions ahead of time."

He paused, a hint of a resigned smile appearing at the corners of his lips. "Sometimes they'd believe me and sometimes they wouldn't, but when I opened my eyes each morning, what I saw was still this awful world."

"Fortunately, although the world is still so awful, or even worse than before, at least there's no need to count down the days until extinction."

Pauli Jones lowered his head. In his hand was a copy of Base Alliance Daily with the date and time on the cover, April 2164.

One hundred thirty-four years after the calamity occurred, humankind seemed to have finally been integrated into this violent world.

Many people would mention the last war. The Northern Base had chosen to assist the Highland Research Institute, otherwise, the Highland Research Institute couldn't possibly have persevered until the moment the stable frequency was found. The Underground City Base had chosen to aid the East Pole, otherwise, the magnetic pole would have collapsed and fallen to the enemy, and there would have been no way to emit the frequency. The two decisions were both made on account of humankind's inner kindness, and they narrowly achieved victory.

And the ones who had assisted the Highland Research Institute only had one fighter fleet, while the ones who assisted the Northern Base had only a thousand paratroopers. Humankind's final struggle as it moved toward its own demise was not a magnificent war but a dull cry. Although humankind believed its existence, evolution, and demise to be of vital importance among the world's changes, they had proved their own weakness and insignificance again and again.

Indeed, the human race had actually met its demise.

After being infected by the "absolutely stable frequency," they had finally obtained a permanent and stable immunity. Sometimes, there was even a chance of them being able to obtain a monster's genes, obtaining those powerful physical features and shapes while still maintaining clear wills. This may have been the Fusion Faction's victory—although the theories and methods used were not the Fusion Faction's.

After the peaceful fusion with monster genes, humankind's own strength had been enhanced, and they no longer depended so much on the limited quantities of weapons and equipment. They began using the monsters' methods to fight monsters, using plain methods to attack and defend. Some humans chose to leave the bases, either returning to the ruined cities or forming small settlements in the wilderness.

All in all, the cities disintegrated.

Around the world, there remained fewer than five thousand survivors. They could no longer form grand social structures or armies—those kinds of things. Centered around the East Pole, West Pole, and Highland Research Institute, small settlements radiated outward in star-like shapes.

The monsters of the external world who needed food still eyed them greedily, but they no longer coveted human genes, or to put it another way, most of the monsters who survived up until now had already obtained human genes. Viewed from a different angle, under that all-encompassing frequency, both humans and monsters had achieved stability. It was an undeniable fact that humankind's intellectual superiority had come to an end long ago.

The bell tolled, allowing humankind to survive but proclaiming the end of the age of humans. It seemed as though they had started being an ordinary species, living arduously in this world.

"Some people say it's a fall, but I think it's an ascension." Pauli looked forward. "We are simply retreading the journey that humankind's ancestors once took with new accomplishments and knowledge."

On the open space in front of the white building, young scientists clad in white coats traveled back and forth between instruments.

Suddenly there was a jubilant commotion, and a young man in the middle raised aloft a beaker full of water. The situation was crystal clear: by sampling and reproducing the frequencies of substances, they successfully infected other substances with the frequency of distilled water, turning the pitch-black muddy water in the beaker into a cup of clear pure water.

Many things were being redefined, and a new theoretical framework was beginning to emerge. Whether it was correct or not was a mystery, but it was

indeed slowly progressing.

"I still don't understand exactly what these frequencies are. Do they represent a substance's fundamental composition? Or are they just terms referring to a substance's properties?" Pauli Jones's voice had become hoarse due to his advanced age. "Obtaining the frequencies of specific substances and then being able to alter the real world is even more of an expectation-exceeding accomplishment."

"We are still insignificant, only obtaining a superficial projection of the real world via simple and crude methods, but even a mere projection is enough to temporarily shelter humankind itself."

Facing the boundless wilderness, he muttered to himself, "In a hundred years, a thousand years, will we know more?"

Lu Feng pushed his wheelchair over to the waterfall-like vines. On this spring day when everything was coming back to life, tiny white flowers grew thickly all over the oddly shaped vines. The flowers came in a variety of shapes and hues ranging from dark to light, but they all coexisted on a single vine.

"Am I being too optimistic?" Pauli smiled. "Even the question of whether humankind still exists in a hundred years is a difficult one to answer."

Survival was as precarious as before, and dark clouds were still circling. There was still no effective solution to the issues of fertility and reproduction.

The copy of Alliance Daily in Pauli Jones's hand, which had already started going fuzzy at the edges from frequent perusal, was stopped on the third page, where two things were reported.

The first report stated that a scientist who had happened to fuse with a bird had laid an egg while in bird form, but the chick that hatched suddenly changed into human form after it turned one year old. The second report stated that a fertile woman from the Underground City Base had declared that when her life came to an end, she would be willing to walk into the Simpson cage and donate her own frequency for research.

"My life is coming to an end," he said and closed the Daily.

"Some people have finally survived. Throughout all these years, I've

constantly been asking myself if I had finished atoning for my sins," he said. "But I still cannot face everything I did back then. I can only wait for God to judge whether I was right or wrong after I die."

Lu Feng asked, "Was it for this reason that you left the base back then?"

"Yes. I was unable to face my own heart after all and unable to approve of the Trial Court's beliefs." He looked at Lu Feng. "I can't compare to you."

"I haven't done anything," Lu Feng said.

Pauli shook his head.

A mighty spring breeze blew over the mountain peak, and the delicate fragrance of the vine's flowers dissipated in the wind.

"You all have faced everything that I could not face back then, and you've persevered the longest." He lifted his head and held Lu Feng's hand. "Humankind's interests take precedence over all else. Thank you for allowing the base and artificial magnetic pole to persevere until the end. This is the ultimate reason for humankind's victory."

Lu Feng said, "Thank you."

"I heard that they've started compiling a 'Base Chronicles.' In a hundred years, how will people judge the Trial Court?" Pauli looked toward the pale eastern sky, where the daybreak was rising, and his gaze contained a distant tranquility. "Some will criticize it, while others will eulogize it. The only sure thing is that everyone will remember it."

He continued. "And even more will remember you, child."

Lu Feng's gaze lingered on a patch of snow-white velvety petals.

The sunlight turned it into translucent golden crystal.

"There's no need." His eyes closed slightly and his voice was flat, as though all of what Pauli Jones just said had nothing to do with him.

The sun's rays also illuminated the dark silver buttons and trimmings on his black uniform. His figure was straight-backed and his attire impeccable. His nigh-perfect facial features, uncommon eye color, and impassive expression left a haunting impression on all passersby. New vines wound around the corridor

that was bathed in the morning light. He stood in a patch of surging spring scenery, yet he seemed completely out of place.

In the courtyard and the corridors, many people would surreptitiously turn and examine him. As the final generation of Arbiters, he carried on his shoulders too many unsettled grudges and puzzling enigmas. Opinions in the Northern Base varied. Some said that he was assassinated, and others said that he shot himself. Only the people of the research institute knew that the Arbiter was staying here forever—although nobody knew why.

"Look at me, child." Pauli murmured.

Lu Feng looked at him.

Although those gray-blue eyes had clouded over, they were still bright with excessively clear and penetrating wisdom, benevolence, and grief. It was like they could see through all of the world's facades.

"Sometimes I feel like you've been freed, and sometimes I feel like you haven't," Pauli said. "These past three years, everything has been making a turn for the better. Are you still unable to face the past?"

"No."

The answer, however, was unexpected.

Lu Feng looked straight at him, his voice calm and devoid of any hesitation. "I have not sinned."

"There's not a single Arbiter who would say such a thing."

"Humankind's interests take precedence over all else." Lu Feng turned slightly. In the infinite morning light, he was a backlit silhouette. "My belief has never wavered."

"Yet you live in suffering."

"I used to suffer for the trials," Lu Feng said. "Now, losing him is my only suffering."

"I'd never met such a warm and quiet child before." Pauli closed his eyes, seemingly dwelling on the past. "He came from the unknown into the world, as though it were for the sake of experiencing suffering. But humanity's suffering

would not harm any of his innate qualities. My days are numbered. I only wish to see him alive one more time."

In the long silence, they looked at the laboratory behind them.

In that place that was only a wall away, young assistants were busy recording data. They were even more busy than ever, as though today were some special day. Visible through the window was a transparent rectangular tank laid horizontally on the snow-white floor. It resembled a coffin of crystal. The coffin of crystal was filled with pale green nutrient solution—and within the nutrient solution, snow-white hyphae grew without restraint, intertwining with each other and forming a snow-white cocoon that was shaped vaguely like a human.

It had grown very swiftly from a spore the size of a jujube pit into a long and soft aggregate of hyphae. Just like that chick who had suddenly changed into a human infant, one day, it exhibited a human form.

On countless nights, Lu Feng had leaned down and looked at that familiar profile through layers of hyphae.

"Is that him?" he asked Pauli Jones.

"He was an asexually reproducing mushroom, with no distinction at all between his body and his spore. I can only tell you that there are no differences genetically and that the frequency has always been identical. In a biological sense, they are one and the same," Pauli murmured with a small smile. "In your ancient legends, there are stories of the phoenix being reborn amidst raging flames. In fact, with regard to those creatures with simple compositions, it is indeed so. Death means rebirth. They have many ways of continuing their lives, unlike mammals."

"… Will he remember?"

"I don't know." Pauli shook his head. "It'll depend on him. Is that a new individual or a continuation of his old life? I'm afraid that we will only know after he wakes up. This is also part of my current research; remember what I mentioned to you before? This may be a new and unique method of survival for organisms."

Lu Feng turned his gaze to the distant sky, his expression unswervingly cold

and calm. "I hope he forgets everything."

"Why?"

"The human base and I have only brought him suffering," he said. "I hope he'll never experience these things."

Pauli shook his head. "And how do you know what this world was like for him?"

Lu Feng's words landed softly. "Therefore, I'll accept all outcomes."

Pauli said nothing. In the silence, the sounds of instruments beeping, laboratory staff shouting, and objects falling to the ground suddenly came from the laboratory. The sounds traveled over intermittently, allowing the people outside to know what was happening inside.

At the break of dawn, the morning light illuminated Pauli Jones's elderly body. As though the final worries on his mind had been resolved at last, he felt a sense of relief and turned his wheelchair toward the laboratory, his gaze even warmer than before.

But Lu Feng didn't turn around.

"He's woken up," Pauli Jones said. "Why won't you go see him?"

In the laboratory, there were some chaotic noises.

After a very long time, Lu Feng spoke.

"You once asked me how exactly I viewed him." His voice seemed to come from a faraway place. "I thought about it a lot."

There was another long silence. Golden sunlight flooded the chain of mountains in the east, and a red sun sprang up from the horizon.

In the wind, he closed his eyes. The sculptures of the ones waiting, the portraits of those who went on pilgrimages, every one of them resembled him. Every person had once shown this expression, on the night before judgment arrived.

He said calmly, "He is the one who judges me."

There came the sound of a door, and light footsteps stopped not far away.

On the mountain peak, within the morning sunlight, the mist, and the gentle breeze, a clear, soft voice spoke.

"Lu Feng?"

**-END-**

# EPILOGUE

# EPILOGUE 1

## “LET ME SEE YOU GIVE BIRTH TO ANOTHER ONE.”

### AN ZHE SANK INTO A DREAM.

He had dreamed this kind of dream a very long time ago—on the day he left Lu Feng.

Sometimes, although it was clearly daytime and he was awake, he would suddenly sink into dreamland again. They were probably the hallucinations of a dying man, but he didn't mention them to Pauli. The inexplicable bloody coughs, high fevers, and various aches and pains had already consumed too much of Pauli's mental energy.

In the dream, his body was divided into two, much like the leech in the past. One half was at the Highland Research Institute, while the other half was at some unknown place, free from pain and free from the cumbersome human body.

In the dream, he had neither eyes nor ears, no nose or any human perceptivity. It was the same kind of feeling as when he was just born, buried in the rain-soaked soil—mushrooms had their own senses, which could not be described in human language.

He knew that he wasn't far from Lu Feng. This must have been a delusion caused by him leaving Lu Feng, but it did not hinder him from getting closer to Lu Feng in his dream.

This dream wasn't always happy, either. Sometimes, he was put into a sealed container, accompanied by an ice-cold liquid. At the very beginning, it was Dr. Ji at his side, and then later it was always Pauli, along with… many others who came and went.

He had nothing to do. If Lu Feng was nearby, An Zhe would wrap around him, but if not, he would soak in the liquid, thinking back on his own life.

Those distant memories floated to the surface—in the soil, in the rainy season, in the winter, and in the base.

He would get a little closer to Lu Feng when he recalled certain things, and Lu Feng's fingers would touch his hyphae. It seemed as though he had managed to stay together peacefully with this man at last. He was on the edge of wakefulness the entire time, but he didn't wish to wake up. In the real world, he and Lu Feng could never be like this.

But after he thought back on his own memories for the hundredth time, there was no dream he could dream, so he chose to wake up.

He discovered that he was still alive.

When he thought back to that day now, he no longer remembered it. The fluctuation of emotions had made many other places go blank.

He only remembered that he was standing at the door and that Lu Feng had turned around amidst a patch of lush spring greenery—he locked eyes with him in that manner, not able and not daring to step forward. He had dreamed too many dreams, and he had tried scooping up the fragile full moon in the water too many times.

Until Lu Feng walked up to him.

When this man wasn't around, he had cried many times. Sometimes his heart would violently tremble when thinking of him, but now, when he truly met with Lu Feng, the corners of his lips curled up in spite of himself.

He reached out to touch Lu Feng's shape. He couldn't tell anymore if he had gotten thinner or if he had become haggard—it had been too long. He hadn't met with this man in far too long.

It wasn't until then that tears slid down from the corners of his eyes. He withdrew his hand and looked blankly at Lu Feng before being wrapped up in a frontal hug and having the tears wiped from his cheeks. He rested against Lu Feng's shoulder, voice hoarse as he softly called out his name.

"It's me." Lu Feng said.

The people in the laboratory had congratulated him. Unexpectedly, Pauli had brought a man back from the dead—he couldn't imagine the involved principles at all. The people in the laboratory told him lots of words like genes, frequencies, samples, and such. It was all incomprehensible to him, but human technology had always been very miraculous, so he simply accepted it.

Three years had already passed since he jumped into the Simpson cage.

The outside world had calmed as well.

The age of genetic disorder ended with the single toll of a bell. His frequency was transmitted all over the world, but whether it was for good or ill could not be determined, for all tangible things were infected by the frequency at that moment and stabilized. People were always people, and a monster was always that type of monster. Polymorphic mutations could occur, but the dominant consciousness was always that one that had been in control when the bell tolled.

As for why this was the case, Pauli's explanation was that after many experiments and comparisons, the frequency obtained by the Simpson cage approached a definition of matter itself.

For example, when facing an apple and an orange, humans knew that this was an apple and that was an orange, but the apple itself did not know it was an apple, and the orange itself did not know that it was an orange either—they themselves would never know. Only humans knew.

Just like how cicadas did not know of spring or autumn, humankind's field of biology was only a flawed superficial analysis of the surface. They also had no way of knowing what constituted themselves or what defined them as humans—it was a framework that four-dimensional creatures could not understand.

However, by means of the Simpson cage's analysis of elementary particles, they briefly glimpsed a negligible reflection of the truth and glimpsed traces of the true meanings, then grasped some noteworthy frequencies. In this symphony of the universe, humankind was the musical note that was most easily destabilized by other creatures, whereas he, a mushroom that somehow had its own consciousness, was the stable frequency that could contain

everything. When this stability was bestowed upon the entire world, a brief peace arrived.

"This is chance," Pauli said. "Chance is destiny, and living is fortuitous."

When An Zhe heard that, he had just been fed a piece of peeled apple by Lu Feng.

With only a single bite, the freshly picked apple gushed with juice that was sweet and slightly tart. He forgot what he was about to say, and Lu Feng fed him another piece.

"Then what about oranges?" he asked. "What do oranges taste like?"

Lu Feng had said, *Wait until autumn*.

Pauli invited them out along with their apples and future oranges.

On the way back to his room, An Zhe ate half of an apple and left the other half for Lu Feng. He had intended to cut it into pieces for the Colonel, but Lu Feng did not let him touch the knife.

On this matter, An Zhe did not argue with the Colonel. If the other party were not Lu Feng, he actually would not really have wanted to cut the apple. He was drowsy, for it was time for an afternoon nap.

But he could not sleep. As he held a tablet, he scrolled downward. Stored within it were the documents he had scraped together from various places over the ten days since he woke up. The electronic version of Alliance Daily, the research records copied from Dr. Ji's computer, the laboratory manuals copied from Pauli's computer, along with many other similar things.

Lu Feng sat down at his side, and he swiftly turned, not allowing the man to see. Lu Feng let out a soft chuckle, then cut up the remaining half of the apple and fed it to An Zhe.

Although the apple was very tasty and the Colonel very good-looking, An Zhe did not want Lu Feng to be next to him while he was reading the documents. He was always paranoid, thinking that Lu Feng was looking at his screen.

But the hateful thing was, when he woke up, he discovered that Lu Feng had taken over the room he used to have at the research institute. Everything in the

room was identical to the way it was before he died, but its owner had changed.

He tried to have Lu Feng move into the room next door, but Lu Feng expressionlessly told him, *If you don’t want to share a room with me, you can continue sleeping in the tank of nutrient solution.*

Leaving An Zhe at a loss for words.

It had been three years. The past three years had not softened this man's character at all, not even the slightest bit.

As a result, he could only share a room, a desk, and a bed with the Colonel.

In the end, he got paranoid to the point where he could no longer continue reading the documents and so drowsy that he had to sleep.

"Boring." On the bed, with Lu Feng holding him from behind, he dazedly stared at the white walls.

The Colonel's voice was like snowpack just beginning to thaw. "Where do you wish to go?"

"I wish…" An Zhe looked at the wall, slight confusion in his gaze.

He had somewhere he wished to go.

And it was a place that, apart from himself, only Lu Feng knew about. He hadn't mentioned it even to Pauli.

"I wish to go find An Ze," he murmured.

In the cave where everything began, An Ze's bones were still waiting for him. He had many things he wished to say to An Ze. He remembered every word that An Ze had said to him. An Ze had said that he was someone whose life had no meaning. He wished to recount the Northern Base's dramatic changes to An Ze, and he wished to tell him of the source of that last bell toll.

If he hadn't met Lu Feng or An Ze, none of that would have happened. Just like that, destiny tossed and turned within countless coincidences.

But the Abyss was so big, he couldn't find him, and nobody was willing to accompany him in his search, so it would forever be an unattainable wish.

"But I can't find him," he mumbled. "I can't do anything, and I don't remember where I left him."

"I can," Lu Feng said into his ear. "Let's go find him."

An Zhe opened his eyes wide.

Everything was like a dream. The next day, after they bid farewell to Pauli, their armored vehicle was airdropped by a transport plane into the exact middle of the Abyss. The crew commander was the PL1109's pilot. Before bidding farewell, he had insisted that they remember to search for traces of Hubbard and Tang Lan as well. Ever since the war in which monsters laid siege to the research institute, they both had been confirmed missing. Now, the only thing they were certain of was that although Tang Lan had suffered heavy wounds, he was still alive—their bodies were nowhere to be found for miles around.

"I strongly suspect that they went off to recuperate, then got lost, and then laid eggs." After putting the facts together and making one last deduction, the crew commander flew the transport plane away.

Lu Feng opened the armored vehicle's door and helped An Zhe down. The ground was covered with velvet-like grass that rose past their ankles. An Zhe looked into the distance. In the late spring, lush greenery stretched through the Abyss as far as the eye could see. Primeval winds shook the branches and leaves, and the sounds of birds flapping their wings traveled from afar. He had come to this place again.

He looked at Lu Feng. Lu Feng had come here with him, which surprised him even more.

He asked, "Why have we come here?"

Lu Feng lifted his eyebrows slightly. "Didn't you want to come?"

"For a very long time," An Zhe said. "Don't you only do things for the sake of humankind?"

"The Trial Court has been dissolved." Lu Feng looked at him. "If there are more wars, or when they need me, I'll return to the base then."

Those cold green eyes contained neither suffering nor resentment, or anything else. It was like he had lost something, yet also as if he had been relieved of a heavy burden.

An Zhe reached out and plucked a soft fallen leaf from Lu Feng's shoulder, then found himself effortlessly wrapped in Lu Feng's embrace.

"Now I wish to be with you," he heard the Colonel say in the silence.

"… Why?" he asked in a small voice as he hugged Lu Feng and rested his chin on Lu Feng's shoulder.

He didn't say plainly what he was asking, but he knew that Lu Feng would know. It seemed that the two of them had never needed to say much but still understood each other.

He knew that he liked Lu Feng, but he didn't know why Lu Feng would like him.

Lu Feng took one step forward, and An Zhe ended up with his back pressed to the car. He looked up at Lu Feng.

Those eyes were still as quiet and clear as when they first met at the base's gates.

Lu Feng looked at him for a long time.

Throughout those three years, he often dreamed of that day.

Back then, Lu Feng's soul was deeply trapped in a thorny mire, at the edge of losing control and unable to do anything about it.

And in that state, he met An Zhe.

An Zhe was a person, a xenogenic, and a monster. Lu Feng should have killed him, yet he also should not have. He was everything that could not be defined, the wildest possibility, and was like all the people in those pools of blood that had come before him.

"Why did you walk into the Simpson cage?" he suddenly asked.

An Zhe slowly searched his thoughts, then shook his head.

"I don't know," he said.

Then An Zhe asked in a small voice, "So you don't know either?"

"I do know," Lu Feng murmured, putting his forehead to An Zhe's. "Because you're a little mushroom."

This perfunctory reply made An Zhe lift his gaze in discontentment, but after seeing everything surging in those cold green eyes, his gaze softened in spite of himself.

In the Abyss, all things grew.

In fact, he remembered every word Pauli had said.

The entire universe was a place of constant disturbance, and the consciousness of humans were ephemeral lights and fragmentary shadows produced within a brief period of stability. A story was taking place in a book, but the book was currently being burned to ashes. The frequency of the magnetic field was like cold air, resisting the scorching heat. His frequency turned its pages into asbestos, allowing it to keep intact within the blaze.

But the flames still burned. They were unknown waves, unpredictable disturbances. They would still continue to come, either hotter or change into a completely unfamiliar form entirely.

Perhaps it would be the very next second, perhaps it would be ten thousand years from now.

But—

It did not matter.

They had all already received an outcome beyond their wildest hopes.

Leaning against the car, he smiled at Lu Feng.

Lu Feng leaned down and kissed him on the corner of one eye, then turned to one side and began calibrating the compass and navigator.

While he was fiddling with the compass and navigator, An Zhe continued flipping through his own documents. He had already gone through nearly all of it earlier, so before five minutes had passed, he completely finished reading everything that was left. With a click, he pressed the lock screen button.

At that point, Lu Feng had also finished what he was doing.

They started from the south. In front were lakes, to the east were jungles, and to the west were bogs.

"Where to?" Lu Feng asked.

"I don't know." An Zhe's attitude was somewhat negative.

"Let's go east," Lu Feng said.

"Why?"

"I don't know where your cave is," Lu Feng said, putting aside the navigator. "But I do know where I met you for the first time."

It was better when he hadn't said that. Once he did, An Zhe's mood completely soured.

He looked up at Lu Feng, his eyebrows slightly furrowed and the rims of his eyes red, about to start crying.

Showing a rare baffled expression, Lu Feng cupped An Zhe's face. "What is it?"

"You don't like me at all," An Zhe said, frowning.

Lu Feng said, "I do like you."

An Zhe raised his voice. "Then what about my spore?"

Lu Feng didn't mention the matter of the spore to him at all. An Zhe was so fierce in the past, he didn't dare to ask of his own accord. He could only search everywhere for news, wishing to know where that inert sample had gone.

But it wasn't anywhere. It wasn't until he searched to the very end that he saw something about "inert extract" from scraps of the news along with a photo showing a snow-white spore the size of only a jujube pit inside a glass bottle.

Now, Lu Feng didn't mention it, and traces of the spore were even scarcer.

There was only one possibility, which was that it had been killed.

Upon hearing those words, a hint of a smile appeared in Lu Feng's eyes instead.

An Zhe was so angered that he could not speak coherently.

"It got smaller and smaller in your care." His vision misted over, and he was on the verge of crying. "You killed it."

Lu Feng said, "I didn't."

"You did!" An Zhe grabbed his arm, a lump in his throat. "You weren't good to it at all… Give it back to me."

"It still exists. Don't cry," Lu Feng said. "What is the spore to you?"

"It's…" An Zhe strove to describe it in human language, but he couldn't. He could only say, "It's just my spore."

"Is it very important?"

"Yes, it is." An Zhe was almost shaking with anger. "I can die, but I must plant my spore. I only gave it to you because I thought you would raise it properly."

"Is it even more important than your own life?"

"… Mm-hm."

"To any creature, its own life is the most important."

"The spore is the most important," An Zhe unrelentingly argued. "It's not like you're a mushroom. You wouldn't understand."

"Okay." Lu Feng's voice still contained a very gentle smile. "So it's your child?"

An Zhe bit his lip. A mushroom's world had no parents or children, no kinsfolk, not even friends. Every single type of mushroom in the Abyss was different from the other mushrooms. He had no way of using human relationships to describe the relationship between himself and his spore. Unable to say that it was his child, he could only say, "I gave birth to it."

"I raised it."

"You didn't raise it properly at all."

"Hm?" Lu Feng said. "Then why is it that at the Lighthouse, even though it saw you too, it only floated to my side of its own accord?"

An Zhe had just been brooding over Lu Feng killing the spore, but now that

the past was brought up again, he instantly recalled how the spore acted so traitorous.

Both of them were no good.

Unsure of what to say, he could only reply, "But I gave birth to it."

Lu Feng smiled again.

The world spun.

An Zhe was pressed firmly against the car.

Lu Feng's fingers skated over his abdomen, and in that weakest and softest place, the cool fingertips sparked a shudder.

An Zhe softly gasped for breath.

Lu Feng lowered his head and gently spoke into his ear.

"Let me see you give birth to another one."

# EPILOGUE 2

## “ONE DAY.”

AN ZHE LOOKED up at Lu Feng with a frown. He was unhappy, the rims of his eyes reddened, and he did not speak to Lu Feng. Grabbing Lu Feng's wrist, he forcefully tried to move it aside.

But the man was far stronger than him, so An Zhe couldn't pull it away at all. After trying a few times, he simply turned his fingers into hyphae and wrapped them around Lu Feng's wrist, pulling it outward. But the strength of his soft hyphae was even less than that of his human form, breaking with even a bit of force.

"Don't pull," Lu Feng said into his ear, his voice low.

An Zhe ignored him.

Lu Feng laughed softly, then parted the snow-white layers of hyphae with a feather-light touch and once again laid his fingers on the skin of An Zhe's abdomen.

"Do you have any more?" he asked.

"I don't." An Zhe's tone was hostile.

He already had his spore dug out once by this man, so how could there possibly be a second time? Furthermore, he truly did not have any new spores now.

The strange thing was, although the original spore had clearly been lost and there was no new spore in his body, that feeling of something being missing had also left him. The hole in his body that could never be filled was gone, and his mind was no longer constantly preoccupied with the missing spore—just like a long time ago, when he had just been born. When he woke up, he could not

have been any more whole.

An Zhe looked down at his hyphae, his snow-white, soft, dexterous, and well-defined hyphae. Slightly stunned, he put his other hand to his abdomen and touched them. Then Lu Feng held that hand as well. He could not help but think of his time at the research institute. He would shut himself up in a deserted room and carefully change part of his limbs back to hyphae, and what would be revealed after the human skin and bones disappeared was a tangled dark gray mass. The original hyphae had shriveled and liquefied. Before long, his entire body would turn into a puddle of black liquid and dry up on the floor or in a corner; this was how a mushroom died. Every time he got to that point, he would turn them back into human form as though he had received an electric shock, then look out the window at the endless night sky and at the deep nighttime of his own life. The tremendous fear that every creature felt when directly facing death shrouded him as well. He would feel the bone-deep chill of it, tremble, close his eyes, and wait for everything to slowly dissipate before walking back out to live with the people of the research institute like a normal human.

Of these things, Lu Feng knew nothing.

For some reason, this knowledge made the rims of his eyes sting. Recalling the fear and despair from that time, he once again looked up at Lu Feng, his heart suffused with a feeling of hurt even stronger than before.

Lu Feng clearly understood his expression.

"You're crying for real?" The hand that the Colonel had held his shoulder with moved up, touching the corner of his eye. "What's the matter?"

An Zhe shook his head. "In any case, I'm not giving it to you."

With that, he struggled to escape Lu Feng's grip, but he was restrained in another way, and the two of them toppled over onto the grass! He found himself pinned down beneath Lu Feng.

The thin, soft mid-February grass rose past him. Springtime came to the Abyss extraordinarily early this year. An Zhe turned his head and looked to the side. A plump, pure white mushroom had just unfurled its cap. Its gills were not yet fully open, but presumably it would not be long before thousands of spores

would fall from the cap and diffuse outward like fog.

Other mushrooms had many spores, but he only had one, and it was gone to boot. He bit his lip.

He heard Lu Feng say, "Don't be afraid."

He said nothing, and Lu Feng continued. "I don't want the spore."

"Then what about my spore?" An Zhe asked.

"You wish to know?"

"I do."

Lu Feng scooped up a few strands of hyphae.

"Other mushrooms all have many spores," he said. "Why did you only have one?"

"I don't know," An Zhe said.

"When did you know that you were a mushroom?" Lu Feng asked.

An Zhe thought hard, then said, "Since a long time ago."

"Was there a catalyst?"

"It was raining."

"What else?"

"I snapped in half, but I didn't want to die yet."

"Did it hurt?"

An Zhe shook his head.

Lu Feng asked, "Is there anything else?"

An Zhe could only think of one thing. "It was raining," he repeated.

Lu Feng seemed to think for a while. Then he asked, "You can fuse with many creatures. Are you able to distinguish exactly how many you've fused with? No matter if it was active or passive?"

An Zhe shook his head. He had indeed come into contact with many creatures either actively or passively, but he did not know if he had obtained their genes.

The sole time was when he completely absorbed all of the blood and tissues from An Ze's body, unconsciously obtaining the ability to turn into a human.

He heard Lu Feng ask, "Have you seen snakes before?"

An Zhe nodded, for he had certainly seen snakes before.

"Snakes shed their skin. The original skin is discarded, and it crawls out from there," Lu Feng said. "Many creatures can do the same."

For a while, An Zhe did not know what Lu Feng wished to express, so he merely listened.

"But Mr. Pauli said that this is still very different from your form of life. Some single-celled eukaryotes have an additional trait," Lu Feng said. "When the environment is hostile, it will stop growing, and the main parts of its body will form a sporocyst and fall into a deep sleep, only to come back to life in a suitable environment."

An Zhe frowned. He seemed to understand what Lu Feng was saying, yet he also seemed to still be unable to accurately express it.

"Furthermore, you are a fungus. Although you aren't the same species as them, you're all living things with simple compositions."

Feeling that what Lu Feng was saying was not flattering, An Zhe pushed the man away.

Lu Feng did not move. He only looked at An Zhe, a hint of a smile in his eyes. "It still hasn't occurred to you?"

An Zhe looked at his hyphae as he asked in a small voice, "Are you saying that my… my spore grew into me?"

Strangely, after saying it, he did not feel surprised at all. Perhaps he simply said something ordinary.

He became lost in thought as he contemplated the whole thing.

"Pauli said that when you cast off your fundamental form as a mushroom, you also obtained new properties. Perhaps you fused with the properties of other simple creatures, obtaining a new form of life. As an existence similar to sporocysts, the spore became a spare life to be used after your body decayed.

Therefore, you viewed it as more important than your own life because it truly was your life. Through this method, you may have achieved immortality," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe's eyes widened slightly.

"Also," Lu Feng said, "the first time I met Pauli, he was suffering greatly. At that time, the spore landed on Pauli of its own accord. I figured that only you would know him."

An Zhe nodded, for he did indeed have a vague recollection of approaching the grieving Pauli. Similarly, he also had many memories of approaching Lu Feng.

It was simply that he was not aware of what he was doing at the time.

He perceived his intact body.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled to Lu Feng.

If this were indeed the case, then he truly was wrong about Lu Feng—he had assumed the worst of this man. Lu Feng truly had not gone against the wish he left behind and raised the spore to adulthood.

"It's okay." Lu Feng leaned closer to him. Within those perpetually indifferent cold green eyes, indescribable waves seemed to surge. He lowered his voice, saying, "… You're alive."

Indeed, he was alive.

He was still alive.

Golden sunlight shone down on the verdant grass, and sparkling dust gently floated on the breeze. It was like a dream.

An Zhe lightly grabbed the edge of Lu Feng's sleeve.

Then he thought of something else—the thing he had held a grudge over for a long time already. On that long-ago day, he had opened the laboratory door and seen the spore. He had assumed the spore belonged to him and would float in his direction, but it had floated to where Lu Feng was.

He said it.

Lu Feng murmured, "It was you wishing to be at my side."

An Zhe slowly lowered his gaze.

"I didn't know," he said. "At that time…"

At that time, he and Lu Feng did not exactly have a good relationship.

At that thought, he then wondered if the relationship between himself and Lu Feng could now be considered good.

He gradually tightened his grip on Lu Feng's sleeve, but these unformed and chaotic thoughts vanished like mist the moment he looked up and met Lu Feng's eyes.

Today was February 14th. On this day four years ago, he and Lu Feng met in the wilderness of the Abyss.

Later, they spent a brief amount of time together. Then he slept for three years, and Lu Feng raised the spore for three years.

They might not have known each other for too long, nor did they have much experience interacting with each other, so compared to the relationships between other people, theirs really did not count for much.

However, for the two of them, for a xenogenic and an Arbiter, there was nobody else who could be like the other party.

In the wind, he and Lu Feng silently locked eyes.

After a long time, he heard Lu Feng murmur, "Thank you."

He asked, "For what?"

"A lot of things." Lu Feng's tone of voice was neutral, but his eyes never left An Zhe. He reached up and gently rested his hand on the side of An Zhe's face, his voice slightly raspy as he said, "Mostly for waiting for me all night on Judgment Day."

An Zhe smiled, clearly very happy, but then he felt a little bitter. With his voice also slightly raspy, he said, "Then I also thank you for always sparing me."

The Colonel's pale, thin lips curled up, and then he lowered his head to kiss the corners of An Zhe's eyes, every touch fleeting. In his cold green eyes was An

Zhe's reflection. An Zhe suddenly felt that this color was very gentle.

Lu Feng looked at him in that manner, and An Zhe was pressed into the grass. He initially felt that this man's gaze was very gentle, but then a feeling of danger slowly arose, as though he were being watched from the jungle by some man-eating beast that was ready to pounce.

When Lu Feng leaned down, dropping all his weight on An Zhe, and buried his head in An Zhe's neck, the feeling reached its peak.

They were so close that there wasn't the slightest gap, pressed directly against each other. Lu Feng's breathing and heartbeat were right in his ear and on his body.

An Zhe hesitantly put his arms around Lu Feng's shoulders and used his limited knowledge to analyze the current situation.

Then he asked in a small voice, "Do you wish to bed me?"

He heard Lu Feng let out a soft laugh, the sound slightly hoarse and breathy.

Then Lu Feng asked, "Who taught you that?"

"Mr. Shaw said it once," An Zhe replied.

"Shaw Scott." Lu Feng accurately pronounced Mr. Shaw's name. "What else did he say?"

An Zhe said, "It was all more or less the same."

In short, Mr. Shaw's language always revolved around these words.

Lu Feng asked, "If I did, what would you think?"

An Zhe thought hard.

"That…" he said, "that Mr. Shaw truly was very incredible."

He used to think that Mr. Shaw's words were completely unfounded, but now it appeared that they were correct about even the Arbiter himself.

He truthfully shared his thoughts with Lu Feng.

Buried in his neck, Lu Feng began to laugh. It unexpectedly sounded like he was quite happy.

After he finished laughing, he rolled over and lay side by side with An Zhe on the grass. An Zhe turned to look at him and saw that this man was indeed relaxed. He had never even dared to dream that this Arbiter who lived in constant night would wear such an expression.

Lu Feng asked, "Who else wished to bed you?"

"Hosen, I suppose, when I came to the base in their vehicle." An Zhe thought back as he spoke. "I think there was Josh as well, and on the third floor, there were some mercenaries."

"What about you?"

"I didn't like them much." An Zhe thought about their gazes.

He saw that Lu Feng was looking at him as well, the cold arches of his eyebrows relaxing. It was a clear expression, similar to the mountain breeze currently blowing through the wilderness.

An Zhe became a bit lost in thought. If time repeated itself, if Lu Feng were not the Arbiter, if he were an invincible, ambitious, and powerful young military officer, perhaps his expression would often have been like this.

"Then," Lu Feng said, "I'm different from them."

An Zhe questioned him with a puzzled gaze.

The Colonel only smiled. It was very good-looking, like the season's snowpack in the initial stages of thaw.

"Let's go." He got up from the grass. Facing the morning sunlight, he held out a hand to An Zhe. "I'll take you to search for An Ze."

An Zhe also held out his hand, got pulled upright, and then followed.

"What's different?" he asked.

"Everything's different."

An Zhe looked at him with suspicion.

"Really?" he asked.

This time, the Colonel did not reply.

# EPILOGUE – ROSES

## FIRST ROSE - YEAR 2103

### "WE HAVE NO OTHER ALTERNATIVES."

"Everything in the world is devouring humankind, and our numbers are decreasing day after day."

"Child." Madam Lu removed the golden rose badge from her chest, placing it in the palm of her hand, then slowly curled her fingers around it so that she could feel the soft raised lines of the petals, as if she were touching a real rose.

"Everyone must take up the weapons that they can so they may confront this age. Everyone." Her voice was gentle like a ripple of water.

"But you won't receive anything, Mom."

"No single individual besides me will benefit, either. It is the entirety of humankind that will benefit. It is only when the entirety of humankind gradually escapes this awful plight that we as individuals will see improvement, although it may be hundreds of years into the future. But the truth is, it is only when you've saved everyone that you yourself will be saved."

"But we cannot rule out the possibility that our salvation will come far later than everyone else's," she continued. "That is when we take up weapons to protect ourselves."

"Will that day come, Mom?"

"It will." Her voice was startlingly resolute. "Unless—unless we have all

perished before we could be saved. But remember, child. No matter what, humans love each other."

"Child, do you love them?"

"I do."

She handed over the badge to her young daughter.

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## SECOND ROSE - YEAR 2105

There was a loud thump.

Something heavy landed on the ground, and the world spun. Her mother had used that object to hit her on the back of the neck, and she fell to the floor.

Then came the sound of the bedroom door slamming shut.

With a click, the door was locked.

She should have fallen unconscious, but at the last second, a glimmering golden object fell from her coat pocket, and its color called back the remaining scrap of her consciousness. With a ringing in her ears that was like the roar of airplanes, amidst a terrible pain that seemed to split her head open and a numbness that felt like she had lost all her limbs, she reached out, gripped the golden rose badge, and hurriedly panted for breath.

She would not allow herself to fall unconscious. Her temperament was mild, but her will was strong, far exceeding that of ordinary people, which was also something her mother acknowledged.

And her mother was a distinguished and outstanding woman. Auntie Lin Shan had said, *Your mother had shown an extraordinary gift for leadership since she was a young girl and was even the initiator of the Rose Manifesto and one of the drafters of the birth law, which saved humankind from disaster*. Until now, when the oppression that women were suffering became heavier and heavier,

exceeding the agreed-upon upper limit, she and her compatriots took up weapons and defended the freedom and dignity, just as they were supposed to.

It seemed as though a long time passed. Half an hour, one hour, or perhaps two hours. Through the bedroom door, she heard rough knocks come from the nearby entryway. Then came the rhythmic tapping of high heels. That was her mother, Madam Lu. There was not a single person who did not know that Madam Lu had been self-possessed and elegant all her life. When she was not with child, she always wore a long crimson dress girdled at the waist with modest black high heels, and she carried herself with a grace that did not change with the passage of time.

The door opened, and the visitors entered. Their footsteps were very heavy, as those were the sounds of military boots striking the floor. She felt a sense of danger, but of late, these sorts of things happened often.

Then came the sound of endless chatter, which seemed to have been deliberately lowered, and she vaguely heard a few words like "modify," "cease," and "centralize." Her mother had often conversed with some people over the last three months, and although she avoided her daughter, the keywords she had unintentionally heard were the same.

She knew more or less what had happened. For the past half a year, the anti-oppression "Roses" posters could be seen everywhere, and the base had attempted to reach a compromise with them.

"I do not agree," her mother said in a raised voice.

"I'm afraid you need to come with us."

"We have already come with you many times."

"It's different this time, Madam."

"Are there others?"

"Only you, Madam. The Marshal wishes to personally negotiate with you. You may also choose to bring others."

"I demand that Lieutenant General Lin Shan and her armed escort come along."

"Of course, Madam," the officer said after a short silence.

It seemed as though the officer dialed a number, while her mother walked over to the filing cabinet near the bedroom door.

The officer hung up.

A long while later, Madam Lu said, "I'll prepare the materials. When Lieutenant General Lin Shan arrives, I will go."

Then came the sounds of the file cabinet opening. Everyone in the living room was very quiet.

A long time passed, so long that she nearly lost consciousness.

But she was still thinking, why would her own mother knock her out?

Why?

Why?

Because…

Because—

She continued thinking such thoughts until she was right on the cusp of losing consciousness.

Until a gunshot rang out.

She trembled all over. Her hands dripped with cold sweat, and the golden badge slipped from her hand. In the very next moment, it was going to hit the floor and make a clear sound.

And her unsteady beliefs would be just like this badge.

In this difficult-to-measure span of time, she strenuously gathered her fingers together, securely clenching the badge in her palm once more, and put her fist to her chest.

After a long while, blood slowly trickled through the gap beneath the door like an octopus's tentacle.

She turned her gaze away from it and quietly looked at the comfortable room. Whether her gaze contained sorrow, hatred, pity, or perhaps nothing at all was

a mystery.

In the following moment, she completely lost consciousness.

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## THIRD ROSE - YEAR 2105

She was brought to a place where she stayed in a few small rooms along with some other girls of a similar age. Every day, people would deliver food and water to them. She knew that many things happened outside, lasting for at least three months, because her new lifestyle lasted for three months.

She kept thinking, if her mother had not known that danger was coming, why did she knock her out that far in advance? If she had known that danger was coming, why had she not taken precautions before it was too late?

If shooting Madam Lu could have solved the problem, why did the chaos last for three months? If it was predicted that it would lead to three months of chaos, why did they choose to kill her?

Sometimes, she suspected that her mother had intentionally allowed herself to be killed. And knocking out her daughter was to allow her to live.

Her mother had even said that apart from the women closely connected to the Manifesto, the other members of the base were indifferent to the opposition activities. Of course there existed a way to make them care, which was to make them see how massive the thing oppressing the women was, and there would eventually come a day when it crushed everyone.

Or perhaps she would never know the truth of that time.

No matter what had happened, her mother, Madam Lu, and Madam Lu's companions had been defeated.

Because she and her companions had been brought to the entrance of a massive, silvery-white hexagonal building. This building, which she could see every day as soon as she pulled open the curtains, was called the Garden of

Eden.

In the main hall was an older woman she did not know, pulling her along by the hand.

"Child," the Madam asked, "do you love humankind?"

"No matter what," the girl said softly, looking into her eyes. "Humans love each other."

She walked in.

And she knew that, many years later, she would be called Madam Lu as well.

As if her mother still lived.

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## FOURTH ROSE - PRESENT

It was a deep green monster.

An Zhe crouched down and examined it.

It was nearly dead. In its abdomen were three bloody holes, each the size of a bowl's rim, from which thick black liquid was flowing. Its skin, which consisted of fine scales along with protruding spines and lumps, feebly rose and fell. Four of its five eyes were compound eyes, and they were shrouded over with an ominous layer of white. The fifth eye was tightly shut, and the dozen-or-so fist-sized compound eyes on the backside were dimmed.

In the Abyss, it was rare to see mortally wounded monsters like this one. This meant that it had just eked out victory in a struggle and that the aroma of its blood had not yet been noticed by other hunters.

It was not large, about the length of a newborn human baby. Of course, that did not mean it had always been that length, because the polymorphic-class monsters of the Abyss could freely change between many forms and sizes. Pauli had said that this would be inconceivable under the previous theoretical

framework because some substances would vanish into thin air and other substances would appear out of thin air, but if it was explained using waves and frequencies, the changing of forms was merely an alteration in frequency, which was easy to achieve and understand.

Now, the reason why it looked like this on its deathbed may have been because it wished to die in this form. Perhaps it was its original form, or perhaps it was its favorite form.

An Zhe gently touched its head with his hyphae, but there was no reaction whatsoever.

"It's almost dead." He frowned slightly as he looked at the monster.

Next to him, Lu Feng only said, "It's raining."

An Zhe tilted his head back and saw that dark clouds had gathered overhead. With a "plop," a raindrop fell between the layered branches and leaves of the trees and vines and splattered on the ground. In the following second, yet another drop landed on the monster's wound. It spasmed, seemingly feeling pain from it.

The summer rain came so swiftly that in just a few seconds, white raindrops came pelting down thick and fast, sounding like drumbeats as they struck the leaves. Lu Feng covered An Zhe's shoulders and head with his uniform coat. An Zhe said, "When we came, there seemed to be a cave nearby."

He grabbed Lu Feng's hand and stood up, then hesitated for a few seconds. In the end, though, he picked up the small and trembling monster, and the two of them walked toward the nearby mountains.

"The shape isn't quite right," Lu Feng said.

But An Zhe did not feel anything in particular, for the Abyss had never been short of strangely shaped landforms.

The cave mouth was right there, a quiet opening between tangled vines.

The monster in An Zhe's arms was still trembling. Many years ago, he had dragged the severely-wounded An Ze back to his cave in a similar manner. Although he knew in his heart that the cave before him now was definitely not

the cave from back then, he had the strange feeling that time and destiny were overlapping and that he was traveling the path from back then once more.

However, when he stood at the so-called cave mouth, he finally believed Lu Feng's assessment.

The cave mouth was not the commonly seen irregular opening, but an approximation of an arch. It was an abandoned building, squeezed by the raised ground into its current appearance. Within the Abyss, there really were some of humankind's ruined cities scattered around, and the sites had various buildings with different functions. In the span of a hundred years, the creatures of the Abyss grew upon and infested them.

Once inside, the surroundings were pitch-black with the occasional fluorescent glow from plants. An Zhe put the monster down, then placed the flashlight in an appropriate spot. The flashlight lit up a limited area. This place was a spacious hall, its furnishings long since decayed. It seemed to be a church. The walls were mottled with signs that monsters lived within, but they seemed to be from a very long time ago.

There was a sound of carapace scraping against stone as the dying monster moved five centimeters toward them. An Zhe reached out and touched the fluff on its limbs, and the monster's head turned. Unlike mammals, insects' eyes lacked pupils, so it was difficult to make out what their vision was focusing on, but An Zhe knew that it was looking at him.

Why was it looking at him? What was it thinking? What kind of feelings would a five-eyed monster have when it was on its deathbed? An Zhe did not know. Strands of white hyphae climbed up the monster's body and gently covered its deepest wound.

Its limbs twitched, as though the monster wanted to come to An Zhe, but in the following moment, all movement ceased.

It was about to die.

An Zhe looked at it without retracting his hyphae. It felt like there were eyes on him, and when he turned, he discovered that Lu Feng was leaning against one of the church's crumbling pillars with arms crossed and gaze cast in his direction, as though he were observing An Zhe's every movement.

"Did you do this often?" Lu Feng asked.

"Sometimes," An Zhe replied.

He knew what Lu Feng was asking. If he encountered a wounded creature in the Abyss, he would drag it back. Occasionally, a seriously wounded creature would live due to recovering in the safe cave, but the vast majority of the time, it would die.

It had been the same with An Ze.

Lu Feng was still looking at him.

"At that time, did you already have a human's consciousness?"

An Zhe thought back for a moment, then shook his head. He was just a mushroom at that time, and furthermore, he did not know how to describe a mushroom's living state in human language.

He pursed his lips, then continued. "If my hyphae broke, I would feel pain, and I was afraid of dying. So when I saw them about to die, I would think of ways to help."

After a long time, he saw Lu Feng smile. "That is something you would do."

The coat had gotten wet from the rain, and this place was particularly dark and damp. Fortunately, the backpack they always carried around contained a few blocks of charcoal. They set up a stand, made a fire, and turned the flashlight off.

"Are you cold?" Lu Feng asked An Zhe.

An Zhe shook his head, but he still moved closer to Lu Feng, and Lu Feng draped an arm around his shoulder.

Neither of them spoke. An Zhe leaned against Lu Feng's shoulder and watched the dancing flames.

"Will I be able to find An Ze?" he asked after a long while.

He and Lu Feng had agreed to stay in the Abyss for one month and at the base for one month.

Lu Feng did not dislike the Abyss. An Zhe even felt that the Colonel preferred

the Abyss to the base. The Colonel knew many aspects of the Abyss like the back of his own hand. In this month, he could also collect many samples for the research institute. But no matter how skillful Lu Feng was or how much the scope was narrowed, the Abyss was still very big.

"So long as that cave still exists, yes." Lu Feng said.

An Zhe thought back on everything about the Abyss. "The cave entrance may have been covered up by mushrooms, flooded with water, or collapsed by large monsters fighting… And sometimes the caves themselves are alive. They'll wake up and then leave."

He continued, "But I still want to search."

"This is something I promised to An Ze."

"Although he didn't know."

"Then let it be a promise I made to myself."

He spoke to himself, while Lu Feng just repeatedly stroked his hair. In the end, he said to An Zhe, "He won't be angry because you were late in finding him."

An Zhe nodded. An Ze was a very good person.

He cut off his fanciful thoughts, and while continuing to watch the flames, he slowly spoke of the Abyss. Lu Feng simply listened.

At some point, it suddenly occurred to An Zhe that he had already recounted the entirety of his life as a mushroom to Lu Feng. Lu Feng knew of the rainy season and the grass, as well as An Ze and Josh. He knew of all the people he knew, and he knew of all the things he encountered.

On the other hand, he knew nothing about Lu Feng's past.

"Have… have you ever made a promise to someone that you couldn't keep?" he asked.

An Zhe already thought of his answer. He imagined that a person like Lu Feng would not lightly make promises or have unrealistic fantasies.

But contrary to his expectations, after a brief silence, Lu Feng said, "I have."

The crackling of the firewood gradually softened, and the hot flames turned

into a red glow on the pitch-black charcoal. The surroundings dimmed, and the aroma of dust wafted over.

The stairwell on the twenty-second floor of the Garden of Eden had also been a dark and dusty place.

"When the day comes," a gentle female voice suddenly spoke into Lu Feng's ear, "when the day that we are all freed comes, I will no longer need to meet my children in secret like this."

Jibran was not Madam Lu's child, but he often came to the twenty-second floor as well. As he sat on the railing of the emergency stairs, his little legs swinging, he said, "Madam, you'll definitely be able to see that day."

The Madam patted his head. "Our great scientist is here."

Jibran tilted his head back and whistled. "Lu Feng and I will see that day too."

The Madam's gaze moved away from Jibran and settled on Lu Feng. "Do you also want to go to the Lighthouse?"

Lu Feng shook his head.

"Then you're just like your father." The Madam kissed his forehead. "When you grow up, you must protect the base."

Then the Madam took one of his hands and one of Jibran's hands, put them together, and placed her own hand on top.

"We will all see that day, and when that day comes—" Upon her young face was a gentle joy. "When that day comes, we'll be together, along with your father. Promise me, you two."

"Promise me, you two."

"I promise, Madam."

"I promise, too."

Lu Feng's story was very short, but while An Zhe was watching him, his attention wandered.

This time, it was Lu Feng who watched the dying fire.

An Zhe reached out.

He straightened up and attempted to hold Lu Feng in the same way that Lu Feng had held him earlier. The Colonel, seeming to understand, adjusted his angle and moved closer to An Zhe. An Zhe put an arm around his shoulder, and although he was a bit unaccustomed to it, it wasn't bad.

"You once told me that she turned into a bee because of a rose from many years ago," Lu Feng said. "I've been constantly thinking about who it was that gave it to her."

An Zhe was taken aback.

On a day when the ultrasonic disperser had not yet been invented or when it had briefly stopped working, a bee that had mistakenly entered the city was enticed by the flower and stung Madam Lu on her finger.

The bee's weak frequency concealed itself in her body, to be awakened one day in the future by the vast and unknown wave from the universe.

Within this base, only Madam Lu had roses because she loved such things and other people loved her. Lu Feng's father and later Lu Feng himself would give her seeds that the Lighthouse collected and confirmed to be safe—only those two people.

An Zhe gently held Lu Feng's hand.

The pile of firewood burned out, and the dim red was receding as well. The wind echoed inside the church. It seemed to be another windy night.

"I hope you can go to the United Front Center," Madam Lu had said.

That was the last time Lu Feng spoke with her before he officially joined the military. Back then, he was at a small field site on one side of the base, a distance that the base's civilian communications could barely get through to.

"That place suits you the best. They also go into the wilderness the least often, so it's also the safest," she had said. "In all my years serving the base, this is the only time I've been selfish. I want you to live. I hope that all my children can live, but I only know you."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"If it's someplace else, I won't stop you either, but don't go to the Trial Court.

I'm afraid of that place," she murmured. "Last year, there was even a shooting incident at the Trial Court. Many of the base's drastic changes began from bloodshed, and the Trial Court sheds blood like water every day. There is too much suffering there."

"Were you listening?" she asked after a stretch of silence.

"I was," he replied.

She smiled. "Then promise me."

"You must promise—"

The rustle of static suddenly started up.

"Bzz—"

It was immediately followed by soothing music, a relaxing frequency, and a gentle female voice. "I'm sorry, but due to the effects of the solar wind or the ionosphere, the base's signal has been interrupted. This is normal. Please refrain from panicking and carry out all activities as usual. The communication signal will recover at some point. At that time, the public broadcasts will be sent to you, so please stay tuned."

"… Please stay tuned."

When all the wood burned into loose pale debris that would fall apart with just a touch, the church fell into darkness and lonely quietude.

Right at that moment, however, countless faint green lights lit up, for the insect monster they picked up had died.

An Zhe looked over. Its body gradually fell apart and dissipated into a scattering of tiny green lights, resembling a cloud of glowing green smoke or a swarm of fireflies.

The lights first enveloped them, dream-like, then rose and illuminated the entire derelict church along with the mottled painting of the Virgin Mary on the left wall and the massive painting of the crucifixion of Jesus in front. Withered vines hung on the Virgin Mary's shoulders and her cheeks were scored by animal claws, while Jesus's body was covered with mold. Only their eyes were clear. From behind the vines, mold, and dust, they silently observed the mortal

world.

The stream of lights dissipated.

Destiny dispersed in the mortal world.

# EPILOGUE – SUMMER

SUMMER HAD COME to the Abyss.

Below the Highland Research Institute, a deep green that covered everything rose and fell, like a mighty ocean connected to the pale blue sky. In the distant mountains, a flock of black winged monsters circled, letting out long warbling cries.

Their cries and the wind were delivered together to the mountain peak. Above the corridor, the foliage and clustered flowers of the vines swayed, and snow-white petals drifted down to land on An Zhe. He raised a hand to catch one, holding it in his left hand, and fiddled with the tip of a vine with his other hand.

Lu Feng reached out to remove the petals on his shirt collar and hair. Feeling the man's movements, An Zhe turned back and pulled the vine over to Lu Feng. "Look."

He had just discovered a new snow-white bud on this vine.

Of course, whether there were new buds on this vine or whether the buds were big or small or black or white would not pique Colonel Lu's interest. The Colonel expressionlessly leaned down and kissed him on the forehead.

"Tsk." Across from them, Dr. Ji let out a sound akin to admiration. He leaned against the windowsill, left hand shaking a reagent bottle and right hand hanging at his side.

In the last battle to defend the Northern Base, Dr. Ji had lost his entire right arm and the lower part of his right leg. He had carried out the conversation with the Highland Research Institute in the midst of such terrible agony. As for why

he survived instead of dying from excessive blood loss, it could only be attributed to the mercy of God.

He later applied to transfer to the Highland Research Institute. His brain had been unaffected, but in this age without artificial limbs, a right arm and half a leg were more than sufficient to put an end to the scientist's life. He had not come to continue his own research, but rather because of his admiration for Pauli Jones and his willingness to contribute his own body for new research. With the help of dozens of experimental volunteers who were similar to him, the research institute determined six safe frequencies that could be propagated, among which was a creature that had the ability to regenerate limbs.

In short, Dr. Ji was now like any other regular person, although he was still not yet accustomed to his new limbs.

An Zhe turned to look at Dr. Ji, wishing to see what he was clicking his tongue about this time.

Dr. Ji was looking at Lu Feng. At the same time, he lifted his hands and sharply clapped twice.

"You've been seen by me, Colonel Lu," he said. "If I hadn't seen it, I would've truly thought that you were planning to forever be an honorable gentleman, a qualified father. Oh, you seem to be too young, so you can be a competent older brother instead."

Lu Feng plucked the last petal from An Zhe's neck, then gave a flat look at Dr. Ji.

"Jibran," he said, his tone of voice straightforward, "I've overestimated your personality."

"Okay, okay okay okay." Dr. Ji raised both hands in surrender. "I was wrong, I've underestimated the mighty Arbiter's moral standards."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"It was my mistake, I admit it. It's not that your personality is too respectable, it's that my moral standards are indeed rather low." Dr. Ji continued begging for mercy. As soon as he shifted his gaze, he saw An Zhe, who was looking at him

while holding on to Lu Feng's wrist.

"Supposing I was given such a little darling"—he grinned, held out a hand, and made a gesture—"I'd tie him to the bed, and then…"

Lu Feng shot him a cold look.

"… and then dissect him." Dr. Ji shut up after he finished his sentence.

"There's something wrong with Dr. Ji's brain," Lu Feng said to An Zhe, his head lowered. "You can consider using your hyphae to treat him."

"There's absolutely no need!" Nearby, Dr. Ji went pale with fright. "I'll just leave."

This suggestion of Lu Feng's to plot Dr. Ji's murder also failed to pique An Zhe's interest. An Zhe stood on tiptoe and planted a kiss on the side of Lu Feng's face.

Once again, Dr. Ji said, "Tsk."

Lu Feng said, "You can go now."

"Is this how you're going to treat your best friend, Colonel Lu?" Dr. Ji asked.

"Yes."

"What, I don't even have the qualification to watch you two play house?" Within Dr. Ji's voice was a trace of heartbreak.

"No."

The phrase "play house" piqued An Zhe's interest, so he once again lifted his head to look at Dr. Ji.

"So cute." Dr. Ji looked at him as well, an odd light flashing in his eyes. "He'd cry for a long time after being dissected, wouldn't he?"

An Zhe always had the feeling that Dr. Ji had been possessed by something. Perhaps he had fused with Mr. Shaw.

Dr. Ji crossed his arms and let out a sigh before shifting his attention back to his light blue reagent bottle.

"Colonel Lu, you really won't try it?" he asked. "Extract No. 1014 doesn't have

any side effects. In combination with a minor frequency adjustment of the magnetic poles, after three subjects were injected, one of them had perfect night vision. This is something that you yourself brought back from the Abyss a month ago."

Sunlight shone in from the gaps between the vine leaves and onto the slender glass tube, the reagent sparkling within.

Lu Feng merely glanced at it.

Beneath the doctor's expectant gaze, An Zhe answered in Lu Feng's stead. "He doesn't want it."

"Tch." Dr. Ji turned and left with his reagent, fiddling with his communicator. "Pauli is calling me. Goodbye."

An Zhe said, "Goodbye, Doctor."

Lu Feng truly did not want it, An Zhe knew.

Moreover, Colonel Lu did not need to obtain those strange enhancements or abilities at all, for he already came and went freely from the Abyss.

While An Zhe was lost in fanciful thoughts, he latched onto the nearby lush vine with his hyphae. He had been eyeing it for a long time.

"Don't eat things willy-nilly." Lu Feng spotted his movements.

"This can be digested," An Zhe argued.

He extended a strand of hyphae to show Lu Feng. The hypha climbed up to the cuff of the Colonel's black uniform sleeve and formed on the silver sleeve buttons a verdant new leaf that gently trembled in the wind.

This was An Zhe's recent amusement. Ever since he discovered he could safely fuse with all living and non-living things, he tried many of them—apart from the ugly ones.

On one relatively successful occasion, he turned himself into a room full of drifting willow catkins and nearly choked the Colonel.

But fusion was not always safe either. Just as Lu Feng said a long time ago, polymorphic-class monsters would sometimes make mistakes when changing

form. Not long ago when he was drinking potato soup, out of his love for this plant, he went to the laboratory and fused with a small piece of potato, then unexpectedly fell unconscious and woke up only after three hours had gone by. Pauli had said, *This is because your frequency as a mushroom and the potato's frequency are too different, so rejection occurred*. It was the same when fusing with other things. Although the results were always positive, the process was full of uncertainty, just like how a piece of sodium would dissolve in water but the process would produce an explosion.

From then on, Lu Feng prohibited him from eating things willy-nilly.

But An Zhe wished to eat this small piece of vine. This action would not cause any harm to the vine's life, and furthermore, the vine had no abnormalities. It was just a quiet and beautiful blooming vine.

An Zhe gently scraped a small opening in its skin, and juice seeped out.

It was very… quiet. As the pale green juice saturated the hyphae, a wind from the Abyss blew through the cold sky, stirring this vine that was attached to the research institute. The sun, moon, stars, everything in the sky shone upon it. An Zhe closed his eyes. It seemed like his body was likewise relaxing, and Lu Feng was right at his side, so he did not need to worry about anything. Allowing Lu Feng to half-hold him, he sat down on the bench in the dark green corridor.

Perhaps his condition was normal and the vine was also normal. Lu Feng had not allowed him to eat this vine, but he did not stop him either.

That was an implied acceptance.

He lay in Lu Feng's arms, grabbing his hand, his thoughts very disorganized. It was like he was soaking in warm water.

"It's been growing here for many years, and it was originally a vine that wouldn't flower," he said. "Later, some winged animals brought pollen over, so then it had white flowers. It thinks they're very pretty, and it's very happy."

As he softly rambled about the feelings he experienced from the vine and its memories, he reached up to hold Lu Feng by the shoulder and burrowed deeper into his embrace. He rubbed his head against Lu Feng's neck, then pressed his cheek against the slightly cool silver tassels on the other man's chest, feeling

very comfortable.

Lu Feng hummed to indicate that he was listening.

A vine's feelings and memories were very simple things, but there were also some things that couldn't be described in human language. An Zhe scraped together a few words. "It also wishes to have blue flowers. Then… it also hopes that birds or butterflies and bees will come again and pollinate its flowers. After pollination, it can bear fruit."

Then there was nothing else to talk about.

Lu Feng ruffled An Zhe's hair.

Just then, Lu Feng's communicator lit up, and he picked it up. An Zhe also looked at the communicator screen, which showed a message from the already departed doctor. "You really won't consider Extract No. 1014? Your friend truly needs you very much. He needs a test subject."

The doctor still hadn't given up on peddling his extract.

With a smile, An Zhe watched Lu Feng push a button and reply with one word. "No."

The doctor replied, "Why is your attitude so cold? Isn't night vision good? You don't need it? Don't you want it? Every time you go to the Abyss, I worry for your safety. It's only after you inject Extract No. 1014 that I can rest easy."

He spoke as if it were actually true.

Lu Feng replied, "Aren't infrared glasses easy to use?"

"Then you can consider Extract No. 1015, pure black membrane wings with an average wingspan of four point three meters. You'll be able to fly, and it looks great. I sincerely hope you can experience the feeling of gliding through the air. Won't you consider it?"

"Don't need it," Lu Feng said.

The speed at which the doctor replied was swift. Even through the screen, his resentment as he quickly typed could be felt.

"Times have changed, Mr. Arbiter."

"You must forget the doctrine of human lineage, lay down the prejudices in your heart, and embrace foreign genes."

Lu Feng's reply was as simple and cold as before. "Thank you."

"It's not right of you to be like this. Do you need psychological counseling?"

"No."

"You're beyond saving!" The doctor went so far as to send an exclamatory voice recording.

It was followed by a text message. "Just when will you be able to cure your obsession with clean bloodlines and morals? You once exiled yourself. Have you still not come back yet? I wish to splash you with extract."

It was clear that the doctor was already irate.

He was always like this after failing to peddle his extracts.

With an expression that was as calm as always, Lu Feng replied, "I'm very normal."

"Choose between 1014 and 1015, and I'll believe you."

Lu Feng said nothing.

"See, you're beyond saving," the doctor said.

Lu Feng frowned slightly. After a long time, he tapped out a single word on the communication interface and sent it.

"Ugly."

A brief silence.

"You really are something," the doctor said.

Lu Feng loosened his grip, and An Zhe held the communicator, smiling as he read.

He thought, the doctor unexpectedly just learned it, whereas he had guessed it long ago.

After the "bell toll," many people voluntarily took in some frequencies that were certified to be safe. Some people grew wings, while others obtained the

ability to photosynthesize. Of course, some people experienced harmless rejections, and there were even a rare few who obtained nothing despite fusing.

But Lu Feng refused such things.

Of course, the reason was not at all like what the doctor said, with Lu Feng having an obsession with bloodlines and not allowing the makeup of his own species to be contaminated by other monsters.

The true reason was very simple.

Lu Feng felt that those monsters, or xenogenics, were all very ugly.

Having him peacefully coexist with the humans at the research institute who had fused with other creatures' genes? Fine. Having him also try to grow some other things? Not a chance.

He hated it.

An Zhe put the communicator aside and looked up at Lu Feng's face. His point of view was just right for seeing all the details.

Lu Feng had an unforgettable face, but few would dare to look directly at him, and even fewer would carefully examine his features.

An Zhe felt that his eyes were the most good-looking point about him, as distinctive as the crisp, biting wind at the top of the mountains in the Abyss. He reached up to touch the Colonel's thin eyebrows. When he was making the mannequin, there was a time when Mr. Shaw had repeatedly admired the blank mannequin head that only had eyebrows and hair, clicking his tongue in admiration. *Well done.*

Further down were long and narrow deep green eyes half-covered by eyelashes, their appearance cold and lonely. Within those eyes, it was possible to dimly see one's own reflection.

An Zhe thought that if a human looked like this, they indeed had the qualification to disdain other things for being ugly.

He looked at the communicator again, and there was another message from the doctor.

"So what you mean is that I'm not good-looking either?"

The Colonel did not reply.

He turned back again to look at Lu Feng and burrowed even deeper into his arms. For some reason, he just wanted to do so right now, and he strangely felt a little lethargic.

Lu Feng pulled him closer and asked, "What is it?"

An Zhe shook his head, having suddenly thought of a problem.

He looked at Lu Feng but said nothing.

An Zhe was a mushroom who often slept early and woke up early, with eyes that were usually clear and bright, but now it was like they were fogged over with a layer of wetness.

Lu Feng lowered his head, getting a little closer.

An Zhe said in a small voice, "I'm also a xenogenic."

"Mm-hm," Lu Feng said. "Little xenogenic."

An Zhe asked, "Do you think mushrooms are also ugly?"

"Not you. You're fine," Lu Feng said. "The color white is pretty."

"Then what if I were a gray mushroom?"

"It'd be all right."

"What about a black mushroom?"

"That's fine too."

"What about a rainbow mushroom?"

"Hmm." Lu Feng looked at him expressionlessly. His voice was flat as he said, "I'd give you a white mushroom to eat."

This man had a trait where his expression would look more serious the more he teased others.

So An Zhe also expressionlessly said, "I'll eat you."

With a soft laugh, Lu Feng scooped him up and changed their positions so that

they went from a horizontal hold to facing each other.

An Zhe flopped forward as though he were boneless and just happened to bump his forehead against Lu Feng's. It was unusual, for he normally did have bones. But right now he was feeling lazy down to the marrow of every single bone, so he did not draw back. The rubbing from Lu Feng's high nose bridge was a little ticklish, so he rubbed back, then buried his head in the hollow of Lu Feng's shoulder.

Lu Feng encircled him, and he unconsciously continued rubbing against Lu Feng.

Seeming to smile, Lu Feng held him a little tighter.

The communicator lit up and went out, then lit up again as Dr. Ji continued tirelessly sending slanderous messages. Lu Feng glanced at the doctor's irate words, thought of the conversation from earlier, and turned to An Zhe.

He asked, "Are my moral standards very high?"

"Huh?" For a while, An Zhe did not understand what he meant. After some thinking, he said, "You're a good person."

"Oh."

Feeling that perhaps his answer was somewhat perfunctory, An Zhe added, "You're very good to us."

Lu Feng asked, "What about to you?"

"To me…" An Zhe pondered it. "Sometimes you aren't very good."

"You can give your answer one more time," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe stubbornly said nothing, which made Lu Feng laugh again. When he laughed, his chest vibrated a little, and they were so close that An Zhe could feel it.

Lu Feng said nothing else.

So An Zhe began to think.

Of course, Lu Feng was good to him. Getting wounded while in the Abyss was inevitable. Sometimes only a trickle of blood would ooze from his arm, but the

way Lu Feng treated his wounds would make him feel like his arm had been broken with the amount of care he took to do so. If An Zhe wished to do something, he would not stop him. If An Zhe did not wish or agree to do something, he would not demand it of him either, although such a thing seldom happened.

However, this man often bullied him over some small matters. Starting from the chaotic prison disaster, when they had just gotten to know each other, this man had revealed his true nature.

Lu Feng was quite good to Dr. Ji as well, although it appeared that the two of them were exchanging cutting remarks every day.

Then others—

Of course, there was nothing to nitpick in the way Lu Feng treated them.

Supposing the research institute encountered a calamity, no matter who shared a room with Lu Feng, Lu Feng would inevitably make that person leave first while he himself faced the danger alone. If someone asked for help, Lu Feng would definitely not refuse them either.

But that was all. If not for essential and work-related interactions, he would not communicate more than necessary with anyone other than Pauli.

In fact, the people of the research institute had very amicable relationships. Mutual banter and quarrels were both very common occurrences, and there were many peaceful conversations and collaborations as well, but it was obvious that the mighty Arbiter would not join in.

An Zhe thought that the Colonel had been protecting people from afar for too long, to the point where he had forgotten how to mingle with them, or perhaps he had never learned how to at all.

He said, "You can also lower the expectations you have for yourself a little."

"How?"

An Zhe had no clue how he was supposed to do that, so he replied, "Think for yourself."

Lu Feng said, "Okay."

The timbre of his voice was also very chilly, seeming to contain a smile; it was a very youthful sound.

An Zhe thought that he was a mushroom that had joined human society to a certain extent. In this place, he still had much to learn. But the same was true of Lu Feng. In that way, they were exactly the same.

So he said, "For example, if you wish to be friends with the people of the research institute, you can eat with everyone and bring them fruit when you come back from the outside."

These sorts of methods may not be applicable to Lu Feng. He was only giving examples, and of course Lu Feng would understand.

"I don't really wish to," Lu Feng said. "I have you to eat with and bring back fruit for."

"That's different."

"Hm?" Lu Feng's voice took on the slight nasal sound it often had when he was teasing An Zhe. "What's different?"

An Zhe did not really wish to talk to this man, so he bit Lu Feng's neck. It seemed to hurt, so he kissed the same spot to make up for it.

Lu Feng's voice contained a smile. "You're right."

An Zhe felt that he and the Colonel had been talking past each other from the beginning. He wished to sit up and knead Lu Feng's face.

So he put his hands on Lu Feng's shoulders and moved back a little.

Right at that moment, his body suddenly went limp for no reason, and he nearly failed to stabilize himself as he fell forward.

… Right onto Lu Feng.

Lu Feng supported him. "What is it?"

An Zhe shook his head, for he was unable to describe how he was feeling.

Lu Feng touched his forehead, but he discovered nothing. An Zhe rested against his shoulder and took a hurried breath, unable to muster up any strength as he said, "I don't feel well…"

"Where are you not feeling well?"

An Zhe just dazedly wrapped himself around Lu Feng. It was difficult for him to describe how he was currently feeling in human language. It was like… like receiving the season's call, waiting for something to happen. The last time he had this sort of premonition, it was the day his spore left him. But this time was different.

Was he going to produce a new spore and begin another round of withering and rebirth? No, that wasn't right either. Right now, he only wished to be a little closer to Lu Feng. Lu Feng held his hand. The Colonel's hand was very cold, but then An Zhe realized that Lu Feng's temperature was normal and that it was himself who was very warm.

He rubbed against the hollow of Lu Feng's shoulder, shook his head, and closed his eyes, and some blurry images appeared before him.

Wind. The summer wind blew from someplace south of the Abyss. The jungle was a deep green sea, heaving and churning in the wind, and the vine's new leaves gently swayed as well. Summer was its flowering period. In the spaces between the leaves and branches, snow-white flowers grew like mushrooms popping up from the soil after the rain, and petals filled the sky.

Then came waiting.

Waiting for what?

Waiting for birds, waiting for butterflies.

What would the birds and butterflies do?

He whimpered in discomfort.

It was that vine's problem. He had just disregarded Lu Feng's warning and eaten the sap from one of this year's new vines before these strange symptoms presented themselves. It was like that time when he ate a piece of potato and passed out for three hours.

Lu Feng tilted An Zhe's head up and gently patted his cheek. "An Zhe?"

An Zhe was clearheaded, but he had lost control of his body. To clearly see his condition, Lu Feng lifted him up a little, which made him very uncomfortable. As

An Zhe kept trying to lean against Lu Feng, he mumbled, "The vine…"

"What? Pain?"

An Zhe hauled over one of the soft vines dangling from the corridor at random. "The vine."

Holding him, Lu Feng breathed a faint sigh of relief. Indeed, An Zhe did not look like he was in pain right now.

He patted An Zhe's back, and An Zhe whimpered as he tried to burrow into Lu Feng's arms.

Lu Feng glanced at the nearby cascade of flowering green vines.

Behind the vines was the white building of the research institute. Fortunately, this place was not far from their living quarters.

There was a faint aroma of flowers on the wind, something that had always been there. Now there was an additional cool fragrance that was faint to the point of being nearly imperceptible, like the scent of grass and small white flowers after the rain.

It was what mushrooms liked as they grew. After a few rainy seasons, it would become the scent of the mushrooms themselves.

The mighty Arbiter let out a rare soft sigh.

He held An Zhe by the shoulders, making him meet his eyes.

An Zhe tightened his grip on the fabric of his sleeve and looked up at him, fine droplets clinging to his wet eyelashes.

"You are a mushroom," Lu Feng said. "You can't eat things willy-nilly. ”

An Zhe looked at the vine. There were no vines in the world more normal than this one, but he was still very uncomfortable. Only by being close to Lu Feng could he find relief, like how the vine's white flowers insisted on waiting for butterflies.

With a frown, he returned Lu Feng's gaze.

Lu Feng looked down at him as well.

Then he was picked up.

"Will you keep that in mind now?"

# EPILOGUE – HEROES

"REMEMBER WELL: bravery, steadfastness, and self-sacrifice are the heroism in this age we are in, the heroism of humankind as a whole."

In the Garden of Eden, Tang Lan was reciting a lesson.

"What collective and individual heroism have in common are—"

Hubbard covered his face with an illustrated firearms manual. "You still aren't done reciting?"

"Just about." Tang Lan shut his book and looked up at the ceiling. "Hubbard."

"What is it?"

"Do you wish to be a hero?"

Hubbard pulled the manual down a little, revealing chestnut-colored eyes. He looked at the ceiling as well, and after three seconds, he said, "It doesn't matter to me."

After three more seconds, he asked, "What about you?"

Tang Lan said, "I don't know."

Their dormitory teacher at the Garden of Eden was a short-haired woman.

“Every boy wishes to be a hero." She put away their books, then added, “Girls, too."

Hubbard looked at her, seemingly discontent at the illustrated manuals being put away, but then the dormitory teacher said, “The assessment at the military base is the day after tomorrow. You two must take in extra nutrients, so hurry and go eat dinner."

Back then, the Garden of Eden's supplies were still very abundant, and it wasn't until children turned ten years old that they were divided into A, B, and C ranks and then sent away. Undoubtedly, Hubbard and Tang Lan would be taken in by the military.

After the Garden of Eden gave out detailed evaluation files, the field operations department had its eyes on them well in advance.

But just like all the unexpected accidents in human history, Tang Lan fell ill on the eve of the selection.

It was an unknown bacterial infection or some other untraceable disease. Whether he could be cured, whether it was contagious, and how to deal with it were all unknown.

As the final means of treatment, the Lighthouse provided all the basic drugs that it could and transferred him to a sealed-off floor so he could heal himself in isolation.

When the dormitory teacher told Hubbard this news, he was doing pull-ups in the training room in preparation for the military selection.

He got down from the horizontal bar and wiped his face with a towel. The expression in his eyes was heavy, and no emotion could be seen. He had always been cold and sparing with his words. The dormitory teacher anxiously looked at him.

“Can you pass on a message to him?" Hubbard asked. “Don't die."

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When Tang Lan was confirmed to have healed, the military selection had already been over for two months.

The drugs brought damage to his body, and it was uncertain if it would be permanent. As a result, he lost his qualification to enter the military and was assigned to the Outer City.

Just before he left, the dormitory teacher packed his luggage for him—a simple box containing antibiotics, bandages, emergency medicine, half a box of

multivitamins, a few books and illustrated manuals he often read, and a copy of The Principles of Heroism. He didn't ask who had put it all together.

“Hubbard went to the field operations department and is training in isolation."

He nodded, then picked up the suitcase and got on the train.

If a child of the Outer City was adopted, he'd live with his parents. Those who weren't would live in a collective, and they would not be allowed to leave the city before they came of age. They could take basic education courses that the base offered, do odd jobs, or join a mercenary team and receive training in advance. Having his own ideas, Tang Lan refused to be adopted. He began taking classes and training himself to regain his physical health that had been damaged by the drugs. As the intensity of his training broke through his limits time and again, his body miraculously recovered little by little.

Time passed very quickly, but life was not always smooth sailing.

Tang Lan was good-looking. With black hair and black eyes, his was a sharp-edged handsomeness, the most outstanding kind among Asians. In collective life, there was no shortage of thugs and troublemakers. Fistfights and bullying the weak were common occurrences. He had been beaten and experienced his share of suffering. At first, he didn't have the strength to hit back, but as time passed and his training continued, he could take on three by himself.

Last night, a mercenary from the team he wished to join came to find him and made trouble. He gained a new scar on his right wrist, while the mercenary lost both arms. Earlier today, he put the word out that he better watch himself.

He was not afraid. From a young age, he had never been afraid of much.

Of his own accord, he took up a defensive position at a winding alleyway and spread the news that he had come here to avoid fighting. This place consisted of the remains of unfinished buildings from when the Outer City was being built, so the surroundings were extremely complex. In a fight against many people in an open space, he had no chance of winning. Only in a place like this could he be confident in his success.

He waited on a rooftop around the entrance to the group of buildings and

didn't see a soul from noon to midnight. That mercenary was ferocious, the type to get even for the smallest slight, so this was not his style.

In the end, he went downstairs, and the faint sounds of fighting traveled over from afar. He casually hefted a steel bar and cautiously walked toward the end of the alleyway.

By the time he walked over, the sounds of fighting had already stopped.

Outside the alleyway, there was a wall encircling a patch of open space where three people were currently lying flat. Tang Lan jerked his head upward. Within the brief silence, he saw the moonlight and the buildings' shadows cast on the wall, and where black and gray shared a border, someone was leaning against the wall.

Hubbard had a chiseled face, chestnut-colored eyes, and slightly curly black hair. He seldom spoke and was usually expressionless, and combined with the fact that he was taller than other youths his age, people often gave him a wide berth.

He was also very easy to recognize.

Upon seeing Tang Lan arrive, Hubbard lifted his chin, gesturing toward the three people.

Without even looking at them, Tang Lan walked right up to him. “Did you sneak out?"

“No." Hubbard took out a blue ID from his pocket. Using the moonlight, Tang Lan saw that it was the Outer City's type.

“What's going on?" Tang Lan asked.

“I was disciplined," Hubbard said. “I'll be living in the Outer City from now on."

Tang Lan stared at him. “Don't lie to me."

Hubbard put away his ID card, saying nothing.

“What is happening?" Tang Lan did not let him dodge the question at all. “Tell me the truth."

In the distance, ear-piercing sirens cut through the night.

Hubbard asked, “What's wrong?"

Tang Lan was silent for a moment.

“Run," he said.

Afterward, because of that savage fight, the two of them spent a month in the City Defense Agency's jail.

As to exactly why Hubbard had come to the Outer City, Tang Lan did not ask again. Not until many years later, when he and Hubbard were drinking.

As a first-class mercenary, the boss of mercenary team AR137 rarely got drunk. Of course, his vice-captain always had some special tricks to get him drunk.

After several rounds, the man was so drunk that he pitched forward toward the table, and Tang Lan nearly failed to steady him.

“I got to know a field operations department officer at the supply depot,” Tang Lan said in a mild tone as he poured Hubbard another brimming cup of liquor. “Said he was a roommate who had trained with you. He asked me if Hubbard had some political bias, otherwise why would he voluntarily put himself in the Outer City, sacrificing an excellent future? What do you think, Boss?"

“What did I sacrifice?" Hubbard replied only after a long time had passed. “Things are pretty good right now."

“Captain, you're insightful and always victorious.” Tang Lan began knocking back his own drink. “Ten years later, you're humankind's number one frontline commander in the fight against monsters. If you aren't careful, you can still save the world and be a hero."

The alcohol burned so much that his vision went blurry. Upon recalling his recitation of "bravery, steadfastness, self-sacrifice, heroism,” he said to himself, “It seems that you don't particularly yearn to be a hero either."

A breathy sound seemed to come from Hubbard's chest. He was laughing.

“I *have* been one," he suddenly said.

“Been a what?"

“Sacrificed to…”

They were both equally drunk. One could not speak clearly, while the other could not hear clearly. Tang Lan tried hard to get closer to Hubbard, and he finally caught a few syllables.

“To the vice-captain… himself," Hubbard said.

“You've gone nuts," Tang Lan said.

Then he heard Hubbard say, “It's… individual… heroism."

“Motherfucker." With his breath stuck in his chest, Tang Lan gave him a kick. Afterward, he swigged a mouthful of alcohol and smiled.

“Have you read any books before, Hubbard?” he asked. “Can this phrase be used in this way?"

---

“Welcome to the Highland Research Institute, child."

“Hello, sir."

“Could you describe the process by which you changed into your current form?"

“Let me think."

“Okay."

At night at the research institute, a bonfire was lit on the terrace, illuminating Tang Lan's face. On his left cheek was a line of blue-black scales that had not yet completely receded.

“Around here”—he pointed to an area on a map of the Abyss—“I had an argument with… our captain, regarding whether or not to go deeper."

“I was on the night watch, and my mood was poor. I drove near the perimeter and stayed there.” Recalling the initial scene, Tang Lan's eyes went slightly out of focus. “Then I discovered that monster. It was clearly a large flying-class one,

but it was moving close to the ground. Its wingspan was over ten meters wide. As it ran along the ground, slowly climbing up the mountain slope, it made no noise whatsoever, just like a ghost. I almost assumed it was a shadow."

He demonstrated the strange posture of the monster as it traveled by foot, his voice trembling slightly. “I had a gut feeling that it must be very dangerous. I've dealt with monsters for many years and rarely saw this kind… that would make me feel so threatened. Similar things had been recorded in the mercenary handbooks and field guides, all of them fearsome.

“I couldn't take any risks. If we attacked it, perhaps everyone in the team would have died. I didn't know how quickly it could move. If we hastily retreated, it was very likely that we wouldn't have been able to escape at such a distance. I also couldn't warn everyone. If there was movement from our side, it may very well have charged over at high speed," Tang Lan said. “But I was sure that it was charging toward us."

At that point, he took a deep breath. “I didn't have a better alternative."

Pauli asked, “What did you do?"

“The storage compartment door was within my reach. I took out forty pounds of fresh hybrid meat, still bloody, and went in a different direction. Across from me, there was also a mountain," Tang Lan said.

“Monster meat that's undergone the hybridization process has various genes, so it's extremely alluring to monsters," Pauli said.

“That's right, we often used hybrid meat as bait," Tang Lan said. “It was lured in, and I slowly led it in a different direction. After walking for approximately twenty minutes, it began to speed up. I knew with just one look that it had figured out my strength and was preparing to immediately dash over and attack. At this point, we were far away from the camp. I sent them the communication signal to immediately withdraw, then put the meat down and went toward the opposite corner."

“Unfortunately,” he said, “it ate very quickly and had no plans to spare me. I carried a gun with me at all times, but I couldn't drive it off at all."

“Later… I changed into *this*, and I knew that I could never return to the base

again." His face was slightly pale as he bowed his head. “But my teammates should've safely withdrawn—at least I hope they did."

“They're definitely safe now.” Pauli gently patted his back. “You were very brave, child. You have the qualities of a hero."

For some reason, that sentence made Tang Lan smile. Then his gaze turned sad.

“Our captain and I were friends for many years, but I always left without bidding farewell. It was the same this time too,” he said. “We probably can't see each other again. This time, there's no place where his individual heroism can be exhibited."

---

The reinforcements from the Northern Base had arrived at the Highland Research Institute.

The heavy weapons were on the planes, and with Colonel Lu in command of the aerial fighting, the remaining light troops used large hang gliders to reach the ground. They dispersed in an orderly manner to sweep up the monsters that had attacked the research institute.

Hubbard was in a large open space to the right of the research institute, and behind him were steep cliffs. The scarlet triangle sign erected on the edge of the cliff read, "Slippery slope, do not approach." The main part of the research institute obstructed the majority of his vision. After a small monster was killed by a heavy machine gun, there were no more enemies in the area.

The reason why he came here was because he had looked up into the sky during the skirmish earlier.

A bout of bloody and confused combat was taking place in the sky. A huge monster died and fell to the ground, and when he looked up, he saw a black human figure in midair.

No, not a human. He had a human body, but sprouting from his back were a pair of massive jet-black wings, one of them broken. It was a xenogenic.

When he glimpsed the figure, it was also falling, so it only existed in his field of vision for a single brief second.

But this brief second made his soul go blank.

"Where are you going?" his teammate shouted at him, but he did not hear it clearly. It was like that voice was coming from a faraway place.

Then he rushed frantically to where that person had fallen.

It was a neglected place, with tangles of vines and waist-high weeds growing wildly. On the surface, nothing could be seen, and behind it was a cliff.

His gaze was cold as he stepped in, heavy machine gun in his grasp. Pushing aside the vines, he looked everywhere amidst the waist-high grasses.

A gasp that seemed like an illusion seemed to travel to his ears. He whirled around, but all he saw was the grass swaying in the strong wind.

"Is anyone there?" he shouted.

The gasping seemed to intensify, and the sounds of movement came from over his right shoulder.

He looked in that direction, but his gaze abruptly froze.

A thousand meters away, to the left rear of the research institute building, where the wind turbines were located. Several three-armed turbines were spinning furiously in the strong winds.

At this very moment, several snow-white tentacles covered in thorns had climbed up the turbine towers and entangled the rotating shafts at the centers of the turbines. The tentacles were sturdy and strong, and the rotations of two of the turbines had already ground to an eventual halt.

But the monster's goal was not limited to that, for the thorns and tubercles on its tentacles were standing upright. Hubbard had spent the greater part of his life in the wilderness with his team, and as a battle-seasoned veteran, he knew that that was an expression of the monster's building strength. It was about to uproot the turbines.

The heart of the skirmish was in the open space in front of the research institute, so it was doubtful that anyone would notice the distant turbines.

Furthermore, the color of the thing was incredibly similar to the turbines themselves.

Of course, the most important reason was—there was no time.

The third turbine stopped spinning.

The tentacles were already trembling with exertion.

The importance of these turbines was not very clear to Hubbard, but he could imagine it. The research institute's communications equipment and scientific research facilities—including the apparatus that the red sea of flames An Zhe had just walked into depended on—all needed large amounts of power.

He unloaded the large hand-held uranium bomb launcher from his back and took aim. Few individual soldiers could make nimble use of this weapon. It had plenty of firepower, but its weight was terrible, which made aiming extremely difficult, and the recoil could pulverize an ordinary person's shoulder.

Hubbard knew the vital points of tentacle-class monsters very well, but the research institute building severely hindered his aim, and the vital point was not exposed.

He drew back.

All of his thinking and decision-making were done within three seconds of seeing the monster. He drew back, one step, then another step.

The wind got louder and louder. Within a few short seconds, he had already passed the "do not approach" sign. He glanced backward, seeing the endless sky, and then looked down. He was only one step away from the cliff's edge, and the ground beneath his feet was swaying slightly. There was a clicking noise, as though a pebble had tumbled down.

Just a little bit further. The place where he could kill the monster while not destroying the building and turbines was just a little bit further.

He had never thought about wanting to be a hero. But he still took another step back.

There were more sounds of earth and rock loosening.

The crosshairs of the scope lay right over the monster's vital point.

The type of launcher in his hands had ample penetration, firepower and range.

"Bang—"

The tremendous recoil propelled him backward, the edge of the cliff trembled, and the already-loose rocks fell like an avalanche.

The wind whistled in his ears as he flew backward and began to fall.

His vision was filled with the magnificent daybreak. The sun leapt out from one side of the mountains, and the dazzling golden light struck his retinas. Just after this fleeting moment, another figure appeared from above the cliff and leapt down toward him.

A few drops of blood landed on Hubbard's cheek.

As though he were dreaming.

He reached out—

Tang Lan grabbed him with a hand that was pale from blood loss.

Shadows covered the sky, and bloody wings sprang open. The mountain wind blew eastward. Blood had soaked through the clothes on his chest, and he lacked the strength to fly back up. He simply grabbed Hubbard and glided down on the wind like the paper planes he had folded when he was young.

Hubbard looked at his eyes.

Tang Lan's eyes were still as handsome and chilly as before. There were two scratches on his cheek, and they were oozing blood.

Tang Lan, looking at Hubbard as well, smiled.

There seemed to be much in Hubbard's eyes. He could see it. He wished to ask why he was here and what he had experienced, and he wished even more to ask why he would sacrifice his own life and fall from the cliff along with him.

Tang Lan simply smiled and held Hubbard's hand even more tightly. Hubbard responded to him with the same amount of strength.

All that remained in the world was the howling wind. They were falling toward an unknown destiny, but there was nothing to fear.

"You became a hero once," Tang Lan said. "I'll do the same."

In the distance, the mountains sprawled out.

The rising sun gushed forth.

# EPILOGUE - SKYLIGHT

AN ZHE WAS up in the front of the vehicle.

The midday sunlight shone down through the armored vehicle's skylight.

Today was his first day going with Lu Feng into the Abyss.

When humans carried out missions in the wilderness, the armored vehicles served as their mobile encampments. The driver's cabin was up in front. A massive storage space took up three-quarters of the vehicle body, and the remaining quarter was at the bottom, a low-ceilinged and oppressive rest cabin in which one could barely stand up straight. The rest cabin was nominally divided up by thin sheets of metal, two people per compartment, and in the middle there was only a tea table for putting water cups on. Because they had not seen sunlight in a long time, the quilts and pillows carried a slightly musty scent. Before arriving at the human base for the first time, An Zhe had sat in Vance's team's vehicle, and An Ze's memories also contained some impressions related to the armored vehicles. Those impressions all had to do with the narrow, humid, dark, and cramped conditions.

This impression was so deeply ingrained in his mind that in the past, as soon as he thought of how the Colonel would have to rest in the armored vehicle for six months out of the year, he would feel that it was difficult toil. Maybe when the Colonel got up from the narrow bed in the rest cabin, he would even bump his head against the ceiling.

Then the Colonel would be in a bad mood.

When the Colonel was in a bad mood, the entire team would live beneath a massive shadow, trembling with fear, and nobody would dare to say a single word.

This atmosphere would make the Colonel's mood worsen and then affect his sleep.

So when the Colonel woke up the next morning, due to lack of sleep, his intelligence would decline by a certain extent and his actions would no longer be immaculate and flawless.

… So he would bump his head again.

Thus, the team's journey within the Abyss would be carried out day after day beneath that massive shadow.

On the first night spent in the Colonel's vehicle, there was a beautiful starry sky outside the skylight. In a roomy space, An Zhe sat on a flat bed, hugging a pillow. As a cool and comfortable breeze blew in from the side window, he described his initial fantasies to the Colonel.

The Colonel looked like he had heard something baffling.

An Zhe had predicted his confusion, but he hadn't predicted the issue that the Colonel paid attention to first.

"Why did you think that my intelligence would decline after waking up in the morning?" Lu Feng asked.

"I expected that you hadn't gotten enough sleep that night," An Zhe replied.

"Even if I don't get enough sleep, that kind of scenario wouldn't happen," the Colonel said. "Furthermore, supposing I bump into the ceiling once, there wouldn't be a second time."

"Then that means you really have bumped into it before," An Zhe said.

This time, he triumphed over Lu Feng in their battle of words.

After a short silence, Lu Feng said, "Such a scenario happened only once, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old."

"But no matter what time it is, my mood and intelligence are always very stable."

"Is that so?" An Zhe looked at him suspiciously. "But a while ago, I often noticed that in the morning, you'd be looking at me and not moving at all, as if

your thinking speed was very slow."

"That's because you wake up too late." Lu Feng was expressionless. "If you wake up earlier than me, you can look at me."

What he said was unexpectedly very logical. An Zhe turned his back to Lu Feng, expressing his unwillingness to continue conversing. But three minutes later, he couldn't hold back anymore. He asked Lu Feng, "Why are you treated differently from them?"

The Colonel did not sleep in the rest cabin below. His vehicle had obviously been modified; the roomy and bright space above was the Colonel's actual living area. The four walls of the living area were all a beautiful silvery white, there were windows above and on both sides, and in the limited space, even a separate lavatory had been installed.

Next to the bed was a desk, the setup somewhat resembling that of Outer City's standard rooms. The majority of Lu Feng's extremely perfunctory work notebook was completed on that very desk.

In short, this comfortable and bright scene differed from An Zhe's assumptions.

The Colonel said, "One Arbiter went mad inside his vehicle. There were other reasons for his madness, but the supply depot still upgraded the living environments of the later Arbiters."

"They may have wanted you guys to cheer up a bit," An Zhe said.

"Mm," Lu Feng said. "Later on when I led my men, I had the supply depot modify all of the Trial Court's vehicles and add five more vehicles to store materials."

"You're so nice," An Zhe said.

Lu Feng's tone was unusually flat. "Because I discovered that they often bumped their heads, and then they would be in a bad mood."

Hugging the pillow, An Zhe began to laugh.

Unexpectedly, what Lu Feng said next was, "Have you bumped your head before?"

"I haven't," An Zhe said.

He was different from foolish humans.

Then Lu Feng looked him over from top to bottom.

"I forgot," he said. "You lack the qualification for it."

An Zhe felt that if there came a day when his life got snuffed out, it would definitely be because Lu Feng angered him to death.

---

An Zhe was on the roof of the car.

The dusk sunlight spilled across the armored vehicle's skylight.

Today was his thirtieth day staying with Lu Feng in the Abyss.

In the Abyss, they had discovered a beautiful valley. Slender blades of verdant grass covered the valley soil, which encircled a clear lake.

The almost-translucent grasses were suffused with a weak fluorescence.

"It's so beautiful," An Zhe said as he looked around.

"No. 29 fine-bladed grass," Lu Feng said, "can secrete strongly-corrosive liquid and begins hunting when night falls. We should go now."

An Zhe got down from the skylight's little ladder, and Lu Feng went to the cabin.

The cabin and the living area were connected. An Zhe could see the Colonel at any time even if he was not sitting in the front passenger seat, and normally he would also stay in the areas that the Colonel could see in the rearview mirror.

In the living area, he read for a while, then began to clean. In fact, though, there wasn't much to clean; it could only be described as tidying up.

He closed the Colonel's work notebook, put the ballpoint pen in the pen cup at a forty-five-degree slant to the right, and placed the books he himself had flipped through back in their original spots. Then he folded the small ladder and stored it in an unobtrusive corner, wiped down the tube lights, and folded the

quilt into a perfect square. A bit of dust had landed on the windowsill, and although there seemed to be no need to wipe it off, he always felt that the Colonel had a slight obsession with cleanliness—his rooms in the Main City and the City Defense Agency had an almost neurotic simplicity, bare to the point where they didn't seem lived in. So An Zhe carefully wiped away that bit of dust, then wiped it three more times.

After he was done, he looked up and met the gaze of a small bug.

The bug was very small. He recognized this type of creature; it was a firefly, which contained few nutrients and lived in groups. Because they were often accompanied by poisonous mushrooms, within the Abyss they lived relatively well.

At dusk, the little firefly's stomach was aglow with a faint fluorescence. It was very beautiful, and An Zhe liked it a lot. Back when he was purely a mushroom, he had secretly envied those fluorescent mushrooms that could emit light.

But after a moment's hesitation, he nonetheless gently blew the little bug out of the car. As someone he slightly suspected of having an obsession with cleanliness, the Colonel probably wouldn't like bugs in the room, he thought.

After the bug left, he closed the window and began to wipe away the dust on it.

The entire time, he felt like the Colonel was watching him.

Sure enough, three seconds later, the Colonel asked, "How come you've been wiping the window this whole time? Do you have an obsession with cleanliness?"

An Zhe was rendered speechless.

He turned and left the area that was visible in the rearview mirror.

Over the next three days, An Zhe constantly observed Lu Feng.

First, he discovered that whether the quilt was neatly folded or not would have no effect on the Colonel's mood.

The angle at which the ballpoint pen was placed would have no effect on the Colonel's usage of it either.

Then he deliberately dirtied the desk. At night, when the Colonel saw the tea stain on the desk, he did not show any obvious displeasure. After picking up the cleaning spray and dissolving it, he calmly continued working.

An Zhe began to doubt the importance of his former neurotic cleaning habits.

He felt a little lost.

At bedtime, Lu Feng held him from behind.

"I don't have an obsession with cleanliness. Before, I saw that your rooms were very bare," An Zhe said quietly. "I thought you liked it like that."

Lu Feng kissed his temple.

"Thank you," he said.

An Zhe laid his fingers on Lu Feng's arms, saying nothing.

After a while, Lu Feng said, "I didn't pay attention to it before."

"What about now?" An Zhe asked.

Lu Feng said, "Anything's fine as long as you're comfortable with it."

Pillowed on Lu Feng's arm, An Zhe looked down.

This was only a minor matter, but he had thought about it a lot.

"I just, I just thought..." With some difficulty, he organized his words, his gaze blank. "Sometimes, I don't really understand you."

"It's impossible to completely understand someone," Lu Feng said.

"But..." After saying that, An Zhe's voice trailed off.

Humankind's matters were too numerous, and their emotions were too numerous as well, he thought. Humans were always speculating on and thinking about other humans. Sometimes he really wished that he and Lu Feng could be two mushrooms, blown by the same wind, drenched by the same rain, and spending their entire lifetimes growing together, nothing more.

He turned to face Lu Feng, but Lu Feng got up.

An Zhe watched him, bewildered. The Colonel pulled open the nightstand drawer, took something out, and held it out to him.

In the darkness, it emitted a beautiful pale green fluorescence. Wide-eyed, An Zhe accepted it. It was a glass bottle, and inside it were more than a dozen little fireflies, the same kind as the one he saw that one evening.

They flew around in the transparent glass bottle. Now that it was nighttime, the sky had completely darkened, and those tiny lights were even more beautiful than they had been at dusk.

"Wow," An Zhe said.

He held the bottle tight.

The Colonel said, "For you to play with."

After saying that, he opened the glass bottle, and the fireflies flew out. As they were social creatures, they flew together from one side of the room to the other and from the floor to the ceiling, resembling tiny floating lights as they did so.

An Zhe sat up in bed and grabbed at them a few times. They were a species that had a close relationship with mushrooms, so they did not avoid him, but rather circled around him.

"When did you catch them? I didn't notice." With a smile, he turned back to look at Lu Feng and discovered that the Colonel seemed to have been attentively watching him ever since he took out the glass bottle.

He suddenly got it.

It was impossible for someone to completely understand another person, but humans have always been trying to understand each other.

This was also a type of joy, like being drenched by the same rain.

---

An Zhe was up against the vehicle door.

Misty drizzle landed on the skylight, turning it all hazy.

This was his third time going with Lu Feng into the Abyss.

He was currently turning into a mushroom.

Hyphae climbed up Lu Feng's clothes, and his shape gradually transformed. After becoming a mushroom and casting off the shackles of his human body, he could freely go here and there in the Abyss.

Halfway through the change, Lu Feng pressed down on his stomach with one hand. The man had always liked to play like this.

Lu Feng asked, "When will you have a baby spore?"

His tone of voice was as natural as if he was asking, "When will you give me a child?"

Of course this wasn't a natural thing.

Firstly, An Zhe could not give birth to children. He could only grow a spore that belonged to himself alone, an endospore, according to Pauli—the embryonic form of a new body.

Secondly, even he himself did not know when he would have a spore. As for when his initial spore had started growing and the reason why it had started growing, he no longer remembered.

He said, "I don't know."

Then he asked, "Do you want a baby spore very badly?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"It's very entertaining."

An Zhe was angered by this man once more.

Was toying with his subconscious really such a joyful thing?

He said, "I won't give it to you to play with."

Lu Feng earnestly rubbed his stomach, as if by doing so he'd be able to speed up the baby spore's growth.

An Zhe couldn't be bothered to acknowledge him. Continuing to change shape, he wound his hyphae securely around the man.

Lu Feng plucked apart some of his hyphae, then tied two wisps of it into a

bow. But An Zhe had special knot-untying skills. By reversing the original steps, he untied it.

Lu Feng tied a more complex knot.

An Zhe untied it.

Another knot.

Another untying.

In the end, An Zhe completely retracted those two wisps of hyphae.

This game was so childish, even human younglings would not deign to play it.

Lu Feng laughed softly, then scooped up large clumps of hyphae in order to smooth An Zhe's ruffled strands.

By no means did An Zhe need such a service. Every time Lu Feng smoothed down the hyphae, he retracted some of them. Ten minutes later, his body had shrunk by three-quarters of its usual shape. He was now only the size of a coconut.

Lu Feng seemed to suddenly realize something. He asked, "You can get smaller?"

He could.

This was something An Zhe himself had only recently realized as well. He could control his own size, but he didn't know if it had anything to do with how he used to eat things willy-nilly. He obviously hadn't eaten such things in a long time.

Then he heard Lu Feng ask, "Can you get even smaller?"

An Zhe tried hard to retract his hyphae and became the size of an apple.

With further shrinking, he became the size of a ping-pong ball.

... It seemed that he could still keep going.

Feeling his control over his own hyphae, An Zhe continued getting smaller.

His body suddenly felt weightless as it left the ground.

He was startled, but then he realized that Lu Feng had picked him up.

And after that, he was placed in the chest pocket of Lu Feng's uniform.

With a click, the button snapped into place.

"I'll take you out to play," The Colonel said with a relaxed voice, as though he were in high spirits.

An Zhe was rendered speechless.

The Colonel had definitely obtained some kind of strange joy.

---

An Zhe was in the vehicle.

The early morning sunlight spilled in through the armored vehicle's skylight.

This was the fourth time he and Lu Feng had gone to the Abyss.

He woke up.

But he did not get out of bed.

He also could not get out of bed.

He wrapped himself up in a quilt and refused to get out until Lu Feng had prepared a cup of milk and placed it in front of him.

Lu Feng asked, "Are you feeling a bit better now?"

An Zhe nodded.

"Does it still hurt?"

An Zhe shook his head.

Then he nodded.

With a slight frown, Lu Feng came over to An Zhe and peeled away the thin quilt that he had wrapped himself with. An Zhe allowed him to peel it away.

The surface of the quilt was made from a delicate fabric, both smooth and soft, yet when compared to the translucent and delicate milk-white skin, it seemed coarse.

But now on the skin there were crisscrossing marks, and just below the left

side of his chest was broken skin surrounded by a large patch of red. It had originally been nothing at all. An Zhe had gotten up this morning and put on his shirt, but the fabric just happened to rub against the wound, causing it to sting, and he softly gasped.

Lu Feng pulled open a drawer and took out the alcohol, then dipped a cotton ball in it and cleaned the wound before applying medicine.

So the skin turned red again. An Zhe's skin was too delicate, like the white mushrooms newly grown after the rain, leaking juice with only a pinch.

After the medicine was applied, the area around the wound felt chilly. An Zhe wrapped himself up tightly in the quilt again, and he was pulled into Lu Feng's arms along with the quilt, where he rested his head against Lu Feng's right shoulder, leaning against him.

A little while later, it suddenly occurred to him that this man was the culprit responsible for the wound and that he should not peacefully coexist with him.

An Zhe tried to get away, but he had already been restrained in place.

He struggled fruitlessly, and in the process, the fabric of the quilt rubbed against his wound again.

"Don't move," Lu Feng said.

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

This man's tone of voice was not only lacking the slightest hint of guilt, but it also sounded like he was criticizing him for squirming around. It was extremely hateful.

It just so happened that he could see Lu Feng's neck as soon as he looked up. He ground his teeth.

Then he was hugged even tighter, and he could not move at all anymore.

An Zhe mulled over it and was still very unhappy in the end. It was not a temporary unhappiness, but rather a mood that incrementally developed over many days. He had been constantly wishing to find fault with Lu Feng.

This time, there was finally a wound worth noting.

He mumbled, "You're so mean."

Lu Feng asked, "Am I?"

"Yes."

"No I'm not." Lu Feng pulled him over. "I'm being very attentive."

An Zhe did not know what he was talking about.

Supposing all of this was the aftermath of being attentive, then when you are not being attentive, do you take people apart and eat them?

An Zhe frowned. "That's impossible."

"Hm?"

"When you go too far, I struggle every time," An Zhe said, "and I cry."

Lu Feng looked at him.

"But you ignore me," An Zhe said, "and you even become more mean."

The new day began with criticism from a little mushroom—Lu Feng looked down at the mushroom in his arms.

His voice was soft and delicate as he complained under his breath.

An Zhe finished speaking.

But Lu Feng still wished to hear him talk more.

So he asked, "Is there anything else?"

An Zhe glared at him, the meaning of which was, "Is this not yet enough?"

"I thought that was the way to pay attention to you," Lu Feng replied.

An Zhe was confused.

"Is there anything else?" An Zhe asked.

"Yes," Lu Feng said. "You ought to learn to control yourself."

An Zhe did not know what he was talking about.

He could not possibly have done anything wrong.

He looked straight at Lu Feng, his voice cold as he said clearly, "There's

something wrong with you."

"See," Lu Feng said, "you're acting childish again."

An Zhe confirmed that there was indeed a species difference between himself and Lu Feng.

If he could reach over to pick up the pillow, the first thing he would do would be to throw the pillow into Lu Feng's face.

But now his hands were both bound by Lu Feng, so he could only maintain a deadlock with this man with his eyes.

After a while, Lu Feng was the first to smile.

He lowered his head to kiss the corner of An Zhe's lips. An Zhe turned his head to avoid his touch, but he was restrained.

First he found himself tilted up by the chin and deeply kissed a few times, only being released after he could not catch his breath. Then Lu Feng gently kissed the corners of his eyes.

Breaths skimmed past his ear. Lu Feng no longer touched him through the quilt, reaching in with his right hand to grasp An Zhe's waist, where there were certainly still red marks from last night.

An Zhe trembled all over.

He said, "I don't want to."

"I can't hear you."

An Zhe brought up the past again. "Then every time I cry, you can't see it either?"

"It's not like I'm beating you. Crying is useless."

The new day began with unspoken criticism of the Colonel.

---

An Zhe was still in the vehicle.

Starlight spilled in through the armored vehicle's skylight.

This was the fourth time he and Lu Feng had gone to the Abyss.

The third time An Zhe mumbled on and on to himself, the Colonel put forth a solution.

Without any expression, he leaned against the back of the bed. "Do it yourself."

With an expression and tone of voice that was like he was at the genetic examination office at the city gates, next to the examination device, he said, "Do it yourself."

Facing him, An Zhe hesitated for a while before several strands of hyphae crept onto the Colonel.

Then he leaned down and kissed the Colonel's Adam's apple.

Then he kissed the side of the Colonel's neck and contemplated his next move.

Then it occurred to him that he was wearing loose white pajamas while the Colonel was still neatly dressed, so he began to struggle with the shirt buttons.

He was intimately familiar with this shirt, for he was an emotionless washing machine after all.

But not only did the shirt not open up as a result of their friendship, it was even more difficult to undo because of the angle.

After undoing the first button, he said to Lu Feng, "Undo them yourself."

Just like how Lu Feng would sometimes say to him.

Colonel Lu remained unmoved.

A few more strands of hyphae climbed up.

Humbling himself, the Colonel undid the second button in an unhurried manner.

An Zhe continued to think.

"You're someone who came from the third underground floor," he heard Lu Feng say, his voice slightly hoarse and containing a hint of a smile. "You should be a bit more practiced."

An Zhe was silent.

Then he said in a small voice, "It's not like I learned anything."

And he could not go back and learn again.

"I can see that," Lu Feng said. When this man lowered his voice, it contained a distant magnetism. An Zhe gave a start, feeling numb from his ears to his back.

So he once again recalled the past.

When he first met Lu Feng, he had even personally said "I work on the third underground floor," and the Colonel had responded with an "oh."

An Zhe was very curious about the impression the Colonel had of him at that time.

Seeming to understand him, the Colonel said, "I didn't know you were a mushroom then. I thought that if you didn't work on the third floor, there'd be no way for you to survive in the base."

He nonchalantly glanced at An Zhe, then continued. "Now it seems that even so, you can't support yourself."

The number of hyphae increased.

The Colonel stopped talking.

Right now, An Zhe's greatest wish was that the Colonel would be like that of his mannequin, unable to say a single word.

He lay his slender white fingers on Lu Feng's chest, waiting for the other man to finish undoing the buttons so he could hold his hand.

Then he saw the Colonel look at that place, seemingly also contemplating—and it was the kind of expression he only had when contemplating something serious.

A few seconds later, Lu Feng said, "In the past, you deceived me."

An Zhe tilted his head.

"Slow on the uptake, ignorant of what the crime of indecency is, doing illegal work with monthly wages lower than the baseline." The Colonel listed these three items, seemingly deep in thought. "These can't be explained by excessive

simple-mindedness and limited intelligence."

An Zhe was at a loss for words.

He said, "Stop right there."

But it was obvious that the Colonel's hearing would selectively stop working.

"That night was also very unusual. You invited me to stay in your room."

An Zhe said, "That was because you had nowhere to go."

"The problem lay with how you wanted to give your toothbrush to me. You didn't understand human social etiquette at all."

An Zhe said nothing, as though his hearing had also selectively stopped working.

"Unless that was a clumsy flirting method you learned on the third floor… But that night, you were very well behaved," the Colonel said.

An Zhe knew the Colonel was talking about the night of Judgment Day, when he had invited this man to sleep for a night in his room.

He went to hold Lu Feng, pressing his forehead against the other man's chest. Even through a layer of fabric, there was a warm and solid sensation, and he could hear a steady heartbeat in his ears. All sorts of things had happened, just like a dream.

An Zhe imagined another possibility.

"Then," An Zhe said, "supposing that, at that time…"

Supposing that, at that time, it truly was a coincidental mistake—

If he truly was a worker on the third underground floor, or if he had mindlessly followed Mr. Shaw's suggestion, using another method to get close to the Arbiter—what would he have done that night?

The xenogenic with ulterior motives took in the Arbiter who had nowhere to return to.

When they did not yet know each other well and were even on their guard against the other.

But it was also at a time full of death, unrest, and abandonment.

Supposing that, at that time, An Zhe had leaned over to kiss Lu Feng on the lips or undid the buttons of his coat, what would they have been like?

An Zhe didn't know.

He only knew that to this day, when he thought of Lu Feng's back on the night of Judgment Day, his heart would violently tremble. He looked at those green eyes and seemed to return to that moment, when the blood-scented evening wind howled through the city.

So that expression appeared on his face again.

A quiet, grief-laden expression.

God did not love the world.

God loved the world.

The bed, the desk, and the decorations here used to be like the base's standard rooms. At night, the room darkened. The sound of the wind came from an unknown place, much like that night.

The An Zhe from that time was also like this, with snow-white soft cotton pajamas and an innocent face.

Lu Feng put a hand on his shoulder, his gaze seeming tangible. An Zhe first dropped his gaze slightly, then lifted it again to meet his eyes. His eyelashes also trembled slightly, like the minute shake of flowers and leaves when a butterfly perched upon them.

Lu Feng stared at him for a long time, as though he were staring at the twilight above fields of snow.

Until this twilight descended, and An Zhe leaned over to kiss him on the corner of his lips.

Soundlessly, he moved to kiss him on the lips.

The past flickered out.

# THE MUSHROOM'S DIARY

NEWS HAS COME from the Northern Base. Beneath the ruins of the Main City, they plan to establish a human history museum in the center of the ventilation ducts, which avoided being blown up by a stroke of luck. For this reason, they're asking for almost everyone's memoirs. Many of the people at the research institute have handed theirs in.

But Lu Feng hasn't.

He doesn't have a memoir, nor does he write in a diary. His work notebook was equivalent to a diary, but those words were too slapdash, and it has already been lost.

In all of humankind's records thus far, the Arbiter himself has not left behind any words whatsoever.

However, amidst humankind's records, there's no shortage of writings and discussions about him. Humans think their history is like a long flowing river. He doesn't speak, hiding within this long river, yet he seems to be behind the shadow of every single ripple.

Once many years have gone by, how would people think of him? Would there be people who love him? Would there be people who hate him? Would there be people who doubt that he existed?

What can I do to make him more real?

I don't know.

He's loved people before. His mother, his friends, his subordinates. He hasn't hated anyone before, though.

He also likes humankind, but there were at least two times in which he felt

bone-deep loneliness amidst the crowds. The first time was on Judgment Day at the city gates, and the second time was when the Arbiter's mannequin was shot by the opposition faction. At that time, would he have felt lost? What would have caused him to feel lost? The crowd that didn't understand him? Himself? All of humankind? Or the fact that humans would never be able to understand each other?

I don't know.

Every time I think of these things, I feel so upset that I cannot speak.

There will also be some times when I think, why are he and I always together? Will he be able to free himself from eternal loneliness by holding my hyphae in his hand? I can talk with him, but what can we talk about? He and I are the two most dissimilar people, and the people of the research institute have never been able to understand why we are able to peacefully coexist.

I asked Pauli, and Pauli said, "Actually, you're the two most similar people in this world."

I didn't understand.

Pauli said, "Once you get a little older, when you reach the age where you can look back on the past, you'll understand."

But at that point in time, where would he be? And where would I be?

We'll probably be traveling around the world together, I suppose.

All right, I'll stop writing here.

I have to go prepare a New Year's gift for him.

# THE COLONEL'S DIARY

THE MUSHROOM SAID that my diary was too slapdash, but his is by no means honest either.

What he says he doesn't know, he actually knows all of it.

Childish.

# A QUESTION

THE ENGINE ROARED, and beneath the clear winter sunlight, the powerful airflow of the massive fighter plane lifted the snow on the ground, sending it flying along with dirt and dust. Lu Feng walked toward it, and the crew commander's voice came from the walkie-talkie. "News has come from the Northern Base. Monsters have invaded for the first time since winter began, and the scale is of an unprecedented large size, so the base is continuing to ask for reinforcements. Let's hurry."

After the final "bell toll," the Northern Base's military forces were divided into two branches. One part stayed at the original base, while the other part was stationed at the Highland Research Institute to assist with the collection of samples of living things from the Abyss and advance the research of substance frequencies. Since the base and the research institute had reached an accord, it was only natural that the Northern Base would seek the Highland troops' aid upon being attacked.

But, An Zhe thought—

If it weren't for such a crucial pressing task, he doubted that Lu Feng would have ever returned to the Northern Base again in this lifetime. In other words, he had assumed Lu Feng had no plans of going back to that place, but after receiving the emergency mission, the Colonel still chose to walk toward the PL1109's landing pad.

Just like that similarly dusty day three years ago, when he went to the PL1109 and went to the Underground City Base across the ocean.

Because he was thinking, he fell a few steps behind. It just so happened that he could see the back view of Lu Feng up ahead, which was identical to that

earlier time. The Colonel always went toward the unknown like this, never looking back.

Just as An Zhe had that thought, he saw the Colonel turn around and look at him. Beneath the silvery sky, a chilly and beautiful facial profile.

An Zhe looked at him while standing in place.

"What are you thinking about?" the Colonel asked.

Only then did An Zhe walk over, catching up to him.

"You're really handsome," he said in a small voice.

Then he saw the Colonel smile.

It was like the fluttering of the aurora or the drifting of snowflakes. The Colonel rarely smiled so obviously.

So An Zhe also asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"I was recalling that time at the base," the Colonel said, "when the incident at the Underground City Base happened."

Surprisingly, this man was thinking of that time as well. Saying nothing, An Zhe listened to him continue.

"I saw you before I left," he said.

An Zhe hummed in response. He remembered that they had touched upon the matter of the mushroom soup, and then the Colonel had told him to take care of himself.

He said, "You also said that you may not be able to return."

"That sounds right," the Colonel said. "It felt like you were worried about me and thus said a few extra things."

"Just one thing," An Zhe replied.

The Colonel smiled again.

The light reflecting off the snow illuminated the silver badge on his combat uniform. The combat uniform was black camo, black fingerless gloves, and a tactical vest. It gave the feeling of a casual yet clean strength, unlike the

uniforms worn in peacetime.

"There was indeed something left unsaid," Lu Feng said. "I wanted to ask you —"

He cut himself off.

An Zhe asked him, "What?"

Lu Feng was expressionless, seemingly weighing his words.

So An Zhe became even more curious. Just as he thought that the Colonel was going to say something of vital importance and great depth— The Colonel gestured to himself with his gun and asked, "Do I look good?"

# BASE CHRONICLES

IN 2020, the geomagnetic field began to swiftly weaken.

That same year, in Asia, Plan A—constructing a simulated geomagnetic field—began.

That same year, in North America, Plan B—constructing the humans' underground city—began.

In 2030, the geomagnetic field disappeared, so the biosphere fell into dysfunction, the climate changed dramatically, and the solar radiation was abnormal. The "Desert Age" had begun.

In 2040, Plan B was successful, and the underground city was opened up to inhabitants.

In 2043, Plan A was successful, and a weak magnetic field covered the entire world.

In 2045, with the marine life of the Pacific Ocean at the center, species all over the world mutated. The "Calamity Age" had arrived, and the war began.

That same year, construction of the Northern Base and Southeastern Base were completed.

That same year, the Underground City Base assisted in the construction of the Virginia Base.

In 2050, in the war, humankind suffered tremendous losses, and the "Fusion Faction" was established.

In 2053, humans observed widespread genetic mutations, and birth rates plummeted.

In 2061, there was a mutant rodent upsurge, and the Southeastern Base fell.

In 2066, the women of humankind's four bases voted unanimously to pass the Rose Manifesto. The bases introduced a fertility scoring system, and women with a score above 60 signed an agreement with the bases to voluntarily subject themselves to artificial insemination.

In 2067, at the Northern Base, "Judgment Day" occurred. The Arbiter's Code was introduced. Holding the license to kill people, the Arbiter indiscriminately shot all who were contaminated.

In 2070, the Fusion Faction defected, and the Highland Research Institute was established.

In 2073, the Virginia Base fell.

In 2115, at the Northern Base, the "Rose Incident" broke out. Women united to revolt against the base's envious crushing grasp on fertility. The base suppressed it, and all women with a score over 60 were confined in the "Garden of Eden."

In 2135, communication conditions deteriorated even further. The Northern Base and Underground City base closed the daily communication channel, leaving only the emergency channel open.

In 2150, the Northern Base's population experienced steady growth, and the "Recovery Age" began.

In 2154, genetic examination technology matured.

The story begins.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shisi is a Jinjiang Wenxuecheng contract author who began serializing web novels in 2016. Specializing in fantasy, Shisi has a dynamic writing style and has also written xianxia, sci-fi, and other genres. Aside from her most famous work, Little Mushroom, her other published titles include Cultivating in C, The Cat's Rose, and Zhezhu. Many of Shisi's novels have been licensed for multimedia adaptations.