

Information

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Chapter 1 The Unlucky Man of the Moon Country

The year 3066. In the third residential zone of Chibei on the Moon Nation, the air circulation system emitted its usual faint scent of ozone and metal.

A young man wearing overalls stained with engine oil was squatting in his "workshop"—a cramped compartment stuffed with various homemade devices and empty snack wrappers—grinning foolishly at a pile of buzzing equipment.

"It worked! I knew it! Using coils from scrapped maglev trains plus the resonator I snagged from Old Zhangtou's Scrapyard, I could definitely create a gravity interference field!" He proudly patted a smoking hunk of metal beside him. "Sure, it only makes this bag of chips float five centimeters... but I bet cucumber-flavored ones would float higher! Science! This is pure sci—"

BANG!

The compartment door was violently shoved open, hitting the wall with a dull thud.

Several safety officers clad in the Earth Federation's standard gray uniforms, their expressions colder and harder than lunar rock, blocked the doorway. The bald leader glanced at the floating chip bag and the still-smoking "experimental device," his mouth twitching.

"Lin Feng?"

The bald man's voice grated like rusty bearings. "You are suspected of illegally conducting high-energy gravity field experiments, violating Articles 7, 12, and... oh, forget it, lots of articles of the Lunar Stability Convention. You're coming with us."

The smile froze on Lin Feng's face as if someone had hit pause. "Officer, misunderstanding! This is absolutely a misunderstanding!" He raised his hands in an exaggerated gesture. "Look, this is just a... uh... maglev toy? Yeah, for the neighborhood kids! Want one for your kid? Free shipping!"

The young safety officer behind the bald man couldn't help rolling his eyes. "This is the Moon Nation. We, the Earth Federation, have jurisdiction here! Stop the nonsense and come out!"

Standing in the shadows by the door, the Moon Nation technical liaison officer assigned to escort this "troublemaker" frowned slightly. Su Wanqing, wearing a form-fitting, efficient black Moon Guard uniform, seemed utterly out of place in this messy doghouse of a room. Watching Lin Feng's face, which was a masterpiece of "innocence" and "I can still talk my way out of this," she sighed silently. This guy had been a "legend" at the Moon Nation Engineering Academy—renowned for his shocking talent and even more shocking ability to cause trouble.

"A toy?" The bald safety officer sneered, kicking aside an empty instant noodle cup at his feet. "A 'toy' that sucked Old Wang's pot of space moss from next door onto the ceiling? Cut the crap, take him away!"

Half an hour later, Lin Feng, sporting a pair of lightweight electronic manacles, was "escorted" onto a small, unmarked gray transport ship. The cabin was narrow and cold, equipped only with two rows of hard seats.

Su Wanqing, in her black uniform, sat at the long table in the command room, tossed her military cap onto the edge of the table, crossed her long legs propping up a tablet, and focused intently on verifying something.

"So, Officer Su," Lin Feng twisted his neck, the manacles emitting a faint hum, "the treatment here is pretty lousy, huh? Not even a cup of hot tea? I was, after all, a former nominee for Moon Nation's 'Most Promising Young Engineer'!"

Su Wanqing didn't look up, her voice flat and unemotional. "You were nominated because you fixed the central circulation system's core pump at seventeen. You were disqualified because you drew a giant... well, an obscene doodle on it, leading to complaints, removal, and inspection."

"Art! That was artistic expression!" Lin Feng protested. "Besides, didn't I fix the pump? It was running like a dream!"

"And then three months later, your 'artistic modification' caused it to overload and nearly shut down the oxygen circulation for half the residential zone." Su Wanqing finally looked up and shot him a glare, her slender dark eyes holding a trace of helplessness. "Lin Feng, the Earth Federation is very angry this time. Your 'little toy' triggered measurable gravity fluctuations. Minor, but enough for them to use as an excuse to pressure the Moon Nation. Exile to the 'Shard Zone.' Just five years. That's the lightest sentence possible, okay? First Officer, launch!"

"Aye!" the electronic First Officer responded. The transport ship slowly ascended, soon entering lunar orbit and gradually escaping the Moon's gravity.

"Wait! The Shard Zone?" Lin Feng gasped dramatically. "That godforsaken edge of the asteroid belt, full of space junk and pirates? Five years? Officer Su, could you really bear to watch the Moon Nation's brightest engineering star fall and rot in a place like that?"

"I could," Su Wanqing replied crisply, looking back down at her datapad. "And 'brightest'? You're more like a firework waiting to explode."

Lin Feng was momentarily speechless. He leaned back into his seat with a disgruntled huff. His eyes drifted to her slender, toned legs. "Fine, exile it is. But Officer Su, isn't this escort mission a bit too cushy for you? Just you alone? Aren't you afraid this 'firework' might go off mid-journey?"

"The ship has auto-pilot and defense systems. My task is to ensure you reach the Shard Zone K-7 Outpost and sign the transfer documents." Su Wanqing paused, then added, "And to stop you before you try to dismantle the ship's engines or convert the toilet into a particle cannon."

"Tch, you know me so well." Lin Feng pouted, idly fiddling with an old pocket watch hanging from his neck. It was left by his grandfather, its brass casing worn shiny, the cover engraved with intricate, incomprehensible patterns. It hadn't worked for years, but Lin Feng always wore it as a memento, his heart feeling a certain way.

Ten hours passed quickly. It was 21:00 Earth time.

"Officer, our comms pulse is being interfered with by a low-frequency electromagnetic wave!" the ship's electronic First Officer urgently reported to Su Wanqing.

"Activate the EM wave barrier! Pipe the signal here, let's see who's causing trouble!"

"Aye!"

A slightly hoarse, magnetic voice suddenly popped up on the command cabin's large spliced screen. "Excuse me, are you heading for the Shard Zone?"

"This is an official vessel. Our course is government classified, not for public disclosure. Identify yourself!"

"Oh... My surname is Leng. Well, I suggest you turn the ship around and run the opposite way, fast. Although it's probably too late already..."

"I don't care who you are. You are directly interfering with a government vessel's communication frequency, which violates Moon Nation law..."

"Alright, this isn't the Moon Nation's jurisdiction anyway. Suit yourself. I just have a leased satellite nearby that spotted you, giving a friendly warning, that's all."

The low-frequency pulse cut off abruptly. Su Wanqing frowned, the more she thought about it, the more uneasy she felt, and she started bickering with Lin Feng again.

"Tell me, why does that voice sound so familiar?"

"Sounds a bit like a wanted felon."

"You're a felon now, so you must be very familiar with your colleagues."

"Don't be so quick to mock me. She said her surname is Leng. Could it be that bounty hunter?"

"Ah! Leng Xingyun! What would she be doing here..?"

The transport ship sailed on in silence. Outside the viewport lay the deep cosmos, dotted with cold starlight and the faint outline of the distant asteroid belt.

Suddenly, a piercing alarm blared through the cabin without warning! Red lights flashed wildly!

"Warning! High energy reaction detected! Collision alert!" A cold synthetic voice rang out urgently.

"What's happening?!" Su Wanqing sprang up instantly, lunging for the control panel. The screen was full of static; several high-speed moving red dots were rapidly approaching on the radar.

"Pirates! Raiders from the Belt Alliance!" Su Wanqing's face was grave, her fingers flying across the control panel. "Engine overload! Evade!"

Before her words faded, the ship jolted violently!

A tremendous impact force sent both of them slamming hard against the bulkhead!

Lin Feng felt a "buzz" in his head, stars dancing before his eyes, his chest feeling as if hit by a sledgehammer. The cold metal casing of the pocket watch dug painfully into his skin.

The sounds of alarms, tearing metal, and the hiss of oxygen leaking mixed together.

"Shields failed! Engines damaged! Prepare for emergency landing!" Su Wanqing's voice was broken by the violent shaking.

"Emergency landing?! In this godforsaken place?!" Lin Feng gripped the armrests tightly, feeling like his internal organs were churning.

Through the viewport, he saw a desolate, gray, crater-pocked asteroid rushing towards them!

Another, even more violent impact!

Lin Feng felt like he'd been thrown into a washing machine. In his last moment of fading consciousness, he seemed to see the old pocket watch on his chest, touching the blood seeping from the corner of his mouth, emit a faint, almost invisible, eerie blue glow before he plunged completely into darkness.

He didn't know how much time had passed when Lin Feng woke to a biting cold and a nauseating smell of burnt debris.

He found himself half-lying in the corner of a twisted, deformed metal bulkhead, his entire body aching as if it had fallen apart. The electronic manacles had come loose at some point.

Above him was a huge hole, through which he could see a gray, gloomy sky—if it could even be called a sky.

"The Moon's sky is still the most beautiful—" he thought weakly.

"Ugh..." He struggled to sit up, looking around. Wreckage from the ship was scattered everywhere, smoking. The air was filled with the smell of burnt metal and something else... the mixed stench of expired food being charred?

Wait, was that his treasured "Lunar Flavor" compressed biscuits?

Damn, his last food reserves!

"Su Mei... Su Wanqing?" Lin Feng called out hoarsely, his voice abrupt in the deathly quiet ruins.

"I'm... here." A response came from not far away, laced with suppressed pain.

Lin Feng followed the sound and saw Su Wanqing pinned by a pile of debris, her legs trapped. Her face was pale, there was blood on her forehead, but she was conscious. She was trying hard to free herself.

"Well, well, Officer Su the Beauty, looks like our honeymoon trip ended early. And it's the deluxe ruins-themed suite." Lin Feng grimaced as he got up, limping over to try and move the metal plate pinning her legs. It was cold and heavy in his hands.

"Shut up... Lin Feng... This is no time for your jokes!" Su Wanqing gritted her teeth, cold sweat beading on her temple. "Check... the comms equipment... call for help..."

Lin Feng tried rummaging through the wreckage, only finding a few twisted, deformed components.

"Totally screwed. The comms unit is more shattered than my dreams of getting rich." He spread his hands, a look of helplessness on his face. "Navigation's dead too. The good news is, the engines seem to have quieted down completely, at least they won't explode."

A glimmer of despair rose in Su Wanqing's eyes, but it was cut short by Lin Feng's sudden exclamation.

"Ow!" Lin Feng jumped up as if scalded, clutching his chest.

"What is it?" Su Wanqing asked nervously.

"My grandfather's pocket watch! That crash earlier, it dug right into me!" Gnashing his teeth, Lin Feng pulled the watch from his neck. The brass casing was stained with his own blood. Right now, those incomprehensible patterns were flowing with a faint, strange blue light!

Before either of them could react, a cold, emotionless mechanical voice sounded directly in Lin Feng's mind:

[Detecting compatible lifeform... DNA binding confirmed... Stardust Core System activating...]

Lin Feng's pupils contracted sharply. He stood frozen in place.

[Initiating environment scan...]

[Warning: High concentration of inert dust aggregation detected... Energy readings abnormally elevated... Analysis: Regional 'Dust Tide' event... Estimated eruption countdown: 89 days, 23 hours, 59 seconds...]

[Basic survival threat assessment: Extreme. Core requirements: Sealed food, clean water, thermal insulation items, basic medical supplies...]

Lin Feng: "???"

Su Wanqing watched Lin Feng standing there like a stump, holding a glowing broken pocket watch, his expression shifting unpredictably. She couldn't help but shout, "Lin Feng! What are you spacing out for? We need to figure out how to survive, now!"

Chapter 2: Survival in the Ruins! The Awakening of the Junk King

Lin Feng slowly turned his head to look at Su Wanqing, his expression incredibly complex, mixing shock, absurdity, and a hint of... indescribable excitement?

He raised the old pocket watch flowing with blue light, grinning to reveal a roguish smile that seemed particularly out of place amidst the ruins and despair:

"Officer Su, there's good news and bad news. The good news is, we might have... uh, hit the jackpot?"

"The bad news is, the jackpot is called 'In three months, we all turn into popsicles!' The Dust Tide is coming! You've never seen it on the Moon before, have you? Ready to play squirrel? We need to start frantically gathering junk!"

Su Wanqing looked at Lin Feng, then at the eerie glowing pocket watch in his hand, feeling for the first time that she might have taken on an escort mission carrying trouble bigger than a cosmic black hole.

The icy cold wind cut like invisible blades through the gaps in the wreckage, scraping against Lin Feng's exposed skin and stealing away the last traces of warmth.

The air was thick with the smell of scorching and corroded metal, mixed with a more pungent, sulfur-like mineral dust that made every breath feel searing.

"Hiss... planetary-level Dust Tide arriving... turning into popsicles in three months..." Lin Feng shook his dazed head, trying to process the cold countdown in his mind.

"This is the damn apocalypse!"

"Then I'll start stockpiling!"

He glanced at the old pocket watch in his hand. The flowing blue light had faded, restoring its antique brass color, but a strange, blood-connected sensation was clearly imprinted deep in his consciousness. He tried silently calling out in his mind:

"System?"

■ Stardust Core System online. Status: Primary activation. Binder: Lin Feng. Current Resource Points: 0.■

A simple light screen instantly projected onto his retina, displaying only a few basic options: ■ Scan ■, ■ Blueprint Library (Locked) ■, ■ Exchange (Locked) ■. Blueprint and Exchange were grayed out, clearly requiring Resource Points to unlock.

"Resource Points? How do I get them?"

Lin Feng instinctively looked at the packet of compressed biscuits at his feet, charred black and emitting a peculiar "Moon flavor."

■ Detected scannable item: Expired high-energy compressed biscuits (severely carbonized). Scan? ■ The system's prompt sounded timely.

"Scan!" Lin Feng pointed decisively at the blackened biscuits.

The pocket watch surface instantly lit up with a soft blue light, enveloping the biscuit packet like a spotlight. The light flowed for a few seconds before disappearing.

■ Scan complete. Obtained Resource Points: 0.5.■

■ Item analysis: Organic components severely damaged, extremely low residual thermal value. Minimal exchange value.■

"Pfft... 0.5 points? My collector's edition is only worth half a point?"

Lin Feng nearly coughed up blood, but then an indescribable excitement rushed to his head. This broken system actually worked! Trash could really turn into "money"!

"Lin Feng! Stop spacing out! Help me!"

Su Wanqing's suppressed, pained voice came again, her lips slightly purple from blood loss and cold. The twisted ship armor plate pinning her leg weighed at least a hundred kilograms.

"Coming, coming!"

Lin Feng quickly tucked the pocket watch back into his collar and moved closer to examine the situation. Forcibly pulling it wouldn't work—Su Wanqing's leg would suffer secondary damage.

He scanned the surroundings, his gaze landing on several scattered, twisted but still sturdy metal pipes.

"Officer Su, bear with it! I'll make a lever! You need to pull your leg out!"

Enduring his body aches, he laboriously dragged over the two longest metal pipes and found a relatively flat metal wreckage piece to use as a fulcrum.

He inserted one pipe into the gap at the edge of the armor plate and placed the other across it, forming a simple lever.

"One, two, three... lift!" Lin Feng growled, using all his strength to press down on the lever's end.

"Creak... creak..." Harsh metal grinding sounds echoed. The heavy armor plate was pried up, creating a narrow gap!

Su Wanqing seized this critical moment, yanking her injured leg out forcefully!

"Huff... huff..." Lin Feng released the lever, exhausted, slumping to the ground and gasping for breath, each inhalation bringing dull chest pain.

Su Wanqing also leaned against the wreckage, sweating from pain, but her eyes were filled with relief at surviving the ordeal and surprise at Lin Feng's quick thinking.

"Th... thank you." Her voice was weak, her gaze toward Lin Feng much more complex. This troublesome rogue had displayed unexpected action and calmness in desperate circumstances.

"Don't mention it, Officer Su! We're grasshoppers tied together now—no, junk kings on the same ship!"

Lin Feng grinned, but his smile quickly turned serious,

"But now's really not the time to rest. You heard it, right? That damn 'Dust Tide'! Three months! We need food, water, warmth, medicine, and... a shelter that can withstand that hellish weather!"

He struggled to stand up, his eyes sweeping over the chaotic crash site like searchlights.

"System, scan the entire area!"

The pocket watch lit up again, casting a broader blue light over the surrounding wreckage and scattered items. A stream of information instantly scrolled across Lin Feng's retinal screen:

- Scan complete. Main item list: ■
- Ship high-strength alloy fragments (twisted) x numerous - Potential Resource Points (requires specific blueprint processing) ■
- Damaged life support system components x 3 - Can extract small amounts of sealing materials, piping ■
- "Moon flavor" compressed biscuits (expired, carbonized) x 1 packet - Resource Points 0.5 ■
- "Clear Spring" brand mineral water bottle (empty, half-crushed) x 1 - Resource Points 0.1 ■
- Multi-function tool pliers (partial functions disabled) x 1 - Resource Points 1.0 ■
- Emergency medical kit (damaged, contents scattered) - Scanned residues: Painkillers (3 tablets), disinfectant gauze (half roll), hemostatic gel (1 small tube) - Total Resource Points 1.5 ■
- Su Wanqing's Moon Guard standard thermal undershirt (lightly damaged) - Resource Points 2.0 ■
- Lin Feng's work pants (stained with oil) - Resource Points 0.3 ■
- ... ■

"Stop, stop, stop!" Lin Feng mentally shouted to halt; the information was scrolling too fast, making his eyes blur.

"Priority scan: Food, water, medicine, warmth items!"

The information stream instantly simplified.

- Edible/drinkable items: None ■
- Medicine: Painkillers (3 tablets), disinfectant gauze (half roll), hemostatic gel (1 small tube) ■
- Warmth items: Su Wanqing's Moon Guard thermal undershirt (lightly damaged), Lin Feng's work pants (oil-stained), small amount of insulation cotton fragments ■

"Dammit! We're truly dirt poor! Huh? Something feels off in that list..."

Lin Feng joked, but his eyes were fixed on the empty water bottle and scattered painkillers and gauze. He tried focusing his intent, selecting the empty water bottle:

"Exchange for Resource Points!"

- Consumed item: Empty mineral water bottle. Obtained Resource Points: 0.1 ■
- Current total Resource Points: 0.1 ■

The empty bottle in his hand instantly transformed into barely noticeable blue light particles and vanished.

Su Wanqing witnessed this bizarre scene, her pupils contracting: "Lin Feng! You... what did you do? Where's the bottle?"

"Turned into 'money'!"

Lin Feng shook his head excitedly, pointing at the painkillers and gauze, "Officer Su, your painkillers and gauze... lend them to me? I promise, it's for the great cause of survival! I'll pay you back double... no, ten times the medicine!"

Su Wanqing looked at the nearly fanatical "junk collecting" gleam in Lin Feng's eyes, then at her painful injured leg, finally nodding helplessly:

"...Take them. But you'd better explain what's going on!"

Lin Feng treated them like treasures, immediately scanning and exchanging the painkillers (3 tablets) and disinfectant gauze (half roll), gaining another 2.5 points. He temporarily left the hemostatic gel untouched—it was their most precious emergency medical supply now. Watching the total Resource Points jump to 2.6 points gave him some slight reassurance.

- Resource Points reached 1.0. Basic Blueprint Library partially unlocked ■

On the light screen, the Blueprint Library icon lit up. Lin Feng eagerly opened it, finding only one basic icon lying alone:

Simple Tool Repair/Modification (Level I). Exchange requirement: Resource Points 5.0, Basic Metal Component x1.

"5 points... still need half. And requires metal components..." Lin Feng's gaze turned to the twisted ship fragments,

"System, scan that smaller alloy plate, see if it can be used directly as material?"

Scan: High-strength alloy fragment (twisted). Volume 0.1 cubic meters. Status: Structural damage, strength reduced 30%. Can be used as "Basic Metal Component." Resource Point value: 10 (requires blueprint extraction or direct use in blueprint manufacturing).

"Perfect!" Lin Feng's spirits lifted. He immediately tried mental operation, selecting the blueprint Simple Tool Repair/Modification (Level I) and the small alloy plate, then clicking "Manufacture."

Manufacturing requirements: Resource Points 5.0, Basic Metal Component x1. Detected material: High-strength alloy fragment (meets requirements). Insufficient Resource Points (2.6/5.0). Manufacturing failed.

"...Spoke too soon."

Lin Feng deflated like a punctured balloon. He glanced at Su Wanqing's seemingly thick thermal undershirt, his eyes wandering.

Su Wanqing immediately wrapped her coat tighter defensively: "Don't even think about it! This is my only warm clothing! And... it's still wearable!"

"Ahem, I was just looking..."

Lin Feng awkwardly averted his gaze. He stood up, enduring the cold and pain, looking toward the distant desolate, gray land covered with massive craters and jagged rocks.

"We can't just wait to die, Officer Su. We need to move. The system says this hellhole becomes literal hell in three months, but it's bad enough now. The wind's getting stronger, temperature's still dropping. We need to find shelter from the wind, and then... continue collecting junk! Goal: Save up 5 points, repair these broken pliers, or make something useful! And see if we can find any food, water, or... more junk!"

The cold wind howled, whipping up gray dust.

On this cold, dead silent ruin, the Moon Nation's "former most promising engineer" officially began his career as the "Junk King."

Su Wanqing watched Lin Feng's hunched back in the cold wind, meticulously examining every piece of wreckage like he was searching for treasure, feeling absurdity and a faint sliver of hope intertwine in her heart.

Perhaps this troublesome guy was truly their only hope?

Chapter 3: Mine and Shack, Laying the Foundation!

The biting surface wind, carrying fine sand particles, whipped against Lin Feng and Su Wanqing's faces, stinging painfully.

The limited shelter provided by the crash site wreckage appeared fragile and inadequate against the increasingly violent planetary storm.

The temperature was dropping at a perceptible rate, and exposed skin quickly lost sensation.

"Not good, Miss Su! If we stay here any longer, we'll both turn into ice sculptures!"

"Then let's go! I can endure the pain, let's depart immediately!"

Lin Feng hunched his shoulders, pulling his work pants collar up as high as possible, but it couldn't block the bone-chilling cold.

He reached out to support Su Wanqing's slender waist, his shoulder bracing her head as he helped the still-injured woman move away from the relatively flat crash site, step by painful step toward an area ahead that appeared to have denser rock formations and slightly higher ground.

Although the system could scan items, its terrain and hiding spot detection seemed quite basic, only providing vague prompts like "Higher rock density ahead, possible natural caves present."

"Watch your step."

Su Wanqing endured the pain, trying her best to keep up with Lin Feng's pace. Her Moon Guard thermal underlayer was indeed much better than Lin Feng's work pants, but even she felt the cold penetrating to the bone now.

The painkiller's effects seemed to diminish in the cold and rough travel. She watched as Lin Feng walked while still using his gaze to "scan" every oddly shaped rock they passed, every cluster of dried-up alien-like plants, muttering to himself:

"Broken rock... 0 points? Scanning for nothing!"

"This dried grass... 0.01 points? Even a mosquito's leg has meat, brother!"

Lin Feng's persistent "trash collecting" spirit made her feel both amused and exasperated amidst the despair.

After walking for about an hour, both were exhausted. Their resource points had only pitifully increased by 0.21, coming from a few scattered small metal fragments barely qualifying as "artifacts" and a piece of torn plastic sheeting, bringing the total to 2.81 points.

Still far from the 5-point target. Worse, the sky had grown darker, and the storm seemed to be intensifying. Visibility dropped sharply, wind-whipped dust and sand crackling against their protective goggles.

"Lin Feng... can't go on... need to find... shelter..."

Su Wanqing's voice came intermittently through the wind, her physical exhaustion immense, the burden on her injured leg even heavier.

Lin Feng was also nearing his limit. He stopped, anxiously scanning their surroundings. On the system interface, the environmental threat index kept rising.

Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to a massive, slanted rock wall slightly ahead. At its base, there seemed to be an irregular depression half-buried by windblown sand.

"Over there! Looks like a crevice!" Lin Feng's spirits lifted as he supported Su Wanqing and struggled toward it.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn't just a simple depression but a dark opening barely large enough for one person to bend and enter!

The wind and sand were blocked by the rock wall, significantly reducing the wind force near the entrance. A smell mixing dust and aged minerals wafted from the cave.

"Jackpot!"

Lin Feng excitedly prepared to crawl inside.

"Wait!" Su Wanqing grabbed his arm, staring warily at the dark opening, "Unknown situation inside, could be dangerous creatures or... unstable structure."

"Can't worry about that now! Better than freezing to death outside!"

Lin Feng pulled out his multi-tool pliers—though most functions were broken, the plier head could still serve as a short club.

He took a deep breath, activated the weak built-in light on his wrist device, and bent down to enter first.

The interior was more spacious than expected—narrow entrance but opening up after a few steps into an irregular space of about ten square meters.

The walls were rough rock, the floor covered in thick dust. The air, though stale, was considerably warmer than outside, and most importantly, completely blocked the wind!

The ceiling was high and appeared relatively stable.

"Safe! Come in quickly, Officer Su!" Lin Feng's voice echoed, filled with the joy of discovering new territory.

Su Wanqing also bent and entered, immediately feeling the biting cold wind cut off, her body involuntarily relaxing slightly.

She leaned against the cave wall sitting down, breathing tiredly. Though sheltered from wind, the cave remained piercingly cold.

"Whew... finally somewhere to catch our breath." Lin Feng plopped down on the ground, using his wrist light to scan the area, "This place is good! Natural windbreak! Just too empty, not warm enough."

Just then, a low, hoarse voice with a strong local accent unexpectedly came from the darker shadows deeper in the cave:

"Who?! Who's there?!"

The sudden voice echoed like thunder in the silent cave!

Lin Feng jumped up startled, nearly dropping his "short club."

Su Wanqing also instantly tensed, her hand reaching for her waist—unfortunately, her service weapon had been lost in the crash.

"Who? Come out! No ghost games!"

Lin Feng feigned calm, shielding Su Wanqing behind him, directing his wrist light toward the sound source.

From the shadows, a tall, burly figure slowly stood up. The man wore tattered, oil-stained, mineral-dust-covered heavy work clothes, a battered miner's helmet with half the goggles missing on his head, his face so covered in dust and stubble it was almost unrecognizable, only his eyes gleaming warily in the faint light.

He tightly gripped a large metal crowbar with an unusually sharpened tip, like a beast protecting its den.

"I asked who you are?!"

The big man's voice rose, carrying clear hostility and tension as he stepped forward, "This is my territory!"

"Calm down! Brother, calm down!"

Lin Feng quickly waved his hands, putting on his most harmless-looking rogue smile,

"We're crash survivors! Our ship wrecked, the storm outside is too strong, we came in for shelter! Absolutely no ill intentions! Look at us—one cripple, one skinny monkey, how would we dare compete for territory with a mighty brother like you!"

The big man suspiciously examined Lin Feng and the pale, injured Su Wanqing behind him, then looked at Lin Feng's pitiful little pliers. His tense muscles relaxed slightly, but the wariness in his eyes remained undiminished.

"Ship crash? In this godforsaken place?" he muttered, "More unlucky souls..."

"Absolutely true! Brother, look at my sincere eyes!"

Lin Feng nodded eagerly, seizing the chance to build rapport, "I'm Lin Feng, this is Su Wanqing. What should we call you, brother? You look like an experienced... miner brother?" He noticed the man's attire and professional crowbar.

The big man fell silent for a moment, seemingly assessing their threat level. "...Name's Zhao Yan. Used to be a miner."

He said gruffly, tacitly confirming Lin Feng's guess, but didn't lower his crowbar, "Found this cave, reinforced it, safe. You... leave once the wind passes!"

"Brother Zhao! What fate!" Lin Feng acted as if he hadn't heard the "leave quickly" part, familiarly moving closer,

"Look at that awful weather outside—going out means death! We're all survivors here, why not help each other out? Look, my companion's leg is injured, urgently needs a stable place to recover. We promise not to stay for free! We... uh, we're really good at scavenging! Can help you tidy up this cave!"

Lin Feng deliberately touted his "scavenging" skills.

Zhao Yan looked at Lin Feng's face full of "sincerity" and "cheekiness," then at Su Wanqing's clearly weakened state, frowning deeply as if weighing options.

Having struggled to survive alone in this desolate place for so long, he knew well the huge pressure of another mouth to feed. But these two—one smooth-talking and unreliable-looking, the other woman seeming decent but injured—both were burdens...

Just then, a grating, sharp metal scraping sound came from outside the cave, as if something heavy was being dragged by the storm and hitting rocks!

"Roooar—!"

Immediately after, a roar filled with violence and hunger pierced through the wind and sand, faintly audible!

Zhao Yan's face instantly changed dramatically!

"Damn! Ironclaw Lizards! They've caught our scent!"

He tightly gripped his crowbar, his eyes turning sharply alert, all previous hesitation gone, replaced by instinct facing threat.

"Quick! Block the entrance! Use that rock!"

He pointed at a half-person-high, irregularly shaped boulder beside the entrance and shouted.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing also heard the terrifying roar, their hearts tightening. Lin Feng reacted instantly, lunging toward the boulder.

Su Wanqing also stood up despite the pain to help. Zhao Yan rushed to the side of the entrance, using his crowbar to firmly brace against a loose section of rock wall, preventing it from collapsing from impact.

The three worked together, struggling to roll the boulder into the narrow entrance as a second, closer, more ferocious roar sounded, barely blocking most of the opening, leaving only some gaps.

Almost the moment the rock settled into place, a tremendous force slammed against the boulder!

"Thump!" The dull impact made the entire cave seem to shake, rubble trickling down.

"Hold it!"

Zhao Yan roared, using his crowbar to firmly wedge the gap between boulder and rock wall. Lin Feng, ignoring the dirt, pressed his shoulder hard against the rock.

Su Wanqing watched the gaps outside nervously, searching everywhere for usable weapons, but could only find rocks nearby.

Impact after impact came, accompanied by furious roars and the scalp-tingling sound of claws scraping against rock.

Each impact made the boulder shift slightly, dust filling the air.

Chapter 4: Escape from Death

After who knows how long, the banging sounds outside gradually thinned out and finally stopped, leaving only the howling of wind and sand. That "Ironclaw Lizard" seemed to have temporarily given up, or perhaps went looking for other targets.

The three of them slumped to the ground, gasping for breath heavily, the relief of surviving a disaster intertwined with the fear of being threatened by an unknown monster.

Inside the cave, it was deadly silent, with only the sound of heavy breathing.

Zhao Yan wiped the sweat and dust from his face, looking at Lin Feng and Su Wanqing who were so exhausted they were nearly paralyzed, his expression complex.

Finally, he let out a heavy sigh, his voice hoarse as he broke the silence:

"This cave... you can stay here for now. But for food and water, figure it out yourselves! I... I don't have much left either."

He paused, then added another sentence, his tone carrying a certainty that was almost instinctive, "This rock won't hold for long, I need to reinforce it more. Otherwise, we're all done for!"

Lin Feng looked at Zhao Yan's rugged face etched with survival wisdom, then at this crude but temporarily safe cave, feeling a heavy weight lift from his heart.

He grinned, though the smile was somewhat weary, his eyes shining brightly: "No problem! Brother Zhao! Food and water, leave it to me, the 'Junk King'! As for reinforcement... let's do it together! From now on, this will be our 'Stardust Base' number one mine cave shack!"

Su Wanqing looked at Lin Feng's posture as if he already owned a castle, then at this cold, dark, dust-filled, monster-coveted crude cave, and the taciturn miner Zhao Yan before her. For the first time, she felt that the goal of "surviving" no longer seemed like an unattainable illusion.

Although the start was just a "rock shack" crammed with three unlucky souls, Lin Feng was already rapidly calculating in his mind how to scan and exchange Zhao Yan's worn work clothes that looked like they should be worth quite a few "resource points"...

Of course, he had to figure out how to get food first! The inspiration for compressed bricks seemed to be sprouting under the drive of hunger.

Inside the cold mine cave, the three survivors of the disaster slumped in the thick dust.

Outside the cave, the Ironclaw Lizard's heart-stopping roars and impact sounds gradually faded away, leaving only the never-ending howl of wind and sand.

"Huff... huff..." Zhao Yan panted heavily, his large calloused hands still tightly gripping the end of the crowbar stained with some dark liquid, vigilantly watching the cracks in the entrance blocked by the giant rock.

"That beast... holds grudges, might come back." His voice was hoarse and low, carrying the halting quality formed from long periods of solitude.

Lin Feng was also exhausted, his shoulders aching from being pressed against the rocks, but his spirit was unusually excited.

"Brother Zhao! Amazing! Truly amazing! If it weren't for you just now, Officer Su and I would have become that big lizard's afternoon snack!"

He gave Zhao Yan a thumbs-up, his face showing genuine admiration and post-disaster relief.

Su Wanqing leaned against the cave wall, her face pale, the blood on her forehead had congealed, but the wound on her leg throbbed with pain after the violent movements.

Silently, she took out the last bit of disinfectant gauze from her damaged first aid kit, carefully wiping the wound on her forehead, her movements efficient but unable to conceal her fatigue.

"Thanks, Zhao Yan."

She looked at the silent miner, her voice soft but sincere.

Zhao Yan just grunted "Mm" in response. He stood up, walked to the cave entrance, carefully checked the stability of the giant rock with his crowbar, then tapped the adjacent rock wall with his hand, listening intently to the echoes, his expression focused as if listening to the pulse of the earth. "Here... not sturdy enough."

He pointed his crowbar at several places with obvious cracks, "Need to prop it up, otherwise if it comes again, or if the wind gets stronger, we'll all be buried inside."

His judgment carried a certainty that was almost instinctive.

"Brother Zhao, we'll do whatever you say!"

Lin Feng immediately declared, "What do we need? Wood? Rocks? Or..." His gaze subconsciously drifted toward Zhao Yan's seemingly thick, grease-and-dust-stained work jacket, thinking to himself:

"System, scan that jacket!"

[Scanning: Wear-resistant Miner Jacket (heavily worn, oil-stained, mineral dust attached). Material: Synthetic fiber + partial metal reinforcement. Thermal performance: Medium (dirt affects heat efficiency). Resource point value: 5.0.]

"5 points!"

Lin Feng's heart jumped, this was even more valuable than Su Wanqing's thermal liner! But looking at Zhao Yan's burly back and the menacing crowbar in his hand, he immediately suppressed the thought of "exchanging" it—

Mentioning that now would probably get him knocked out as an accomplice of the Ironclaw Lizard outside.

Zhao Yan didn't notice Lin Feng's little thoughts. He pointed to several directions inside the cave:

"Over there, there's a small branch passage leading to another smaller cave, more sheltered from wind and drier, but the entrance is too low. Here, the rock layer sounds hollow, there might be a larger space behind, but it's blocked by collapsed rocks. Right now, the most urgent thing is to secure the entrance and several key points inside."

He walked to a corner of the cave where some messy items were piled up, clearly collected manually:

Several metal rods of varying lengths, some large bolts and nuts, a few relatively flat metal plates, and even a small bundle of fairly flexible synthetic rope.

"Stuff I picked up usually, can be used."

Zhao Yan said succinctly.

Lin Feng's eyes instantly lit up! This was treasure!

"Brother Zhao! You're a natural packrat... no, survival expert! These are all great items!"

He rushed over, caressing the cold metal like a miser, "System! Scan! Scan everything!"

[Scanning: High-strength alloy drill rod (discarded, partially bent) x 3 - Resource points 8.0]

[Scanning: Standard connection bolt/nut set (rusted) x several - Resource points 2.5]

[Scanning: Industrial composite metal plate (slightly deformed) x 2 - Resource points 6.0]

[Scanning: High-toughness synthetic rope (20 meters) - Resource points 3.0]

[...]

Lin Feng looked at the numbers flashing on his retina, overjoyed! This pile of "junk" added up to nearly 20 points! Much better than scavenging for half a day at the crash site!

He forcibly suppressed the urge to exchange them; the top priority now was building the shack, and these items were ready-made building materials!

"Brother Zhao, Officer Su, let's get to work!"

Lin Feng rolled up his sleeves, picked up a drill rod, "The entrance and those key points you mentioned, let's use these rods to prop them up like scaffolding! Then use the metal plates to block the wind! Brother Zhao, you direct us on how to build it most sturdy!"

Zhao Yan looked at Lin Feng's enthusiastic demeanor, then at Su Wanqing struggling to stand up and help, and nodded silently.

He picked up his tools and began demonstrating how to use the crowbar to create fulcrums in rock crevices, how to cross-fix the drill rods to form triangular support structures.

His movements carried the strength and precision unique to miners, every hammer strike perfectly placed.

Lin Feng learned quickly; although his strength was far inferior to Zhao Yan's, he was clever and always found labor-saving methods or proposed additional reinforcement ideas.

Su Wanqing was responsible for organizing the ropes, passing small tools, and using her calm observation skills to point out potential structural issues.

The three worked together in division of labor, and the efficiency was surprisingly high.

Inside the cold mine cave, the clinking sounds of hammering and panting replaced the deadly silence.

A crude but visibly stabilizing support framework gradually took shape at the entrance and key positions inside the cave.

Zhao Yan used the two relatively intact metal plates to lean against the support frame inside the entrance. Although it couldn't completely seal it, it significantly reduced the speed of cold wind blowing in and the invasion of wind and sand.

"Temporarily... done."

Zhao Yan wiped his sweat, looking at the reinforced structure, his tense expression finally easing a bit.

"The wind has lessened, the temperature inside... might rise a little."

Lin Feng plopped down on the ground, sticking out his tongue from exhaustion, but looking at this "home" they had reinforced with their own hands, a sense of accomplishment welled up.

"Excellent! This 'Stardust Base number one mine cave shack' finally looks a bit like a shack!"

He announced proudly.

Su Wanqing also breathed a sigh of relief; the reinforced cave indeed felt much safer and warmer.

She looked at Lin Feng, this guy covered in dust, his nose red from cold, yet still full of energy, who always seemed able to ignite a spark of hope in despair.

She then looked at the taciturn but reliable-as-a-rock Zhao Yan, feeling for the first time a faint sense of belonging to this hastily assembled "team."

However, a louder "gurgle" sound inopportunistically came from Lin Feng's stomach, breaking the brief calm.

"Uh..."

Lin Feng rubbed his stomach awkwardly, "Brother Zhao, Officer Su, shouldn't we... discuss a more pressing issue?"

He looked at the two with pleading eyes, "Like... food?"

Zhao Yan's face instantly darkened again.

He walked to the corner, carefully took out two flattened, label-blurred cans and half a bottle of murky water from a metal box covered with a rag.

"I... only have these left."

He placed the items on the ground, his voice low, "Even if we ration, it won't last more than a few days."

Lin Feng looked at the pitiful supplies, then touched the cold, hard "first-generation gourmet brick" in his pocket. The flame of "junk collecting" burned fiercely in his eyes again.

"Don't worry!"

He stood up abruptly, swaying a bit from the sudden movement, "With Brother Zhao's safe fortress, Officer Su's wisdom, plus my skills as the 'Junk King' and 'culinary god'! We'll definitely dig our way to survival from the garbage piles of this damned place!"

"At first light tomorrow, I'm going out to sweep the area! Target: sweep clean all the expired cans, plastic water bottles, rags, and rotten cotton within a five hundred meter radius!"

Su Wanqing looked at Lin Feng's posture as if he was about to raid a supermarket, and sighed helplessly, but this time, she didn't argue.

Zhao Yan silently placed the crowbar within reach, gazing out through the cracks of the blocked entrance into the deep darkness outside, his eyes profound. The challenge of survival had only just begun.

Chapter 5 Shopping in the Cold Wind

The coldest moment before dawn, the temperature inside the mine shaft had almost dropped to freezing point.

The three of them huddled in a corner, wrapped in all the rags and fragments of insulation cotton they could find, still shivering uncontrollably.

Lin Feng's "first-generation gourmet brick" was carefully divided into three portions. Although the taste remained... memorable, its solid calories and salt content became the key to helping them endure the cold night.

As dawn began to break, the wind seemed to lessen slightly. Lin Feng couldn't wait to start his "shopping spree operation."

"Officer Su, your leg injury isn't healed yet, so guard the cave and study what else among Brother Zhao's pile of 'treasures' might be usable."

Lin Feng stretched his frozen limbs, securing the multi-function tool clamp behind his waist.

"Brother Zhao, could you trouble yourself to come with me? Mainly... to help me learn the routes, and also to guard against that 'Iron Claw' fellow from yesterday?"

He looked at Zhao Yan, his eyes carrying a request.

Zhao Yan nodded silently, picked up his signature pry bar, and pulled out a half-piece of sharpened alloy sheet from a worn backpack, handing it to Lin Feng:

"Take this, for self-defense. Better than your little clamp."

Lin Feng gratefully accepted it; it felt heavy in his hand, its edges gleaming coldly.

"Thanks, Brother Zhao! Let's go!"

The two carefully moved aside the giant rock blocking the entrance and squeezed out of the mine shaft.

The cold wind immediately swept grit into their faces. Visibility was still poor, but much better than yesterday.

Under the gray sky stretched a vast, desolate, dead world filled with huge craters and jagged rocks. In the distance, the outlines of some spaceship wreckage or other man-made structures were faintly visible.

"System, maximum range scan! Priority: food, water, containers, fabric, medicine!"

Lin Feng commanded mentally while tightening his grip on the alloy sheet, vigilantly observing his surroundings.

[Scan initiated... Range: 100-meter radius...]

[Detected: scattered metal fragments (low value)... weathered rock (no value)...]

[Warning: faint biological heat source signal detected, bearing: 11 o'clock direction, approximately 80 meters, behind rocks. Type analysis: small rodent? Threat level: low.]

[Target found: suspected abandoned supply crate (partially buried), bearing: 3 o'clock direction, approximately 50 meters.]

"Supply crate?!"

Lin Feng's spirits lifted. He lowered his voice and said to Zhao Yan, "Brother Zhao, three o'clock direction, 50 meters, there's something!"

Zhao Yan looked in that direction, squinting; his vision seemed better adapted to this dim environment than Lin Feng's.

"Looks like... a crate. Let's check it out, carefully." He moved first towards it, his steps steady like an experienced mountain goat, skillfully using rocks for cover.

The two quickly approached. It was a gray metal box half-buried in sand and gravel, severely deformed with a broken latch, the lid tilted open a crack.

Lin Feng carefully pried open the lid with the alloy sheet. A rush of air mixed with dust and a stale smell emerged.

The inside of the box was a mess, most items damaged: crushed synthetic nutrient paste tubes, hardened shells from burst water bags, scattered pills contaminated with sand... But Lin Feng's eyes locked onto several "treasures" like radar!

"Hah! Unopened water purification tablets! Half a box! Good stuff!"

He grabbed a sealed small aluminum box.

"This roll of sealing tape! Although old, it hasn't hardened! Perfect for sticking things!" Another roll of gray tape went into his possession.

"And... look! Compressed rations! Even though the packaging is a bit torn!"

He pushed aside the fragments on top and pulled out several small silver packages printed with the Earth Federation emblem.

"Expired... one year? No problem!" He expertly pulled out a testing pen and quickly poked one, "Safe!"

[Scan: water purification tablets (half box/12 tablets) - Resource Points 3.0]

[Scan: industrial sealing tape (1 roll) - Resource Points 1.5]

[Scan: compressed rations (lightly damaged packaging) x 5 - Resource Points 5.0]

Lin Feng grinned from ear to ear, stuffing everything into a worn burlap bag Zhao Yan had brought.

"Starting off lucky, Brother Zhao!"

Zhao Yan watched Lin Feng's excitement as if he'd struck gold, the corner of his mouth seeming to twitch almost imperceptibly.

He was more focused on the box itself, tapping the body with his pry bar:

"This box... sturdy, can be a stool, or hold things."

"Right, right, right! Good stuff!"

Lin Feng immediately scanned it, [Damaged metal box - Resource Points 2.0], but he didn't convert it.

"Let's keep it as a storage box!"

Dragging the box, the two continued exploring forward. Led by Zhao Yan, they avoided several areas of soft-looking sand and suspicious rock crevices.

Lin Feng's "scanning radar" kept working, discovering more "treasures":

A small, rusty but relatively intact metal bucket (Resource Points 1.0, Lin Feng planned to use it as a pot);

Several large, dirty but substantial pieces of insulation cotton blown by the wind (Resource Points 4.0, warmth treasure);

A flattened but internally intact insulated cup (Resource Points 1.5);

Even in a rock crevice, they scanned half a bottle of... functional drink? frozen solid into an ice lump.

Resource Points 0.5, Lin Feng decided to thaw it and try it...

"Over there!"

Zhao Yan suddenly stopped, pointing at a huge, half-buried cylindrical object in the distance.

"Looks like... an abandoned fuel tank? Or... a small living pod?"

Lin Feng looked over; the system scan feedback: [Large industrial-grade composite material tank (severely damaged) - Resource Points 15.0 (requires blueprint processing)].

"Let's check it out! Might have surprises!"

Just as they prepared to approach, Zhao Yan suddenly grabbed Lin Feng, pulling him behind a large rock. His eyes sharp as an eagle's, he made a silencing gesture.

Lin Feng's heart tightened, holding his breath.

From the shadows on the other side of the abandoned tank, a figure slowly stood up.

The man was tall, wearing a heavy jacket so dirty its original color was unrecognizable, with a fierce scar running diagonally from his brow to the corner of his mouth, adding to his already cold, hard features.

He carried a steel pipe with sharp metal pieces welded onto it, vigilantly scanning his surroundings, his gaze sweeping over the direction of the rock where Lin Feng and Zhao Yan were hiding.

He seemed to have also discovered the abandoned tank and was cautiously approaching it.

"It's 'Old Scar'..." Zhao Yan whispered extremely quietly into Lin Feng's ear.

"Lone wolf, very skilled, and very... cautious. Don't provoke him."

Lin Feng watched the scar-faced man radiating danger, his heartbeat accelerating.

Is this the "veteran" Zhang Weiguo from the outline? He doesn't look easy to recruit! But Lin Feng's gaze was soon drawn to something hanging from Old Scar's waist—a heavily worn but seemingly intact military canteen!

And his bulging backpack!

"Resource points! Mobile resource points!"

Lin Feng's "Junk King" spirit was burning, but reason told him charging out now would be suicide.

He stared intently at Old Scar, watching him inspect the tank, apparently finding nothing valuable, then warily looking around before disappearing like a ghost into the shadows of another rock formation.

Only after Old Scar's figure completely vanished did Lin Feng and Zhao Yan relax.

"That guy... is a tough character."

Lin Feng wiped cold sweat from his forehead, "But, did he seem injured? His left leg looked unnatural when walking."

Zhao Yan nodded:

"That scar on his face, and the way he holds his weapon, he's a veteran. In a place like this, being injured... is troublesome."

Lin Feng looked in the direction Old Scar disappeared, then felt the two remaining painkillers and a bit of hemostatic gel in his pocket. A bold plan began to sprout in his mind.

He needed a doctor, needed security, and Old Scar needed medicine and... food!

"Let's go, Brother Zhao!"

Lin Feng's eyes became determined, "Let's head back first! Good haul today! Back at the cave, I'll show you my skills, upgrade the 'gourmet brick'! As for Old Scar..."

A sly smile curled at the corner of his mouth, "I have a way to make him come find us himself!"

Chapter 6: The Fragrance of the Mine

Dragging the heavy metal box and full "spoils of war" back to the mine cave, Lin Feng immediately became the center of attention.

"All this stuff?"

Su Wanqing looked delightedly at the water purification tablets, tape, compressed rations, small metal bucket, insulated cup, insulation cotton, and that half-frozen bottle of drink being pulled from the burlap sack, her tired face relaxing somewhat.

Zhao Yan silently dragged the metal box to a corner to store it, then went to check the reinforcement situation at the cave entrance.

"Small potatoes!"

Lin Feng proudly patted his chest, "This is just the beginning! Once our base develops, the garbage dump will be our supermarket!"

He eagerly began assigning tasks: "Officer Su, your leg isn't convenient, so you're responsible for organizing supplies, sorting and storing them properly. Brother Zhao, could you please check inside the cave again, see if we can enlarge that small side passage opening so we can divide areas. As for me..."

He picked up the small metal bucket and the several blocks of solid alcohol fuel he'd collected, grinning, "I'll make you something warm, an upgraded version of 'Lin's Gourmet Cuisine'!"

Soon, a small flame rose in one corner of the mine cave. Lin Feng built a simple stove with a few stones and placed the small metal bucket on it.

He opened the 5 compressed ration blocks found today, used a relatively clean half-piece of metal plate as a cutting board, and used the back of an alloy fragment as a hammer to smash the hard ration blocks into coarse powder.

Next, he placed the half-frozen bottle of functional drink, bottle and all, near the fire to thaw.

"Today we're adding something special!" Lin Feng mysteriously pulled out the half box of water purification tablets, "Officer Su, Brother Zhao, watch this!" He poured about half a bottle of "purified water" made from Zhao Yan's stored water into the small metal bucket, then poured in the ration powder and stirred.

When the water boiled and the paste began to thicken, he carefully poured in part of the thawed functional drink.

"Energy supplement! Although expired, it enhances flavor and refreshes!" Lin Feng stirred the paste in the bucket like an alchemist as its color deepened and viscosity increased. This time, he had a "pot," more stable heat, and more even stirring.

He even luxuriously broke off a small piece of the synthetic energy bar found yesterday, hard as a rock, ground it into powder, and sprinkled it in.

A more complex, but seemingly... more "fragrant" mixed smell than yesterday's began to permeate the mine cave.

Salty flavor, artificial sweetness, burnt bitterness, and the distinctive chemical fruit flavor of the functional drink intertwined.

"Final step! Soul infusion!"

Lin Feng carefully pinched out a bit of precious salt from the salt packet and evenly sprinkled it in.

He stirred even more vigorously until the paste turned deep brown, bubbling with large blobs, its texture becoming very sticky.

Extinguished the fire, let it cool slightly. This time Lin Feng didn't use a metal plate, but found a relatively flat, smooth stone.

He put on makeshift gloves made from rags, scooped up a large spoonful of steaming hot paste, poured it onto the stone slab, then picked up another flat stone and forcefully pressed, patted, and shaped it! This time, he worked more carefully, pressing it more firmly.

Soon, several more regular, thicker, deep brown "bricks" with suspicious oily sheens on their surfaces were freshly made! They lay quietly on the stone slab, emitting an indescribable but genuinely heat-bearing aura.

"New generation 'Lin's High-Energy Compression Bricks'! Added precious functional drink essence and energy bar powder! More solid texture! More surging energy!"

Lin Feng proudly introduced.

Su Wanqing and Zhao Yan looked at those "bricks," their expressions somewhat subtle.

But hunger and cold were the greatest motivators. Su Wanqing broke off a small piece, blew on it, closed her eyes, and put it in her mouth. Chewing... Her brows first furrowed tightly, then relaxed slightly.

"...A bit light on salt." She evaluated objectively, "But... less burnt and bitter. The energy bar powder gives it... some granularity? Not unpalatable."

This was already high praise.

Zhao Yan directly picked up a brick and took a forceful bite. He chewed very slowly, his cheeks bulging, the scar on his face slightly pulling with his chewing motions. After swallowing, he remained silent for a few seconds, then said only one word:

"Fills you up."

Lin Feng grinned from ear to ear: "Haha! Success! Looks like the second-generation bricks have achieved a phased victory! Once we find bean cans or... expired meat paste! I'll make you third-generation 'Deluxe Minced Meat Bricks'!"

The three of them sat around the small fire, sharing the warm compression bricks. Although the taste was still bizarre, the warmth and fullness rising in their bodies gave this cold mine cave a trace of "home" warmth for the first time. Lin Feng especially ate with relish, planning as he ate: "Tomorrow we need to focus on finding containers, storing more water! And warm things, old blankets, worn clothes will do! Need to try our luck with medicine too..."

Just then, an extremely faint, almost wind-masked rustling sound came from the cave entrance.

Zhao Yan instantly became alert, grabbing the crowbar. Lin Feng also immediately put down his "brick," gripping the alloy fragment tightly. Su Wanqing held her breath.

At the gap in the massive rock at the cave entrance, an eye appeared. A sharp, vigilant eye carrying deep exhaustion and a trace of barely perceptible longing.

That eye's gaze was firmly locked onto the... last half compression brick on the stone slab beside the fire, and the painkillers and hemostatic gel Lin Feng had casually placed in the small metal box nearby.

It was Old Scar!

He appeared at their "doorstep" like an injured lone wolf, silent and soundless. He didn't force his way in, just stood there, through the gap in the massive rock, his gaze sweeping between Lin Feng's trio, the food, and the medicine. The posture of his left leg was clearly somewhat unnatural, the scar on his face appearing even more menacing in the dim light.

The atmosphere inside the mine cave instantly solidified.

Lin Feng's heart pounded like a drum, but he forced himself to stay calm.

He took a deep breath, forcing his signature grin mixing roguishness and sincerity onto his face. Addressing those sharp eyes outside the gap, he raised the remaining half brick in his hand, then pointed to the medicine in the small metal box, saying clearly:

"Hey, friend! Cold out there? Want to trade for some warm 'bricks' to fill your stomach? Or... need some medicine for the pain?"

He paused, his voice tempting, "We're short on a capable security guard here. Food and lodging provided, medicine priority supply! How about it? Come in and chat? Guaranteed fair trade, no cheating the young or old!"

Outside the gap, Old Scar's eyes flickered intensely.

He licked his chapped lips, glanced again at the compression brick emitting heat and the aura of food, and at the medicine representing hope for survival.

After a long silence, just as Lin Feng thought he was about to turn and leave, a hoarse, rough voice, difficult as sandpaper rubbing, struggled to come from outside the gap:

"...How to trade?"

The air inside the mine cave seemed to freeze, leaving only the crackling of the campfire and the never-ending wind outside.

Outside the massive rock gap, Old Scar's sharp, hawk-like eyes repeatedly scanned between the half compression brick in Lin Feng's hand and the painkillers and hemostatic gel in the small metal box.

Hunger and injury were cruel whips, lashing this solitary veteran.

"...How to trade?" The hoarse voice sounded again, carrying a trace of barely perceptible urgency.

Lin Feng's heart beat like a drum in his chest, but the smile on his face brightened further, carrying a mixed aura of mercantile and sincerity.

"Simple! One 'Lin's High-Energy Compression Brick,' in exchange for you... guarding our cave entrance for three days, protecting against outside 'Ironclaw Lizards' or other clueless fellows. How about it? Three 'bricks' a day included, eat until full!"

He paused, pointing to the small metal box.

"As for the medicine... one painkiller tablet, or this bit of hemostatic gel, in exchange for you teaching us where reliable water sources are nearby, or... where other people's unwanted 'garbage dumps' are?"

These terms were extremely cunning. Compression bricks were Lin Feng's mass-producible "hard currency," while information and experience were the unique value of an "old hand" like Old Scar.

Medicine was the bait within the bait.

Old Scar's eyes flickered intensely. The heat and satiety of the compression brick were tangible temptations, and medicine was what he urgently needed right now.

Guarding the cave entrance wasn't difficult for a veteran of his experience, and information... could be disclosed some if it didn't endanger his own safety.

He remained silent for a few seconds, seemingly weighing risks and benefits. Finally, a vague "Hn" came from his throat, indicating agreement.

"Straightforward!" Lin Feng immediately handed the half brick in his hand to Zhao Yan,

"Brother Zhao, help move the rock aside a bit, invite our new security in to warm up!"

Zhao Yan silently complied, using the crowbar to move the massive rock to create a larger gap.

Old Scar cautiously squeezed through sideways, his movements swift and silent, though the stiffness in his left leg caused him to stagger slightly upon landing.

Once inside, he immediately occupied a corner near the cave entrance that allowed observation of both outside and inside the cave, back against the rock wall, steel pipe gripped tightly in hand, his eyes scanning every person and item in the cave like a precise scanner.

Lin Feng paid no mind to his vigilance, enthusiastically picking up a freshly made, still warm second-generation compression brick and offering it:

"Here, Brother Old Scar, try it! Warm! Lin's products, guaranteed quality!"

Old Scar didn't immediately take it, first looking at Zhao Yan and Su Wanqing. Zhao Yan nodded expressionlessly, while Su Wanqing observed him cautiously.

Only then did Old Scar take the compression brick. Unlike Su Wanqing's small tasting bites, he directly took a large bite and chewed forcefully.

The scar on his face twitched with his chewing motions, his brows tightly furrowed—clearly this taste was quite a challenge for his taste buds too.

But he didn't pause, swallowing the entire brick in a few bites, then letting out a long exhale of white breath carrying food heat.

"...Fills you up."

His evaluation was identical to Zhao Yan's, but the tension in his voice seemed to have lessened a trace.

Chapter 7 Iron Claw Lizard!

Lin Feng immediately picked up another painkiller tablet and the small tube of hemostatic gel: "Brother Old Scar, your leg injury is important, let's deal with it first? Our deal is honest and fair!"

Old Scar looked at the medicine, then at Lin Feng's face full of "sincerity," and finally took them.

He skillfully applied the hemostatic gel to a wound on his left leg that had been roughly bandaged with cloth, then swallowed the painkiller.

The medicine seemed to take effect quickly, his tightly furrowed brows relaxed slightly, and his body leaning against the rock wall also became more relaxed.

"Water source," Old Scar's voice was still hoarse, but with less sharp wariness,

"Head east, cross two large craters, there's a rocky area. There's ice in the rock crevices, break it and melt it, use water purification tablets. Beware of 'sand worms,' those things burrow underground, their bites are poisonous." He was concise and to the point.

"Junk pile... south, a transport ship crashed there, exploded badly, things scattered far, you can scavenge, but many people, fierce competition." He added another piece of information.

"Excellent!"

Lin Feng excitedly rubbed his hands, "Brother Old Scar, your information is worth its weight in gold! From now on, we're family! You keep watch at night, I'll handle food and medicine!" He immediately marked the information Old Scar provided on the system's crude map display.

With the addition of Old Scar, this experienced veteran, the sense of security in the mine cave instantly increased by a level. Lin Feng struck while the iron was hot and began planning the shelter upgrade.

"We need to organize this place properly!" He pointed inside the cave,

"Brother Zhao, you're strong, see if you can widen that small branch tunnel entrance a bit more? We'll use it as a storage room! Brother Old Scar, you have plenty of experience with the entrance supports, see how we can reinforce them most securely? Officer Su, inventory sorting and classification is up to you! We need to be like hamsters, organizing every item clearly!"

With clear division of labor, efficiency increased. Zhao Yan took a crowbar and hammer and began carefully widening the low branch tunnel entrance.

Old Scar meticulously inspected the entrance and internal support structures, occasionally tapping the rock walls with a steel pipe or using the thick iron wire he brought to reinforce key connection points. His methods were professional and efficient, making even Zhao Yan couldn't help but watch closely.

Su Wanqing sat on the ground, taking items out of the burlap bag one by one, recording on a relatively flat stone slab with a piece of charcoal she found:

Water purification tablets x11, sealed tape x1 roll, compressed rations x4 (Lin Feng used 1 block for brick-making),

Small iron bucket x1, insulated cup x1, insulation cotton x3 blocks,

Functional drink (half bottle frozen), various rags, metal fragments (scattered)...

She recorded meticulously, even estimating the approximate volume and storage location of each type of supply.

Lin Feng was like a foreman and inventor combined, wandering around everywhere. He used the sealed tape to firmly attach the insulation cotton to several rock wall crevices where drafts were worst. Seeing the relatively dry soil Zhao Yan dug out while widening the branch tunnel, he had a sudden inspiration:

"Officer Su, record! New resource: dry clay! Later we'll try to see if we can mold a few bowls!"

Just as everyone was working enthusiastically and the mine cave shelter was taking shape, rapid and panicked footsteps came from outside the cave entrance, accompanied by a young male voice crying out:

"Help! Is anyone there?! Save me! That thing is chasing me!"

Following that was a familiar, bone-chilling roar of the "Ironclaw Lizard"!

Old Scar, who was on guard duty at the entrance, narrowed his eyes sharply, instantly gripping his steel pipe tightly, his body tensing. Zhao Yan also stopped his work and picked up his crowbar. Lin Feng and Su Wanqing's hearts leaped into their throats.

They saw a figure scrambling and stumbling toward the gap in the large rock at the cave entrance.

It was a young man who looked to be in his early twenties, slightly chubby, wearing a dirty work jacket with some logistics company logo, wearing glasses with a cracked lens, his face full of terror and abrasions.

He carried an equally dirty, bulging large backpack on his back.

"Help! Let me in! Please!"

Seeing people inside the cave, the young man grabbed at this lifeline, desperately trying to squeeze through the gap.

Old Scar's steel pipe blocked the gap, his eyes cold: "What's behind you?"

"It's... it's the 'Ironclaw Lizard'! A huge one! It's been chasing me all the way!" The young man was so frightened he was incoherent, tears and snot covering his face, "I... I just wanted to find a place to hide from the storm, accidentally stumbled near its nest!"

The roars grew closer, and even slight vibrations could be felt through the ground.

Lin Feng made a quick decision: "Brother Old Scar, Brother Zhao, get ready! Let him in!"

Old Scar and Zhao Yan exchanged glances, then simultaneously exerted force, moving the large rock to create a wider opening.

The young man slipped in like an eel, almost falling flat on the ground. Old Scar and Zhao Yan immediately reset the large rock, while picking up their weapons, firmly bracing against the entrance.

"Thump!" The heavy impact came as expected! The large rock shook violently! This time, the creature seemed larger and more furious than the previous one!

The impacts continued over a dozen times, each one making everyone in the cave tense up.

Old Scar and Zhao Yan stood like two door gods, holding firm, veins bulging on their arms.

Su Wanqing gripped the alloy fragment Lin Feng gave her, shielding the trembling young man. Lin Feng nervously watched the support structures.

Finally, the monster outside seemed to have vented enough, or decided this rock was too hard, roaring as it gradually moved away.

Dead silence filled the cave, only the young man's heavy panting after his narrow escape remained.

Only then did Lin Feng have time to examine this uninvited guest. The young man sat slumped on the ground, still shaken, his hands tightly clutching his large backpack.

Lin Feng's gaze swept over the backpack, and system prompts instantly flooded his vision:

[Scan: Damaged but high-capacity logistics backpack - Resource Points 1.0]

[Scan: Inside backpack - Unopened filter cotton cores x 2 packs (Premium goods!) - Resource Points 6.0]

[Scan: Inside backpack - Various sized sealed bags (Large quantity!) - Resource Points 4.0]

[Scan: Inside backpack - Small metal parts (screws, washers, etc., sorted by category!) - Resource Points 3.5]

[Scan: Inside backpack - Recording board (electronic screen damaged, but paper interlayer has handwritten list) - Resource Points 0.5]

[...]

Lin Feng's breathing instantly became heavy! This... this wasn't a refugee! This was a mobile treasure trove! Especially those filter cotton cores and sealed bags! They were absolute game-changers for shelter upgrades!

The young man seemed to sense Lin Feng's "burning" gaze and instinctively hugged his backpack closer. He looked up, adjusted his cracked glasses, and looked at this group of "odd-looking" people in the cave, still shaken:

A silent, burly miner, a fierce-looking veteran with a scarred face, a calm and capable woman with a leg injury, and another... young man with green eyes staring at his backpack like a starving wolf?

"Th-thank you for saving me." The young man's voice was still trembling, "My name is Wu Yu... I used to be the manager of Deep Space Express Warehouse 7."

"Manager?" Lin Feng's eyes shone even brighter, he crouched down, putting on his friendliest smile,

"Brother Wu Yu, right? Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, you're safe here now! I'm Lin Feng, these are Su Wanqing, Zhao Yan, and Brother Zhang Weiguo.

We're all survivors who ended up together." He pointed at the backpack Wu Yu was tightly clutching,

"Your bag... has quite a lot of stuff? What treasures are inside?"

Wu Yu instinctively opened his backpack, revealing items packed to the brim yet miraculously sorted into small bags by category.

His eyes instantly lit up with a strange brilliance when he saw his "belongings," even his fear diminished considerably:

"These... these are all useful! Look, these are filter cotton cores, they filter impurities when installed in water circulators! These are sealed bags, for portioning food to prevent moisture and contamination! And these small parts, they might fix things at critical moments! This recording board, although the screen is broken, I recorded the location and quantity of everything..."

He enumerated them like precious treasures, speaking rapidly, as if showing off his most prized collection.

Looking at Wu Yu's nearly obsessive expression and meticulously organized "collection," a brilliant idea surged in Lin Feng's mind. He picked up a still-warm second-generation compression brick and waved it in front of Wu Yu:

"Brother Wu Yu, hungry? Here, try our Stardust Base specialty, 'Lin's High-Energy Compression Bricks'! Guaranteed to fill you up!"

Hunger instantly overwhelmed other emotions. Wu Yu took the compression brick, hesitated for a moment, then imitated Old Scar's method and took a big bite.

The familiar complex flavor assaulted his taste buds, his brows furrowed tightly, but a solid feeling of fullness followed.

"How is it?" Lin Feng asked with a smile.

"Uh... the flavor... is very unique." Wu Yu struggled to evaluate, but his eyes were still fixed on the items in his backpack, "But... it really fills you up."

"Right!" Lin Feng slapped his thigh, revealing his true intention.

"Brother Wu Yu, look, our 'base' is just starting, everything needs to be built! We especially need talent like you! Look at your skills in categorization and record-keeping, you're a natural warehouse manager! Stay here! Help us manage supplies! I guarantee your 'treasures' will receive the most proper storage and use! And..."

He leaned closer, lowering his voice, full of temptation, "Food and accommodation included (upgraded shelter version), and when we find good stuff later, you get priority registration into inventory! How about it?"

Wu Yu looked at Lin Feng, then at his beloved backpack, then at this simple but reinforced mine cave that had been divided into a "storage area," and at Su Wanqing's neat supply list on the stone slab.

A powerful desire to organize and control overwhelmed everything else. He nodded vigorously, his eyes shining behind his glasses:

"Okay! I'll join! Where do I put the stuff? I'll register them into inventory right now!"

He eagerly pulled out that broken recording board, ready to start working immediately.

Lin Feng looked at Wu Yu who had instantly entered work mode, beaming with joy.

He proudly winked at Su Wanqing, Zhao Yan, and Old Scar.

Su Wanqing helplessly massaged her forehead, Zhao Yan's mouth seemed to twitch slightly, while Old Scar remained expressionless as he wiped his steel pipe.

The mine cave shelter had finally assembled its core members: Hands-on expert and culinary god Lin Feng, rational housekeeper Su Wanqing, intuitive miner Zhao Yan, brave veteran Old Scar, and... storage management genius "Canned" Wu Yu.

Lin Feng looked at the piled-up supplies in the corner and his busy companions, his hoarding plan burning fiercely in his heart.

Chapter 8 Prelude to a Planetary Dust Storm

With "Canned Goods" Wu Yu joining them, the management of supplies in the mine cave shelter immediately underwent a dramatic upgrade.

The previously haphazardly piled items were now sorted into categories, sealed in airtight bags with simple labels handwritten by Wu Yu, and neatly stacked in the small storage alcove that Zhao Yan had expanded.

The two precious filter cotton cores were treasured by Lin Feng like prized possessions, saved for a future water purification system.

"Boss Lin, here is today's supply inventory summary." Wu Yu handed Lin Feng a "report" torn from a recording board, densely covered in charcoal writing, his expression serious and earnest.

"Eleven water purification tablets remaining. Recommend prioritizing drinking and cooking water purification. One-third of the sealing tape consumed, primarily used to reinforce gaps at the cave entrance and repair tools.

"Four blocks of compressed rations in stock. Recommend reserving as emergency supplies, not to be used unless necessary. Raw materials for second-generation compressed bricks critically low, need replenishment urgently.

"All insulation cotton has been used for windproofing key areas, with significant effect, but more is needed..."

Looking at the clearly organized entries and precise numbers on the report, Lin Feng was almost moved to tears.

"Good! Excellent! Comrade Wu Yu! You are the stabilizing pillar of our base!"

He vigorously patted Wu Yu's shoulder,

"Raw materials critically low, you say? No problem! Tomorrow we'll organize a scavenging team! Target: all expired canned goods, plastic water bottles, rags, and rotten cotton within a one kilometer radius! Brother Old Scar, based on the intel you provided, we'll check out that transport ship wreckage site to the south tomorrow!"

Old Scar leaned against the inner wall of the cave entrance, holding a steel pipe, and merely gave a slight nod in response, his eyes still vigilantly scanning the dim outside light.

The world outside the mine cave was quietly changing. The wind was no longer just howling; it began to carry a sharp, metallic scraping-like screech, making teeth-grating sounds as it scraped against the rocks.

The thermometer showed the temperature outside had dropped to a terrifying below minus fifty degrees Celsius and was still slowly but steadily decreasing. The smell of sulfur and mineral dust in the air seemed thicker, causing a faint burning sensation in the throat when inhaled.

"Signs of the Dust Tide..." Lin Feng looked at the cold countdown on the system interface—

[Time until Dust Tide outbreak: 76 days 15 hours 22 minutes]

Lin Feng felt heavy. The system also issued a new warning:

[Ambient temperature continues to drop, inert dust activity increasing, corrosive properties beginning to manifest. Recommend promptly upgrading shelter sealing grade and thermal performance.]

A sense of urgency whipped everyone like an invisible lash. Reinforcing the mine cave, stockpiling supplies, making more compressed bricks and warm items became the overriding tasks.

Lin Feng, Zhao Yan, and Old Scar formed a scavenging team, leaving early and returning late in the increasingly severe weather.

With Old Scar's intelligence and Zhao Yan's familiarity with the terrain, plus Lin Feng's "scanning radar," their efficiency greatly increased.

A week later, they reached the transport ship wreckage area to the south. The ground here was rugged, and after walking for over an hour, everyone was exhausted.

"Lin Feng! Look at these treasures!"

Zhao Yan shouted. He had climbed to a high point, turned around, and pointed into the distance.

Twisted but usable metal sheets,

Rolls of insulated cable sheathing,

Several severely dented thermoses,

Even several small crates marked as supplies, who knows what might still be sealed inside, albeit damp!

"Thump!"

A thunderous crack echoed. Zhao Yan clutched his neck, a look of stunned disbelief on his face, and slowly collapsed.

"Brother Zhao!"

Lin Feng surged forward, but Old Scar held him back with one hand while picking up a rock with the other and throwing it high into the air towards the right front. In less than half a second, the rock was sent flying high into the sky by a bullet.

"Get down, it's a sniper!"

"Brother Zhao is fin..."

"He took a sniper round to the neck, no saving him. We need to save ourselves first!"

"Who the hell is it?!"

The two men crawled back the way they came, Lin Feng's cheek twitching, his eyes red and swollen, while Old Scar's weathered face showed no expression at all.

Finally reaching a safe corner, they hid behind a massive rock.

"Old Scar, if we can't even retrieve his body, it would be a huge disservice to Brother Zhao Yan. After all, we only survived initially thanks to his cave!"

Old Scar kept his voice low, his hands busy pulling back any clothing edges of theirs that were exposed.

"I know. We'll wait a bit longer, wait for them to leave. Any team with sniper deployment now is definitely a major faction. This was likely an outer perimeter sniper post. Zhao Yan's shout drew their attention."

"Your skills aren't up to it yet. Wait here for me. I'll scout first."

Lin Feng waited for less than half an hour, but it felt like an entire day. Finally, he heard a loud scraping sound outside.

He peered out and saw Old Scar pushing a black plastic bag back towards him.

"Old Scar, is this..."

Old Scar nodded and handed over a half-charred detonator tube.

"Pan... Suo... What is this?"

"This might be the symbol of Panshan Shelter. They have several hundred people. Probably their scavenging combat team was here today. Let's head back first and plan our next move carefully."

"Alright..." Lin Feng gritted his teeth tightly.

All that remained at the scene were various discarded bottles and cans, torn clothing, plastic sheets – useless junk.

As the two men wearily dragged the heavy black plastic bag and their "bountiful" haul back near the mine cave, they spotted two figures huddled not far from the entrance.

It was a middle-aged man and a girl who looked only thirteen or fourteen years old.

The two clung tightly together, wrapped in a tattered blanket leaking cotton batting, shivering violently in the biting cold wind. Their faces were bluish-purple, lips chapped, and they seemed almost unconscious.

The thin girl had her hair in a ponytail and clutched a worn, antenna-bent portable radio tightly to her chest.

"It's 'Little Ears' Sun Wen and her dad!"

Old Scar said in a low voice. He clearly knew this father-daughter pair. "They work with communications, have some minor skills, but their health is particularly poor, especially her father's."

Lin Feng quickly approached and found Sun Wen's father in worse condition, breathing weakly, clearly frozen stiff.

Sun Wen still had a sliver of consciousness. Seeing someone approach, she fearfully hugged her father and the radio tighter.

"Don't be afraid! We're here to help!"

Lin Feng immediately crouched down, pulled out a third-generation compressed brick still warm from his body heat, broke off a small piece, and took out a thermos and precious chocolate.

"Lin Feng, chocolate... we don't have any reserves of that..."

Lin Feng whipped his head around, eyes bloodshot.

"I don't want to see anyone else die in front of me today! Here, eat something first, have some warm water!"

Sun Wen obediently ate the chocolate, then looked at the dark-colored "brick." Her eyes showed some resistance initially, but her father's condition left her no choice.

Trembling, she took it, took a small bite, and drank some water.

The warm food in her stomach brought a touch of color back to her pale face.

"Dad... Dad, he..." Sun Wen's voice was choked with tears.

Lin Feng felt the man's carotid artery; there was still a faint pulse.

"Quick! Carry him inside!"

Su Wanqing and Wu Yu ran out upon hearing the commotion. "What happened? Where's Brother Zhao?"

The three worked together to carry the frozen man into the mine cave. The warmth inside made Sun Wen shiver, then she greedily took a few deep breaths of the relatively less stinging air.

Upon hearing the bad news, Su Wanqing was calmer than Lin Feng, being military-trained after all. She knew the people in front of her were more important right now. She immediately took out the last precious bit of hemostatic gel, applied it to the man's most severely frostbitten areas, and carefully wiped his body with a damp rag using warm water.

Wu Yu dug out the largest pieces of insulation cotton and wrapped the man in them.

Lin Feng handed the remaining compressed brick and warm water to Sun Wen: "Don't worry, your dad will pull through. Take care of yourself first."

Sun Wen nodded gratefully and began eating ravenously.

Her gaze was quickly drawn to Wu Yu's densely written supply record board and the neatly stacked supplies in the corner, a flicker of surprise and curiosity in her eyes.

"Th... thank you."

Sun Wen's voice was as faint as a mosquito's buzz, but her eyes were much clearer. "We... we had a small shelter... but it was taken by... another group... everything was..." She hugged the broken radio tighter to her chest,

"Only this is left..."

Lin Feng looked at the broken radio, then at Sun Wen, an idea sparking in his mind.

"Can you fix this thing? Or... work with communications?"

Sun Wen nodded, then shook her head:

"It... it's been broken for a long time. But... I can feel it, the electromagnetic interference here is very strong, ordinary equipment is hard to use... But, if we could find good parts..."

A gleam of intense focus on a technical challenge shone in her eyes, incongruous with her weak physical state.

Just then, under Su Wanqing's care, Sun Wen's father let out a faint moan and slowly opened his eyes.

Seeing the unfamiliar environment and his daughter safe, tears welled in his cloudy eyes.

"Dad!" Sun Wen threw herself towards him.

Lin Feng watched this scene, then looked again at the radio in Sun Wen's arms. A plan formed in his mind.

He walked to the storage alcove, rummaged for a while, and pulled out several old circuit boards that looked relatively intact, picked up today, along with several lengths of different types of wires, and a small, shiny signal amplifier salvaged from some unknown device.

He placed these items in front of Sun Wen.

"Sun Wen, and Uncle Sun,"

Lin Feng put on his most sincere smile,

"Welcome to 'Stardust Base'! Room and board included here (conditions are limited), shared medical supplies. As for this..."

He pointed to the pile of parts and the broken radio,

"Consider it your welcome gift and your first work assignment! See if you can get this old friend to speak again? We desperately need to know what's happening outside!"

Sun Wen looked at the pile of parts in front of her, then at Lin Feng, then at the concerned faces of the others in the cave, especially the faint rekindled hope in her father's eyes.

She nodded firmly, clutching the broken radio and the parts tightly to her chest, as if holding onto a lifeline.

Inside the mine cave, the stove fire flickered, illuminating several tired yet hopeful faces.

Outside, the wind wailed like ghosts and wolves howling, and the mercury column in the thermometer was slowly, steadily sliding towards a deeper freezing point.

The "junk" Lin Feng hoarded and the life-saving "compressed bricks" not only sustained the survival of this small team but were beginning to attract more souls struggling on the brink of the apocalypse.

And the mine cave shelter of "Stardust Base," under the shadow of the dust storm, had finally stubbornly lit its first faint lamp.

Chapter 9 Half-Life

The darkness deep within the mine shaft seemed to have weight, pressing down heavily, leaving only bone-deep exhaustion and cold.

Outside the cave, the wind was no longer a single howl but had evolved into a myriad of whimpers and shrieks. At times it sounded like countless glass shards scraping against metal, at other times like some colossal creature breathing heavily on the distant horizon. Occasionally, a particularly violent whirlwind would force its way through cracks in the cave entrance, bringing in snowflakes and sharp grit that struck the cave walls with faint crackling sounds, like malicious urging.

"Hiss... this damn wind, why is it changing pitch now?"

Lin Feng rubbed his nearly numb hands together, breathing out a rapidly dissipating white puff of air into his palms. He had given his thick coat to Old Scar and now wore only thin work pants and a sweater, his teeth chattering from the cold. He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out the last half of a compressed brick, hesitated for a moment, then broke it into smaller pieces, handing them to Su Wanqing, Wu Yu, Old Scar, and Little Ears.

"Save it carefully, who knows where our next meal will come from."

His voice trembled slightly from the cold, but he still tried to maintain a light tone.

"This damn wind has left us with only half a life," Wu Yu quipped. After holding a simple funeral for Zhao Yan, everyone had tacitly agreed not to speak of what happened, hoping time would wash away the panic and sorrow in their hearts.

Su Wanqing silently accepted her portion, chewing it in small, almost cherished bites. The strange taste now seemed tolerable because it represented precious calories. Leaning against the cold cave wall, she carefully examined the energy gauge of her laser pistol using the pitifully weak daylight filtering through the cracks. "Only 17% energy left, must use it sparingly," she announced calmly, her voice particularly clear in the confined space.

Old Scar took his small piece of brick but didn't eat it immediately. Instead, he first carefully checked the simply bandaged wound on his leg. The painkillers were still working, and the bleeding had stopped, but the cold made the muscles around the wound stiff and painful. He silently put the compressed brick in his mouth, chewing and swallowing mechanically, the entire process soundless except for the movement of his Adam's apple. After putting on the thick coat Lin Feng had given him, his situation had improved considerably, but he still curled up in the position closest to the cave entrance, like a silent, ever-vigilant stone statue, his sharp eyes occasionally flashing in the shadows, capturing any unusual movements outside.

"Need to start a fire..." Lin Feng breathed into his hands, his gaze scanning the cave. The walls were cold rock, and aside from the dry moss and rags Old Scar had spread on the ground, the place was empty. "Firewood... this damn place doesn't even have a single strand!" he said somewhat dejectedly.

"Can use this."

Old Scar suddenly spoke, his voice hoarse and low. He nudged a rusted iron bucket in the corner with his foot.

"Take it apart, split it open. Inside... there's some residue left, can burn. Lots of smoke, but provides warmth."

He had clearly considered this problem long ago.

"Reliable! Scar Brother, you're a treasure trove!"

Lin Feng's eyes lit up, and he immediately perked up. He took out his multi-function tool pliers and worked with Su Wanqing to laboriously dismantle and twist the iron bucket. Old Scar was responsible for using the alloy pipe he had picked up to flatten the removed metal pieces and split them into smaller pieces that would burn relatively easily.

The process was difficult, the tools were awkward to use, and the metal was cold and sharp. But driven by the will to survive, the group managed to produce a small pile of twisted, rust-stained metal "firewood" with suspicious oil stains.

"Fuel?"

Su Wanqing asked. The solid alcohol blocks had long been used up.

Lin Feng smiled mysteriously and pulled out a small bottle from his seemingly bottomless work pants pocket containing half a can of thick, black liquid:

"Scraped it from the remains of that 'Mule' mining robot! Seems like some kind of low-quality lubricating grease? Tested it, it burns, just smells strong!"

He smeared a little lubricating grease on several small metal pieces, then used Su Wanqing's laser pistol set to lowest power to carefully ignite it.

"Sss..." A black smoke rose, accompanied by a pungent smell similar to burning plastic, and finally a small cluster of orange-yellow flames trembled and rose, dispersing a small patch of darkness and illuminating everyone's frozen faces with flickering light and shadow.

A faint warmth began to spread. Though it was still cold, the psychological comfort was immense.

Everyone unconsciously moved closer to the small fire, stretching out their frozen hands.

"Cough... cough... this smoke..."

Lin Feng coughed from the irritation, "Strong stuff! But... warm!"

He sighed contentedly, looking around this extremely crude "home"—a dark, cold stone box filled with the smell of rust and strange smoke.

"Temporarily... safe," Little Ears said softly, hugging her knees and watching the jumping flames. Her rationality told her this was only a temporary respite, but her tense nerves relaxed slightly.

Old Scar added a small piece of metal to the fire, sparks crackling and flying. He remained silent for a while, then suddenly spoke, his voice like sandpaper:

"This wind... not right."

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing both looked at him simultaneously.

"Before... not like this."

Old Scar's gaze turned toward the blocked cave entrance, as if he could see through the rock to the scene outside,

"Wind has... something. Like sand, but finer... colder. Sticks to skin, like needle pricks, after a while... turns red, itches." He pulled up his sleeve, revealing a small patch of slight redness and swelling on his arm.

Lin Feng's heart skipped a beat, immediately recalling the system's warning—inhert dust, corrosive properties beginning to manifest. "Scar Brother, when did you discover this?"

"Just these past two days."

Old Scar lowered his sleeve,

"Becoming more obvious. Temperature... dropping too fast. Not like usual nights." His intuition and experience had detected the environmental deterioration earlier than any instrument.

Su Wanqing's expression turned grave:

"If the wind really carries corrosive particles... it's a huge threat to our protective suits, equipment, even respiratory systems. We need a better sealed environment."

"And water."

Lin Feng added, licking his chapped lips, "Wu Yu... uh, I mean, the ice we found earlier, when melted, also had a strange taste. The water purification tablets don't seem to work as well either."

He almost slipped up and revealed Wu Yu's nickname "Canned Goods," quickly covering it up.

The topic became heavy. The firelight flickered, illuminating everyone's solemn faces.

The wind outside seemed to carry a mocking tone, growing more rampant.

"That 'Dust Tide'..."

Lin Feng lowered his voice, almost talking to himself, "The system said three months... at this rate, surviving two months would be difficult."

"System?" Old Scar keenly caught this unfamiliar term, his sharp gaze turning to Lin Feng.

Lin Feng inwardly cursed his slip of the tongue. He laughed it off, patting his chest:

"Ahaha, just a set of... uh... survival assessment methods I've been thinking about! Yes, methods! Based on phenomenon observation and data inference! Like this wind, this temperature, Scar Brother's skin reaction... looking at it all together, things don't look good!"

He tried to brush it off. Old Scar stared at him for a few seconds, his gaze profound, seemingly not completely convinced, but didn't press further, just gave a faint "hmm" and turned his attention back to the fire.

Everyone had their own secrets, and at the edge of the apocalypse, probing deeply was meaningless.

Silence fell again, with only the crackling of flames and the ghostly howling wind outside. Worries about the future, like cold vines, wrapped around everyone's hearts.

"Must survive." Su Wanqing suddenly broke the silence, her voice not loud but carrying undeniable determination, "No matter how difficult, survive first. Only by surviving is there hope."

Lin Feng took a deep breath of the smoke-filled cold air and nodded vigorously:

"Right! Survive! Miss Su is absolutely right! We have shelter now, we have fire, and we have such a capable teammate like Scar Brother! When day breaks tomorrow, I'll go out! Even if I have to plow through these ruins, I'll find more food, water, and supplies! We'll make this shelter as solid as an iron bucket! Let that damn Dust Tide come and just stare helplessly!"

His bold words dispelled some of the gloom. Old Scar added another piece of "firewood" to the fire, making the flames burn brighter. The whisper of the dust storm was already clearly audible in the wind.

Chapter 10: Dig Deep in These Ruins—Everything's Treasure!

The latter half of the night was spent in a half-asleep, half-awake haze of cold and hunger.

The wind outside the cave never ceased for a moment, as if countless vengeful spirits howled against the rock, constantly reminding them of the desperate situation they were in.

That little fire, reeking and barely holding on, had become their lifeline; they took turns feeding it metal "firewood," not daring to let it die.

The cold seeped in through every crack, penetrating thin clothing and stabbing straight to the bone.

When daylight finally strained through the fissure at the cave mouth, it brought not hope but an even deeper chill.

The temperature seemed much lower than last night; the wind blowing through the gap carried a distinct granular texture that stung the skin. Seeing a new day gave everyone a slight lift in spirits.

Lin Feng barely dragged himself up from the freezing ground by sheer willpower, flexing limbs stiff from the cold.

"Move! Moving warms you up! Let's get to work, guys!" he shouted, pumping himself and his companions up. His voice echoed in the cavern but sounded hollow.

Breakfast was the last scraps of a compressed brick, crumbled up and mixed with a small sip of the strangely flavored water left in the insulated cup, used to dissolve some protein powder into a paste.

It was a drop in the bucket, but better than nothing.

"Today's objectives: food, water, containers, anything burnable, and... see if we can find something more airtight to seal the hole."

Lin Feng announced the plan, his breath thick in the cold air.

"Old Scar, how's your leg? Why don't you stay in the cave and watch the fire, and see if you can make the entrance more secure? Officer Su and I will go scavenge."

Old Scar checked the wounds on his leg and flexed his ankle.

"I'll go. Together. Outside... it's not safe." His tone brooked no argument. After yesterday's "Mule" incident, he clearly didn't believe Lin Feng and Su Wanqing could handle all the dangers alone.

Su Wanqing nodded as well. "We go together. Watch each other."

"Little Ears, you and Wu Yu stay here and take care of your dad!"

"All right, okay."

So the three of them set foot again into that cold, deathly silent wasteland.

The sky was the color of dusk, visibility extremely poor. The dust whipped by the wind was no longer simple gray-brown but carried a sinister, faint metallic dark red, clinging to exposed skin and clothing, leaving a prickly sting and stubborn grime.

"This ghost dust..." Lin Feng complained, covering his mouth and nose with a rag. "System... uh, my gut says breathing this a lot won't be good!"

Exploration was even tougher than yesterday. Low temperatures drained their strength, and the strange wind interfered with their senses and judgment.

They carefully made their way toward the smashed convenience store they'd discovered yesterday.

The "Mule" robot that Old Scar had disabled still lay where it had fallen, dusted with a thin red film.

Inside, the convenience store was even worse than it looked from outside. Shelves had toppled; goods were buried, crushed, and frozen together. Lin Feng's scanning ability proved invaluable here.

[Scan: Deformed synthetic protein bars (box of 12) — partially edible — resource points 3.0]

[Scan: "Interstellar" brand bottled water (freeze-cracked, roughly 1/3 remaining) x3 — resource points 1.5]

[Scan: Multi-purpose folding knife (rusted, blade functional) — resource points 2.0]

[Scan: Large sealed storage container (damaged, lid missing) — resource points 1.0 (higher value as container)]

[Scan: Waterproof tarp (large area, multiple tears) — resource points 4.0 (can be used for sealing after repair)]

"We hit the jackpot! We actually hit the jackpot!"

Lin Feng hissed with excitement, like a squirrel finding a stash of pinecones, digging frantically through the rubble.

They found the half-box of protein bars, three bottles of cracked but still partly frozen water, the rusted folding knife with a usable blade, and that huge plastic storage bin without a lid.

The most precious find was the fairly large, thick waterproof tarp, torn in several places but intact enough to be invaluable.

Old Scar focused more on structure and safety. He pried open twisted metal cabinets with a steel pipe, checked corners, ensuring there were no active defense systems or hidden dangerous creatures.

Su Wanqing kept watch, gripping her laser pistol tightly, eyes sharp as she scanned the wind-blurred ruins.

When Old Scar laboriously dragged the heavy tarp out from under a pile of broken glass and metal, his foot suddenly slipped!

"Aiyo!"

He yelled and fell backward, his elbow smashing hard on a jagged shard of metal, blood gushing instantly and staining his work-sleeve crimson.

"Old Scar!" Lin Feng turned instantly.

"Hiss... it's fine, it's fine! Just a scratch!"

Old Scar gritted his teeth against the pain and waved him off.

Su Wanqing moved swiftly, using leftover clean cloth and some hemostatic gel to bandage him.

"We all need to be careful!"

"An exposed wound in this dust will get infected easily!"

Lin Feng used the steel pipe to move aside what Old Scar had stepped on — a charred, deformed tablet computer casing partially buried in debris.

He picked it up curiously. The screen was shattered and the body warped, but a special port on the edge caught his attention.

"Huh? This looks like... a unified engineering recorder issued to the Third Residential District of the Moon Nation? An older model!"

A strange familiarity rose within him. He tried pressing a side button that was almost melted away.

Nothing happened.

But his pocket watch at that exact moment warmed faintly against his chest, and the system prompt snapped into his mind unexpectedly:

[Detected faint same-frequency residual signal... attempting parse... error... data corruption rate 99.8%... unable to restore...]

At the same time, an extremely fuzzy, noise-ridden audio fragment, broken and intermittent, as if projected from a very distant place, pierced his mind:

"...alarm... unknown energy reading... peak... evacuate... failed to... request... sizzle... 'Stardust'... project... 'key'... sizzle... grandfather... protect... sizz—"

The voice cut off abruptly, as though an invisible hand had pinched it off.

Lin Feng froze, his face instantly paling. His grip loosened and the charred recorder slid into the dust.

"What's wrong?" Su Wanqing keenly noticed the change in him.

"N-nothing..." Lin Feng's words sounded distant. He bent to pick up the recorder and found his fingers automatically tracing the blurred Moon Nation emblem on it.

"Maybe... I heard some static... maybe it was just the wind playing tricks..."

He forced a smile, but the shock and confusion in his eyes couldn't be fully hidden.

Grandfather? The Stardust project? A key? Those shattered words plunged into his thoughts like ice spikes. Who had owned this recorder?

Were the "Stardust" mentions related to the "Stardust Core" in his pocket watch? Grandfather... what did he know? Was it merely coincidence, or...

Was there a deeper connection behind all this?

Old Scar's sharp gaze swept over Lin Feng's ashen face and the scorched recorder; he said nothing, only tightened his hold on the steel pipe.

Su Wanqing frowned slightly. She sensed Lin Feng was hiding something, but now was not the time to press.

She only reminded them, "This place is no good to linger. The dust's getting worse. Grab what we can and let's head back."

The heavy storage bin, precious tarp, food and water... they had harvested quite a lot, but the three returned under a shadow cast by Lin Feng's unsettling discovery.

The way back felt especially long and oppressive.

The red dust fell like an ominous veil over everything, and the wind's whispers seemed to carry a certain frequency that kept plucking at those disquieting questions in Lin Feng's mind.

Once back in the mine, they handed their haul to those on guard. Lin Feng sat alone in a corner, holding the charred recorder, probing it over and over for any clue, but found nothing.

Only the pocket watch against his chest would occasionally give off a barely perceptible warmth, reminding him that it had not been a hallucination.

Chapter 11 "Airdrop" Surprise

The air inside the mine shack was so heavy you could almost wring water from it.

Not because of the cold—though the temperature was still bone-chilling—

but because a silent despair was spreading. On Wu Yu's record board, the columns for "drinking water" and "compressed brick raw materials" were followed by a glaring, massive "zero."

Old Scar's leg wound healed slowly from the cold and lack of medicine, occasionally seeping some tissue fluid and bringing muffled groans.

Sun Wen's father still lay weakly asleep, breathing shallowly. Sun Wen herself hugged a pile of scrap metal and that treasured radio, brow furrowed as she tried to pick up any orderly signal from the chaotic electromagnetic noise, with little success.

Lin Feng rubbed the ever-warming pocket watch against his chest. The cold countdown on the system screen—[Time until Dust Tide outbreak: 71 days 03 hours 17 minutes]—hung over him like the sword of Damocles.

Their resource points had been used up earlier to trade for some adhesive and repair tools, and within scan range there was nothing but cold rock and useless dust.

"We can't wait any longer."

Lin Feng's voice broke the suffocating silence. He stood up and flexed his numb limbs, "Sitting around until our supplies run out is a death sentence. We have to get out and actively find 'food'."

All eyes turned to him.

"Where to?"

Su Wanqing asked as she carefully replaced the barely clean bandage on Old Scar's leg, "We've almost searched everywhere nearby, including where Old Scar and the rest have been."

A familiar gleam—only the Junk King would have it—flashed in Lin Feng's eyes: "Remember when we came back yesterday, at the east side of that big canyon, that white rock layer jutting out?"

Old Scar nodded slightly: "'White Tooth' cliff. Windy, dangerous route, not much there."

"No no no," Lin Feng wagged his finger, "Scar bro, you saw it with your naked eye. But I 'feel'... there's something over there! A lot of... plastic reactions!" He couldn't directly say the system had given a vague hint (resource enrichment zone), so he credited it to mystical "intuition."

"Plastic?"

Wu Yu pushed up his cracked glasses, suddenly alert, "Plastic's great! Lightweight, waterproof, insulating! If we can find large pieces, we can make containers, lay moisture-proof floors, even fashion makeshift dust masks!"

His storekeeper soul ignited; he was already planning a hundred and eight uses for plastic in his head.

"Plastic burns into black smoke and poisons people," Old Scar said, coldly dousing the enthusiasm.

"Who said we'd burn it? We're in an advanced civilization phase—sustainable development now!" Lin Feng put on a solemn face and babbled nonsense.

"The main thing is plastic bottles! Bottles! Officer Su, remember our 'grand plan'?" He winked at Su Wanqing.

Su Wanqing immediately recalled Lin Feng's earlier muttering about needing massive "bottled water points" to trade for the [Simple Water Recycling Blueprint].

She considered for a moment: "How risky is it?"

"The route is a bit dangerous, and the wind's strong," Lin Feng shrugged, "but based on my feeling, the return will be huge! Worth the gamble! Scar bro, your leg is inconvenient—stay behind this time, guard the house, protect Uncle Sun and Sun Wen. Officer Su, Wu Yu, you two come with me! Wu Yu handles identifying and recording materials, Officer Su keeps watch, and I'll handle the 'sensing' and heavy work!"

Old Scar wanted to object, but moving his injured leg made him decide against it. He finally nodded and set a sharpened metal spear within reach. Sun Wen looked up and whispered:

"...Be careful."

Stepping outside again felt like entering a giant, slowly spinning grinding machine made of red dust and icy metal shards.

Visibility was under fifty meters and the wind was ferocious; people had to lean into it just to move forward. Sharp dust struck their goggles with a constant crackling.

Guided by the system's fuzzy signals and his memory, Lin Feng stumbled along at the front.

Su Wanqing held the laser pistol with the last of its energy and scanned the surroundings warily; the gale whipped her hair and instantly crusted it with white frost.

Wu Yu lugged the huge empty pack on his back and struggled to keep up, still scribbling with a charcoal pencil in his notebook as they went, recording coordinates of potentially valuable "trash" and muttering:

"...Three o'clock, fifteen meters, suspected alloy frame, large volume, mark for later collection... eleven o'clock, under rock, partially buried cables, model unknown..."

Every step was a struggle. The cold rapidly drained strength; the wind left them staggered.

Once, a sudden gust nearly sent the thin Wu Yu tumbling into the adjacent chasm. Fortunately, Lin Feng's quick reflexes snagged the strap of his backpack.

"Hold on! Comrade Canned Goods! You two ounces of meat won't fill the wind's teeth!"

Lin Feng shouted; his voice was shredded by the gale.

Finally, they reached the edge of the "White Tooth" cliff. The wind was worse here, like countless hands pushing, trying to shove them into the abyss.

Beneath their feet the cliff plunged almost vertically; they couldn't see the bottom, only rolling red mist.

"Are you sure... it's down there?"

Su Wanqing shouted, doubt thick in her tone. This place didn't look like it could hide anything.

Lin Feng lay on the rim and peered down against the blast. The system's prompt grew stronger here.

[Detected a platform approximately 30 meters below, with a large polymer (plastic) response... accompanied by weak metal signal...].

"There's a platform down there! My intuition says the treasure's there!"

Lin Feng pointed downward.

"How do we get down?"

Wu Yu stared into the dizzying void, pale.

Lin Feng took out the precious coil of synthetic rope and a few crude pitons from his pack.

"Simple! Watch my Lin-style fast descent!" He found a seemingly solid fissure, hammered in the pitons, tied the rope, and secured the other end firmly to his waist.

"I'll go down and check! Officer Su, watch the rope! Wu Yu, stand guard!"

Without waiting for objections, he grabbed the rope and began to abseil clumsily and slowly.

The descent was heart-stopping.

The gale tore at him like a mischievous child; the rock was cold and slick.

Several times his foot slipped and he swung in the air, sustained only by arm strength and the iron grip of Su Wanqing above holding the rope.

Fine red dust drove into his collar and cuffs, making his skin itch.

After descending about twenty meters, a narrow platform partially sheltered by an overhang finally appeared.

What Lin Feng saw on the platform widened his eyes!

It wasn't a heap of discarded plastic as he had imagined. It was a...

badly damaged escape pod!

About the size of a small car, its hull severely deformed, surface covered in ablation marks and impact dents, yet the original sleek lines were still faintly visible.

It was lodged crookedly on the platform's edge, as if it might slide into the abyss at any moment.

And the "large plastic response" the system reported was the escape pod's outer covering: expansive panels of special ablative, heat-resistant polymer!

Though torn and battered, large sections still remained intact!

"My God... this isn't a plastic paradise, this is a spaceship teardown!"

Lin Feng was both shocked and thrilled. He carefully dropped onto the platform and steadied himself.

Up close, the escape pod looked even more tragic. The viewport was completely shattered; the hatch was twisted and jammed halfway. Through the gaps, the interior was a mess, various fragments and equipment frozen together.

[Scan: Starship-grade ablative heat-resistant polymer (large area, partially damaged) - Resource points 85.0!]

[Scan: Escape pod titanium-aluminum alloy frame (twisted) - Resource points 120.0 (requires blueprint processing)]

[Scan: Internal equipment wreckage (includes: small emergency signal emitter (damaged), life support system fragments, a few unopened first aid kits?, residual cryogenic suspension fluid (toxic)...) - Resource points complex, requires detailed scan.]

Lin Feng's heart raced!

Jackpot! This was a real score!

Just that layer of insulation alone could be traded for a lot of supplies! There might even be first aid kits!

He tried to pry the jammed hatch, but it wouldn't budge. He peered through the shattered viewport into the dim, frost-coated interior.

Suddenly, his gaze froze.

In the pilot seat, there seemed to be... a person? Or rather, a corpse in a tattered spacesuit, frozen solid?

The body bowed forward and the face was indistinct; one hand still rested on a cracked console.

A chill ran down Lin Feng's spine that wasn't entirely from the cold.

He hesitated—whether to try to enter or call the others above—when a glint from beside the corpse caught his eye.

It was a palm-sized, silvery metal box with rounded edges.

It looked unusually clean, almost brand-new, out of place amid the wreckage.

There were no markings on its surface, only a subtle depression in the middle.

As if compelled, Lin Feng reached through the broken viewport, carefully avoiding the frozen body, hooked his finger under the edge of the silver box, and gently pulled.

The box came free easily and felt icy to the touch, with an odd texture.

The instant the box left the console, the unexpected happened!

Hum—!

A low, energy-gathering hum suddenly sounded from inside the escape pod!

Moments later several of the pod's barely-intact indicator lights began to flash red like mad!

"Warning! External intrusion detected! Emergency protocol activated! Self-destruct sequence countdown: 60 seconds!"

An icy, urgent synthetic electronic voice emanated from inside the pod!

Chapter 12 An Uninvited Guest

"Damn!" Lin Feng was terrified, almost flinging the box from his hands!

He didn't have time to think. Clutching the box, he shouted wildly upward, "Pull me up! Quickly! Pull me up! It's going to explode!!"

Su Wanqing and Wu Yu above heard the abnormal hum and faint alarm coming from below, and then Lin Feng's blood-curdling cries. Their faces changed drastically! Su Wanqing immediately grabbed the rope with both hands and strained her entire body to pull him up! Wu Yu lunged over to help as well; both of them turned bright red in the face, using almost every ounce of strength they had!

Lin Feng felt the rope at his waist suddenly go taut, and his whole body was yanked upward at breakneck speed! He clung to the silvery box, his heart pounding so hard it felt like it would leap from his throat! Beneath his feet, the escape pod's red lights flashed more urgently, the hum sharpening into a piercing shriek!

10... 9... 8... 7...

The cold air howled as friction intensified. The two on the cliff strained with every bit of strength, their arm muscles screaming with pain.

Just as Lin Feng was about to be hauled over the cliff edge—

Boom!!!

A heavy, violently impactful explosion erupted from the platform below! A powerful gust carrying shrapnel blasted upward! The whole cliff seemed to shudder!

The blast wave shoved Lin Feng hard; he was finally pulled onto the cliff top and crashed onto the rocks, tumbling several times before coming to a halt, smothered in dust and shaken to the core.

All three collapsed to the ground, gasping for air, staring at the small plume of black smoke rising from the platform below, which the gale quickly blew away. The escape pod—along with any first-aid kits and other supplies inside, and that frozen corpse—was completely obliterated.

"W-what... what just happened?" Wu Yu was so frightened he could barely form words.

Lin Feng didn't answer. He only stared blankly at the silvery metal box in his hands that, despite the violent explosion, remained unscathed—without so much as a scratch.

His instincts told him he had probably... grabbed something far more troublesome and far more significant than all the broken junk in that escape pod combined.

This scavenging run had turned over in the most extreme way possible.

The cold wind at the cliff top had been stunned for a moment by that dull explosion, then returned with doubled ferocity, tearing away the last wisps of smoke from below and leaving behind the blackened, alarming crater on the platform—a silent record of those heart-stopping seconds.

Lin Feng, Su Wanqing, and Wu Yu lay on the cold rock, chests heaving. The air they drew in smelled of char and icy cold from the blast remnants, causing them to cough.

"Cough, cough... Lin, Boss Lin... what did you do down there?" Wu Yu's voice broke with panic; frost and dust coated his glasses and his limbs trembled. "How... how did it explode?"

Su Wanqing quickly checked Lin Feng and herself; there were no new injuries, only blood and qi overturned by the blast. Her sharp gaze landed on the silvery metal box clenched tightly in Lin Feng's hand, and her tone turned grave: "Is it because of that?"

Lin Feng swallowed; his throat felt dry and sore. He raised his hand and looked at the cool, smooth box in his palm, its dull sheen faintly shifting in the dim light, then nodded with lingering dread:

"...It seems... when I took it, that rickety ship... it started to self-destruct..." He recalled the cold countdown tone and the frantic flashing red lights, and a cold sweat broke out on his back.

The box was only palm-sized, seams seamlessly fused—no buttons, no ports, no gaps, as if molded in one piece. Only a barely perceptible circular indentation sat at its center.

It was strangely light, hardly like metal at all. After such a violent explosion, it bore no scratches or any sign of temperature change—eerily pristine.

"What... what material is this?" Curiosity temporarily overrode Wu Yu's fear; he inched closer, about to poke it with his finger, but Lin Feng instinctively moved the box away.

"No idea... but it's definitely not ordinary." Lin Feng turned it over again and again, even picking at the indentation with his fingernail—no reaction. "System, scan it!" he ordered in his mind.

[Scan request... analyzing... error... unable to identify material structure... energy signature weak and abnormal... no match in database... warning: unknown interference field detected... recommend cautious handling.]

Even the system couldn't identify it? Lin Feng's heart sank. This thing was likely more trouble than he had imagined. Blessing or curse—he couldn't dodge the consequences. He carefully slid the box into his inner pocket, zipped it up, and patted it down. "We'll study it back at camp. We shouldn't stay here. That explosion made a lot of noise; who knows what it could attract."

His words felt almost prophetic. As the three of them struggled to stand and gather the rope to leave, a sudden engine roar—definitely not the wind—ripped through the dead quiet from afar, growing louder and approaching aggressively!

The sound was low and wild, with a grating metallic rasp that suggested poor maintenance, and it was closing in fast on their position!

"Not good!" Su Wanqing's expression changed. She immediately lifted her laser pistol and searched for cover. "It's a vehicle! Or a small flyer!"

Old Scar wasn't here! The three of them—one tech geek, one engineer, and only Su Wanqing with dwindling energy—were the only ones with any fighting capability!

Lin Feng cursed inwardly and fumbled to pull the rope back. Wu Yu flattened himself behind a rock, trembling.

Soon, a bizarre open-top off-road vehicle that looked cobbled together from countless scraps barreled through the dust like a rabid dog; with a wild skid it stopped less than thirty meters away. Three people jumped out of it.

The leader was a burly, broad-faced bald man wearing a filthy leather vest whose color couldn't be made out, exposing muscular arms covered in twisted tattoos and scars. He carried a crude rifle welded with a huge bayonet, and his gaze was viciously greedy as he scanned Lin Feng and the others, and the expensive synthetic rope and several small tools that hadn't yet been packed away.

Two thin, monkey-like lackeys followed him—one waving a metal-ball flail chained to an iron rod, the other sholdering an old shotgun, both wearing predatory grins.

"Yo-ho! Look what we found?" The bald man's voice was coarse and unpleasant, like sandpaper scraping rusted metal. "A few lost fat lambs? You guys start that bang earlier? Found something good? Hand it over and maybe I'll be in a good mood—could let you keep your corpse intact!"

Raiders! The most common and dangerous hyenas of the Fragmented Belt!

Lin Feng's heart dropped and his mind raced. A direct fight would be suicide. He plastered his usual ingratiating, fearful smile on his face and stepped forward half a pace to shield Su Wanqing and Wu Yu:

"Hey, big brothers! It's a misunderstanding! Totally a misunderstanding! We were just passing through, picking up junk to get by. There's nothing valuable here. We accidentally detonated an abandoned power cell—scared the hell out of us!"

"Bullshit!" The bald man spat, pointing the rifle at Lin Feng. "You think I'm blind? This rope? Those rock anchors? Professional gear! And you three look too clean to be eating dirt every day! What's in your bags? Open 'em!" His gaze flicked to the laser pistol in Su Wanqing's hand; a flash of caution crossed his eyes, but greed dominated. "That gun looks good too. Out of power, huh? Little girl, toss it over here!"

Wu Yu shivered even more behind the rock. Su Wanqing's grip on her gun was rock steady, but the energy indicator showed red; she could only fire it two or three more times at most.

Lin Feng's brain spun. He pretended to fumble with his pack while scanning the surroundings with peripheral vision for an escape, rattling off, "Please, big brother, please be reasonable! We're refugees, that's all we have... this gun's out of energy anyway, just decoration... look, big brother, we even have half a bar of emergency compressed rations—honor you with it..."

He moved slowly, trying to buy time.

The bald man was clearly impatient and sneered, "Cut the crap! I'll check myself!"

Chapter 13: The Bone-Spiked Tank's Ambush!

The bald man waved his hand, and the lackey holding the metal ball bat grinned viciously as he stepped forward.

Just then, a sudden mutation rebirthed itself!

A monstrous howl ripped through the air—!!

A sound entirely different from before, even more chilling, filled with violence and hunger, detonated from the red mist at the side! The roar cut through the gale, making eardrums throb with pain!

Immediately after, a massive silhouette covered in dark-red bone plates and razor bone spikes, like a heavy-duty truck, smashed through the dust and lunged at the battered off-road vehicle with terrifying speed!

It was the Ironclaw Lizard! And judging from its size, it was far larger than any they had encountered before! It seemed drawn by the earlier explosion and the engine noise!

"Shit!" The bald man's face went pale; he couldn't care about Lin Feng and the others anymore. He swung his gun around and sprayed wildly at the beast! His two lackeys, terrified, opened fire haphazardly as well.

Rifle rounds and shotgun pellets struck the Ironclaw Lizard's bone plates, scattering sparks, but they seemed unable to cause fatal damage—instead, they enraged the beast completely! It emitted an even more savage roar, and its thick tail whipped out violently!

Bang!! The battered off-roader was swept away like a toy, tumbling into a giant rock and instantly disintegrating, its parts flying in all directions!

"Run!!" Lin Feng seized the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and shouted, abandoning any thought of salvaging everything. He grabbed the nearest backpack, hauled a dazed Wu Yu up, and sprinted toward the mine entrance!

Su Wanqing didn't hesitate. She fired her final energy beam at the Ironclaw Lizard that was locked with the raiders—deliberately avoiding lethal spots just to create chaos—then turned and followed Lin Feng closely!

Behind them, the raiders' screams, furious roars, and the din of gunfire echoed into a single cacophony and were quickly carried away by the wind.

The three of them ran with everything they had across the jagged red dust, hearts about to burst from their chests, the icy air slicing into their lungs like blades.

Only when they could no longer hear anything behind them did they dare to stop. They leaned against a rock, bent over and gasping violently, the taste of iron and blood filling their mouths.

"Just... just now..." Wu Yu slumped to the ground, face ghostly pale, unable to finish his sentence.

"Damn it... we barely crawled out of the tiger's den and straight into the wolf's mouth..." Lin Feng panted, wiping cold sweat and dust from his face, instinctively feeling for the cold silver box in his inner pocket.

What started as a routine scavenging trip that they thought would yield only plastic unexpectedly detonated an escape pod, producing a mysterious silver box. They met brutal raiders and only escaped by the luck—or misfortune—of an even more terrifying monster intervening...

This twist was one hell of a rush. And that silver box seemed like an ominous magnet, beginning to attract more and more trouble.

Dragging nearly disintegrated bodies and hearts still pounding from near-death, the three returned to the mine in a pitiable state. Old Scar was already posted behind the entrance holding a spear, eyes sharp as an eagle's; only when he recognized them did his taut posture loosen a fraction.

Seeing them empty-handed, filthy, and clearly shaken—especially Lin Feng's new scrapes on his arm and Wu Yu's missing glasses—his brow immediately knitted.

"What happened—" His hoarse question hadn't finished when—

A distant, hair-raising roar from that giant beast echoed faintly again. Though it seemed farther away now, the sound snapped everyone's nerves tight again! Wu Yu shook so badly he cowered into a corner.

Old Scar understood most of it in an instant and stopped asking. He immediately helped move boulders to seal the entrance completely, leaving only a narrow slit for observation. The brief light in the mine was cut off, plunging them back into the familiar, comforting gloom, the only illumination a small metal fire that spat acrid smoke.

"What exactly... happened?" Su Wanqing steadied her breathing while checking the new scrapes on Lin Feng's arm from the escape, her tone threaded with both fear and seriousness.

She took out the last clean cloth and the tiny bit of disinfectant gel left.

Clenching his teeth through the sting of disinfectant, Lin Feng recounted, succinct but clearly, what they found under the cliff, how the silver box triggered a self-destruct, and then their encounter with the raiders and the giant Ironclaw Lizard.

When he produced the unscathed silver-white box, everyone's eyes in the tunnel were drawn to it.

Old Scar took the box. Those hands, tempered by countless life-and-death trials, weighed and stroked it carefully. His fingers traced a subtle groove, his gaze full of scrutiny and palpable caution.

He tried to pry it open with force—the box didn't budge—then used the tip of his dagger to cautiously pry at the edge but still couldn't find any entry point. He shook his head and handed the box back to Lin Feng, rasping two words: "Trouble."

If even Old Scar said that, everyone's hearts sank further.

Without his glasses, Wu Yu groped forward and squinted to look. He muttered, "...Completely sealed... this craftsmanship... doesn't resemble Federation tech or any known faction... it's more like—" He didn't finish the sentence, but the implication was clear.

Sun Wen, drawn by the commotion, shuffled over from beside her father, curiosity fixed on the box. Hesitating, she extended a slender finger, lightly touched the surface, then quickly withdrew as if the cold had burned her.

"It... seems like... it's making a very faint... sound?" she said uncertainly, tilting her head to listen. "Not something the ears hear... it's here..." She tapped her temple.

Brainwaves? An energy field? Everyone exchanged looks; the box grew more uncanny by the minute.

Lin Feng sighed and tucked the box deep into his backpack. "Better luck than misfortune, worse luck than escaping—if it's trouble, we might not be able to avoid it. Keep it for now. Far better than letting those raiders get it. Right now, the priority is how we survive."

He glanced at the nearly empty supplies corner, then at the increasingly lawless red dust outside.

"Today we almost didn't make it back, and we lost most of our haul... Next time out, we need to be more careful."

The shadow of failure and the enormous threat outside weighed down the mine's atmosphere again. The collective stomach-rumbles only amplified the sense of despair.

At that moment, the girl who had been silently tending her father, Sun Wen, spoke up in a small voice: "Um... Brother Lin Feng... about those parts you gave me earlier..."

Everyone looked over. Beside her father where the old radio lay in pieces, several circuit boards and the signal amplifier had been soldered and connected in an oddly clever but seemingly haphazard way, forming a strange contraption.

At the device's center, thin wires were even wrapped around a small, shiny metal part Wu Yu had given her (the kind you'd find at a resource point, 0.1 worth).

"I think... I made something..." Sun Wen's voice carried a mixture of uncertainty and faint excitement. "It still can't pick up a clear signal, but... in the noise of the interference... there might be a tiny... regular pulse? Very short, repeating..."

She adjusted a few makeshift "knobs" of twisted wire on the device and pressed a small piezoelectric ceramic chip against it.

A very weak but distinctly discernible rhythmic "beep... beep-beep... beep..." stuttered from the piezo! Though faint, the sound was like a sliver of light that instantly pierced the tunnel's despairing darkness!

"What is that?!" Lin Feng lunged forward.

"Like... some kind of beacon? Or... a distress signal?" Su Wanqing concentrated, listening.

Wu Yu squinted hard to make it out. "This pulse code... is ancient... but it is indeed a variant of a standard distress code! Direction of origin... seems to be... west by northwest?"

Old Scar's gaze turned toward that bearing, his look deep. "That area... goes deep... there are a lot of old ruins... they say... many people died there." His instincts always carried a bad omen.

But this unexpected discovery injected fresh hope into the stranded team. Even if danger accompanied it, a clear signal potentially pointing to other survivors or resource points was extraordinarily significant.

"Nice work! Little Ears!" Lin Feng couldn't help but ruffle Sun Wen's hair, real smile finally breaking across his face. "This is our biggest find today!"

Sun Wen's pale face flushed faintly red; she bowed her head shyly.

Hope—even tiny—could dispel that vast fear. Lin Feng watched the flickering fire, then glanced at the empty containers in the corner, and a plan slowly took shape.

"Old Scar, will your leg hold up tomorrow? We need to go fetch more water or we won't last. This time, we'll pick a different direction and avoid those bastards and the giant lizard." He looked at Old Scar.

Old Scar shifted his injured leg and nodded. "I can."

"Officer Su, I'll leave the camp to you with Little Ears and Wu Yu. Spend time analyzing that signal; try to pin down the exact direction and distance."

"All right." Su Wanqing nodded.

"As for this..." Lin Feng patted the silver box in his pack, then looked at Sun Wen's crude receiver. His eyes flickered. "...Maybe someday it'll tell us something."

Chapter 14 I can turn waste into treasure!

The cold silver box remained silent, but that faint yet regular distress pulse, like a heartbeat, stubbornly echoed within this icy stone hovel.

In desperate situations, the brilliance of technology and the cooperation of companions once again became the most precious warmth in the darkness.

The process of gathering daily necessities was filled with surprises and dangers, but occasionally, it also brought unexpected turns and hope.

Struggling for survival for many consecutive days under lethal radioactive dust and extreme low temperatures made every breath of air in the mine cave hovel carry the rusty taste of despair.

The faint distress signal received by Sun Wen, after her and Su Wanqing's sleepless analysis and triangulation, ultimately pointed toward the direction of a small refuge called "Bedrock."

According to Old Scar's vague memories and the approximate coordinates attached to the signal, it seemed more like a survivor gathering point of mixed characters established around the ruins of an early mining base. It couldn't be considered safe, but it at least had some order, and perhaps trading could be conducted.

The decision to go to "Bedrock" was made after intense debate. The risk of exposing their location was enormous, but staying trapped in the isolated cave was undoubtedly waiting for death. Ultimately, the need for survival outweighed fear.

The preparation process was cautious. Lin Feng used the last bit of materials to hastily produce over ten more "third-generation high-energy compression bricks," these being relatively the best in appearance.

Su Wanqing charged the last remaining energy from the laser pistol into a portable energy counter, to be used for demonstrating force deterrence when necessary.

Old Scar's leg injury had improved somewhat; he carefully polished all weapons and handed the sharpest alloy fragment dagger to Lin Feng for self-defense.

Meanwhile, Wu Yu had been responsible for meticulously counting, categorizing, wrapping in rags, and recording all the team's "assets"—those few bottles of murky water, the remaining protein bars, tools, and the few largest pieces of insulating plastic fragments that Lin Feng insisted on bringing.

After leaving Sun Wen to care for her father and guard the mine cave, the three of them set off on the road to "Bedrock," braving the seemingly endless fierce wind.

The journey was more difficult than expected. Relying on Old Scar's intuition and occasionally received signal fragments for guidance, it took them almost an entire day to finally see the outline of the "Bedrock" refuge in a relatively wind-sheltered valley surrounded by huge rock walls.

It couldn't even be called a town. It more resembled a huge nest haphazardly pieced together from countless discarded shipping containers, damaged living pods, tilted prefab houses, and caves.

The periphery was built into a crude wall with rough metal sheets and sharp scrap piles, with only one entrance/exit guarded by several vigilant-looking individuals holding various shabby weapons.

The air was filled with a more complex stench than outside: inferior fuel fumes, untreated waste, rotting matter, and a kind of... oppressive despair.

The inspection at the entrance was looser than expected; the guards' gazes lingered more on Su Wanqing's laser pistol and their seemingly bulging packs, with greed outweighing vigilance.

After paying "one standard energy battery or equivalent" as an entry fee, they were allowed inside.

The interior of the refuge was noisy and chaotic. The narrow, muddy "streets" were crowded on both sides with sallow, emaciated people with numb eyes.

Under some crude sheds were stalls, mostly displaying rusty parts, unrecognizable junk, or small amounts of very suspicious-looking "food."

Trading was mostly barter; occasionally, one could see crumpled old banknotes printed with Earth Federation or Mars Colonial Association logos used as supplementary currency, but clearly credit had long collapsed.

The people here almost looked down on the metal fragments and plastic bottles that Lin Feng considered treasures.

What they needed were tangible things that could sustain survival: food, water, medicine, weapons, energy.

"First, find a place to settle and inquire about the market," Lin Feng said in a low voice, his eyes scanning the stalls, quickly assessing in his mind.

He found that a small piece of blackened, unknown-composition synthetic patty could be exchanged for a large bundle of relatively clean rags;

A small bottle of murky water was worth far more than a thick but worn coat; and an ordinary rifle bullet was almost a hard currency.

"We're going to strike it rich!!!"

They found an unnoticed spot in a relatively remote corner near the rock wall to sit down and spread out their "goods."

Lin Feng took a deep breath, took out two of the best-looking "third-generation compression bricks," and placed them on a relatively clean stone.

Soon, someone was attracted. A burly man wearing a greasy leather apron with a missing front tooth squatted down, poked the compression brick with his finger, then put it under his nose to smell, frowning deeply:

"What is this thing? Mud blocks?"

"Boss, good eye!"

Lin Feng immediately switched to a shrewd merchant's smile,

"This isn't ordinary mud! 'Lin's High-Energy Compression Bricks!' Exclusive formula, high nutrition, high calories, fills you up and fights cold! Eat one piece, it'll last you most of the day! Want to try some?" He broke off a small piece from the edge and handed it over.

The burly man skeptically put it in his mouth, chewed a couple of times, and his face instantly twisted:

"Pah! What the hell is this! Salty, bitter, and has a greasy rancid taste!"

Lin Feng remained unperturbed: "Boss, these days, taste is secondary, filling your stomach is what matters! Look at this portion, this solidity! Absolutely essential dry rations for working outside or avoiding sandstorms! Cheap, one brick for your... that roll of cleaner insulation cotton, how about that?"

He pointed to a roll of silver insulation cotton on the man's stall.

The burly man acted as if he heard the biggest joke: "This broken mud block, wanting to trade for my insulation cotton? Are you dreaming? At most... I'll give you this!"

He threw over a small piece of blackened substance that looked like solidified grease.

Lin Feng quickly calculated in his mind; this grease should be high in calories, but too many unknown components.

He shook his head, picked up the compression brick: "Boss, no deal but friendship remains. Take another look, my brick is substantial!" He deliberately weighed the brick in his hand, making a dull thudding sound.

At that moment, an old woman wrapped in a tattered blanket who had been silently watching nearby, coughing constantly, spoke up tremulously:

"Young man... that brick of yours... really fills you up?"

Lin Feng immediately turned to her, his smile more sincere: "Grandma, don't worry! Absolutely fills you up! If you need it, I'll trade it cheaper to you, what do you have to offer?" He could see the old woman probably didn't have anything valuable.

A flicker of desire appeared in the old woman's cloudy eyes. She fumbled for a long time, pulled out a small metal box from her bosom containing a few rusty sewing needles and a small tangled ball of thread:

"I... only have this... can I trade for a little bit? My grandson... is too hungry to have any strength..."

Lin Feng looked at the needles and thread, then at the old woman's pleading eyes, and his heart softened.

He was about to break off a piece for her when Su Wanqing gently pulled him, slightly shook her head, and whispered: "Here, kindness can't be given lightly; any similar historical experience can tell you, it will cause trouble."

Lin Feng froze for a moment, then immediately understood. He hesitated briefly, but still broke off about a quarter of the brick and handed it to the old woman, without taking her needles and thread:

"Grandma, this is for you. Find a sheltered spot to eat it."

The old woman was stunned, looked at Lin Feng in disbelief, her eyes instantly reddened, repeatedly thanked him, clutched the small piece of brick, tucked it into her bosom like a treasure, and hurried away unsteadily.

The burly man sneered: "Idiot."

Lin Feng ignored him, but felt somewhat uncomfortable inside.

Just then, a middle-aged man dressed relatively decently in worn but bleached-clean engineer overalls walked over. He also looked tired, but his eyes were sharp, and his gaze went straight to the compression bricks.

"What's the energy density? Stable composition?" he asked directly, his tone straightforward.

Lin Feng perked up, knowing he might have encountered someone who recognized value:

"Absolutely high energy! Main components are carbs and protein, added salt and essential trace elements! Stable, stores well, as long as kept dry, lasts months no problem!" He handed over the historical data displayed on the detection pen.

The man carefully looked at the data, then picked up the brick and weighed it, even pressed it hard with his fingers to feel its hardness.

"Somewhat interesting." He nodded, "How to trade?"

Lin Feng's heart pounded, knowing the critical moment had come: "Depends on what you're offering. We urgently need clean containers, water, medicine, or... information is fine too."

The man pondered for a moment, then took out two military canteens from an old tool bag he carried. Although old, they were well-maintained and sealed intact. "These two canteens, filled with clean water. For five of your bricks."

Lin Feng quickly calculated mentally. Canteens were urgently needed, filled with water was immensely valuable. Five bricks were painful, but worth it. He was about to agree when Su Wanqing spoke first, her voice calm:

"Not enough. We know the value of clean water in this environment. Add one box of standard antibiotics, or equivalent broad-spectrum anti-infection medicine. Otherwise, no deal."

The man frowned, looked Su Wanqing over, seemingly not expecting this woman to be so shrewd.

He hesitated for a few seconds, finally sighed, fumbled in his bag again and took out a small aluminum box containing half a blister pack of antibiotic tablets:

"Only this much left. Deal or not, up to you."

"Deal!" Lin Feng immediately agreed, afraid the other might change his mind.

First transaction completed! Holding two heavy canteens and half a precious blister pack of antibiotics, Lin Feng felt like he was holding a gold mine!

The value of compression bricks had received external recognition for the first time!

The man took the five compression bricks, carefully wrapped them, and before leaving, seemed to hesitate, turned back and said quietly:

"Your stuff... not bad. But don't be too conspicuous. 'Black Tooth's' people have their eyes on you."

He pointed at a few thug-like individuals with sinister eyes staring at their packs not far away, then quickly left.

Excitement was instantly replaced by vigilance. Lin Feng and the other two immediately packed up their stall, clutching their things tightly.

The stockpiling trip had started well, but the rules and dangers of the "Bedrock" refuge were now clearly displayed before them for the first time.

Here, a small piece of "brick" that could fill your stomach might truly be more precious than gold, but it could also attract fatal disaster.

Their "junk for treasure" plan had just taken its first step.

Chapter 15 The Most Original Transaction

The gaze of the "Black Tooth" thugs clung to their backs like maggots burrowing into bone, intensely uncomfortable.

Lin Feng's trio didn't dare linger where they were. Clutching the two water bottles filled with clean water and the half-plate of antibiotics they'd just traded for, they felt like they were holding scalding hot potatoes as they quickly melted into the chaotic, noisy crowds of the "Bedrock" refuge.

They needed to find a relatively safe spot to digest the results of their first transaction and plan their next move. Squeezing into a corner piled with discarded tires that offered meager cover, Lin Feng eagerly unscrewed one water bottle. A faint, clean moisture wafted out, making his parched throat involuntarily bob.

But he restrained himself, taking only a careful sip before tightening the cap securely.

"Worth it! So worth it!" he whispered excitedly to Su Wanqing and Old Scar, keeping his voice low. "Two bricks can almost trade for a full bottle of water! And we have so much material left to make more bricks!" He could practically see countless containers, medicines, and tools waving at him on the horizon.

Su Wanqing, however, remained calm and vigilant, constantly scanning their surroundings. "That engineer was right. We stand out too much. For us, compressed bricks are low-cost, but for many people here, they're a vital energy source. Possessing treasure invites crime."

Old Scar didn't speak. He simply positioned himself deeper within the tire shadows, his hand gripping the dagger hidden under his clothes. His eyes swept over anyone approaching like a hawk's gaze. His mere presence served as an invisible deterrent.

"We need a different approach," Lin Feng said, calming down and rubbing his chin. "We can't keep setting up a stall ourselves. We need to find locals, find channels, sell in bulk, and buy in bulk." His eyes began searching the market, looking for merchants who seemed to have fixed stalls, handled larger transaction volumes, or whose faces looked less cunning.

The market in "Bedrock" was saturated with primitive barter trade.

He traded a small piece of compressed brick with a woman who looked deeply worried for two large sheets of thick plastic—worn but relatively intact. He exchanged a few recovered, still-serviceable alloy drill bits with a stall owner for a small bundle of highly flexible synthetic rope and several metal hooks of varying sizes.

He even traded a small bag of carefully sorted screws and nuts of various types, prepared by Wu Yu, with an old craftsman for a crudely made but incredibly sturdy metal pry bar!

These seemingly insignificant "pieces of junk" actually held specific value in this refuge where everything required DIY repair and construction!

Lin Feng's "scanning" ability was utilized to its maximum potential here. He could quickly assess an item's potential uses and scarcity, enabling precise bartering.

However, their primary targets—stable, large quantities of containers and a wider variety of medicines—remained elusive, with no suitable trading partners found. These were the true hard currency, controlled by a select few.

The turning point came in a remote corner that smelled of fish and water rust. A thin, wiry man with unusually sharp, lively eyes crouched behind a stall. His stall didn't display typical goods, but rather over a dozen containers of various sizes and shapes!

Everything from cracked plastic buckets to rusted tin cans, and even a few glass bottles that looked relatively intact! Behind him, even more seemed to be piled up.

Lin Feng's eyes instantly locked onto the scene!

He approached, avoiding direct focus on the containers, and first offered a small piece of compressed brick. "Boss, mind if I ask... do you deal in water here?"

The wiry man jerked his head up like a startled rabbit, eyeing Lin Feng warily. He glanced at Su Wanqing and Old Scar behind him, his gaze lingering particularly on Old Scar's face, a flicker of fear passing through his eyes. He swiftly took the compressed brick, stuffed it into his clothes, and lowered his voice:

"Water Rat" Jim. Trade only, no selling. What do you want? What do you have?"

"Boss Jim," Lin Feng said, putting on a friendly smile. "I need large, sealable water storage—the more, the better! What do you want for trade? Food, I have it!" He patted his backpack.

Jim's small eyes darted around shrewdly, his voice dropping even lower. "Food? What kind of food? Those mud cakes mixed with sand won't fool me now."

Lin Feng took out half of a complete "third-generation compressed brick" and handed it to him. Jim took it but didn't eat it immediately. He carefully weighed it, inspected it, even scraped a tiny bit off with his fingernail to taste it. His eyes lit up slightly.

"Interesting... Hardness is good, taste... acceptable. How's the energy content?"

"Absolutely high energy! It's been tested!" Lin Feng assured him. "One brick can keep a strong laborer going for a full day!"

Jim hummed thoughtfully, seemingly calculating the value. He pointed to a rust-covered but seemingly intact metal water storage tank behind him, about half a person's height. "That one, used to be an industrial coolant tank. I've cleaned it thoroughly, many times. Replaced the seal with a new one myself, guaranteed no leaks. For that... twenty bricks of this kind."

"Twenty bricks?!" Lin Feng almost jumped. "Boss, that's outright robbery! The tank is decent, but twenty bricks is way too much!"

He quickly calculated internally—the cost of twenty bricks wasn't actually high for them, but he absolutely couldn't reveal that.

"Robbery?" Jim sneered. "Kid, do you even know the market? What's the price of clean water now? What's the price of anything that can store water? This tank of mine, filled with water, could last one person half a month! Twenty bricks for half a month of life—is that expensive?"

Su Wanqing stepped forward, speaking calmly. "The tank is decent. But its value lies in its ability to hold water, not the tank itself. We don't have a stable water source right now. Getting the tank means getting an empty tank. Ten bricks, maximum."

Jim shook his head vigorously. "No, no! Fifteen! That's the lowest! And I'm taking a risk here! They're cracking down hard now!"

"Risk?" Lin Feng keenly picked up on this word.

Jim seemed to realize he'd said too much, his eyes darting away evasively, he mumbled vaguely.

"...Anyway, it's trouble! Twelve bricks! Not a single brick less! And... and add a small bottle of that energy paste of yours for a taste!" He had spotted the small insulated cup hanging from Lin Feng's waist.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged a look. Twelve bricks plus a bit of paste for a large water storage tank—this deal was feasible. This tank was crucial for their next steps.

"Deal!" Lin Feng nodded. "How do we get the tank away?"

Jim grinned, revealing yellowish teeth. "Tonight. Location to be specified separately. Deposit now, two bricks."

The transaction proceeded discreetly. Securing the promise of their first large water storage tank gave Lin Feng a solid sense of relief. Through Jim, they seemed to have found a potential channel for acquiring important supplies.

This man nicknamed "Water Rat" clearly had his own methods for obtaining "containers" that he wasn't willing to disclose openly.

And Lin Feng also realized that his compressed bricks were quietly becoming a new, popular form of "hard currency" within this desperate refuge.

He began more deliberately using bricks to trade for items that seemed useless but were either judged by the system to have high resource points or were bound to become scarce in the future: bundles of old clothes, torn blankets, large quantities of assorted bottles and jars, nails and screws of various specifications, even some discarded electronic components.

On the return journey, their backpacks were heavier than when they arrived, stuffed full with various "pieces of junk," but all three wore a trace of long-absent exhilaration.

These things, which in peaceful times wouldn't even be worth throwing in the trash, were here precious bricks for building their fortress of survival. They had faintly grasped the outline of a unique path—using "garbage" to barter for survival capital!

Chapter 16 Water rats are also afraid of being bitten

The Bedrock refuge under the night sky wasn't falling into silence; instead, it more closely resembled a weary giant beast lurking in the darkness, with all sorts of subtle activities that didn't want to be exposed by sunlight rustling and stirring within the shadows.

The cold wind was even more biting than during the day, and the swirling red dust, illuminated by a few swaying emergency lights, looked like drifting blood mist.

Lin Feng, Su Wanqing, and Old Scar navigated through the maze-like shantytown area and waste piles according to the instructions on the crumpled note that "Water Rat" Jim had secretly slipped them during the day.

Wu Yu stayed behind at the temporary resting spot to guard their supplies. His nearsightedness actually resulted in less fear in this environment, allowing him to focus entirely on counting and recording those "treasured" scraps.

"Turn left, behind the third container, next to the abandoned hydraulic pump..." Lin Feng identified the scribbled handwriting on the note by the faint light, lowering his voice, "This Jim, picking a spot like he's arranging a spy rendezvous."

"Being careful is never wrong." Su Wanqing whispered, her laser pistol held in hand. Although it was out of energy, the cold feel of the metal still offered a sliver of psychological comfort. Her gaze swept over every dark corner and the precariously piled debris overhead like radar.

Old Scar moved like a panther blending into the shadows, following silently behind them. His presence alone was the best early warning system. His injured leg seemed to be no longer a serious issue, and his movements had regained that unique, explosive lightness.

Finally, they found the location—behind a massive, long-rusted and scrapped hydraulic pump, piled high with discarded filter cores and oil drums. The air was thick with the strong smell of engine oil and some kind of chemical solvent.

Jim was already waiting there, his small body wrapped in an overly large, greasy coat, shivering from the cold and constantly stomping his feet. Seeing the three of them appear, he visibly relaxed, then nervously glanced around again.

"Where's the item?" Lin Feng got straight to the point.

Jim pointed to the half-person-height metal tank in the shadows behind him. It was indeed cleaned reasonably well, with new rubber seals at the connections that gleamed black and shiny under the faint light. "The bricks?" He rubbed his hands together, his small eyes fixed intently on Lin Feng's backpack.

Lin Feng took out the prepared twelve compressed bricks and the small insulated cup: "Bricks here, paste here. We need to inspect the tank."

Jim eagerly took the bricks, hefted them, then opened the insulated cup to smell the protein powder paste. A satisfied expression appeared on his face as he muttered, "Tsk, much better than the sand-adulterated synthetic paste those Black Tooth bastards sell..."

Old Scar stepped forward, carefully inspected the tank body, tapped it to listen to the sound, and specifically checked the seals and valve, confirming there were no hidden damages or leaks, before nodding to Lin Feng.

The transaction was complete. Lin Feng looked at this heavy tank, his heart filled with a sense of accomplishment. This was their first large water storage equipment! It held significant meaning!

Just as they were preparing to work together to lift the tank and leave, a chaotic mix of footsteps and arrogant cursing came from not far away.

"Damn it! Where did that damned water rat run off to? Dares to owe money to the Black Tooth boss and not pay up?"

"He must be hiding! Search! He's definitely around here somewhere!"

"Heard he got some fresh edible goods today?"

Jim's face instantly turned as pale as paper, his body trembling like a leaf in the wind: "Oh no... oh no! It's the Black Tooth gang! Quick! Quick, hide!" He tried to bolt deeper into the waste pile like a startled rabbit.

The three of them also felt their hearts tighten. Old Scar instantly pressed his body tight against the shadows, his dagger held in a reverse grip. Su Wanqing tugged at Lin Feng, signaling him to crouch down.

The footsteps drew closer. Three men dressed in disarray, with crude black fang tattoos on their arms, walked over cursing and swearing, carrying steel pipes and cleavers.

"Hey? What's that smell? Engine oil... and..." One of them sniffed the air, his gaze suddenly locking onto the waste pile where Lin Feng and the others were hiding, "Who's there? Get the hell out here!"

No way to avoid it!

Lin Feng's mind raced. He abruptly stood up, his face instantly switching to an obsequious yet slightly panicked smile: "Aiyo! Big brothers! Are you... are you the brave fellows from the Black Tooth gang? A pleasure to meet you!"

The three thugs were momentarily stunned by his sudden performance. The scar-faced leader narrowed his eyes: "Who are you? What are you sneaking around here for?"

His gaze swept over Lin Feng, then looked towards Su Wanqing in the shadows behind him and the conspicuous water storage tank, finally settling on Jim, who was trying to shrink himself into a ball.

"Water Rat! It is you! When are you paying the protection money you owe the boss?!" the scar-faced man barked sharply.

Jim was too terrified to speak.

Lin Feng quickly stepped forward, blocking Jim, while simultaneously pulling two more compressed bricks from his backpack with a swift motion, his face all smiles: "Big brother, big brother, don't be angry! Boss Jim is our friend. He's just gathering goods right now! See, we just made a deal with him, traded for this broken tank. This small token, please take it to wet your throats, and let it slide?"

He subtly slipped the two bricks into the scar-faced man's hand.

The scar-faced man hefted the bricks in his hand, looked at Lin Feng again, his eyes suspicious: "What is this stuff?"

"Good stuff! Fills you up, fights the cold! Exclusive secret recipe!" Lin Feng lowered his voice, putting on a mysterious act, "Much better than those black-market biscuits in the market! Why don't you big brothers give it a try?"

Another thug came over, picked up a brick, took a bite, chewed a couple of times, his frown tightening then loosening: "Pah! Tastes like shit... but... seems like it actually has some kick?"

The scar-faced man, still half-doubting, broke off a small piece and tasted it, his expression shifting. He was clearly more concerned with the practical effect of the stuff than its taste. "Hmph, you know what's good for you."

He stuffed the bricks into his pocket, then glared viciously at Jim again, "Water Rat, I'm giving you one more day! If you can't scrape together the full amount, we'll toss you to the Ironclaw Lizards!" After saying this, he waved his hand and left with the other two thugs, still cursing and grumbling.

Only when the footsteps faded into the distance did Jim collapse to the ground, gasping for breath, his back soaked with cold sweat.

Lin Feng also breathed a sigh of relief, a layer of cold sweat on his own back. He pulled Jim up: "Boss Jim, you've got quite a problem here."

Jim looked utterly miserable: "... No choice... Those Black Tooth vampires... regularly demand 'safety fees'... otherwise, you can forget about doing business in this area..."

Su Wanqing walked over and said calmly, "It seems your 'channels' aren't easy either. We need more things: containers, medicine, tools. If you can provide them consistently, we can trade long-term with this kind of 'brick.' It might help you solve your trouble."

Jim's small eyes suddenly lit up, as if he had grabbed a lifeline: "You... how many of these bricks do you have?"

Lin Feng grinned, showing his standard "Junk King" smile: "That depends, Boss Jim, on how many 'good things' you can get for us."

The crisis seemed temporarily resolved, and they had unexpectedly broadened their channels. But the shadow of "Black Tooth" had now truly fallen upon them. On the way back to their temporary resting spot, carrying the heavy water storage tank, the three of them were much more silent. In this lawless land, possessing scarce resources was itself a kind of original sin.

In a dim corner, Wu Yu was using a small homemade oil lamp (made from some found lubricating oil and torn cloth strips) to record things with extreme seriousness in a tattered notebook.

He carefully sketched every newly acquired item with a charcoal stick—the dimensions of the plastic sheeting, the length and thickness of the rope, the model of the hooks, the style of the crowbar... and noted their estimated uses and exchange value beside them.

"Hmm... Large metal water storage tank x1, evaluation: Excellent. Good seal, can meet basic water storage needs, value approximately equal to 12 units of standard compressed bricks + 0.5 units of liquid nutrients..."

He adjusted the broken glasses he'd found in the trash—one temple arm fixed with wire—and murmured to himself, "Boss Lin is really amazing... These things nobody wants, when combined, can become the capital for survival... Must record everything clearly, these will all be important assets in the future..."

He was completely unaware of the greater danger approaching, entirely immersed in his role as "storekeeper." This focus even brought about a strange sense of peace.

Chapter 17 Lin's Brick Industry

With "Water Rat" Jim as their not-entirely-reliable but genuinely useful local intermediary, Lin Feng's team's "stockpiling operation" entered the fast lane.

They no longer needed to personally set up stalls in the market and endure scrutiny and risks, instead using Jim to secretly contact those with specific needs or people wanting to offload their hidden "junk."

Most transactions occurred at night or in remote corners, filled with caution and testing.

Lin Feng's compressed bricks, with their substantial hunger-suppressing effects and relatively stable supply, quickly gained fame among the lower-class populace and some small merchants in the "Bedrock" refuge, even earning the nickname "Lin's Bricks."

"Hey, heard about it? You can get those hunger-fighting 'bricks' from 'Water Rat'!"

"Really? Better than the sand-filled paste 'Black Tooth' sells?"

"Why would I lie! My neighbor Old Cripple traded half a year's worth of broken circuit boards for two bricks, and they really work! The taste is just... uh, unique."

"Who cares about taste if it fights hunger! How to trade?"

"Depends what you have. Jim seems to take anything—broken bottles, old jars, worn clothes, decent metal pieces... he takes it all! Rumor says there's some mysterious 'master' behind him supplying those bricks..."

"Tsk tsk, these times..."

Similar conversations began quietly circulating in the refuge's corners. "Lin's Bricks" became a sort of underground currency, especially popular among the lowest-class residents who lacked combat strength, couldn't obtain energy weapons or hunt large prey, and survived only by scavenging garbage and doing odd jobs.

Lin Feng accepted everything offered. Through Jim, he acquired large quantities of planned supplies:

Containers: Plastic buckets of various sizes, tin cans, even several huge glass bottles originally used for industrial enzymes (dirty but excellent water storage containers after cleaning and sterilization).

Fabrics: Bundles of old work clothes, torn blankets, canvas fragments (for warmth, making sleeping bags, further sealing shelters).

Tools and Materials: Various manual tools (wrenches, hammers, saw blades), nails, screws, wire, batteries of different models (though charge levels unknown), even a small roll of almost-new solder wire!

Miscellaneous: A large pack of expired but still usable antibiotic powder after testing, several boxes of waterproof matches, half a can of industrial petroleum jelly, and loads of scattered, seemingly useless items that the system identified as having resource points or that Wu Yu deemed valuable.

Their temporary shelter was nearly overflowing with this "junk." Wu Yu worked frantically every day sorting, recording, and packing, yet his face glowed with unprecedented satisfaction, constantly muttering about "asset appreciation" and "inventory turnover."

However, expansion brought new troubles. First, the "Black Tooth" gang clearly noticed this "food" circulation outside their control. Jim faced increasing pressure, appearing panicked during several transactions, claiming "Black Tooth" members were investigating the brick source.

Moreover, the large-scale "junk" collection aroused curiosity and spying from others.

Once, when Lin Feng and Old Scar went to collect a "big order" of over fifty various bottles and jars traded for twenty bricks, they were almost ambushed by a group.

Fortunately, Old Scar's experience allowed him to detect something wrong in advance. They decisively abandoned the transaction and escaped by diving into complex ruins.

"Damn, looks like Jim's channel alone isn't stable enough," Lin Feng panted, leaning against a cold metal wall. "We need to be more careful."

Su Wanqing wiped the energy port of her laser pistol (trying to find a charging method but failing): "Tall trees catch the wind. Our bricks are cutting into others' profits. Also, I feel like the atmosphere in 'Bedrock' is somewhat off."

Her feeling was correct. Beyond the "Black Tooth" threat, another more unsettling atmosphere began spreading. Rumors about "bad weather" began circulating through the refuge in more specific, more terrifying forms.

"Heard about it? The 'Shattered Bone' camp east of here got completely buried a few days ago! Didn't even make a sound!"

"Really? I heard it was just a normal sandstorm?"

"Normal my ass! One-Eye escaped from there, said the wind was red! Carried a weird smell! Felt like needles stabbing your skin! Could corrode right through stone!"

"Yikes... then our place..."

"Who knows... Can Bedrock's crappy walls hold up?"

"...Need to stockpile more food and water..."

These rumors spread like an invisible plague, intensifying people's panic and making Lin Feng's compressed bricks even more sought-after, with their bartering rates quietly rising in the shadows. Panic and greed were catalyzing conflicts within this fragile refuge.

Lin Feng looked at the mountain of "junk" piled in the corner, feeling both pleased and worried. Pleased about their growing material wealth, worried about the situation spiraling out of control.

He touched the still-cold silver box in his inner pocket, remembering the distress signal Sun Wen had received.

"Looks like we need to speed up," he said quietly to Su Wanqing and Old Scar. "Stockpile enough supplies and evacuate quickly! This 'Bedrock' probably won't be able to protect itself much longer."

Their "Lin's Brick Industry" flourished amid crisis, yet was increasingly shrouded by growing shadows. Their next transaction might not be so fortunate.

Chapter 18: The Mad Dog's "Redemption"

The situation deteriorated faster than expected. First came bad news through a shaken Jim: the small clinic doctor who had been quietly supplying them with medicine disappeared last night; the clinic was smashed to pieces and the little stock of medicine was looted clean. It was clearly the work of Black Tooth or a similar gang.

"It's over... it's over..." Jim's face was ashen as he muttered repeatedly,

"No medicine... even minor injuries and illnesses will become deadly... Black Tooth will surely jack the prices through the roof... Those anti-inflammatories and painkillers you wanted... forget it!"

This was a heavy blow to Lin Feng's team. Old Scar's leg wound had improved but still required infection prevention. Sun Wen's father had been weak for a long time and needed antibiotics. Stockpiling medicine was the top priority for facing future crises. Compressed bricks could be traded for containers or tools, but in critical moments, medicine was what could directly save lives.

As if a leaking roof couldn't be worse, Wu Yu, from days of overwork, malnutrition, and inhaling too much dust, began running a low fever and coughing uncontrollably. Although not life-threatening yet, in this environment, a small illness could easily become a major problem.

"We have to get medicine!" Lin Feng said, staring at Wu Yu's fever-flushed face, resolved. The compressed brick's status as currency was under threat; they needed new bargaining chips—or a risk.

"I'll check the black market." Old Scar spoke up suddenly, his voice hoarse and calm. The "black market" he referred to was a deeper, more chaotic area within Bedrock controlled by several tougher desperados, where weapons, contraband, and all manner of dubious goods circulated—extremely risky.

"Too dangerous!" Su Wanqing objected immediately. "That's one of Black Tooth's strongholds! If you go alone it's suicide!"

"I have my ways." Old Scar's gaze was deep, as if he had made a decision. He didn't explain much; he simply inspected the alloy dagger and a sharpened rebar.

Lin Feng looked at Old Scar and knew that once he decided, not even ten Ironclaw Lizards could pull him back. Gritting his teeth, he shoved the last five highest-quality compressed bricks and a small bag of the synthetic protein powder they had been hoarding into Old Scar's hands. "Scar, take these—might come in handy. Safety first! If it gets impossible, fall back!"

Old Scar glanced at him, accepted without refusal, stuffed the items into his clothes, and his figure melted like a ghost into the deeper darkness of the refuge.

The waiting was agonizing. Lin Feng and Su Wanqing were on edge, tending to the feverish Wu Yu while also on guard for trouble at the door.

Jim paced like an ant on a hot pan, muttering "gone mad," "the Mad Dog must have gone to the Poison Nest," "once you go in there you don't come out"... over and over.

"Mad Dog?" Lin Feng caught the nickname.

Jim shivered. "That... that scar-faced guy who was with you... used to have a name around here... fights like he's got no regard for his life... later he seemed to get into big trouble and disappeared... didn't expect him to be back... the place he went to is the Poison Spider's territory—worse than Black Tooth..."

Lin Feng felt his heart leap into his throat. He hadn't expected Old Scar to have such a past.

Several hours passed. Just as Lin Feng could hardly bear it and was about to go look for him, the torn cloth covering the entrance was abruptly flung aside and a blood-soaked figure staggered inside!

It was Old Scar!

He was pale, breathing heavily, with several new vicious wounds and blood soaking his clothes. But his eyes shone frighteningly bright, carrying a near-mad calm.

He threw down a blood-stained, bulging canvas bag with a dull thud.

"Medicine." He spat out one word, then propped himself against the wall and tore a strip of cloth to begin expertly dressing his deepest wounds, as if feeling no pain.

Su Wanqing immediately moved forward to help with the wounds. Lin Feng's hands trembled as he opened the canvas bag.

Inside was a large quantity of medicine—various antibiotics, painkillers, tourniquets, suture needles and thread, even several sealed vials of stimulants and antitoxin serums! In addition, there were two well-maintained old pistols and several magazines fully loaded with bullets!

"My God... Scar... you... you raided the Poison Spider's lair?" Lin Feng's voice shook.

Old Scar paused in his bandaging; a complex look flashed in his eyes. He neither admitted nor denied it, only said flatly,

"Bumped into an... old friend. Had a little reunion."

His tone was horribly calm, as if he had just popped by for tea. Jim cowered in a corner, looking at Old Scar as if staring at a demon from hell.

The value of these medicines exceeded the total of all their previous trades by far! Especially those serums and stimulants—they could be a second life in certain situations!

Lin Feng immediately found antipyretics and antibiotics and gave them to Wu Yu. Watching Wu Yu's breathing gradually steady and fall into a deep sleep, he finally exhaled in relief.

"Thanks, Scar." Lin Feng looked at Old Scar and said it sincerely. He knew that "thanks" was far too light—Old Scar had surely gone through a brutal fight and perhaps even closed a bloody chapter of his past.

Old Scar only waved a hand and closed his eyes, seemingly utterly exhausted.

This gamble solved the immediate medicine crisis and unexpectedly bolstered the team's strength—especially their firepower.

But it also meant they had thoroughly angered a powerful dark force within Bedrock. The Poison Spider's retaliation could come at any moment.

"We have to leave right away!" Su Wanqing finished tending to Old Scar's wounds and said with iron resolve. "We've got enough medicine and weapons, and we've stocked containers and basic supplies. Staying here any longer is a one-way ticket to death!"

Lin Feng glanced at the blood-stained canvas bag on the floor, then at the wind-whipped red dust outside, and nodded heavily.

It was time to take their hoarded "treasure" back to the rudimentary but relatively safer mine shelter and make final preparations for the impending catastrophe.

And Old Scar's action had written a bloody but crucial full stop on Lin's Brick Industry's trip to Bedrock.

Chapter 19 The Final Shopping

The decision to evacuate meant action had to be swift and covert. This thought wound around Lin Feng's heart like a tightly drawn bowstring, each heartbeat drumming out an urgent rhythm.

The greedy beast that was Panshan Shelter had just had considerable "fat meat" snatched from its jaws, and the current tranquility was merely the deceptive calm before the storm. Who knew if Poison Spider's thugs might kick down their creaking, dilapidated door at any second.

Old Scar's injury was the primary concern, but it couldn't be treated here. The clinic here was exorbitantly expensive and would absolutely leak information. Without a word, Su Wanqing immediately opened the medical kit they had just obtained from Jim, which still carried a faint musty smell.

"I'll handle it, using this!"

Her movements were swift and steady, as if her slender hands were naturally born to snatch lives from death's grasp in such chaotic environments. She used clean water—something scarcer in Bedrock than mood stabilizers—to carefully rinse the gruesome wound on Old Scar's shoulder. The flesh was torn open, with a hint of white reflection visible that made one's scalp crawl.

"Endure it, Old Scar. This stuff isn't high-proof, but better than nothing." Su Wanqing shook a small metal flask containing industrial alcohol diluted with water, serving as disinfectant.

Old Scar merely grunted a short syllable through his nose to indicate acknowledgment.

He clenched his teeth, the muscles on his bronze face taut like rock, fine beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead, gathering into droplets that traced the scars on his cheeks, yet he stubbornly refused to utter even a groan.

The extremely faint "shhh-shhh" sound of the needle passing through flesh, the suture thread being pulled tight, realigning the torn tissue.

Throughout the process, only his pupils occasionally contracting sharply from intense pain revealed this wasn't truly just a "superficial wound."

Su Wanqing also had sweat beading at her temples. She carefully administered the final precious dose of broad-spectrum antibiotics and let out a long exhale.

"Can you walk?" Lin Feng crouched nearby, his brow furrowed deeply, the worry in his tone nearly overflowing. He looked at Old Scar's ghastly wound, then at the gradually graying sky outside—time waited for no one.

Old Scar moved his injured shoulder, the motion somewhat stiff, but his gaze remained sharp as a tempered blade, sweeping over Lin Feng and Wu Yu: "No problem. Superficial wound."

His voice was hoarse, yet carried undeniable determination. In this team, he was the toughest backbone; if he said he could do it, then he absolutely could.

Seizing the darkest hour before dawn, when guards were most weary and lax, the three began frantic, breathlessly tense packing work like wound-up tops. The two large water storage tanks, half a person tall and requiring both arms to embrace, were the biggest challenge and one of their core prizes from this expedition—

One of them had been obtained from Jim at an astronomical price. They were heavy as small mountains, exhausting just to move slightly, let alone transport over long distances.

Various bottles and containers, tools, barely clean fabrics, precious medicines, well-maintained weapons...

Wu Yu's absurdly oversized logistics backpack was stuffed like an overinflated balloon, the zipper nearly bursting, plus several large canvas bags obtained with compressed bricks, similarly filled to capacity.

Wu Yu had taken the fever reducer Su Wanqing gave him, his temperature having dropped somewhat. Though his face remained pale as paper and he staggered when walking, he clung desperately to what appeared to be the shabbiest but best-protected satchel, containing meticulously categorized medicines and crucial weapon components.

He pushed his glasses up from the tip of his nose, muttering incessantly in a weak yet stubborn voice:

"...asset inventory...must verify clearly...bag three is precision tools, cannot be crushed...highest value items...must keep on person...anti-radiation meds and antibiotics...priority SSS..."

Lin Feng quietly summoned Jim as well. The portly shopkeeper slipped in like a startled mouse, tiptoeing cautiously. Lin Feng pressed the final ten heavy compressed bricks and a small can of protein powder worth its weight in gold into his arms:

"Boss Jim, thank you. This is the final payment. We're leaving."

Jim looked at the "hard currency" in his arms, enough for him to live comfortably for quite some time, then at the mountain-like pile of "luggage" on the floor that would drive any shelter resident insane with envy. The gleam in his small eyes was profoundly complex, mixing extreme envy with deeper fear:

"You...really leaving? Outside...it's more dangerous out there! Mutant hyena packs just swept through the eastern wasteland days ago, and those maniacs from the Rust Gang are wandering nearby too! Here...here at least has walls!"

"Here isn't safe either. Poison Spider's people lost face, lost men, they won't let this go. You might be next on their cleanup list." Lin Feng patted his thick shoulder firmly, his tone grave, "You should pack up quickly too, find somewhere to lay low, Jim. Take care."

Jim's plump cheeks twitched several times, until finally all words condensed into a heavy sigh.

He nodded, saying nothing more, clutching those compressed bricks as tightly as his own life, nimbly turning and swiftly disappearing into the shadows of the dim corridor as if he had never been there.

Now, the biggest problem loomed before them: how to safely transport this small "mobile treasure trove" out of Bedrock?

The main entrance was unthinkable; that would be like announcing to the whole world through a megaphone, "I'm dripping with fat, come rob me."

The three studied Wu Yu's crudely drawn shelter sketch for a long time. Ultimately, it was Old Scar, relying on his nearly beast-like intuition and photographic memory of environments, who recalled a long-forgotten old ventilation duct exit located at the base of the shelter's outermost rock wall.

It had been blocked for years by various discarded debris, but precisely because of that, it was unguarded.

The subsequent moving process became an extreme test of will and physical endurance.

The heavy water tanks required both Lin Feng and the relatively better-conditioned Su Wanqing working together to barely lift one end, dragging them laboriously across the rugged, gravel-strewn ground.

The "screech—screech—" noise of metal tank bottoms scraping against the ground was unbearably loud in the silent pre-dawn hours, each sound making their hearts leap into their throats.

Though injured, Old Scar took on the most dangerous scouting duty.

Like a phantom, he vanished ahead into the darkness, using his familiarity with patrol patterns and exceptional hearing to issue silent warning gestures repeatedly.

The three would immediately stop all movement with tacit understanding, suppressing their breathing, pressing tightly against the cold, damp walls, merging into the deepest shadows.

The chill from the cold ground seeped through their clothes straight into their bones. Wu Yu couldn't suppress a shiver, then forcibly restrained himself, stifling a coughing fit. Lin Feng quickly covered his mouth, heart pounding wildly as they watched a team of yawning, grumbling guards wander past a junction less than ten meters away.

Chapter 20 Big Mac Baby! It's mine!

When they finally pushed the last bulging bag through the narrow, rusted ventilation shaft and the three of them laboriously climbed out of the cramped passage one by one, breathing the outside air again—cold and biting, mixed with the scents of radioactive dust and metal corrosion—they almost simultaneously collapsed to the ground, chests heaving violently, feeling a kind of dazed exhaustion as if drained of all strength.

Looking back, the massive, crude metal door of the "Bedrock" refuge and the reinforced rock walls around it, in the dim, gloomy light of dawn, resembled a dormant, scarred steel behemoth, silent and oppressive, exuding a suffocating atmosphere.

Its interior was filled with endless greed, savage violence, and bone-deep despair, yet it was also this very place that had allowed them to complete their initial and most difficult "doomsday capital accumulation."

"Let's go, home." Lin Feng took a deep breath of the air that wasn't sweet but represented freedom, his tone carrying unconcealable weariness, but even more so, a firm determination to break free from the cage and rush toward hope.

The return journey became incredibly long and arduous due to the far-exceeded-expected burden. Every step felt like wading through a swamp. But strangely, looking at these heavy, clattering "junk," instead of complaints, everyone's hearts were filled with an unprecedented sense of solidity and a faint feeling of happiness.

These were their foundation for survival, and the hope for a better life—the embers of civilization, the building blocks of hope.

During a necessary rest stop along the way, Lin Feng even found the mood to find joy in hardship. Leaning against a large water tank, he gestured with his chin toward these two behemoths, grinning as his chapped lips cracked with a trace of blood:

"Look at this! We're 'water tycoons' now! When we get back, I'll show you my skills, make 'Fourth Generation Supreme Concentrated Brick Soup'—guaranteed with extra water and ingredients, plenty for everyone! To celebrate our moving-in celebration!"

Wu Yu, weakly leaning against his precious backpack, immediately pushed up his glasses upon hearing this, coughing while earnestly refuting:

"Boss Lin... according to... according to my records, our protein reserves and vitamin supplements are still severely insufficient... energy bars are seventy percent depleted... the focus of our next collection mission must... must shift in this direction... the nutritional ratio of 'Supreme Brick Soup' is not scientific..."

Su Wanqing, who was carefully checking the remaining bullets in her pistol magazines, couldn't help but chuckle, a bit of color returning to her pale face: "Comrade Wu Yu, as a patient, you should focus on recovering, don't always worry about your KPIs and nutritional ratios."

"If Boss Lin is treating us, we should be grateful to have anything to eat at all." She turned her head and saw that even Old Scar, silently keeping watch nearby, seemed to have the rock-hard corners of his mouth imperceptibly twitch upward for a moment, though it instantly returned to normal, which was enough to lift her spirits a little more.

Just as they were passing through a relatively flat, open area that seemed to have been an old-era road, the sharp-eyed Wu Yu suddenly pointed at a huge silhouette in the distance, his voice filled with surprise:

"...What is that?"

Everyone looked over and saw an utterly abandoned, old-style large transport truck, almost completely buried by sand and withered vegetation, lying tilted there. Time and windblown sand had long eroded it beyond recognition, the driver's cabin collapsed, the cargo compartment steel plates rusted through with large holes, like the skeleton of a giant prehistoric creature.

However, Lin Feng's eyes instantly lit up as if he had discovered a rare treasure. He abruptly stood up, all fatigue swept away, excitedly calling out to everyone: "Wait! Brothers! One last sweep for goods! A heaven-sent opportunity!"

Su Wanqing's heart sank with a sense of foreboding: "Lin Feng... we really can't carry any more! Look at us, we're practically turning into human pack animals!"

"Even if we can't carry it, we have to! This chance won't come again!"

Lin Feng's "Junk King" spirit was now burning fiercely, comparable to a small nuclear explosion.

"Look at those tires! My god, such huge tires! Rubber! Treasures! Heat insulation, shock absorption, making shoe soles, even burnable in critical times! And those steel plates! Look at that thickness! Top-grade materials for reinforcing our mine door, making shields! Old Scar, lend a hand, let's figure out how to remove these two most intact rear wheels! Wu Yu! Record! New important assets: Heavy truck tires x2, high-carbon steel plates, several! Write it down quickly!"

Su Wanqing despairingly held her forehead, letting out a helpless groan. She knew it!

Thus, on the final leg of their journey back from the "Bedrock" refuge, this already overly bloated team reached a new level of absurdity. Lin Feng and Old Scar expended tremendous effort, using crowbars and brute force to finally remove two giant rubber tires taller than themselves, along with several heavy, sharply-edged large steel plates.

The tires couldn't be carried, only laboriously rolled forward, emitting deep, loud rumbling sounds that traveled far across the silent wasteland; the steel plates were dragged using ropes, plowing deep tracks behind them.

The team's progress instantly slowed to a snail's pace, each step accompanied by strange noises and heavy panting.

Wu Yu looked at these newly acquired, hard-to-value "assets," updating his list with a worried frown;

Su Wanqing felt she had never been so embarrassed in her life, anxiously scanning their surroundings, afraid the huge commotion would attract any uninvited guests;

Old Scar remained silent as ever, just quietly keeping his injured shoulder away from the direction of force, using his other hand to firmly stabilize the rolling tire.

But Lin Feng, looking at these two huge tires and clattering steel plates, had a face radiant with an almost obsessive satisfaction and the joy of harvest, as if he were dragging not heavy burdens, but a bright future.

When that familiar, concealed mine entrance finally appeared at the edge of their vision like the warmest harbor in the world, everyone nearly burst into tears. Sun Wen's surprised yet concerned cry reached them first: "They're back! Oh my god! Did they... bring back the entire market?!"

She and her father, along with several other companions who had stayed behind, hurried out to meet them.

Then, everyone stood frozen at the cave entrance as if under a immobilization spell, staring dumbfounded at this team that looked like they had returned from a frantic shopping spree in the post-apocalyptic wasteland—battered warriors, a weak and sick accountant, a doctor with a look of utter resignation, piles of packages, two behemoth water tanks, and finally those two rolling giant tires and dragged steel plates...

This scene was simply too surreal, too... "Lin Feng."

"We're back!"

Lin Feng shouted with his last bit of strength, his face, though covered in grime and sweat, beaming with an incredibly bright and proud smile. He spread his arms as if displaying supreme achievements,

"Look! Our 'doomsday startup capital,' the first batch! All accounted for! Our future is secured!"

His shout echoed through the desolate valley, filled with relief after hardship and infinite longing for the future. The people at the mine entrance, snapping out of their initial shock, rushed forward in disbelief and excitement, helping to take over these heavy "hopes."

Chapter 21 The Beginning of the Junk King

The heavy supplies were dragged into the mine tunnel by many hands, instantly filling the originally quite spacious area until there was almost no room to stand.

Two massive water storage tanks stood like metal giants at the very back, surrounded by piles of various buckets, cans, bottles, bundled fabric tools, plus those two conspicuous giant tires and steel plates, making the place look more like a chaotic garbage recycling station than a shelter.

But everyone's faces shone with irrepressible joy and accomplishment.

Sun Wen's father, under the effect of medication, looked much better and struggled to get up and help, but Sun Wen pressed him back down. However, the murky light had returned to his eyes.

Although Wu Yu still had a low fever, he insisted on leaning against the supply piles, holding his record board, and excitedly began a new round of inventory registration under the dim light, muttering incessantly:

"...Assets exploded...Strategic reserves...Must replan the storage area..."

"Alright, alright! Comrade 'Canned Goods,' a patient should act like a patient!"

"I don't need to!"

"Recover first! You'll have plenty to keep you busy later! Right now, our top priority is upgrading this doghouse...uh, I mean our 'palace'!"

He stood with hands on hips, surveying the cave filled with "treasure," brimming with confidence:

"First, we need a resounding name! We can't keep calling it the mine tunnel shack anymore, that's too cheap! We're propertied class now!"

Su Wanqing was counting medical supplies and looked up at his words, a slight smile touching her lips. "What do you want to call it? 'Lin's Junk Kingdom'?"

"Tacky! Way too tacky!"

Lin Feng waved his hand grandly, his gaze sweeping over the supplies before finally settling on the still-silent silver box in his inner pocket and the faintly warm pocket watch on his chest. A name suddenly popped into his mind as if inspired,

"Our future lies among the stars and seas! Even if we're picking up junk now, we're cosmic-level Junk Kings! This place is our starting point! So, I declare—"

He cleared his throat, his voice echoing through the cave: "From today onward, this place is officially renamed 'Stardust Outpost Base'! What do you think? Doesn't it radiate dominance while brimming with hope and poetry?"

The scene fell silent for a few seconds.

Wu Yu adjusted his glasses and muttered quietly, "...Naming logic shows low compatibility with the base's current functions, but...the meaning is acceptable, easy to remember..."

Sun Wen blinked and nodded gently. "...It sounds nice."

Old Scar wiped his newly acquired pistol expressionlessly, giving silent consent.

Su Wanqing smiled helplessly,

"Fine then, 'Stardust Outpost' it is. So, Commander Lin, how do you plan to upgrade our 'outpost base'?"

"Excellent question!"

Lin Feng immediately perked up and began gesturing animatedly,

"Step one, reinforcement and sealing! Old Scar, Brother Scar! This task falls to you! We have steel plates now! Seal up that broken entrance completely, leaving only one sturdy observation port with multiple bolts! Then use this clay to seal all the cracks! Don't let any of that red dust get inside!"

Old Scar glanced at the heavy steel plates and tools in the corner, nodded, a craftsman-like focus flashing in his eyes. This was work he excelled at.

"Step two, zoning!"

"We have more people now, and way more stuff—we can't have everything jumbled together! Widen that small side tunnel inside! Make it the 'Strategic Storage Center,' managed by Wu Yu! Out here, sleeping, cooking, activity areas—separate them! Use these plastic sheets and old blankets for partitions!"

"Officer Su, you're detail-oriented—you plan this!"

Su Wanqing looked at the pile of assorted materials and nodded, already mentally sketching out the layout.

"Step three, equipment upgrades!"

Lin Feng grew more excited as he spoke, "Water! We have water now! We can't keep drinking it cold! I'm going to build a 'Stardust Brand' high-efficiency energy-saving hot water circulation system! Use that iron barrel as the furnace, for pipes...there must be something usable in this scrap metal! And air!"

"Sun Wen, Little Ears! Your mission is crucial! Use the new parts we acquired to figure out how to get that air filtration device working! At least reduce the dust in the cave!"

"Received!!!"

Sun Wen looked at the pile of mixed old and new electronic components and filter materials, nodded vigorously, her eyes shining as if she'd received a sacred mission.

"What about me?" Old Man Sun couldn't help asking.

"Uncle Sun, you focus on recovering your health, and incidentally serve as our base's...discipline inspector! Criticize anyone who slacks off!"

With the plan set, the entire "Stardust Outpost Base" immediately sprang into action like a wound clockwork.

Old Scar, with Lin Feng's help, began clanging away, cutting and welding steel plates to reinforce the entrance. Su Wanqing directed those who could still move to clear areas, lay insulation cotton and plastic sheets, and demarcate functional zones.

Wu Yu kept recording incoming supplies between coughs. Sun Wen buried herself in a pile of components, starting to design her air filter and attempting to repair the old radio to receive more information.

The sounds of labor drove away the cold and despair; hope burned brighter in everyone's hearts, like that small fire. They were no longer refugees passively surviving, but actively shaping their own living environment.

However, amidst this fervent atmosphere of construction, the silver-white box that had been quietly resting in Lin Feng's pocket vibrated slightly without any warning.

Extremely faint, brief as a trick of the senses.

Lin Feng, who was vigorously swinging a hammer to drive in fixing nails, paused mid-action, instinctively touching his pocket. The box remained cold as ever, showing no unusual signs.

"An illusion?" he muttered, shook his head, and threw himself back into the heavy labor.

He didn't see that in the shadowy corner behind him, Sun Wen, who was trying to wire an old filter core, suddenly looked up, blinked in confusion, and tilted her head to listen, as if catching an extremely high-frequency, faint tremor beyond normal human hearing range, coming from Lin Feng's direction.

But she was soon drawn back by the technical challenge in her hands, dismissing the fleeting sensation.

The base upgrade had just begun, and the accidentally obtained "key" seemed poised to unlock its first mystery. Beneath the calm surface, undercurrents were quietly stirring.

Chapter 22 A sudden crisis of trust!

The renovation project for "Stardust Outpost Base" was progressing rapidly.

Under the operation of Old Scar, the silent yet efficient engineer, the cave entrance was completely sealed off with thick steel plates, leaving only a sturdy opening for one person to observe and fire short-barreled weapons. Multiple layers of insulation material and yellow mud were used for sealing, significantly improving wind and dust protection.

Inside the cave, Su Wanqing cleverly utilized scavenged metal rods, plastic sheets, and tattered blankets to divide relatively independent sleeping areas, material storage areas, work areas, and common activity areas. Though still crude, order and functionality were greatly enhanced, even giving a faint semblance of a "home."

Lin Feng's tinkering with the "hot water circulation system" could be called performance art:

A rusted iron barrel served as the stove, with several sections of mismatched copper pipes crookedly connected, passing through a plastic bucket transformed into a "water tank," relying on the most primitive wood burning for heating.

The effect was... better than nothing. At least it allowed everyone to occasionally drink hot water, but leaks and low efficiency were the norm. Lin Feng grandly called it the "first-generation experimental machine" and stated that subsequent iterations and upgrades would follow.

Sun Wen's progress was the most pleasantly surprising. Using found filter remnants, fan blades, and large quantities of wires, she actually managed to cobble together a rudimentary air filtration device!

Although it was very noisy, like an iron lung gasping for breath, it indeed significantly reduced the dust floating inside the cave, making breathing much smoother. She also attempted to repair the radio; static remained, but that regular distress signal seemed slightly clearer.

Everything seemed to be developing in a positive direction. The stockpiled supplies brought a sense of security, and the base upgrades improved the quality of life.

However, strange situations began to quietly emerge.

The first to notice something wrong was Wu Yu. He had an almost obsessive sense of order regarding the "Strategic Storage Center" he managed, clearly remembering the position and quantity of every item in his mind and on his record board. This morning, during his routine inventory check, his brows furrowed tightly.

"Not right... something's missing."

He muttered to himself, repeatedly checking the records,

"The industrial sealing tape should have about two-thirds of a roll left... now there's only about half a roll. Standard model screws, two are missing. And also... that largest, best-condition piece of insulation cotton, the edge seems to have been irregularly cut, a small piece missing?"

Thinking someone might have urgently used them without recording it, he asked everyone.

Everyone stated they had not used these items.

"Are you sure you didn't misremember? Does such a small cut piece really exist?"

"Officer Su! I am absolutely not wrong, please believe in my professionalism and intuition!"

"I believe you, I believe you."

Su Wanqing was also somewhat intimidated by his seriousness.

"Items don't grow legs and walk away by themselves."

A nameless chill crept up Wu Yu's spine.

Next was Su Wanqing.

She discovered that one of her spare undershirts, though worn but washed very clean, had several strange, subtle scorch marks on the cuff, as if burned by some acidic substance.

She was certain they weren't there before. This time, she finally believed Wu Yu.

Old Scar then found that the gun oil application marks on a pistol he meticulously maintained seemed to have been tampered with, giving an awkward sense of incongruity, although the weapon itself was fine.

Even a clamp on a connection point of Lin Feng's leak-prone hot water system had loosened for some unknown reason, nearly causing hot water leakage and scalding someone.

Individually, these incidents seemed very minor, like negligence or accidents.

But occurring one after another, all pointing to those carefully collected, crucial daily necessities and small parts, made it extremely suspicious. An invisible, intangible unease and suspicion began to spread silently, like the dust inside the cave.

"Could it be... that an outsider got in?"

Wu Yu voiced the most frightening conjecture, his voice trembling. But the cave entrance was securely sealed; Old Scar checked and found no signs of forced entry.

"Or maybe... among us..."

He didn't finish, but the seed of doubt was already planted. His gaze involuntarily swept over everyone, especially the later-joined Sun Wen and her father.

Sun Wen turned pale with fright, waving her hands repeatedly: "It wasn't me! I really didn't touch anything! I've been working on the filter the whole time..."

Old Man Sun also struggled to sit up, coughing excitedly: "Our lives were saved by you... how could we possibly do such a thing..."

Lin Feng frowned deeply. He believed Sun Wen and her father, but he also couldn't explain these strange occurrences. He subconsciously touched the silver box in his pocket; it remained cold and silent.

"Everyone, stop guessing wildly!"

Lin Feng forcefully suppressed the doubts in his heart, maintaining team stability, "There must be some oversight somewhere! Wu Yu, keep good records; from now on, all material usage requires signatures from at least two people! Officer Su, strengthen patrols! Brother Scar, add another hidden lock to the entrance!"

Orders were given, but the atmosphere had become subtle. A crack had appeared in their trust.

Late at night, it was Lin Feng's turn for watch duty. Leaning against the reinforced cave entrance, listening to the ghostly howling wind outside, his mind was unable to find peace. Those missing and damaged small items replayed constantly in his thoughts.

Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he seemed to catch a glimpse of something moving extremely slightly in the shadows of the corner where supplies were stacked!

It wasn't a rat, nor a human figure! It was more like a small patch of shadow itself twisting!

He whipped his head around, laser pistol instantly aimed in that direction!

Nothing. The supply pile lay quietly there, only the monotonous hum of the filter assembled by Sun Wen breaking the silence.

"Seeing things?"

Lin Feng's heart pounded wildly. Cautiously holding his gun, he slowly walked over and carefully inspected. Everything was normal. But he keenly noticed that on the ground, there seemed to be some extremely fine, almost invisible metal shavings. Beside them, a specific type of small screw that should have been in its box lay rolled in the dust.

It was as if something had just been trying to secretly disassemble or study that screw and vanished instantly upon his disturbance.

A hair-raising feeling instantly gripped Lin Feng. He remembered the brief vibration of the silver box, remembered the "high-frequency tremor" Sun Wen had mentioned before.

The intruder might not have come from outside at all. It might have been right beside them all along, formless and intangible, in a way they couldn't comprehend, peering, and had begun silently touching their "treasures."

The real crisis might have already infiltrated the heart of "Stardust Outpost."

Chapter 23: The Mystery of the "Disappearing Materials"

Lin Feng did not publicize that suspected discovery from the night. He knew that without conclusive evidence, speaking out would only intensify the team's panic and suspicion.

But his internal vigilance was raised to the highest level.

He took the silver box out of his pocket, carefully wrapped it several times with a small piece of relatively dense lead sheet he had scavenged, and stuffed it back into his inner pocket, hoping to block out that possibly existing bizarre energy field or signal.

However, the situation did not improve.

The "material disappearance" incident began to escalate. It was no longer limited to small items like screws and tape; some slightly larger objects also started falling victim.

Wu Yu was on the verge of breaking down. He discovered that a small pack of special alloy gaskets he had meticulously sorted for tool repairs was missing more than half.

The record board clearly stated the quantity, but now the box was almost empty.

Immediately after, Su Wanqing found that a roll of high-strength synthetic fiber thread she had collected for sewing thicker door curtains had a section neatly "extracted" from the middle, with a cut so smooth it didn't seem man-made.

Even more unsettling, one morning, an extremely thin, nearly invisible metal wire that Old Scar had fixed inside the cave entrance for early warning was found broken, with the break showing a peculiar, slightly molten then rapidly cooled crystalline appearance.

This was absolutely not an accident or negligence!

There was an invisible "thief" or "observer" systematically and purposefully stealing and studying their supplies! It seemed particularly interested in metal components, specific synthetic materials, and even energy circuits.

Panic spread in silence. Everyone's eyes held scrutiny and wariness towards each other, and conversations became cautious.

The harmonious working atmosphere vanished completely, replaced by a suffocating tension permeating the base. Sun Wen even became afraid to tinker with her components, fearing suspicion.

Lin Feng was extremely anxious. He knew he had to find a way to solve this problem, otherwise the team would collapse from within before the Dust Tide even arrived.

He thought of that silver box again. All the bizarre occurrences seemed to have started after obtaining it.

Late at night, sitting alone by the nearly extinguished fire, he carefully took out the lead-wrapped box. After much hesitation, he peeled back the lead sheets layer by layer.

The silver-white box gleamed coldly in the faint light, its subtle indentation still mysterious.

He took a deep breath, concentrated all his mental focus, and attempted to communicate with it again: "System, scan it! Full power! Analyze its energy fluctuations!"

[Command received... Attempting deep scan... Warning: Encountering unknown shielding field... Energy signature cannot be captured... High interference present...]

[Detecting ultra-micro spatial warp indications... Probability 97.3%... Associated targets: Special alloy gaskets, synthetic fiber thread...]

Ultra-micro spatial warp?!

Lin Feng's pupils contracted sharply. This term far exceeded his knowledge scope, but it sounded extremely ominous. Was this box a miniature portal? Was the "thief" using it to steal things?

Just as he was reeling from this shock, a sudden anomaly occurred!

As if sensing his intense mental scan or some other trigger condition, the subtle indentation at the center of the silver box suddenly projected a faint, azure blue beam of light without any warning!

The light formed an extremely complex, constantly rotating and changing holographic structural diagram in the air! It was a three-dimensional model composed of countless tiny light dots and small character annotations. Lin Feng only understood a small part—it seemed to be an incredibly precise energy circuit, or perhaps the construction diagram of some kind of interface?

Several key nodes were clearly labeled with the names and specification requirements of the materials he had lost!

[Special Alloy Gasket (Heat and Pressure Resistant)], [High-Purity Synthetic Energy-Conducting Fiber], [Superconductive Metal Microparticles]...

This box wasn't stealing things! It was... "ordering dishes"? It needed these specific materials to complete some kind of... construction?

Before Lin Feng could fully process this astonishing discovery, the holographic diagram flickered a few times and abruptly vanished. The silver box returned to its cold silence, as if everything just now was an illusion.

But Lin Feng knew it wasn't! His heart pounded wildly, and cold sweat instantly soaked through his back.

So that was it! There was no invisible intruder! It was this bizarre box!

Through some incomprehensible method, it directly caused the materials it "needed" to disappear from the base! It was like a picky glutton, silently devouring the precious resources they had worked so hard to collect!

Fury and retrospective fear surged through him instantly. But at the same time, a bolder, more insane thought emerged: If this box needed these materials, did it mean it could potentially be "activated" or complete some function?

Would it bring disaster, or... a turning point?

Just as his mind was in turmoil, Old Scar, who was monitoring the outside, suddenly issued a low alert: "Situation!"

Lin Feng sprang up, stuffed the box back into the lead wrapping, and rushed to the observation slit.

Outside, in the dim red dust, several sneaky figures were using abandoned debris as cover, silently moving towards their base!

They held weapons, their movements skilled and cautious, clearly not ordinary drifters.

Were they from "Poison Spider"? Or "Black Tooth"?

The internal bizarre crisis remained unresolved, while an external lethal threat had already arrived!

"Prepare for combat!"

Lin Feng lowered his voice, a flash of fierce determination in his eyes. Whoever it was, if they wanted to mess with their "Stardust Outpost," they'd have to get through him, the "Junk King," first!!

Chapter 24 The Spider Gang's Raid!

"How many people?"

Su Wanqing quickly channeled the remaining energy into her laser pistol and asked calmly, her body pressed tightly against the cave wall.

"Four... no, five."

Old Scar's voice was like cold steel as he adjusted the viewing port's angle slightly, watching the figures outside. "Decent equipment, rifles, movements like veterans. They're from 'Poison Spider'—I recognize that tall, skinny guy's gait."

"Damn it, they just won't give up!"

Lin Feng cursed under his breath, swiftly scanning the interior. They had two combat-capable members, one half-skilled fighter, two injured personnel, and one technician. A direct fight would definitely put them at a disadvantage.

"The entrance is reinforced; they won't get in anytime soon," Su Wanqing assessed. "But if they launch a strong assault or use explosives..."

"Can't let them get close!" Lin Feng's eyes hardened with determination. "We need to show them our 'junk den' isn't an easy target! Brother Scar, where's your big piece?"

Old Scar immediately dragged out the thick, bowl-sized alloy pipe used for smashing robots from the supply pile, then picked up a crude large shield made from thick steel plate and an internal wooden frame hastily bound together.

"Officer Su, you're a good shot—handle precision firing, suppression, and disruption! Brother Scar, you guard the entrance fiercely—smash anyone who comes close! Sun Wen, turn that noisy filter of yours to maximum! Jam their hearing! Wu Yu, Uncle Sun, you two hide in the very back!"

Lin Feng rapidly issued commands, displaying rare decisiveness and leadership in this moment.

The people outside had clearly lost patience as well. After a faint, indistinct whistle, gunfire abruptly erupted!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Bullets struck the reinforced steel plate door with heavy thuds, leaving deep dents but failing to penetrate! Old Scar braced against the door with his shield, his body steady as bedrock.

"Throw Molotovs!" someone outside shouted.

A bottle filled with unknown liquid was lit and thrown in an arc, smashing against the rock in front of the door and bursting into flames, attempting to blockade and intimidate.

"Is that all?" Lin Feng sneered, picking up a long metal hook he'd found earlier. Shouting toward the viewing port, he said:

"Officer Su, give them a taste of their own medicine!"

Understanding his intent, Su Wanqing took a deep breath, quickly extended her laser pistol through the viewing port, aimed—and fired!

Whoosh! A faint red beam shot out, not aiming at a person but precisely striking a broken oil drum near the feet of the Molotov thrower!

Boom!! The oil drum exploded in a small blast, sending flames and fragments flying everywhere, startling the attackers into frantic retreat and scattering their formation instantly.

"Beautiful!"

Lin Feng praised. Energy was precious; every shot had to achieve maximum effect.

Enraged, the attackers fired even more wildly, bullets raining down on the steel plate like a storm. Old Scar held his ground behind the shield, unmoving; only when he occasionally shifted position could one see the shield surface was already covered in pits and dents.

"Can't just take this beating!"

Seeing the enemy's fierce firepower, Lin Feng hardened his resolve, his gaze falling on the two massive truck tires in the corner. A crazy idea surged into his mind.

"Brother Scar! Hold them! Officer Su, cover me!"

He roared, forcefully shoving aside a pile of camouflage debris to reveal a section of loosened, unstable rock wall edge behind it—previously dug out when they were widening the entrance.

Then, with the help of Sun Wen and her father who came over upon hearing his shout, he strained to push those heavy, highly elastic giant tires out!

The tires rumbled down the steep slope with massive kinetic energy and unpredictable bouncing trajectories, charging straight toward the attackers below!

"Dodge! What the hell is that?!" panicked shouts rose from below.

Bullets had little effect on the rubber tires. The tires bounced and tumbled wildly like two gigantic war hammers, instantly scattering the attackers' formation. One person failed to dodge in time and was directly sent flying by a tire, screaming once before falling silent.

The remaining attackers were stunned by this completely unexpected, "junk-style" counterattack, hastily seeking cover.

"Now's the chance!"

Lin Feng grabbed a bag of various-sized screws, nuts, washers, and even a few discarded small bearings that Wu Yu had sorted, and desperately hurled them outward through the viewing port!

For a moment, a shower of metal fragments fell like a storm, clattering against the attackers' helmets, bodies, and the surrounding rocks. While it couldn't cause real damage, it severely disrupted their vision and movement, and made the ground treacherously slippery underfoot.

"Damn it! What crap are these guys throwing?!"

"It's so slippery! Ouch!"

"My foot!"

Amid the chaos, Old Scar seized the opportunity, forcefully pushing the steel plate door open a crack. His sharpened alloy steel pipe shot out like a venomous dragon striking, smashing accurately onto the wrist of the nearest attacker!

Crack! A teeth-grating sound of bone fracture accompanied a scream as the rifle clattered to the ground.

Su Wanqing took the chance to fire another shot, hitting another attacker in the thigh; the man howled and collapsed.

The remaining two attackers, seeing the situation turn sour with one companion dead, two injured, the defenders unexpectedly tenacious, and all sorts of bizarre "weapons" in play, finally lost their fighting spirit. Dragging their wounded comrades, they fled in disarray, disappearing into the red mist.

The battle had started abruptly and ended just as quickly.

Inside the cave, the three of them were nearly exhausted, leaning against the wall gasping for breath.

Sun Wen turned off the noisy filter, and the cave instantly fell silent, leaving only the sound of heavy breathing and faint moans of pain from outside.

They had won. Relying on their reinforced fortress, limited weapons, and Lin Feng's wildly inventive "junk tactics," they had successfully repelled a wave of well-equipped attackers.

"Ha... haha..."

Looking at the chaotic scene outside and the groaning captive lying on the ground, Lin Feng couldn't help but laugh, his laughter growing louder and louder.

"See that! This is the power of 'Stardust Outpost'! The Junk King is invincible!"

The joy of surviving a disaster washed away the previous suspicions and fears. Unity and trust seemed to have returned somewhat through their shared resistance against external enemies.

But they all knew that "Poison Spider's" retaliation would not stop here.

Chapter 25: Prisoner's Confession

The attacker who had several ribs broken by the tire and couldn't escape became a prisoner. Old Scar dragged him into the base like a dead dog, throwing him into a corner with rough movements filled with undisguised killing intent. The guy trembled in fear, grimacing in pain from his wounds. Facing the surrounding people, especially Old Scar's icy gaze, his psychological defenses instantly crumbled.

The interrogation was led by Su Wanqing, whose calmness and methodical approach proved far more effective than intimidation.

"Name? Affiliation? Why attack us?" Su Wanqing's questions were concise and direct.

The prisoner was a thin, small man with scars on his face, but now he looked like a quail: "...Viper... squad under 'Poison Spider'... boss... boss said you wiped out our medicine storage... and... killed several brothers... bounty on your lives... especially that scar-faced one..." He fearfully glanced at Old Scar.

Lin Feng frowned: "We only took medicine, didn't kill anyone!" He realized Old Scar's operation was probably far more brutal than his claimed "catching up with old friends."

"Boss... boss said it was you... left behind... left behind your mark in the warehouse..." Viper stammered.

"Mark? What mark?"

"A... a strangely drawn symbol in blood... like an eye..." Viper struggled to recall.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged glances, both seeing confusion in each other's eyes. They had never left any mark. This was clearly a frame-up! Someone had taken advantage of Old Scar's operation, deliberately escalating their conflict with "Poison Spider"!

"Who told you we were here?" Su Wanqing pressed.

"Don't... don't know... message came from above... said you were hiding in the old mine shafts to the east... with lots of supplies..."

The information had been leaked! Either Jim had cracked under pressure and talked, or they had been tailed during their previous large-scale supply gathering.

"What's Poison Spider's next plan?" Lin Feng interjected.

"Boss... boss is furious... said... said he'll spare no cost... might... might use 'that thing'..." Viper's eyes filled with terror.

"That thing? What is it?"

"I... I don't know specifics... only heard it's some big thing buried in the ruins from long ago... very dangerous... once used, this entire area might..."

Before he could finish, suddenly, the entire mine shaft violently shook! Like an earthquake, dust rained down from the ceiling!

Everyone was startled, instantly falling silent.

The shaking lasted only a moment before stopping, but a low, oppressive rumbling sound, as if coming from deep underground, faintly continued and persisted.

"What's going on?!" Wu Yu asked in panic.

Old Scar's expression turned grave as he listened to the low rumbling, then looked at the observation port where the red dust outside seemed to have grown more frenzied. He spoke hoarsely: "Not an earthquake... something bigger... waking up... or... being activated..."

Combined with Viper's unfinished words, a terrifying speculation surfaced in everyone's minds.

Had those maniacs from "Poison Spider" really activated some forbidden, ancient-era weapon or device buried deep in the ruins?!

The mystery of the disappearing internal materials remained unsolved, while the external enemy not only hadn't retreated but might have deployed even more terrifying means!

The continuous low rumbling and faint tremors felt like a death knell, heralding greater disaster closing in step by step.

"Stardust Outpost" had just experienced victory, only to be immediately shrouded in thicker, suffocating dark clouds.

"Boss... boss is furious... said... said he'll spare no cost... might... might use 'that thing'..." Viper's eyes filled with terror.

"Are the supplies we've stockpiled enough to survive the coming crisis..."

At this moment, the low rumbling from underground continued incessantly, like an awakened ancient behemoth growling in displeasure, causing even Stardust Outpost's rock walls to tremble slightly. Dust kept falling, and the team's recently stabilized morale began fluctuating again, panic spreading like icy tides.

The prisoner "Viper" turned deathly pale, curling up in the corner, continuously muttering:

"It's over... 'Poison Spider's gone mad... he really activated 'that thing'... we're all going to die..."

"Shut up!"

Old Scar's low shout cut through like ice water, instantly silencing Viper. But his own furrowed brow and grave expression showed he understood the situation's severity far exceeded expectations.

Chapter 26: Poison Spider Has Completely Lost Their Minds

"Whatever that is, we can't just sit here waiting to die!" Lin Feng forcibly suppressed the unease in his heart, his mind racing at lightning speed. "The cave entrance is reinforced, but if they really have heavy weapons or some other damn thing, our metal door might not hold! We need to do something proactive!"

His gaze once again fell upon their greatest treasure—that mountain of "junk." This time, he wasn't thinking about how to use it for survival, but how to turn it into weapons and traps.

"Wu Yu! Stop shaking! Get up and work! Get out your precious screws, nuts, springs, wires, and those cans of almost-solidified industrial adhesive!" Lin Feng shouted loudly, trying to use action to dispel fear.

"Officer Su, you're dexterous, work with me—let's prepare some 'surprises' for our 'guests'! Brother Scar, you keep watching outside, report immediately if there's any movement! Sun Wen, try to filter the air, I feel the dust smell outside is even more pungent!" He quickly assigned tasks, his tone carrying a desperate determination to burn their bridges.

No questions, no hesitation. The instinct for survival overwhelmed fear. Everyone immediately sprang into action.

Lin Feng's ideas were wildly imaginative yet grounded in his engineer's instincts:

He took the collected springs of various sizes and twisted metal pieces, cleverly binding and connecting them with wire to create touch-triggered catapult traps, deploying them on the steep slope outside the cave entrance, covered with loose soil and red dust. They wouldn't be lethal when triggered, but enough to make someone lose balance and tumble down the steep slope.

He mixed that viscous industrial adhesive with fine sand and dust, heated it, and spread it on several relatively flat metal plates to create simple adhesive traps, camouflaged as ground, placed along the paths enemies were most likely to charge from.

Lin Feng even disassembled an old fire extinguisher they had found. He mixed the remaining unknown chemical powder inside with collected iron filings and crushed glass, stuffing them into several empty cans to create the most primitive "smoke bombs" doubling as "fragmentation grenades."

Though crude, the explosion and spreading irritating smoke were enough to create chaos.

Su Wanqing also utilized her precise skills to carefully embed the sharpest metal fragments and nails that Wu Yu had sorted into some discarded wooden boards, creating concealed spike boards placed behind cover.

The entire perimeter of "Stardust Outpost" rapidly transformed into a scrap trap fortification full of creativity yet lethally dangerous. All of this was thanks to their previously near-obsessive "hoarding addiction."

Just as they were nervously setting up, Sun Wen, who had been wearing old headphones and adjusting the radio, suddenly jerked her head up, her face pale as she shouted:

"Signal! That distress signal... it changed!"

Everyone stopped what they were doing.

Sun Wen urgently adjusted the knob, amplifying the received signal through a piezoelectric ceramic piece.

It was still that regular pulse code, but now interspersed with a new, extremely faint and intermittent recorded human voice, sounding like it had been repeated countless times and severely degraded, full of static and despair:

"...Warning... 'Excavator'... Awakening... Crust... Unstable... Escape... Eastern District... Repeat... 'Excavator' has been... Activated... Catastrophe... Zzz... Cannot be stopped... Run..."

The voice cut off abruptly, leaving only the repeating pulse code.

"Excavator?"

Lin Feng's heart shook violently, instantly connecting it to the underground rumble and the "that" thing Poison Spider might be using. "Could it be some large construction machinery? Or... something worse?"

"Eastern District... that means our area!" Su Wanqing's expression turned grave. "That signal isn't calling for help... It's a warning! Warning everyone to leave here!"

The truth was revealed! What they had received wasn't a simple distress signal at all, but a disaster warning from the distant past, endlessly repeating! And they were right in the heart of the warned area!

Those idiots from Poison Spider had likely accidentally discovered this buried "Excavator" and tried to activate it as a weapon, completely unaware of the terrifying catastrophe they were unleashing!

The internal material disappearance crisis, the external strong enemy siege, and now this imminent, scale-unknown geological disaster on top of everything!

"Hurry! Speed up!" Lin Feng's voice was hoarse. "No time! We must complete all preparations before Poison Spider attacks again, or before that 'Excavator' completely collapses this place!"

Despair gripped everyone's hearts like an icy giant hand, but it also ignited their final potential. They frantically set traps, reinforced fortifications, practically racing against time.

And now, through the observation slit in the red mist outside, more chaotic and hurried footsteps and engine sounds could faintly be heard.

Poison Spider's second wave of attack, or rather, their final madness, had arrived. And beneath their feet, the rumbling of the earth was growing increasingly clear.

"They're coming! More of them! And vehicles!"

Chapter 27 The War in Front of the Steel Gate!

Old Scar's low, urgent warning came through the observation hole, instantly sending everyone in the cave's hearts up into their throats.

Through the swirling red dust, at least seven or eight shadowy figures could be seen, along with a bizarre "armored vehicle" that looked like a truck chassis crudely welded with steel plates, roaring up the slope toward them! On top of the vehicle sat an old rotary machine gun—rust-streaked but still terribly threatening.

"Damn, they even brought this out! Poison Spider really spent money on this!" Lin Feng cursed under his breath, palms slick with sweat. Their traps worked against foot soldiers, but would probably be of limited use against this makeshift armor.

"Aim for the wheels and the observation slots!" Su Wanqing said coolly as she raised her laser pistol; the energy indicator showed only two shots left.

The armored vehicle roared up the slope, the machine gun opening fire first. Scorching rounds whipped the reinforced steel door like lashes, producing deafening bangs. Old Scar was shaken so that his blood surged, and cracks appeared on his shield.

Foot soldiers followed the vehicle, cautiously advancing uphill.

"Now! Trigger Mine One!" Lin Feng shouted to Wu Yu, who was in charge of pulling the line (the circuit was a simple trigger set up earlier).

Wu Yu gritted his teeth and gave a hard tug on the rough rope in his hands!

Bang! Bang!

Two spring traps set on either side of the ramp snapped up, launching two balls of scrap wrapped in barbed wire viciously toward the armored vehicle's flank! Though they couldn't pierce the steel plates, the rattling impacts and tangled wire disrupted the driver's view, and the vehicle suddenly lurched to one side.

"Throw!"

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing simultaneously lit the fuses on several prepared "smoke-fragment cans" (oil-soaked cloth wicks) and hurled them through the observation hole and the pre-made firing slots with all their might!

The cans landed among the armored vehicle and the foot soldiers, detonating with a roar! The blast power wasn't great, but the sudden, choking smoke and the flying metal shards and glass acted as excellent cover and harassment! The infantry formation collapsed into disorder, some men cut by shrapnel, their screams ringing out.

"Cough! What the hell is this!"

"My eyes!"

Even the machine gunner inside the armored vehicle began to cough wildly from the smoke, momentarily halting his fire.

"Push forward! Don't be scared! This is all they have!" a man who sounded like the leader bellowed hoarsely from within the smoke, driving his men on.

A few desperate attackers staggered through the smoke and, as expected, stepped onto the glue-board trap Su Wanqing had set!

"Ah! My foot!"

"Damn it! It's stuck! I can't get out!"

Screams erupted one after another; those at the front were instantly fixed in place, becoming live targets. Old Scar seized the chance, shoved open a door slit, and his alloy pole struck like a venomous snake against their calves—bone-cracking sounds rang out clearly.

The attacking momentum faltered.

But after adapting to the smoke, the armored vehicle roared back to life; the machine gun resumed its howl as bullets pounded the steel door more densely, the cracks widening continuously!

"The door won't hold much longer!" Old Scar growled, bracing his shoulder to the trembling steel.

Lin Feng's eyes reddened with anxiety as he frantically scanned the cave, finally landing on the noisy homemade air filter! A crazier idea sprang to mind.

"Sun Wen! Point that thing at the entrance! Turn it to max power! Blow all the dust out!"

Sun Wen froze for a second, then understood, and together with her father pushed the buzzing, lung-like filter toward the door.

Lin Feng yanked open a door slit, Old Scar instinctively used his shield to block bullets!

The filter's huge exhaust aimed at the outside, Sun Wen slammed the power knob to maximum!

Whirr—!!!

A violent blast of air, thick with red dust, surged out like a high-pressure cannon, instantly churning the smoke and dust outside into chaos! Visibility dropped to zero in an instant! The raging airflow, carrying grit and stones, slammed into the attackers' faces, forcing into their mouths, noses, and eyes!

"My eyes!"

"I can't breathe!"

"Retreat! Get out!"

This completely unexpected "environmental attack" instantly shattered the attackers' remaining morale. Blind and struggling for breath, they descended into utter confusion; even the armored vehicle's driver lost his bearings, the vehicle roaring uselessly and nearly colliding with his own men.

At the peak of that chaos—

Rumble—rumble—rumble!!!

A far more violent, terrifying boom, as if coming from the very core of the earth, suddenly erupted! The ground convulsed and tilted violently! Rocks on the slope cascaded down!

Inside Stardust Outpost it felt like a powerful earthquake struck; everyone was thrown to the ground! Supplies tumbled, flames flickered! The already-fractured steel door at the cave mouth gave a groan of overload and violently bulged inward, deforming!

Outside, an even more horrifying scene unfolded: the slope where the attackers stood split open with a huge, bottomless crevice!

Red, searing air gushed from the chasm, smelling strongly of sulfur and molten metal!

The armored vehicle let out a desperate screech and, along with several nearby attackers, was instantly swallowed by that all-devouring fissure!

Their shrieks were instantly drowned by the subterranean roar.

The remaining attackers were petrified; they abandoned any mission, scrambling and crawling down the mountain, crying and screaming in flight, leaving behind a field of wreckage and a gaping fissure that looked like an entrance to hell.

The quake gradually subsided, but the low, thunderous rumble only grew louder, as if some enormous creature were turning over underground.

Lin Feng and the others staggered up from the ground, still shaken, staring speechless at the apocalyptic sight outside and the fissure still glowing hot with red light.

They had repelled the enemy attack with wit and junk. But the real disaster had only just begun to awaken. Lin Feng's lips trembled:

"Excavator... what exactly is it?"

Chapter 28 Hurry Up and Go!!

Silence.

A brief, deathly silence enveloped the Stardust Outpost. Only the relentless, heart-stopping rumble from deep beneath the earth and the dreadful sounds of rock grinding and collapsing faintly coming from that enormous fissure outside reminded them that what had just happened was not a nightmare.

Red, scorching gusts poured endlessly from the crack, warping the surrounding air as they burned; the acrid smell of sulfur mixed with an unprecedented metallic corrosive stench that spread outward, even beginning to slowly seep into the reinforced interior of the base.

"Cough, cough...this smell..." Wu Yu hacked and coughed, the burning sensation that had just subsided seeming to flare up again.

"Air filters! Turn them to maximum!" Su Wanqing shouted, covering her mouth and nose.

Sun Wen scrambled up and fought to crank the recently lifesaving filter to its limits. The machine's buzzing grew strained; the filter mesh blackened visibly by the second.

Lin Feng threw himself to the observation port and peered out at the fissure that looked as if it led straight to hell, his heart pounding. It was less than thirty meters from their base!

Rocks along the fissure's edge kept crumbling away; its width seemed to be slowly widening. Under the scorching gusts, the weapons and corpses the attackers had left behind, even the wreckage of that armored vehicle, were visibly rusting and disintegrating!

The corrosion was terrifying!

"We can't stay here!"

Lin Feng spun around, true panic showing on his face for the first time.

"We don't know if the fissure will keep widening! This air... the filters won't hold for long!"

They had to evacuate immediately! But where could they go? Outside lay deadly red mist, unknown geological disasters, and possibly the fleeing remnants of the Poison Spider gang.

"Go... west..."

From the corner, the injured prisoner Viper suddenly weakly spoke up, terror written across his face. "The Poison Spiders... have a secret backup base to the west... deeper than here... stronger... made for disasters... very few know about it..."

All eyes snapped to him. Old Scar snatched him up and glared with blade-sharp eyes.

"How do you know? Exact location?"

"I... I delivered supplies there once before... I remember the rough area... there should be a small reserve inside... but only a few leaders have the key..."

Viper hurriedly confessed, shaking with fear.

This might be their only lifeline! Despite the enormous risk, it was better than staying to be swallowed by the fissure or poisoned to death by the corrosive air!

"Prepare to move out immediately!" Lin Feng decided on the spot. "Take everything you can carry! Especially water, food, medicine, weapons, and tools! Travel light, but don't skimp on core supplies!"

The final and most frantic hoarding began. This time it was not for trade, but for migrating to survive.

Everyone knew time was tight. Wu Yu forced himself despite his illness, sorting the highest-priority supplies with astonishing efficiency and packing quickly. Su Wanqing and Old Scar armed up and shouldered loads. Sun Wen and her father tried to help as much as they could. Lin Feng made the last calls.

Those two huge water tanks definitely couldn't be taken.

He painfully portioned the precious purified water into every container he could find; everyone was to carry as much drinking water as possible.

"These steel plates, the tires... such a waste..." Lin Feng looked at the reinforcement materials with a pang, but there was no choice.

His gaze landed last on the silver box wrapped in lead. Hesitating for a moment, he slid it deep into the back of his pack. The thing was too strange, but it might hold some kind of breakthrough.

While they labored, the rumble from the fissure suddenly intensified! The whole base shook violently again!

The crack widened several visible degrees in an instant! More molten gusts spewed forth!

"Move! There's no time!" Old Scar bellowed, and shoved open the steel door that had already warped.

Outside was like hell. Red, blazing gusts warped sightlines; corrosive air burned their lungs. Visibility was near zero, and the ground trembled faintly.

"Keep close to me! Watch your footing!"

Old Scar led the way, trudging painfully toward the rough direction Viper had indicated. Su Wanqing stayed at the rear, laser pistol trained warily behind them.

Lin Feng, Wu Yu, and the Sun Wen father-and-daughter team stumbled through step by step, burdened with heavy supplies; every move was agonizing. The corrosive air left them gasping and their eyes stinging.

Looking back, the Stardust Outpost they had built with sweat, hope, and oddities was being slowly swallowed by the spreading red fog and the ever-growing fissure.

A tragic, unwilling pride surged in their chests, but above all was a ruthless will to survive.

Carrying their final hoard of "treasures," they stepped into deeper, more unknown, more dangerous ruins—heading for a refuge fashioned from an enemy lair, where hope was slim.

And the colossal beast underground, called the Excavator, had only just opened its eyes. The true catastrophe was accelerating toward them.

Chapter 29 — The Red Acid Rain!

Leaving the relatively sheltered valley and stepping onto the open ruined plain, everyone finally felt how terrifyingly bad the outside environment had become.

The wind grew even more violent—not just whistling anymore, but like the shrieks of countless wronged spirits.

What it carried were no longer simple dust, but fine particles that glittered with an ominous dark red metallic sheen and had strong corrosive properties!

They struck heavy clothing and crude protection with a raspy sound, quickly leaving burning marks.

Visibility fell below ten meters; red mist churned on every side, and they could only barely rely on Old Scar's instincts and Viper's fuzzy memory to find direction.

The ground trembled underfoot from time to time, and from afar came occasional enormous, teeth-aching sounds of metal snapping and rock collapsing, as if the entire debris belt were disintegrating.

"Cough cough... Boss Lin... breathing... it's so hard..." Wu Yu panted, carrying the heavy med pack; his condition was worst—each inhale of the scorching air felt like torture. Sun Wen called from behind, "I can't take it either, my head hurts!!"

"Hold on! 'Canned Goods'! Almost there!" Lin Feng shouted encouragement. His lungs burned and his eyes were swollen with tears. He kept checking the water canteen on his back, ensuring the seal remained intact—this was their most precious resource now.

Although Sun Wen complained of a headache, she still supported her father; the pair staggered forward together. Old Man Sun leaned almost his entire weight on his daughter, his face ashen, but his eyes unusually determined.

Su Wanqing and Old Scar moved one before the other, alert to any possible danger, be it environmental or hostile.

The captive Viper was tied with a rope by Old Scar and walked in the middle of the group. He, too, was thoroughly frightened by this horrific environment and dared not make any sudden moves, only desperately trying to recall the route to the backup outpost.

"It should... should be just behind that patch... behind the shipwreck that looks like giant ribs..." Viper shouted toward a huge, twisted metal structure barely visible ahead; the wind shredded his voice.

Suddenly Old Scar, who was leading, stopped dead and raised his fist to signal caution!

Everyone immediately crouched and took cover behind wreckage.

Through the red fog, several staggering figures vaguely came into view, their movements stiff and abnormal.

They wore tattered protective suits, but most faceplates were shattered; exposed skin showed terrifying ulceration and metallic transformation, their eyes hollow and lifeless, making meaningless wheezing noises as they wandered the ruins like the walking dead.

"They're... they're 'Rust Wights'!" Viper's voice changed with fear. "They inhaled too much Red Corrosive Dust... turned into living dead... don't touch! Their rust can spread!"

The "Rust Wights" seemed to sense the living scent, stiffly turned their heads, and shuffled toward where the group hid, producing hair-raising scraping sounds.

"Around them! Move!" Old Scar decided instantly and led the team to change course quickly, avoiding those pitiful yet dangerous creatures.

The escape became even more arduous. They had to contend not only with the hostile environment but also with these disaster-born derivatives.

As if misfortune weren't enough, from the sky began to fall a light, steady drizzle of dark red "rain" with a sharp, acrid smell! This was not water at all, but highly concentrated corrosive dust mixed with unidentified chemical precipitates!

"Corrosive rain! Find cover!" Su Wanqing cried out.

When the drops hit exposed metal wreckage, white smoke rose immediately and deep pits were left behind. When they struck their protective gear, the fabric and leather corroded quickly.

They hastily ducked under a relatively intact ship cargo hold. Staring at the outside, where the rain looked like concentrated acid, each person's heart sank to the bottom. The environment was becoming utterly unfit for survival.

"This damned weather... the 'Dust Tide'... could it be early?" Lin Feng said, looking at the system display and its accelerating countdown, his voice dry.

No one could answer him.

The rain eased a little but did not stop. They had to press on despite the rain. Old Scar found several relatively intact metal plates and held them over everyone's heads as makeshift shields.

Every step felt like dancing on a knife's edge. Supplies on their backs grew heavier, stamina drained sharply, and the corrosive air and rain kept gnawing at their bodies and will.

Just as despair nearly overtook them, Viper suddenly pointed excitedly to an unassuming metal arch half-buried by a massive rock ahead: "There! That's it! The Poison Spider west district backup outpost!"

The arch looked thick and solid, seeming to be the entrance to some ancient underground facility; abandoned debris and wheel tracks lay around it, but right now it was silent.

Hope flared again! Everyone summoned their last strength and charged toward that metal door that seemed to lead to salvation.

But as they drew near, their hearts dropped halfway. The gate was tightly shut, fitted with a complex mechanical combination lock and hydraulic opening device—extremely sturdy.

"Where's the key?!" Lin Feng asked Viper.

Viper made a doleful face: "...Only a few bosses have it... I... I don't..."

The door that represented their final hope seemed completely locked. Behind them, the corrosive rain fell heavier, and the distant thunderous noises grew nearer.

Chapter 30: After Endless Hardship... A Dead End?

Despair fell over everyone like icy rain.

The heavy metal door loomed like an impassable chasm, cutting off their last route of escape.

The corrosive downpour behind them thickened, and from deep underground came thunderous booms and the sound of rocks collapsing—like the footsteps of Death itself, closing in step by step.

"Smash it! Try to break it!"

Lin Feng, eyes bloodshot, swung the crowbar in his hand and hammered at the lock!

Clang! Sparks flew, but the heavy metal door only took a white scuff; the lock did not budge. Old Scar also tried striking the gap with an alloy pipe, but to no avail. The door's sturdiness exceeded all expectation.

"It's useless... this is an old-era federal blast-proof gate... unless you have heavy construction equipment or know the code..."

Viper slumped into the mud, utterly defeated. Wu Yu coughed violently, barely able to straighten his back.

Su Wanqing checked the hydraulic system and found the power long exhausted and the manual pump destroyed.

"What do we do? After all this suffering to get here, are we really going to be trapped to die outside this door?"

Lin Feng leaned against the cold metal, slowly sliding down to the ground. Fatigue and despair washed over him like a tide. He instinctively reached into his backpack, groping—seeking some comfort, or... a last scrap of inspiration.

His fingers brushed against the silver box tightly wrapped in lead skin.

It was still cold.

Then, just as all hope seemed extinguished and his fingers unconsciously rubbed the lead-wrapped box—

Hum...

A faint but distinct vibration traveled through the lead to his fingertips! A weak yet unusually steady warmth began to seep from inside the box!

Lin Feng froze, as if electrocuted, and fumbled the box out. He tore at the lead wrapping in a panic!

The silver box's surface, once dull and covered with unreadable patterns, now flowed with a soft, breathing blue halo!

From a tiny indentation at the center of the box, a concentrated beam of blue light projected, forming a small, rotating, intricate light shuttle in the air!

[Detected co-frequency high-energy structure... authenticating permissions...]

[Detected eligible life signature... DNA sequence secondary verification...]

[Verification passed. Temporary permission granted. Command: Open standard shelter entrance gate.]

The cold system prompt sounded in Lin Feng's head with unprecedented clarity!

At the same time, from within that impenetrable metal gate came the muffled sounds of mechanisms that seemed sealed for ages turning and hydraulics reviving with a buzz!

Crunch—whirr—

Under everyone's stunned, horrified gazes, the heavy blast-proof gate they had assumed could never open, slowly and smoothly slid upward!

Revealing a deep passage behind it that smelled of stale, aged air!

The door... opened?!

Everyone gaped, petrified, staring at the slowly rising gate and then at the mysterious silver box in Lin Feng's hands.

"This... this..." Wu Yu's mouth hung open, his glasses slipping down his nose.

"Heavens..." Old Man Sun whispered.

Su Wanqing and Old Scar were completely shocked, their eyes darting between Lin Feng and the silver box, incredulous.

Viper fell onto his backside in terror, pointing at the silver box and babbling incoherently:

"The 'key'! The Poison Spider boss has been looking for the 'key'! It's... it's in your hands?!"

A key? That strange silver box was actually the "key" to open this shelter?!

The colossal reversal short-circuited everyone's brains.

Lin Feng was in utter bewilderment too. He had only instinctively taken the box out—how had this happened...

But there was no time to analyze!

"Quick! Go in!" Lin Feng was the first to snap back, shouting as he grabbed the silver box and barreled into the passage. The others jolted awake, helping one another and dragging supplies as they followed close behind!

The moment the last person rushed into the passage—

Roar!!!

A terrifying, unprecedented rumble erupted from behind them! The ground where they had just stood suddenly collapsed! Massive fissures spread like a web, swallowing everything!

Corrosive rain and red mist surged inward, but the slowly descending heavy gate sealed them off, holding the flood at bay!

Bang!

The gate slammed shut. Soil ripped open mixed with rain pounded against it, but the gate held fast.

Darkness swallowed the passage; only the faint glow of emergency lights and the silver box's blue light provided illumination.

They had escaped death!

Everyone collapsed onto the cold floor, gasping for breath, drenched and disheveled, faces etched with stunned disbelief and dazed relief.

They had made it. With the unintentionally obtained "key," they had broken into what the enemy had dreamed of as a shelter.

Lin Feng watched the box in his hand as its light gradually faded and it returned to its icy coldness, his emotions a tangled mess.

This strange object that had cost them so many materials and brought so much trouble had become their lifeline at the final moment.

What exactly was it? What was its relationship with this shelter?

"Stardust Outpost" was now a thing of the past. They now possessed a sturdier, more mysterious stronghold, one that might hide even more secrets and dangers.

Before they could catch their breath, slow, clear applause echoed from deep within the passage.

Clap... clap... clap...

A mocking, cold voice came from the shadows ahead:

"What a spectacular entrance, little mice. Welcome to my... 'spider's nest.'"

Lights suddenly flared, illuminating the end of the passage.

A man in a black trench coat, his face grim and sinister, toyed with a strange energy pistol in his hand. He stood there with several fully armed subordinates, waiting for them at leisure.

Chapter 31 I can turn the tables again!

"Poison Spider" himself! He had actually been waiting here all along!

They had just escaped danger, only to instantly fall into the real lion's den! The reversal came so quickly, so violently, leaving them completely unprepared!

The cold muzzle of the energy pistol emitted a deadly gleam. "Poison Spider" wore a teasing smile like a cat playing with a mouse, slowly emerging from the shadows.

His several subordinates behind him carried sophisticated weapons with fierce eyes, completely sealing off any retreat.

Lin Feng and the others had just escaped the hellish outdoors, only to instantly fall into the lion's den, their hearts sinking to the depths.

Old Scar instinctively reached for his weapon, but was immediately targeted by at least three guns simultaneously.

"Don't move, Scarface."

Poison Spider's voice was icy and slippery,

"I know you're good at fighting. But here, I'm in charge."

His gaze swept over the disheveled group, finally resting on the silver-white box in Lin Feng's hand that had just dimmed, a flash of barely concealed greed and fanaticism in his eyes.

"'The Key'... it really is in your hands."

Poison Spider licked his lips, "That waste Viper actually delivered me a big gift."

Lin Feng's heart jolted, instantly understanding.

Viper's capture and guidance were likely all part of Poison Spider's scheme! He deliberately released Viper to lure out "the Key"!

"How did you..." Lin Feng spoke with difficulty.

"How did I know 'the Key' was with you?"

Poison Spider chuckled lightly, pointing to his own head,

"Intuition, and... information fragments. When Old Scar broke into my warehouse last time, although he killed my men and burned my goods, he was too rushed and didn't discover the surveillance camera I hid in the shadows that captured some interesting things... Although he didn't directly use 'the Key'."

"But his fighting style and certain habits reminded me of some ancient rumors about the guardians of 'the Key'... Plus, you were able to open this door, confirming my speculation."

He stepped closer, reaching out toward Lin Feng:

"Give it to me. Perhaps I can let you die quickly, or even... keep one or two as my experimental subjects?"

His smile turned cruel.

Despair spread again. They had just gained a sliver of hope, only for it to vanish in an instant.

Just as Lin Feng's mind raced wildly to think of countermeasures, the silver box in his hand seemed to sense the extreme threat and Poison Spider's undisguised malice, suddenly vibrating violently again!

Hum—!

More intense than any previous time! The blue light patterns on its surface instantly lit up, becoming dazzling!

The tiny depression suddenly shot out a blazing blue beam, no longer a soft light shuttle, but like a solidified energy dagger!

[Detecting highly malicious life form... threat level elevated to maximum... initiating emergency defense protocol!]

The icy system voice urgently called out in Lin Feng's mind!

"What?!"

Poison Spider's expression changed, instinctively stepping back and raising his gun!

But it was too late!

Whoosh!

The blue energy beam shot out at a speed difficult for the naked eye to follow, not aiming at Poison Spider, but at an inconspicuous interface on the channel ceiling above everyone's heads, covered with cables and pipes!

Boom!

A slight explosion sounded, electrical sparks flying everywhere! The lights in the entire channel instantly went out, plunging into complete darkness! Only the blue light emitted by the silver box and occasional streaks from energy weapons provided faint illumination.

"Ah!"

"What happened?!"

"Protect the boss!"

Poison Spider's subordinates immediately fell into chaos, their gun muzzles moving randomly, not daring to fire easily in the darkness.

"Don't panic! Activate backup lighting!"

Poison Spider shouted sharply, his voice carrying a trace of shock and anger.

But it was this brief darkness and chaos that gave Lin Feng's team an opportunity!

"Now!"

Old Scar moved like a lurking leopard, acting the moment darkness fell! He pounced fiercely toward the nearest gunman, his alloy dagger drawing a cold arc illuminated by the blue light!

Su Wanqing also acted simultaneously, firing her laser pistol toward the general direction of another gunman from memory!

Whoosh! A scream rang out!

Lin Feng, inspired by sudden insight, raised the glowing silver box and shouted toward the deep end of the channel:

"Base defense system activated! Eliminate intruders!" He was completely bluffing, but combined with the earlier explosion and darkness, the effect was astonishing!

The silver box seemed to cooperate by shooting out another energy beam, hitting the opposite wall and exploding into a shower of sparks!

Poison Spider's subordinates became even more panicked. They had no idea about the base's true capabilities and genuinely believed some self-destruct or defense mechanism had been triggered.

"Retreat! Fall back inside first!"

Poison Spider made a decisive decision. Although greedy, he valued his life more and didn't dare to fight hard in the unknown darkness.

He shot a hateful glance toward the silver box's direction, then retreated with his remaining subordinates while fighting, quickly disappearing into the darkness of the deep channel.

In the dark channel, only the heavy panting of Lin Feng's group remained, along with the gradually subsiding hum and glow of the silver box.

They had once again relied on this bizarre "Key" to dramatically turn the tables in a desperate situation!

"Hurry! Check the surroundings! Look for a control room or a way to seal the channel!" Lin Feng immediately shouted, his heart still pounding wildly.

Chapter 32: Old baby? No, this is the hope of the sea of stars!

Taking advantage of the faint blue light gradually recovering from the silver box and the emergency light switch they found on the wall, Lin Feng and the others began carefully exploring this backup outpost called the "Spider Nest."

The passage wasn't long, ending at an ordinary airtight door that was currently wide open, clearly left that way when Poison Spider's members hastily retreated inside.

Beyond the door, the space opened up dramatically, revealing an underground area far larger, more complex, and more advanced than their "Stardust Outpost!"

This place was clearly converted from a proper underground facility from the old era.

The main structure consisted of sturdy alloy frames and concrete, divided into several levels. Although Poison Spider's occupation had added much clutter and filth, the basic functions remained intact.

"My heavens... this place... so many treasures! Are we still in the remote star sectors?"

Wu Yu stared at everything before him, so excited he even forgot to cough, his eyes behind his glasses wide and round.

The first thing that caught their eye was a spacious main hall, furnished with some crude living facilities and miscellaneous items left behind by Poison Spider's underlings.

Nearby were several separate rooms, seemingly serving as dormitories, storage, and even a rudimentary medical room.

Most importantly, Su Wanqing quickly discovered a control room! The equipment inside, though old, was largely intact! Through the console, they could monitor conditions in various base areas, adjust the internal environment, and control lighting.

"Excellent! We can lock the blast door completely shut!"

Su Wanqing immediately began operating the controls, setting the entrance blast door to internal lock status and switching to independent power supply mode.

Old Scar, meanwhile, took Lin Feng and quickly searched the other areas to ensure Poison Spider's members hadn't left any ambushes behind. They discovered a staircase leading downward to a deeper level.

The lower level was even more astonishing!

The space here was larger, almost like a small underground factory or hangar!

It contained some large industrial equipment—lathes, milling machines, punch presses, and even a small smelting furnace—all structurally intact despite surface rust.

Piled in the corners were large quantities of raw materials: metal ingots, composite material plates, various types of piping and cables!

Though mostly old and requiring significant maintenance and repair, this was undeniably a massive treasure trove! Far surpassing anything they had previously scavenged from the ruins!

"This... this is practically tailor-made for us!"

Lin Feng stroked the oil-stained lathe as if caressing a lover's cheek, his eyes shining with extreme excitement, "With these, why bother scavenging junk anymore! We can manufacture things ourselves!"

More importantly, in the deepest part of the hangar, they discovered a massive object covered by a heavy dust cloth!

Lin Feng and Old Scar pulled on the dust cloth together, raising clouds of dust, but couldn't budge it completely. Everyone rushed over to help, heaving and pulling downwards, finally revealing half of the object's true form.

Everyone stared, dumbfounded. "Is this for real?!"

"This... how could such a treasure be here!"

A small starship, roughly over ten meters long, with a streamlined design, appeared before them. Though its surface showed some rust and damage, the overall structure seemed intact!

It looked like some kind of old-style light transport or scout ship.

"A starship..." A flicker of awe also passed through Old Scar's eyes.

"It's ours now!"

Lin Feng was so excited he nearly jumped! Although the ship looked very old and needed major repairs, it represented hope! Hope of leaving this damned place!

"What are we waiting for, let's investigate immediately! Boss Su, you take Sun Wen to the control room. Old Scar, head west. Wu Yu, search the power room. I'll go north. Old Man Sun, you stay here. If there's any problem, bang on this large pipe, and we'll rush back! We must regroup here within one hour!"

The preliminary investigation results were ecstatic. This "Spider Nest" outpost possessed complete living environments, basic industrial capabilities, and even a starship awaiting repair! Its value was immeasurable!

Poison Spider's gang had clearly only used this place as an ordinary shelter and storage depot, never fully exploring or utilizing its potential.

Now, all of it belonged to them!

"Immediately inventory all supplies! Repair the control systems and environmental circulation! We're going to turn this into a true 'Stardust Base'!"

Lin Feng's voice trembled slightly with excitement.

The enormous gains washed away their fatigue and fear. They began working frantically, taking inventory of supplies, repairing equipment, and familiarizing themselves with the environment.

While inspecting the cabin of the old starship, they found a damaged paper log and a relatively well-preserved data chip in a hidden storage compartment in the cockpit.

The title page of the log bore a familiar emblem—astonishingly similar to the pattern on the old pocket watch Lin Feng carried in his breast pocket, and the design on the silver box's surface!

After inserting and reading the data chip on the console, the title that appeared was: "Project 'Stardust' - Outpost 7 - Final Monitoring Log."

All the clues seemed to be pointing to the same source. This base, this ship, the silver box, the pocket watch, and Lin Feng's family lineage seemed connected by an invisible thread. Su Wanqing glanced at Lin Feng.

"These might belong to your family..."

"All of this was originally mine!"

Chapter 33 Taking Control of the Star Base!

Finally taking control of "Spider Nest"—no, this place was now officially renamed by Lin Feng as "Stardust Base Phase Two" or "Stardust Main Base."

After the excitement subsided somewhat, practical problems lay before them: how to best utilize the resources here and truly upgrade it into a sturdy fortress capable of withstanding future catastrophes and supporting their journey into deep space.

The primary task was restoring the base's basic operations.

Su Wanqing dove headfirst into the control room with Sun Wen, debugging and maintaining those aging systems day and night.

Thanks to the solid foundation of Moon Nation engineers and Sun Wen's peculiar affinity for electronic devices, they successfully restored seventy percent of the base's surveillance, eighty percent of its environmental controls, and the complete gate control system. Lin Feng finally had the right to curl his lip:

"Our Moon heritage is the most solid, not flashy like the Earth Federation~~"

That heavy gate gave everyone an unprecedented sense of security.

Wu Yu, meanwhile, was lost in happy troubles.

Facing the mountains of relatively organized supplies piled up in several warehouses, he worked almost forgetting to eat and sleep, conducting inventory, categorization, and registration.

Metal ingots, components, tools...

It greatly satisfied his warehouse manager genius and obsessive organization habits. He quickly established a new supply management system, far more efficient than his previous handwritten notes in the mine tunnel.

Old Scar wasn't idle either. He took time to lead Lin Feng, using tools and materials found in the hangar, not only thoroughly reinforcing the entrance gate but also setting up new physical traps and early warning devices in the passages and at key nodes throughout the base.

He even attempted to repair several old guard robots found in the hangar and temporarily reinforced the weak points of that old spacecraft.

Lin Feng was the busiest of all. He shuttled between various areas, ideas constantly bubbling in his mind:

Energy Core: He focused on inspecting that old nuclear fuel cell pack, ensuring its stable operation, and planning how to expand capacity or find alternative energy sources in the future.

Water Recycling and Agriculture: He discovered the base had a basic water recycling purification system, but it was inefficient.

He immediately set about modifying it, integrating the previously hoarded filter materials with newly found components, significantly improving water purification efficiency.

He even whimsically considered starting a small hydroponic farm within the base, using certain algae spores and nutrient solutions they found to try producing some fresh food.

Industrial Mother Machines: Those machine tools in the hangar were his favorites.

He spent a great deal of time on maintenance and debugging, successfully getting the lathe and milling machine running again! Although their precision couldn't match new-era equipment, they were sufficient for machining most needed parts!

This meant they had officially stepped from "repair" into "manufacturing"!

"Home Tree" System: Lin Feng proposed a concept to integrate the base's life support, energy, defense, manufacturing, and other systems into an organic whole, calling it the "Home Tree" system, hoping to achieve a preliminary self-sufficient ecological cycle.

Although they were still far from that goal, the direction was now clear.

During breaks in their busy schedules, they also studied that log and data chip.

The log was fragmentary, and the data chip was partially damaged, but they pieced together some information: this outpost seemed to belong to an ancient plan named "Stardust," responsible for monitoring some cosmic phenomenon or energy, possibly related to the Dust Tide, and was later abandoned for some reason. The log's end mentioned "key" and "successor," but the crucial parts were missing.

The silver box, after connecting to the base system, seemed much quieter, no longer inexplicably devouring materials, and occasionally provided some vague suggestions about base equipment maintenance and optimization through the system interface, but regarding its core secrets, it remained tight-lipped.

Life at the base gradually settled into a routine.

With a stable environment, ample food, and safe shelter, everyone's complexion improved significantly, and Wu Yu's illness was completely cured.

Sun Wen's father, Old Man Sun, even voluntarily took on the job of cooking for everyone. They had finally transformed from a wandering team struggling for survival into a survivor group with a solid foundation, beginning to look toward the future.

However, Lin Feng hadn't forgotten the external threats. Although Poison Spider had retreated, they certainly wouldn't give up quietly.

And the greatest threat remained the intensifying Dust Tide and that unknown "Excavator" beneath the ground.

The "Home Tree" had to grow faster. And the next step's focus was that spacecraft that could take them away from here, and... preparing to build a large dock capable of accommodating and repairing it.

Chapter 34 I need to prepare the shipyard.

The old spacecraft named "Star of Hope" became the future core of "Stardust Base." However, the difficulties faced in repairing and activating it were as massive as a mountain.

The spacecraft itself was significantly damaged: its hull had multiple breaches and areas of corrosion, the engine status was unknown, the navigation system was completely inoperative, and the life support system required a comprehensive overhaul.

More importantly, it was simply too large to conduct full-scale repairs inside the hangar.

Some large components, like the engine core and thruster arrays, had to be disassembled for major overhauls, which required professional lifting equipment and spacious work areas.

"We need a dock," Lin Feng announced during the base's first formal "work meeting." "A large dock capable of accommodating the 'Star of Hope' at minimum and providing basic maintenance facilities."

"Build a dock here?" Su Wanqing frowned deeply. "The scale of work is enormous, and we lack critical equipment and technology."

"The technology might exist. Look at this." Lin Feng pulled up a blurry blueprint from the control room database. "This is part of the base's original design plans, marking an 'Expanded Construction Zone' located in the area east of the hangar that is currently sealed off by a rock wall. I suspect the initial design intended for it to be expandable into a dock."

Old Scar had inspected that rock wall: "The rock layer is thick, but structurally stable. With large-scale engineering equipment, excavation is possible."

"We have the equipment ready to go!" Lin Feng's eyes lit up as he pointed towards several abandoned, massive machines in the corner of the hangar that resembled giant pangolins – the "Heavy Stratum Excavators" and "Multi-function Engineering Mechs"! Although equally old and lacking power sources, their structures were basically intact.

"But what about the energy?" Wu Yu raised the crucial question. "The base's nuclear fuel cells are already operating near maximum capacity just maintaining current operations. Powering these giants, plus supporting the future dock's operation, is far from sufficient."

"And materials," Su Wanqing added. "Excavation and building the dock will require massive amounts of structural steel, concrete, specialized pipelines... Our current inventory is a drop in the bucket."

Problems surfaced one after another, seemingly insurmountable.

Right then, the pocket watch on Lin Feng's chest once again provided unexpected assistance.

When he concentrated his thoughts on "dock," "energy," and "materials," the system's light screen actually unlocked new blueprints – [Modular Fusion Energy Core (Small)] and [In-Situ Resource Conversion Furnace (Primary)].

[Modular Fusion Energy Core (Small)]: Provides stable, powerful energy but requires Helium-3 as fuel and high-precision machining capability.

[In-Situ Resource Conversion Furnace (Primary)]: Can convert specific types of ore and scrap metal into standard construction alloy materials but requires substantial energy to operate.

"Good heavens... Is this a pocket watch or the Red Queen?" Old Man Sun muttered to himself.

"Who is the Red Queen?"

"Oh, it's nothing, just an AI boss from an ancient game cartridge passed down by my ancestors. I played it a few times, but the frame rate didn't even reach 500, so I tossed it aside..."

"Play less of those low-frame-rate games; they hurt your eyes," Wu Yu lectured Old Man Sun with a completely serious expression.

They had the blueprints, but the requirements were equally stringent: Where could they find Helium-3? How could they achieve high-precision machining? Where would the energy and ore needed for the conversion furnace come from?

As if urging them on, the base shook violently once more! This tremor far exceeded any previous ones, lasted longer, and they could faintly hear an unnerving, enormous sound of metal twisting in the distance!

"It's the Excavator!" Sun Wen pointed at the monitoring screen, her face pale. "Its activity frequency is increasing! Energy readings are spiking dramatically! It seems to be... moving towards our direction!"

On the monitor feed, the distant horizon was shrouded in towering red mist and dust, as if some colossal entity was tunneling underground. Wherever it passed, the ground continuously collapsed and cracked!

The threat was imminent! They needed to gain the ability to leave, and quickly!

"If conditions don't exist, we'll create them!" Lin Feng slammed the console, his resolve firm. "Energy and materials are the key! Old Scar, you lead the way. We need to find a Helium-3 vein and ore rich enough for the conversion furnace!"

"Officer Su, Wu Yu, you hold the fort. Continue optimizing base operations, attempt to repair one engineering mech, and analyze this energy core blueprint to see which core components we need to machine!"

"Sun Wen, continue monitoring the Excavator's movements and try to decrypt more database information to see if there are any records about it!"

The new assignments were executed immediately. Relying on a miner's intuition and familiarity with the nearby terrain, Old Scar planned the route for the risky expedition to find the ore veins.

Lin Feng began preparing exploration and mining tools, fortunately able to utilize and modify hangar equipment.

The plan to build the dock was officially launched, but every step was fraught with hardships and dangers.

Meanwhile, the terrifying giant beast "the Excavator," accidentally awakened deep underground, was heralding the countdown to final catastrophe with its unstoppable advance.

They had to repair the spacecraft and escape this dying world before it, or the dust storms, utterly destroyed everything.

Chapter 35 Mineral Vein Plunder and Energy Breakthrough

The team heading out to search for mineral veins currently consisted of Lin Feng, Old Scar, and Wu Yu, who had mostly recovered from his injuries.

They wore relatively intact old-style protective suits found in the base, carrying modified exploration drills, sample bags, and necessary weapons and supplies as they once again stepped into the hellish outside world.

"Damn this wretched sky..."

The environment had grown even more hostile.

The corrosive red fog was so thick it seemed impenetrable, visibility was extremely low, the air was filled with the strong smell of sulfur and ozone, and occasionally small electric arcs even flashed through the dust.

The ground tremors almost never ceased, and the geological changes caused by the "Excavator's" activities made every step dangerous.

Relying on Old Scar's intuition and the fragmented geological maps in the base database, they struggled toward the area where helium-3 veins might exist.

Helium-3 was typically found in certain types of lunar soil or deep within asteroid rock formations, making it extremely difficult to locate.

Along the way, they encountered the terrifying "Rust Wights" again, and their numbers seemed even greater this time.

These pitiful creatures wandered through the red fog, attacking all living things. The three had to carefully avoid them, and even had several brief conflicts that consumed quite a bit of ammunition.

Persistence paid off. At the edge of a deep crater, after difficult drilling and sampling, Wu Yu's detector finally emitted an excited beep!

"Found it! Boss Lin! Brother Scar! It's helium-3! The concentration isn't high, but the reserves look decent!" Wu Yu's voice came through the faceplate, filled with immense excitement.

However, their excitement didn't last long before rapid engine sounds emerged from the red fog!

Several modified sand motorcycles broke through the dust, their riders wearing mixed equipment, but the clear "Black Tooth" emblem on their arms identified them! They had obviously been drawn by the exploration activity here.

"Damn it! It's the 'Black Tooth' gang!" Lin Feng cursed under his breath and immediately signaled to take cover.

But the other side had already spotted them. The motorcycles circled the crater, their headlights scanning through the red fog like beasts' eyes.

"Friends down below!" a arrogant voice sounded through a loudspeaker, "Find something good? Seeing is sharing!"

Old Scar's eyes turned cold as he raised his rifle.

Lin Feng stopped him, whispering, "Don't fight head-on, they have more people and faster vehicles."

He looked at the drilling sample in his hand, his mind racing.

He stood up, raised the sample bag in his hand, and responded loudly:

"Nothing much, just some common silicate ore! Worthless! We're leaving now!"

"Silicate?"

The opposing leader obviously didn't believe him, sneering coldly, "Trying to fool ghosts! Throw the sample up here for a look!"

Lin Feng hesitated for a moment, then seemingly reluctantly threw the sample bag upward with force.

A Black Tooth underling caught the bag, checked it, and handed it to the leader. The leader took out an instrument to test it briefly, his brow furrowing:

"Damn it, it really is ordinary silicate... bad luck!" He disdainfully threw the sample bag to the ground.

"Told you it was worthless." Lin Feng spread his hands, "Can we go now?"

"Get lost!"

The leader waved impatiently, leading his men away on their roaring motorcycles.

Only when the engine sounds faded into the distance did Lin Feng relax, a sly smile curling at the corner of his mouth. What he had thrown up earlier was a prepared, worthless sample of ordinary rock.

The real helium-3 sample had been secretly slipped into his protective suit's inner pocket.

"Quick! Mark the location, collect enough samples, let's retreat!" Lin Feng said in a low voice.

The three quickly took action, gathering sufficient mineral samples, leaving hidden markers, then rapidly withdrew from this troublesome area.

The journey back to the base was equally perilous, but they managed to return safely in the end. Carrying the precious helium-3 samples, they successfully returned to "Stardust Base."

Those who had stayed behind, Su Wanqing and Sun Wen, had also made significant progress. Su Wanqing had successfully repaired one arm of a multi-function engineering mech, enabling it to perform some basic lifting and precision operations.

And Sun Wen had recovered a maintenance manual for a [High-Precision CNC Machining Center] from a corner of the database! Although the machining center itself was severely damaged, the manual provided possibilities and standards for Lin Feng to attempt "primitive methods" of processing key components of the energy core using existing machine tools!

The flame of hope for energy had finally been ignited!

Lin Feng had no mind to rest, immediately throwing himself into even more frenzied work.

Using lathes, milling machines, and the engineering mech arm controlled by Su Wanqing, consulting blueprints and manuals, he began gradually processing and manufacturing the various oddly-shaped, extremely high-precision components required for the [Modular Fusion Energy Core].

The process was extremely tedious, with countless failures wasting plenty of precious materials. But Lin Feng was used to this madness and didn't care at all. After calculating the remaining supplies, he began conducting experiments through the night again.

"Work hard, push yourself, am I afraid of this? Do you think a warehouse manager for Deep Space Express is some ordinary person? You couldn't even get an interview without a master's in engineering and operations research!"

Wu Yu curled his lip, pushed his glasses up his forehead deep into his hair, pinched between his eyebrows, and began studying the construction requirements for the [In-Situ Resource Conversion Furnace], calculating the types and quantities of ore needed.

He had already pulled five consecutive all-nighters.

The base operated like a wound-up precision instrument, with everyone working desperately toward the same goal.

Finally, after numerous failures and adjustments, a [Modular Fusion Energy Core (Small)]—only the size of a suitcase yet containing astonishing energy—was successfully activated!

A deep blue glow circulated steadily within the core, powerful energy output through thick cables instantly brightening all the base's lights by one level!

"We succeeded!!"

Everyone shouted excitedly, their faces smeared with grease but beaming with bright smiles.

Chapter 36 Fusion Core!

Wu Yu excitedly pushed his glasses back up from the tip of his nose, his fingers flying across the data pad, his voice trembling slightly:

"The output power is stable, far exceeding design expectations! All base system loads have dropped below safety thresholds, and we have ample energy redundancy! We... we'll never have to argue about whether to save electricity for lighting or heating again!"

Su Wanqing stood before the control console, a rare look of relief breaking through her usually calm expression as she gently touched the scrolling data stream on the screen and nodded:

"Mm. The environmental control system can now operate at full capacity. Internal temperature and air quality will reach optimal standards within half an hour. The water recycling filtration system efficiency can also be increased by forty percent."

Old Scar leaned against the metal wall with his arms crossed, a rare grin spreading across his face:

"This is good. Now if those bastards come knocking again, our laser defense array can finally show its stuff instead of being just for show."

He was referring to several peripheral defense points that had just been repaired using the base's original facilities and the newly added energy supply.

"Little Wen, what's the status with the Excavator?"

Sun Wen looked up from the monitoring screen, her face still somewhat pale but her tone noticeably lighter:

"The Excavator's energy readings have temporarily stabilized somewhat, but the overall activity trend is still slowly rising. However, at least now we don't have to worry about it arriving before we lose power and shut down ourselves."

"Heh, that won't happen!"

Lin Feng walked up to the main console and waved his hand grandly. The holographic projection immediately displayed the blueprint for the [In-Situ Resource Conversion Furnace] that had been occupying his thoughts, alongside the composition analysis data of the Helium-3 ore samples Old Scar's team had brought back and geological scan maps of the surrounding area.

"Brothers, sisters, solving the energy problem is just the first step, the foundation."

Lin Feng's gaze swept over each team member as his tone became serious yet inspiring,

"Next, we're building the skyscraper! The shipyard is our key to leaving this place. And to build that skyscraper, we need massive amounts of materials!"

He pointed at the blueprint:

"This thing can turn rock and scrap metal into the standard alloy building materials we need. But it's an energy hog and requires specific ores.

"Old Scar, Wu Yu, the analysis of the ore samples you brought back shows good purity, but we need further exploration to determine reserves. Also, the Black Tooth gang are like hyenas smelling blood—that area probably won't be peaceful."

Old Scar snorted coldly and straightened up: "Are we afraid of them? Now that we have ample energy and our base defenses are up, it's a good time to stretch our legs."

"We can't just rush in recklessly."

Su Wanqing interrupted, pulling up the surrounding terrain map. "That area has complex terrain. The Black Tooth members know the environment well, and our main objective is mining and construction, not fighting them."

Lin Feng nodded: "Officer Su is right. We've got bigger responsibilities now, we need to change our approach." He rubbed his chin, revealing his trademark roguish, cunning smile. "They want the ore, don't they? Maybe we can even get them to work for us."

"Ah? Boss Lin, what do you mean? The Black Tooth gang is vicious, why would they work for us?"

"Heh, not that kind of work."

Lin Feng grinned like a fox that had just stolen a chicken,

"They're convinced that mining area has treasures, right? We can 'help' them confirm it. Old Scar, remember that auxiliary shaft we drilled before? There were some 'little surprises' in there that we can package up nicely and 'sell' for a good price."

Old Scar was momentarily puzzled, then seemed to understand, a strange smile appearing on his bronze-colored face: "You mean... those things? Tch, that would certainly give Black Tooth something to swallow."

Sun Wen blinked curiously:

"Brother Lin Feng, Brother Scar, what riddles are you talking about?"

But Lin Feng remained mysterious: "Heaven's secrets cannot be revealed. You'll find out when the time comes. Our immediate priority is to secure the other common ores needed for the conversion furnace. Old Scar, rest for half a day. Tomorrow you'll lead the way to the No. 2 rich iron ore zone. It's relatively safe there—we'll haul back several loads of basic ore to test run the conversion furnace.

"Wu Yu, you're responsible for creating the detailed list and arranging the necessary transport vehicles. Officer Su, base security and defense upgrades are in your hands. Sun Wen, keep close watch on the Excavator and external movements, especially on Black Tooth and Poison Spider channels. Report anything suspicious immediately."

"Understood!" everyone responded in unison, the excitement from their recent major breakthrough quickly transforming into new momentum for action.

New challenges had arrived, but with abundant energy at their disposal, everyone felt a sense of confidence and brightness in their hearts. Stardust Base, this massive survival machine, was finally beginning to operate at true high speed.

The steady hum of the energy core's operation became Stardust Base's new background noise, like a strong, steady heartbeat giving true life to this underground facility.

The lights no longer flickered, the ventilation system continuously pumped in strictly filtered fresh air, and even the chill in the corners had been significantly reduced.

After the brief excitement, the team immediately threw themselves into a new round of busy work.

Lin Feng barely rested, heading straight into the resource conversion furnace area in the corner of the hangar.

The blueprint's light screen hovered in the air, surrounded by various materials sorted from the warehouse: high-temperature resistant alloy pipes, superconducting coils, thick energy transmission interfaces, and several large reaction vessels disassembled from spacecraft.

This wasn't about directly exchanging for finished products—he needed to assemble and debug according to the blueprint, with many key components requiring him to personally manufacture using existing machine tools.

The challenge was enormous, but Lin Feng reveled in it. He loved this feeling of turning blueprints into reality, especially when most of these parts came from the "junk" they had stockpiled or disassembled.

Various sounds echoed through the hangar: the whine of machine tools cutting metal, the dull thud of wrenches tightening bolts, the sizzle of energy welding torches.

Fine beads of sweat formed on Lin Feng's forehead as he focused entirely on calibrating a complex multi-directional valve, occasionally wiping his brow with the back of his hand.

Su Wanqing came by once, quietly leaving a bottle of purified water and an energy brick before silently departing to work on defense system upgrades.

Old Scar and Wu Yu began preparations for the next day's expedition.

They needed to haul back the first batch of basic ore from the relatively safe No. 2 rich iron ore zone for the conversion furnace's initial testing.

A medium-sized hover ore hauler dragged out from deep in the hangar—rusty but structurally intact—had its faulty energy module violently dismantled by Old Scar and was now connected to a thick temporary cable running from the base's main power source for charging.

Lin Feng methodically checked off the tools: geological hammers, sample bags, small drilling machines, protective gear, and necessary weapons.

Chapter 37 Hovering Mining Carts and the Great Leap Forward in Steel Production

The interior of the base exhibited an efficient yet tense silence. They had to complete the dock and repair the starship before the colossal beast deep underground fully awakened.

The next day, Old Scar and Wu Yu drove the fully charged hover ore hauler, roaring out of the slowly opening base gate and disappearing into the pervasive red mist.

Lin Feng stood in the gate control room, watching them depart until the hauler's taillights were completely swallowed by the dust, then turned back to continue assembling the conversion furnace.

Time slipped away quietly amidst the sounds of various equipment operating and tools clinking.

When the hover ore hauler returned safely to the base, dragging a heavy load, Lin Feng had already successfully erected the main structure of the conversion furnace—a rather menacing and complex-looking metal behemoth with countless exposed pipes and interfaces waiting for final connections and testing.

The first batch of iron ore was poured into the feed inlet at the top of the conversion furnace, the rough ore mixed with red dust forming a stark contrast with the shiny metal furnace body.

"I hope all our hard work doesn't go to waste."

"It won't. Legend says a thousand years ago, this level of iron production could symbolize the strongest power of a political entity, hahaha!"

"Maybe you could even found a nation?"

"Don't even joke about that! I'm afraid with my temperament, I'd eventually turn the country into a nation of robots and AIs. Have you forgotten how the no-man's-land and silicon forest on Jupiter's moon alliance formed six hundred years ago?"

Wu Yu shuddered and fell silent. But Su Wanqing paid no attention to such concerns.

"Lin Feng, you really have a distinctive personality. Ordinary people would worry about how to build a nation, but you're directly concerned with governance methods—isn't that a bit too arrogant?"

"If I can smelt steel, I can build ships. With starships, I'll have a fleet. With a fleet, I can conduct military guerrilla operations. With guerrilla tactics, I can defeat the forces beyond the star gate and establish a nation. Just you wait!"

Su Wanqing muttered under her breath.

"Knowing guerrilla tactics doesn't make you a god of war..."

Everyone temporarily set aside their work, gathering in the hangar, holding their breath as they watched the furnace. Even Old Scar, who was responsible for security, held his rifle tightly, his gaze fixed intently on the massive furnace.

Lin Feng stood before the control terminal, taking a deep breath.

The screen displayed real-time temperature and pressure data from various zones within the furnace chamber, and the energy input interface was already connected to the fusion core. He glanced at Su Wanqing, who nodded back at him, indicating stable energy supply.

He then looked at Wu Yu, who gave a thumbs-up gesture signaling all was ready.

"Initiating first phase, preheating."

His fingers swept across the control panel. The low hum suddenly intensified as the heating units inside the conversion furnace activated, the temperature readings on the furnace surface rapidly climbing.

Through the observation window, they could see the ore inside gradually turning red-hot.

Heat radiated out, dispelling the slight chill that had permeated the hangar.

Everyone could feel the wave of scorching heat. The preheating process was slow, requiring the heat to penetrate evenly into every piece of ore. The waiting time felt particularly drawn out, punctuated only by the monotonous sounds of instrument operation and occasional slight cracking noises from the ore expanding and contracting with heat.

"Temperature reached predetermined value, pressure stable," Su Wanqing reported.

"Inject catalytic energy flow, initiate material dissociation," Lin Feng ordered again.

He pushed another control lever. A dark blue energy flow surged through thick pipes, violently injecting into the blazing furnace chamber.

The interior of the furnace immediately blazed with intense light, the red-hot ore seeming to boil under the impact of the energy flow, visibly softening and decomposing.

Data on the control screen began jumping wildly, displaying the dramatic changes in material composition inside the furnace.

Complex chemical reactions and energy field interactions were stripping impurities from the ordinary iron ore, extracting the iron elements, and performing preliminary bonding with small amounts of alloying elements added in advance.

This process consumed enormous amounts of energy, causing the energy output reading in the main control room to jump up by one notch. But the fusion core continued operating steadily, providing a continuous, powerful power supply.

Several dozen minutes later, the light inside the furnace gradually subsided, the boiling metal liquid calming down to present a dazzling bright white color.

"Dissociation and preliminary alloying completed. Commencing shaping and cooling output."

Lin Feng's voice carried a barely noticeable tremor.

The outlet at the bottom of the furnace slowly opened, and the incandescent metal melt, radiating astonishing heat, flowed out into the pre-prepared molds below.

The molds were standard metal ingot molds that Lin Feng had rushed to create based on the base's construction needs.

The bright white metal liquid filled cavity after cavity of the molds, then was carried by conveyor belts into the cooling zone. High-pressure inert gas sprayed out, rapidly carrying away the heat.

The metal's color shifted from white to red, then from red to dark, finally solidifying into smooth-surfaced, gray-metallic-luster standard alloy ingots.

When the first completely cooled metal ingot was lifted by a robotic arm and placed on the empty floor before everyone, they all crowded around it.

Old Scar picked up one piece with his thick-gloved hand, hefted its weight, then tapped it with his finger, producing a dull, solid sound. "It worked! This thing really can turn stone into good steel!"

Wu Yu excitedly scanned it with a detector:

"Composition stable! Meets construction-grade standard alloy specifications! Excellent! We succeeded!"

Lin Feng looked at the unremarkable yet profoundly significant metal ingot, let out a long sigh of relief, and revealed a tired but immensely satisfied smile.

The material bottleneck had finally been cracked open.

The successful operation of the conversion furnace acted like a shot of adrenaline for the entire team.

Hope was no longer just lines on blueprints or concepts in their minds—it had transformed into these solid, tangible metal blocks right before their eyes.

The pathway to obtaining basic construction materials had been opened, removing the biggest obstacle to dock construction.

In the following days, Stardust Base entered a period of rapid construction. The pace didn't slow due to their initial success—instead, it became even more urgent.

The hover ore hauler began making frequent trips between the base and several identified rich mineral deposits.

Old Scar led escort and transport missions, sometimes accompanied by Wu Yu for mineral identification, other times assisted by Old Man Sun, who had recovered somewhat, with loading and unloading. Each excursion carried risks—visibility in the red mist remained extremely poor, and Rust Wight activity seemed to have increased due to the "Excavator's" restlessness.

Twice, they even encountered small groups of wandering Raiders, but with Old Scar's precise firepower and the hover ore hauler's makeshift added armor protection, they managed to repel the attackers without major incident and successfully brought back the ore.

Inside the base, Lin Feng practically took up permanent residence in the hangar.

The conversion furnace required continuous maintenance and optimization to improve efficiency and stability. Simultaneously, he began using the newly produced metal materials, combined with the aging industrial mother machines in the hangar, to attempt manufacturing more complex components.

His goal was clear: repair those several heavy engineering machines parked in the corner, resembling slumbering giants.

Chapter 38 Rock Layers: Break Through!

Old Man Sun hadn't been idle these past few days either. Using the small amount of edible algae and synthetic starch found in the base, he worked hard to improve everyone's meals. Although the ingredients were limited, he always managed to create some novelty with various methods, allowing everyone to feel a trace of warmth amidst their exhaustion.

A busy yet hopeful atmosphere enveloped the base. The clanging of metal, the roar of machinery, and the shouts of personnel instructions intertwined, playing a symphony of survival and construction.

They all knew time was running out. The vibrations from underground, while seemingly stable in frequency, were slowly but steadily increasing in intensity, like a giant hammer slowly descending, reminding them of the approaching apocalypse.

After days of relentless fighting, the first Heavy Stratum Excavator was finally successfully repaired.

When its massive tracked base, directly powered by fusion energy, emitted a deep and powerful roar, and the giant rotating drill bit at the top slowly began to spin, the entire hangar shook.

Everyone stopped their work, gathered around, and looked up at this steel behemoth. It still bore mottled rust and repair marks, looking somewhat old, but its massive size and the sense of contained power inspired awe.

"Beautiful!"

Lin Feng excitedly patted the excavator's sturdy support frame, his face smeared with grease but beaming with a bright smile, "Old pal, breaking through mountains and boring tunnels will depend on you from now on!"

Old Scar's eyes also gleamed, though he was more concerned with practicality: "This big guy, what's its energy consumption like? Is its power sufficient?"

"The energy consumption is indeed terrifying, but we can handle it now!"

Lin Feng pointed to the thick energy cable connected to the rear of the excavator, "As for power? Heh, just let it take a bite out of that eastern rock wall and you'll see!"

Without any extra ceremony, after a simple test, the excavator was driven directly to the heavy rock wall on the east side of the hangar, marked as the "Expansion Construction Zone." The giant drill bit aimed at the rock stratum, emitting an even deeper, more menacing roar.

"Begin operations!" Lin Feng gave the order.

"Yes!"

The operator, Little Ears, responded with a spirited tone, leaned forward, reached out, and pushed the control lever. The rotating drill bit surged forward violently, colliding fiercely with the hard rock layer!

A screeching friction sound and the tremendous noise of shattering rock instantly filled the entire space. Even from a distance, one could feel the intense vibrations transmitted through the ground.

Gravel flew everywhere, was drenched by the excavator's built-in water spray dust suppression system, and turned into mud as it fell.

The drill bit advanced slowly but steadily at a visible pace. The hard rock wall was stripped away layer by layer before it like soft soil, leaving behind a rough, circular tunnel entrance that continuously extended deeper.

Progress was slower than expected; the hardness of the rock stratum exceeded anticipation, but for the energy-rich excavator, it wasn't insurmountable.

Each rotation of the drill bit meant they were one step closer to their dream of a dock.

Lin Feng and the others stood at a safe distance, watching the tunnel form inch by inch.

"This is a milestone beginning, meaning we truly possess the ability to modify our environment and construct large-scale projects."

"I wonder if we enlarged the drill bit a hundred times, could we go head-to-head with that Excavator? Who knows which one would drill through the other?"

Lin Feng couldn't help but entertain such wild fancies.

However, just as the excavation work had progressed about several meters deep, Sun Wen suddenly sent an urgent communication from the main control room. Her voice, coming through the roaring noise, carried a trace of tension:

"Brother Lin Feng! External sensors detect multiple high-speed moving signals approaching! They're coming from the direction of the 'Black Tooth' stronghold! There are quite a few!"

Almost simultaneously, Wu Yu, responsible for monitoring the channels, also exclaimed:

"There's communication from 'Black Tooth' on the public channel! They... they seem to be saying they found the 'fat sheep's' mining site and are coming to 'take possession'!"

Everyone's hearts leapt into their throats. It seemed the previous trick hadn't completely fooled "Black Tooth," or perhaps their frequent outbound activities had ultimately attracted the attention of these hyenas.

The roar of the excavator abruptly ceased. The operator, Sun Wen, quickly cut the power, and the giant drill bit slowly stopped rotating. The hangar instantly fell into an eerie silence, leaving only the sound of dust slowly settling and the urgent reports coming from the communicators.

"Confirm the number of signal sources! Distance!"

Lin Feng reacted extremely quickly, the excitement on his face instantly replaced by gravity. He shouted the questions while quickly striding towards the main control room.

"At least five vehicle signals! Moving very fast, estimated to reach our peripheral area in fifteen minutes!"

Sun Wen's voice had already regained composure, rapidly reporting the data, "They've dispersed, as if trying to form an encirclement!"

Old Scar had already shouldered his heavy rifle, his eyes becoming sharp as knives:

"Perfect timing! The base defenses were just upgraded, perfect for testing our firepower on them!"

"Don't engage head-on!"

Su Wanqing immediately objected. She pulled up the topographic map of the base's periphery, "They know the terrain, and they've come prepared. Our personnel and weapons aren't sufficient for field combat. If we get bogged down, the consequences would be unthinkable."

"Officer Su is right."

Lin Feng rushed to the main console, his eyes quickly scanning the signal blips on the screen,

"Our top priority right now is ensuring base security and construction progress. Old Scar, take your people to the entrance defense points immediately, and do not open fire without my order! Sun Wen, activate all external surveillance and camouflage systems, hide the entrance to the maximum extent!"

"What... what about the excavator? The newly opened hole..." Wu Yu looked anxiously at the freshly dug, extremely conspicuous tunnel entrance on the screen.

Lin Feng frowned deeply, his brain operating at high speed. Suddenly, he looked at Su Wanqing:

"Can our environmental simulation system create a small-scale dust storm or smoke? The short-term kind?"

Su Wanqing was momentarily stunned, then understood his intention:

"Yes! The base has stockpiled chemical smoke agents that can be released through the external exhaust vents of the ventilation system! But the range isn't large, and the duration won't be long either!"

"That's enough! We don't need it for long, just to disrupt their vision for a few minutes!"

Lin Feng immediately ordered, "Prepare to release smoke immediately, cover the eastern rock wall area, especially that new tunnel entrance! Old Scar, once your people are in position, await my command. If they force their way closer, conduct warning shots, but do not expose our automatic defense firepoints!"

The orders were swiftly executed. Outside the base, several concealed exhaust vents quietly spewed dense gray-white smoke, quickly forming a small smoke belt near the eastern rock wall, cleverly obscuring the fresh excavation marks and the tire tracks left by Old Scar and the others during their outbound transport.

Almost simultaneously, the "Black Tooth" motorcade roared up to the base's periphery.

Several oddly modified off-road vehicles and motorcycles covered with armor plates came to a stop. The people on board jumped down, cautiously surveying the smoke-shrouded area and the distant, tightly shut, featureless giant gate.

"Is this the place?"

Chapter 39 The Bandits' Trail!

A man who appeared to be a leader observed through his binoculars for a long time, but could see nothing except smoke. He yelled irritably into his communicator, "Dammit! I clearly heard a lot of noise over here just now! Sounded like large machinery working! Why did smoke start as soon as we arrived? What the hell is going on?"

"Boss, we found some blurry tire tracks over here, but we can't see anything once they enter the smoke zone!" another subordinate reported.

"Be careful! Don't let it be a trap!" The leader appeared very cautious and didn't rashly enter the smoke zone. He signaled his men to fire several random shots toward the smoke zone and the gate. The bullets struck the thick rock wall and the gate, leaving only a few white marks and sparks from ricochets.

The gate remained tightly shut, showing no reaction whatsoever. The smoke slowly dissipated, revealing the rock wall behind it which seemed completely normal, bearing only some old wear and tear marks.

"Dammit, did I mishear?" the leader muttered suspiciously. "Or did these rats hide back in their hole again?"

Right at that moment, inside the base, Lin Feng looked at the external surveillance footage and gave Old Scar an order: "Old Scar, give them something to listen to. Don't hit people, shoot the rocks near their vehicle."

Old Scar grinned, adjusting his scope. Bang! A crisp gunshot rang out, the bullet accurately striking a rock next to the leader's off-road vehicle, sending up a shower of sparks.

"Sniper! Take cover!"

The Black Tooth members immediately fell into chaos, scrambling for cover while nervously looking toward the general direction of the gunshot. But that direction only had jagged strange rocks and red fog, with no person visible at all.

The leader's face turned very ugly. The other side was prepared, had a sniper, was well concealed, and this base gate looked ridiculously sturdy. A forceful assault would cost too much, and there didn't seem to be any obvious spoils worth grabbing either.

"Pah! Bad luck!" He spat on the ground, waving his hand to give the order. "Withdraw! It must have been noise from somewhere else. What decent machinery could these poor rat nests possibly have! We'll investigate again later!"

The Black Tooth convoy came quickly and left just as fast, disappearing into the red fog with confusion and unwillingness.

Inside the base, everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Lin Feng watched the signals moving away on the screen, but his eyes narrowed slightly. They had managed to deceive them this time by luck, but the Black Tooth harassment probably wouldn't stop. It seemed the plan needed some slight adjustments.

The Black Tooth's sudden visit and retreat were like a stone thrown into calm water, creating ripples that spread through the interior of Stardust Base. The brief crisis resolution didn't bring relaxation, but rather deeper contemplation.

Inside the control room, the atmosphere was somewhat heavy. The recent experience reminded everyone that external threats were never far away, and they weren't resting easy.

"This can't go on," Old Scar spoke first, his voice low. "We got lucky this time, managed to fool them with smoke. What about next time? If they bring more powerful equipment, or simply block the gate and refuse to leave, our outings and construction will be seriously affected."

Wu Yu adjusted his glasses, looking worried. "Yes, every time the mining vehicle goes out, it's nerve-wracking. And once the Conversion Furnace starts running, the noise is considerable. Even though the base has good sound insulation, what if..."

Su Wanqing pulled up the previous surveillance recording, the screen freezing on the Black Tooth leader's suspicious, unwilling face. "Their suspicions haven't been eliminated, they were just temporarily deterred by uncertainty and risk. We must come up with a counter-strategy as soon as possible."

Lin Feng leaned against the console, his fingers unconsciously tapping on the metal surface. His gaze swept over everyone, finally settling on the main screen displaying the external red fog-filled scene.

"Blocking is worse than diverting," Lin Feng slowly spoke, breaking the silence. "The Black Tooth are like hyenas, they come sniffing around for nothing but profit. That mining spot we had before, didn't they take an interest in it?"

Sun Wen blinked. "Brother Lin Feng, you said before you wanted to make them 'work,' what did you really mean? Are we really going to sell them the ore?"

"Of course not selling the ore," Lin Feng smiled, that smile carrying his usual cunning and a hint of calculation. "We are engineers, civilized people. How could we engage in fighting and killing? What we need to do is provide 'value-added services.'"

He walked over to the main console and pulled up the detailed data recorded during the previous Helium-3 ore point exploration, specifically the three-dimensional structural diagram of that subsidiary pit layer rich in associated sulfide crystals and extremely prone to causing violent explosions.

"Look," Lin Feng pointed at those unstable energy reaction points on the structural diagram. "Those Black Tooth guys have very rough mining techniques, they only know how to brute force things. If they charge headfirst into this subsidiary pit... tsk tsk, that scene would be quite lively."

Old Scar immediately understood, a cruel smile appearing on his face. "You mean, find a way to 'guide' them to dig in that subsidiary pit? Use the pit itself to take their lives?"

"No, no, no, that's too wasteful, and it would also easily expose that we were behind it," Lin Feng shook his head, his finger pointing at those energy points. "What I mean is, we can be 'helpful neighbors,' 'accidentally' leak a little 'danger warning' about this mining spot. For example, tell them that certain layers have 'flammable and explosive gases' that require 'professional equipment' for safe extraction."

Wu Yu suddenly understood. "I get it! They definitely don't have professional equipment! But they also can't bear to abandon the mining spot! And then..."

"And then," Lin Feng continued, his smile widening, "we can 'reluctantly' propose that we can 'rent' them a set of our 'outdated' old environmental monitoring and exhaust equipment. Of course, we'd need to charge a little 'rent,' like... thirty percent of the ore they extract? Or exchange it for some special materials we need from their warehouse?"

Su Wanqing looked thoughtful. "This way, we avoid direct conflict, profit from their mining, control their mining progress to some extent to prevent them from digging recklessly and causing a real big explosion that affects the main ore vein... and even, that 'rented' equipment..."

Lin Feng snapped his fingers. "Exactly! Making some small modifications inside, adding remote monitoring or backdoors, wouldn't that be easy? We earn resources while monitoring their movements, killing multiple birds with one stone."

The plan sounded bold and risky, but it fit Lin Feng's consistent style - using technology and brains to solve problems, even turning threats into advantages.

"Of course, this matter needs a suitable middleman to deliver the message, we can't show up directly," Lin Feng rubbed his chin. "That guy Flea, hasn't there been news from him for a long time? It's time to give him a chance to earn some extra money."

Chapter 40: Poisoned Fresh Meat

A seemingly absurd yet feasible plan gradually became clear. Facing greedy wolves, perhaps offering a piece of poisoned meat would be more effective than brandishing a club.

When Flea Wang Xiaoming appeared again on Stardust Base's communication channel, his voice still carried that familiar, slick and shrewd tone, but upon careful listening, one could detect a trace of barely concealed exhaustion and anxiety. The survival conditions outside had clearly worsened.

"Oh my, my Boss Lin Feng! You finally remembered me! This damn weather, the communications are so unreliable, it's hard to even pay my respects to you!" Flea exaggerated his hardships over the channel. "You've become quite famous recently! Even those brutes from 'Black Tooth' are asking about your Stardust Base!"

Lin Feng leaned against the communication console, his tone relaxed. "Cut the crap, Flea. I'm contacting you because there's a business opportunity for you."

"Business? Great, great! Tell me! I knew Boss Lin Feng would remember me when there's good news!" Flea's voice immediately filled with anticipation.

Instead of explaining directly, Lin Feng took a roundabout approach. "Recently, hasn't 'Black Tooth' been suffering from serious ore shortages? Especially energy ore?"

Flea paused for a moment, then lowered his voice. "Oh, you hit the nail on the head! Exactly! Their damn reactor seems to have developed problems, efficiency keeps dropping, their men are almost freezing to death! They're desperately searching everywhere for anything that can burn! What, do you have goods available?" His tone became eager.

"No goods, but I have some information that might be worth something." Lin Feng said leisurely. "I remember you have some connections with one of their minor bosses?"

"Well... I can get a word in..." Flea's tone turned cautious. "What information?"

"My people were out surveying a few days ago and accidentally overheard something. Seems like there's unusual energy activity beneath that old meteor crater to the northeast." Lin Feng began setting the bait. "But that place is pretty sinister - unstable rock formations, seems like there might be flammable and explosive associated minerals too. Our equipment isn't good enough, so we didn't dare investigate thoroughly and ran back quickly."

Silence came from the other end of the channel, only Flea's heavy breathing could be heard. He was clearly quickly digesting and weighing the value and risks of this information.

"Boss Lin... is this information... reliable?" Flea's voice carried doubt. "That kind of place... if those 'Black Tooth' guys really go there, I'm afraid..."

"The information is absolutely reliable, and the risks are real too." Lin Feng's tone was frank. "That's why this information isn't free. You go find the person in charge of this at 'Black Tooth' and sell them both the 'risks' and the 'opportunity.' As for the price... I trust in your abilities. Whatever commission you can get depends on your own skills."

Flea fell silent again, clearly tempted. This was essentially getting something for nothing, using information asymmetry to profit.

Lin Feng continued sweetening the deal, adding as if casually. "Oh, right. Although we retreated quickly, we were careful enough to leave a set of simple environmental monitoring devices near the crater entrance. That equipment is old but still works - it can monitor gas composition and rock layer vibrations in the crater in real time, providing early warning of dangers. If 'Black Tooth' people really want to take the risk, perhaps... we could consider 'renting' that equipment to them, charging a negligible 'maintenance fee.'"

Now Flea completely understood. This wasn't just information - it was a complete plan with hooks. He could profit twice - commission from selling the information, and potential intermediary fees from the subsequent "equipment rental."

"Brilliant! Boss Lin, truly brilliant!" Flea's voice was full of admiration and excitement. "I understand! Leave this to me! I guarantee it'll be handled beautifully - they'll owe you a favor while remaining completely in the dark about our true situation!"

"Be smart, don't get yourself caught." Lin Feng gave a simple warning before ending the communication.

He turned around and found Su Wanqing, Old Scar, and others looking at him.

"Will this work? Is that Flea character reliable?" Wu Yu expressed some concern.

"Flea might not be reliable, but he values his own life and interests above all else." Lin Feng smiled. "He knows what's most beneficial for himself. Plus, the 'risks' we're providing are real, and the 'solution' is exactly what they desperately need. They'll find this 'deal' hard to refuse."

Next came waiting for Flea's message, and whether "Black Tooth" would take the bait. Base construction didn't stop - the tunneling machine roared to life again, steadily advancing deeper into the rock layers. But this time, everyone carried an additional sense of external calculation and anticipation in their hearts.

The waiting period didn't last long. A few days later, Flea's communication came through again, this time his voice brimming with barely contained satisfaction and excitement.

"Boss Lin! It worked! Haha, you're truly a master strategist!" Flea sounded like he was practically dancing over the channel. "That vulture in charge of mining at 'Black Tooth' didn't believe me at first, almost threw me out! Later when I exaggerated the dangers in that crater to the heavens, and 'accidentally' leaked a few details about the energy activity intensity, he couldn't sit still anymore!"

A slight smile touched Lin Feng's lips. "He agreed?"

"Agreed! Practically begged for it!" Flea said excitedly. "They're so desperate for energy they're going crazy, they don't care about anything else! When I mentioned you had some old warning equipment that could be rented to them, his eyes lit up! The terms are exactly as you said - you get thirty percent of the ore they mine, or equivalent value in special materials! Equipment rental fee separate, paid with medicine and batteries!"

The success exceeded expectations, showing just how severe the energy crisis within "Black Tooth" had become.

"Well done, Flea. Take your cut from the proceeds." Lin Feng acknowledged his contribution.

"Hehe, got it Boss Lin, thank you! Also~"

Flea lowered his voice.

"Resources are really scarce here, we can't afford to keep several high-end talents anymore, they're being sent out. Why don't you take a few? There's no place for their skills here anyway... But the leadership doesn't want to kill them, nor do they want to strengthen potential rivals by feeding them, so factions with conflicts like yours definitely can't participate..."

"Bullshit! Who are you calling rivals?"

"Haha! My mistake, hehehe, I mean you're a capable and powerful team, Black Tooth doesn't want you developing too strongly either. During the upcoming transaction, I'll secretly slip a few people through. I was hoping, hoping..."

"You want to keep an escape route with me, right?"

"Exactly Boss Lin! Don't worry! I've arranged everything for the subsequent handover and material transfers! Guarantee no one will suspect you!"

Flea thumped his chest in assurance, then lowered his voice again.

"But... that Vulture guy isn't completely brainless either. He sent a team to follow me, claiming it's 'protection,' but really they want to see where the equipment actually comes from... What do you think..."

Lin Feng had anticipated this move long ago and said calmly, "No problem. Take them to that rocky area east of the base, the place that often gets foggy. An old engineering robot will deliver the equipment there. They won't see the base entrance."

With the plan so thorough, Flea was completely convinced. "Understood! Will definitely handle it properly!"

Chapter 41 The Most Perverted Newcomer!

Two more days passed. Under the "guidance" of Flea and the "surveillance" of Black Tooth personnel, an engineering robot that looked rather dilapidated and moved somewhat stiffly slowly emerged from the smoke billowing east of Stardust Base, dragging a sealed metal box behind it.

The robot placed the box at the designated pile of rubble, then clumsily retreated back the way it came, disappearing into the smoke.

The Black Tooth people cautiously checked the surroundings but found nothing except smoke and rocks.

They opened the box to find a set of environmental monitoring devices that looked somewhat dated but were reasonably well-maintained, accompanied by simple usage instructions and a data slate detailing the rental terms.

The deal was done.

From then on, Black Tooth miners began working in that dangerous auxiliary mine shaft, trembling with fear yet filled with hope.

Meanwhile, standing before Lin Feng were three miners dressed in camouflage gear. The big boss of Lin's Brick Industry looked utterly helpless.

"So he just tucked three miners over here? If I throw out my gourmet compressed bricks here, I could summon over a hundred workers willing to do free labor from the ruins..."

At that moment, one miner stepped forward, took off their hat, shook out their short hair, and looked up.

"Sorry, I'm not a miner~ You're Boss Lin Feng, right? My name is Chen Wei, I have a doctorate in polymer chemistry. I'd rather not say which institution right now. I specialize in frostbite medication and disinfectants. Whether you want to use our services or not is up to you, but I need to leave the planetary belt to conduct biochemical experiments at the star gate. How much compensation do you require for me to travel with you?"

"I can help you produce various lubricants, break-in compounds, and simple chemical preparations. If you don't need any of those, my body is also available for use however you wish. I'm a bit older, but I can still handle an ice bear."

Lin Feng's jaw dropped as he stared at the completely calm Chen Wei. "You... you're absolutely crazy~"

"I don't have time to bargain with you. Is the deal happening or not?"

"Deal, deal! Dr. Chen Wei, haha, please come with me. I'll, I'll show you the laboratory equipment situation."

Su Wanqing forcefully shoved aside the still-stunned Lin Feng, taking the lead to escort Chen Wei into the equipment storage room to begin discussions.

Nearby, Old Scar unusually started teasing Wu Yu. "Old Wu, isn't this kind of 30-year-old engineering woman exactly your type?"

"Old Scar, you never gossip about these things. Are you actually asking me or guarding against me? I don't like women with zero sanity points!"

"Oh, right. In a few days I need to go out to collect samples of radioactive liquid ore. Please assign some robots to protect me. If you really can't protect me completely, just bring back my upper body - I can interface it with mechanical prosthetics. The main thing is my brain still has great uses."

Chen Wei shook her short hair again and retreated back into the warehouse. Lin Feng's lips trembled as he felt the world's aesthetic had somehow shifted. He turned to look at the remaining two people.

"Boss, we're not that kind of weirdos. Everyone in Black Tooth from top to bottom couldn't stand her."

The remaining two were clearly much more normal. One middle-aged man also took off his hat and gestured grandly.

"My name is Li Dali, Boss Lin can call me Wrench. I'm skilled at both welding and lathe work. This is my junior. We've been long-term cooperation partners with Moon Nation's Major Engineering Department and permanent labor suppliers for Jupiter Alliance's surface modification troops."

Everyone's eyes lit up - this uncle was handsome! His short stubble, thick eyebrows, and high nose bridge made his gray-blue eyes appear even more profound.

"So you're just contract brick-carrying workers?" Lin Feng was the first to complain.

"How is that any different from what I said before about being a lifelong reader of Earth Federation government work reports?"

"Hehe, workers and workers aren't the same! You have lathes here, right? Let me show you my skills with thin-walled sleeves!"

After the two were taken to the workshop by Old Scar and briefly familiarized themselves with the lathe tool's wheelbase and overall error, in less than half an hour, Wrench actually hand-turned a perfectly round, flawless medium-sized sleeve with wall thickness under 1mm.

Watching his fluid clamping techniques and walking speed, Lin Feng was somewhat shocked - this was the real treasure they needed most right now! How could Black Tooth be willing to let go of such talent?

"I also have my own demands. I need to go to the asteroid belt at the edge of the solar system. It's a bit far, but I have reasons I must go. After we leave this planet, you can drop me off on any planet whenever you want, Mars or Jupiter are fine. Of course, don't expect much loyalty from me - I don't have that quality. I can't work for a single team my whole life~"

"..."

So they're all ungrateful scoundrels! Now Lin Feng understood why Black Tooth didn't want these people - damn, not a single normal person among them. Either they have negative sanity points or zero conscience.

Maybe in the future I could use "engine cores" and research rights to my strange creations to thoroughly lure these "talents" over, making them truly join us.

While arranging accommodations and work for them, Lin Feng contemplated future possibilities.

One week later.

On Stardust Base's monitoring screens, encrypted data streams from the "rented" equipment were periodically received, clearly displaying the work progress inside the mine, ore production volumes, and... the real-time status of those unstable energy zones.

In Wu Yu's warehouse, anonymously packaged "rent payments" began arriving regularly through Flea - sometimes fairly pure ore, sometimes rare alloy materials, and even on two occasions, several high-energy batteries that were Black Tooth specialties.

These supplies were undoubtedly important supplements for the base's construction.

Lin Feng would occasionally look at the transmitted data, especially when Black Tooth's work faces approached those dangerous areas, revealing a thoughtful expression. Su Wanqing asked him if he was worried about actually causing an accident.

Lin Feng shook his head:

"The risk is controllable. That equipment's data is genuine, and its warning functions aren't compromised. As long as they're not stupid enough to ignore alarms and force excavation, safety is still guaranteed. What we want is a long-term meal ticket, not a one-time explosion."

Using their opponent's strength against them, diverting misfortune elsewhere. Stardust Base cleverly transformed part of the external threat into nourishment for its own development. The base's internal construction consequently progressed more smoothly.

With internal construction steadily advancing and external threats temporarily resolved, Stardust Base entered a period of relatively stable development. But this stability wasn't static - it was a dynamic balance operating at high speed.

The excavation work on the eastern rock wall continued day and night.

The heavy excavator's drill bit tirelessly chewed through the hard rock layers, with the circular tunnel continuously extending deeper into the mountain.

Preliminary support structures followed closely behind, with standard alloy beams and prefabricated panels produced by the conversion furnace rapidly installed to ensure construction safety.

The tunnel interior was brightly lit, filled with the smell of rock dust and heated metal, the roar of engineering mechs interwoven with workers' chants, creating a powerful atmosphere.

Lin Feng spent most of his time at the tunnel construction site and near the conversion furnace.

He needed to solve various technical problems encountered during construction, optimize the conversion furnace's formulas to improve production efficiency of different building materials, while simultaneously monitoring the fusion core's operational status to ensure this "energy heart" beat steadily and powerfully.

Wu Yu became even busier. The variety and quantity of materials stored in his warehouse increased daily, including both self-produced materials and the "rent" obtained from Black Tooth.

After Chen Wei designed a complex barcode system for him, she started going out early and returning late for collection work. This barcode system could label each batch of materials, input them into the database, and precisely track their origin, destination, and inventory status. Wu Yu became even more engrossed in this work, often spending half a day studying just a single energy panel.

Stationed in the main control room, coordinating everything was Su Wanqing. The dock design blueprint on her light screen became increasingly detailed, with every structural unit, energy line, and pipe interface repeatedly simulated and optimized. She coordinated construction progress, material distribution, and energy supply, ensuring efficient collaboration between all subsystems without chaos. The base's defense system was also continuously improved under her direction, with several hidden detectors and firepoints added.

Under Lin Feng's arrangement, Wrench took entire cases of compressed bricks to recruit dozens of "honest people" he had previously worked with to come as technical workers. Wrench's rich manufacturing experience was indeed more "humanized" than robots, doubling the overall construction speed of the base's infrastructure. However, he constantly pestered Lin Feng to study the legendary "new-type energy core," annoying Lin Feng so much he didn't dare casually appear in the construction workshop anymore.

Old Scar led his team responsible for internal base security patrols and the most important material transport work. Hover ore haulers frequently traveled back and forth, transporting large quantities of ore from the mining area back to the conversion furnace's insatiable intake. His expression remained stern, but watching the tunnel grow deeper day by day and the warehouse gradually fill up, a trace of barely noticeable satisfaction appeared in his eyes.

Even Old Man Sun found new enjoyment. Using several edible algae and fungi that had achieved preliminary success in the hydroponics area, he experimented with developing new recipes. Although the taste was still... difficult to describe, it at least provided some variation and anticipation beyond the monotonous compressed food.

Every team member functioned like a precision gear, tightly meshing together, propelling Stardust Base's massive machinery steadily forward toward its established goals.

A sense of tacit understanding and cohesion quietly grew through day after day of shared struggle.

However, beneath this busyness and hope, a thread of hidden worry always remained.

The vibrations from underground were becoming increasingly clear, sometimes even noticeably shaking.

The Excavator energy readings monitored by Sun Wen, while growing slowly, persistently and steadily climbed upward like a volcano continuously accumulating, never knowing when it might erupt.

It was there, in the unknown darkness underground, moving, approaching. The time left for them was like sand in an hourglass, silently decreasing.

But at this moment, no one wanted to think too much about that distant threat. The tunnel before them, the tools in their hands, the companions at their side, and that increasingly clear dream of a dock occupied their entire attention.

Chapter 42 Strange Noises from the Depths of the Mine

The internal operations of Stardust Base had developed an efficient rhythm.

The Fusion Core steadily provided surging power, bathing the entire underground facility in an unprecedented abundance of energy.

The tunnel construction on the eastern rock wall advanced day and night without pause, with the friction sounds of heavy-duty boring machine drill bits against rock, metallic clanging from alloy support structure installations, and hydraulic noises from engineering mech movements weaving together into a symphony filled with industrial power.

The Conversion Furnace continuously processed ore transported from various mining sites, transforming it into standardized metal ingots and prefabricated panels.

Wu Yu's warehouse management system had become as complex as the financial system of a small kingdom, with every piece of material precisely registered, categorized, coded, and then allocated to the most needed locations according to the construction plan coordinated by Su Wanqing.

The transport team led by Old Scar shuttled between the base and mining sites. Although the red mist and potential threats outside still existed, abundant energy and gradually improving defense systems gave them more confidence.

However, beneath this busy and orderly scene, a threat originating from the deep underground was silently eroding the boundaries of safety like slowly rising tidewater.

In the main control room, on the light screen before Sun Wen, the curve representing the "Excavator" energy readings maintained its unsettling upward slope. It was no longer sudden spikes but a continuous, stable, seemingly unstoppable growth, indicating that the activities of the massive entity underground were becoming increasingly frequent and intense.

This continuously strengthening activity was most keenly felt at the tunnel excavation face located at the forefront of the base.

Lin Feng, wearing work clothes stained with rock dust and oil, was checking the support conditions of the latest tunnel section with Wrench and several core engineering team members.

The arched supports constructed from high-strength alloy beams firmly supported the newly excavated tunnel walls, with high-intensity lighting illuminating this several-hundred-meter-deep tunnel as bright as daylight, but the anomalies transmitted from deep within the rock strata couldn't be dispelled by the lights.

"Boss, do you feel it?" Wrench's rugged face showed rare solemnity, his massive hand pressed against the cold, freshly exposed rock wall. "This movement... it's different from before."

Lin Feng didn't speak, just similarly pressed his palm against the rock wall and closed his eyes to carefully perceive. What came through his feet was no longer occasional, scattered vibrations, but a more sustained, deeper low-frequency rumble, as if an enormous machine was continuously operating deep underground. Mixed within this rumble were extremely faint yet strangely rhythmic "cracking" sounds, like some hard object continuously fracturing under tremendous pressure.

"Any anomalies in the monitoring data?" Lin Feng opened his eyes and looked at the team member holding the geological scanner.

That team member nervously stared at the constantly fluctuating waveform graphs and data streams on the screen: "The seismic source depth hasn't changed much, but the continuity and coordination of energy release have significantly increased. And... waveform analysis shows the vibrations are no longer purely geological stress release - they're mixed with... many high-frequency, short pulse signals, very regular, unlike natural phenomena."

Just then, an extremely sharp, ear-piercing noise, like giant metal sheets scraping against glass, suddenly burst from deep within the rock strata. Although weakened and filtered through thick rock layers until it reached their ears as faint, its teeth-grating essence remained clearly discernible.

The sound vanished in an instant, so brief it almost seemed like an illusion.

The tunnel instantly fell silent, everyone stopping their work and looking at each other with uncertain, alarmed expressions.

The humming of the ventilation system now seemed particularly conspicuous.

"What... what was that sound just now?" a young team member couldn't help swallowing and asked quietly, his voice abrupt in the silent tunnel.

Wrench's brows knitted into a tight knot. He shook his head and said gruffly, "Who the hell knows! Definitely doesn't sound like anything good. This damned place gets weirder the deeper we dig!"

Lin Feng's expression turned exceptionally grave.

He walked to the very forefront of the tunnel, where the massive boring machine had temporarily stopped working, its enormous drill bit still covered with crushed rock fragments, pointing toward the unknown darkness ahead.

He stared at that unexplored rock stratum, as if trying to see through dozens of kilometers of rock to clearly observe the terrifying entity active underground.

These regular vibrations, these bizarre high-frequency pulse signals, and that brief, extremely uncomfortable metal scraping sound...

All of this pointed to a disturbing possibility - the "Excavator"'s behavior patterns might be far more complex than they imagined, possibly even containing some difficult-to-understand... purposefulness?

It wasn't just moving; it might be conducting some kind of activity? Collecting? Constructing? Or something else even more unimaginable?

A cold sense of crisis slowly crawled up Lin Feng's spine. Their understanding of the "Excavator" was almost zero, with all judgments based on speculation and limited monitoring data. This unknown was the greatest danger.

"Notify everyone,"

Lin Feng turned around, his voice steady yet carrying unquestionable determination,

"Reduce tunnel boring speed by twenty percent. All work faces must ensure support strength is increased by one grade above design standards. Install an additional set of high-sensitivity acoustic and vibration monitoring arrays, deployed directly on the excavation face. I want the most real-time, most raw data."

His gaze swept over everyone:

"Tell the brothers to heighten their vigilance. If they detect any anomalies, no matter how slight the sound or vibration changes, report immediately without delay!"

He needed to quickly figure out what exactly that thing underground was doing. Were these bizarre "knocking sounds" and "scraping sounds" just unconscious noise before destruction, or signals of some larger, more terrifying operation?

Chapter 43 Data Fog

Lin Feng's instructions were swiftly carried out.

The tunnel excavation pace slowed slightly, while safety inspections and support reinforcement efforts were intensified to unprecedented levels.

A hastily manufactured monitoring array containing multiple high-precision sensor nodes was installed near the foremost excavation face, with data cables spreading out like plant roots, greedily capturing every vibration and sound wave emanating from the depths below.

In the main control room, the screens before Sun Wen and Su Wanqing were nearly overwhelmed by these new data streams. Massive amounts of information flooded in like tidal waves, posing severe challenges to the main computer's processing capabilities.

Noise filtering, signal separation, model building, comparative analysis... a series of complex operations proceeded silently in the background.

Su Wanqing was responsible for establishing mathematical models, attempting to find patterns and regularities within the seemingly chaotic vibration signals.

"Right here."

She crossed her legs, her slender fingers swiftly moving across the light screen as she called up different algorithms, constructing one possible data correlation model after another, though most models were quickly invalidated by new anomalous data.

"Its vibration pattern is too complex," Su Wanqing said with a slight frown, her tone carrying traces of fatigue and confusion, "It doesn't resemble a single vibration source, but rather appears to be a cluster composed of countless small independent sources. Yet these clusters display highly coordinated activity... This defies conventional geomechanical principles."

Sun Wen focused on the captured sound wave signals, particularly that brief but impressive metallic scraping sound.

She employed every available audio processing technique, amplifying, noise-reducing, and conducting spectral analysis on that signal segment, attempting to extract valuable information from it.

"The frequency characteristics of this sound are quite peculiar," Sun Wen pointed at several unusually sharp peaks on the spectrum graph, "Sister Su, look—its main energy concentrates within several very narrow high-frequency bands, and the harmonics are quite regular too... This seems more like... the kind of sound produced during high-intensity energy cutting or precision mechanical processing, but... amplified countless times over."

High-intensity energy cutting? Precision mechanical processing? Dozens of kilometers deep underground? This conclusion sounded even more unbelievable.

"Could it possibly be some unknown geological phenomenon?"

Lin Feng asked, standing behind them with his arms crossed.

"Highly unlikely," Su Wanqing shook her head, "Naturally occurring geological activity typically produces sound waves with broad frequency spectra and relatively dispersed energy distribution. These highly concentrated energy peaks seem more like products of artificial technology."

Artificial technology? Could it be that the subterranean "Excavator" wasn't a natural formation, but rather some kind of... gigantic mechanical entity? Or something controlled by some technology? This thought sent chills down all three of their spines simultaneously.

Just then, Sun Wen seemed to have made another discovery.

She isolated an extremely faint, almost completely noise-obscured low-frequency signal, and after repeated enhancement and processing, an intermittent yet highly regular "ticking" sound emerged.

"What's this?" Lin Feng immediately moved closer, drawn by the discovery.

"It seems like... some kind of beacon?" Sun Wen said uncertainly, "The signal is very weak, the modulation method is quite ancient, but it's very regular. It appears to be wrapped within the massive noise background generated by the 'Excavator,' almost like... intentionally hidden within it?"

She attempted to decode this signal segment. Due to the signal's weakness, the decoding process proved exceptionally difficult, with multiple attempts ending in failure. After switching through various ancient decoding protocols, an extremely brief information fragment was successfully parsed.

The information wasn't linguistic, but rather a repeating string of numerical coordinates, along with a constantly repeating, extremely brief identification code.

"This is..." Su Wanqing looked at the coordinate string and quickly input it into the star chart system for positioning. On the light screen, the star chart rapidly zoomed, eventually locking onto a location.

The coordinates pointed not to their current planet, nor even to the inner regions of this star system, but to a very remote and inconspicuous area at the outer edge of the asteroid belt.

There was almost nothing there—just some sparse, ice-rock hybrid minor celestial bodies.

And that identification code, after fuzzy comparison with the database, surprisingly showed approximately thirty percent similarity to the ancient emblem engraved on Lin Feng's heirloom pocket watch and partially represented by patterns on the silver-white box's surface!

This discovery sent shocks through everyone's hearts!

Hidden within the noise background generated by that terrifying subterranean behemoth's activity was actually a coordinate beacon pointing to the distant edge of the asteroid belt? And this beacon appeared to be connected to the mysterious "Stardust" legacy associated with Lin Feng?

What exactly was going on?

Could there be some unknown connection between the "Excavator" and the "Stardust" legacy? Was this beacon a distress signal? A warning? Or perhaps... a trap?

The mist brought by the data hadn't dissipated; instead, it had grown thicker and more eerie. The subterranean threat seemed connected to the distant starry sky and ancient past by a faint, barely visible thread.

Chapter 44 Deep Space Echoes and Lost Signals

The strange beacon signal emanating from underground was like a stone thrown into a calm lake, creating ripples upon ripples that plunged the core members of Stardust Base into deeper confusion and contemplation.

That string of coordinates, that ancient identification code, intertwined with the unsettling activities of the "Excavator," forming a puzzle that was difficult to unravel.

"Is this signal... emitted by the 'Excavator'? Or is it something it's unintentionally carrying? Or maybe something else hidden within its activity background is sending it?" Wu Yu stared at the coordinate string, his face filled with bewilderment.

"Can't be certain." Su Wanqing shook her head, "The signal is too weak, and it's completely masked by the 'Excavator's' intense noise. That we managed to capture and decode it was largely luck. Its emission source, purpose—all are unknowns."

Lin Feng stared at the remote coordinate point on the star chart, his fingers unconsciously tapping the console.

That place was far from major shipping lanes, resource-poor, with almost no development value whatsoever. Why would a beacon point there? What was hidden there? What connection did it have with "Stardust"?

"Sun Wen, can you try to reverse-track this beacon's faint signal, attempt to locate its underground source? Even just a rough depth and direction would help." Lin Feng asked.

Sun Wen gave a bitter smile:

"Very difficult. The signal has undergone complex attenuation and refraction through geological layers, and it's completely covered by the 'Excavator's' main noise—the signal-to-noise ratio is extremely low. With our current sensor deployment range and precision, precise positioning is almost impossible. At best, we can only confirm it indeed comes from extremely deep underground."

Another dead end. The clue seemed right before their eyes, yet separated by an impenetrable layer of fog.

Just as everyone was at their wits' end, the system monitoring external communications and deep space signals suddenly emitted a low-priority alert tone.

Usually, such alerts meant capturing some abnormal but low-energy background radiation or unrecognizable weak signals.

Sun Wen habitually glanced at it, about to classify it as irrelevant interference and filter it out, but several familiar characteristic peaks on the signal spectrum graph made her freeze abruptly.

"Wait!"

She immediately halted the filtering program and amplified the weak signal,

"This spectral signature... it's so familiar!"

Su Wanqing and Lin Feng immediately gathered around.

"It's that high-frequency pulse!"

Sun Wen pointed at the narrow sharp peaks on the spectrum graph, her tone carrying surprise,

"It's highly similar to the spectral signature of that metallic scraping sound we parsed from the 'Excavator' noise background! Although the energy is countless times weaker, the basic pattern is consistent!"

"Source?"

Lin Feng immediately pressed.

Sun Wen quickly operated, mobilizing all external listening antennas for directional analysis. Several minutes later, results came out.

"The source... isn't underground!"

Sun Wen's voice carried disbelief,

"The signal source points to... deep space! Rough direction is... beyond the Kuiper Belt!"

The peculiar signal spectrum discovered underground, suspected to be related to the "Excavator," was simultaneously appearing in the distant edge of the solar system?

How was this possible?!

Could the "Excavator's" activities actually affect deep space dozens of astronomical units away? This completely exceeded their understanding.

Or... was there some mechanism connecting the underground and deep space that they hadn't yet discovered?

"What's the signal content?" Su Wanqing maintained her composure.

Sun Wen attempted decoding but quickly shook her head: "The signal is too weak, and it doesn't seem to carry complex information itself. It's more like... pure pulse radiation, or some kind of byproduct of energy emission."

Just as they tried to analyze further, another higher-priority alarm sounded on the main console—the base's external environment monitoring system.

"High-intensity energy burst detected thirty kilometers east of the base!"

Sun Wen immediately switched screens, her expression changing slightly,

"Energy signature... unrecognizable! Not fusion, not fission, not common chemical explosion either... Wait, multiple fast-moving life signals detected near the energy burst point... rapidly moving away from the burst location!"

The monitoring image on the screen appeared blurry due to red mist and energy interference, but they could vaguely see a strange, twisted ball of blue-purple electric arcs rising on the distant horizon, then rapidly extinguishing.

Near the light ball, several blurred thermal signals were fleeing in panic.

"It's 'Black Tooth' people." Lin Feng frowned.

"Looks like their activity area." Old Scar had somehow arrived in the control room, watching the screen with a grave expression,

"Judging by their fleeing posture, they probably ran into something tough."

Had the "Black Tooth" people also encountered that bizarre phenomenon with special energy signatures? What connection did this have with the deep space signal they monitored, and the underground "Excavator"?

Abnormal events occurring underground, in deep space, and even on the nearby surface began to show a disturbing, faintly visible correlation.

A vague yet enormous net was slowly tightening.

Chapter 45: Leng Xingyun's Warning

The beacon from underground, the strange pulses from deep space, and the unexplained energy bursts on the nearby surface... These seemingly isolated events were like puzzle pieces, faintly pointing toward the outline of some vast and indistinct truth.

The base's daily operations remained busy, tunnels extended slowly but steadily, and the prefabricated components for the dock began taking shape on the production line.

But for the few who were aware, they realized the threats might come from multiple directions, interconnected in ways they couldn't fully comprehend.

Amid this oppressive atmosphere, an unexpected, highly encrypted communication request connected to Stardust Base's main control system.

The signal's encryption method was extremely complex and unique, carrying a distinctly non-Earth Federation military style.

Su Wanqing noticed the request immediately, quickly operating the system to accept the communication while simultaneously activating signal shielding.

"This is Stardust Base, please identify yourself."

The communication channel remained silent for a moment, as if some kind of verification scan was being conducted.

A few seconds later, a cool, slightly husky female voice with unique penetrating power spoke up, its tone revealing little emotion.

"Major Su Wanqing. It seems you've found a decent shelter."

The voice paused briefly, as if adjusting its breath slightly, "The signal shielding here is passable, but not impregnable."

That voice...

Su Wanqing and Lin Feng exchanged glances, both seeing surprise in each other's eyes.

It was Leng Xingyun! That mysterious, powerful bounty hunter they'd had a brief encounter with when leaving Moon Nation. Why would she contact them suddenly now? And from the sound of it, she seemed to know their location.

"Leng Xingyun?"

Lin Feng leaned closer to the communicator, his tone attempting to regain some of its usual casualness,

"What an unexpected guest. What, has business brought you to our remote backwater? Or have you had a change of heart and decided to jump ship to join our junk collecting operation?"

A very faint, almost imperceptible snort came from the other end of the channel, seeming completely disdainful of responding to Lin Feng's teasing.

"Junk collecting? It seems you've really fallen from grace. I don't have time for nonsense, Lin Feng."

Leng Xingyun's voice remained icy, but her speech pace quickened slightly, "Listen carefully, you'd better remember what I'm about to say."

"In the past month, over thirty percent of the deep space detection network nodes in sectors seven through nine beyond the Oort Cloud have lost contact. The last data fragments they transmitted showed they encountered some kind of... unrecognizable energy erosion and physical overwriting."

"Three Federation rapid response teams sent to investigate have also gone missing. Only one scout ship managed to send back extremely chaotic optical imagery and sensor data before going completely silent."

Her voice paused, as if recalling those disturbing pieces of information.

"The imagery showed only distorted light and incomprehensible geometric structures, while sensor data indicated extremely subtle but definitely existing fluctuations in local physical constants."

"There were survivors—if they could still be called that—who escaped from earlier similar incidents, but they all fell into complete mental collapse, only repeatedly screaming delirious phrases like 'cold devourer' and 'living darkness'."

"Cold devourer? Living darkness?"

Lin Feng repeated these words, his brow furrowing tightly. This made him think of the scene when that silver-white box devoured materials, and the perplexing metal scraping sounds from underground.

"Federation higher-ups tried to suppress the information, but panic has already spread in certain circles." Leng Xingyun continued, her voice carrying a trace of barely detectable gravity,

"No one knows what it is or where it comes from. But there's one point of consensus—that thing, or those things, are slowly, inexorably infiltrating inward from the outermost reaches of the solar system."

She abruptly changed direction: "And the Shard Zone where you're located hasn't been very peaceful recently, has it? Things have been getting livelier underground, haven't they?"

These words struck Lin Feng and the others like ice spikes. She actually knew about the underground situation too?

"How do you know?" Su Wanqing asked in a heavy voice.

"I have my information channels." Leng Xingyun's reply was watertight,

"The geological anomaly activity in the Shard Zone isn't an isolated case. According to scattered information I've obtained, similar patterns of anomalous energy signals and geological structural changes originating from planetary crust depths have been detected in at least two other remote star system border regions."

Her voice grew even lower: "There's an unconfirmed speculation that the 'things' appearing in deep space and the 'things' becoming active underground might have some... connection. They might even be different manifestations of the same catastrophe."

"That's all. Goodbye."

The signal cut off.

Chapter 46: Speculations About the "Vortex"

After Leng Xingyun's communication ended, the main control room fell into dead silence, leaving only the low hum of machinery.

That phrase "larger vortex" struck everyone's hearts like a block of ice, emitting chilling coldness.

Wu Yu pushed his glasses up from the tip of his nose, his voice dry: "Cold devourer? Living darkness? This... this sounds like something from a third-rate sci-fi horror movie. She couldn't be deliberately trying to scare us, could she?"

Old Scar hugged his arms and snorted coldly:

"That woman may be as cold as ice, but she never wastes words. She wouldn't bother sending an encrypted communication from so far away just to tell a ghost story."

"I wish it were a ghost story."

Lin Feng rubbed his temples, trying to dispel the unsettling images,

"At least ghosts have things they fear—black dog blood or crosses? But this 'cold devourer'... are we supposed to hit it with compressed bricks?"

His ill-timed joke did little to lighten the atmosphere.

Su Wanqing frowned deeply, pulling up the star chart and looking at the empty area marked as anomalous:

"If Leng Xingyun is telling the truth, whatever that thing is, its movement direction... will eventually sweep through the Shard Zone. And beneath our feet, we still have a 'landmine' that could explode at any moment."

"Wolves in front, tigers behind—we've fallen right into a den of beasts."

Wrench summarized gruffly, receiving silent agreement from everyone.

"Alright, moping around won't solve our problems."

Lin Feng clapped his hands, forcibly pulling everyone's attention back,

"Whether it's a devourer or an excavator, our job remains the same—fix the ship and escape! It can take its broad road, we'll fly our single-plank bridge... though our bridge is currently more like a canoe."

He walked to the main console and tapped the screen showing tunnel progress:

"Wrench, how far has the tunnel reached? Is there enough space to start assembling the dock framework yet?"

Wrench checked the data:

"Almost there, boss. Just need to clear about ten more meters forward, then we can lay out the first set of keel foundations. It's just that the tremors haven't stopped, makes everyone nervous while working."

"Nervous or not, the work must continue! Tell the crew to work harder, raise protection levels to maximum, double up on safety lines!" Lin Feng ordered, "Wu Yu, our 'Black Tooth brand' ore supply hasn't been cut off, has it?"

"No, no interruptions,"

Wu Yu quickly nodded, then hesitated, "It's just... recently, the delivered ore occasionally contains some... well... very strange things."

"Strange things?" Lin Feng raised an eyebrow.

Wu Yu operated the console, pulling up several images.

Amid piles of standard iron ore were mixed several dark-colored metal chunks with surfaces covered in strange holes, as if corroded by strong acid, and even a small twisted fragment that was neither metal nor stone, bearing incomprehensible patterns.

"What is this stuff? Did 'Black Tooth' dig this up?"

Lin Feng leaned in for a closer look, "Doesn't look like natural ore. Have you tested it?"

"We tested it—abnormally complex composition, contains multiple unknown isotopes, radiation readings slightly abnormal but stable." Wu Yu pushed his glasses up, "Flea secretly passed word that 'Black Tooth' has encountered strange things too recently. A subsidiary mine collapsed partially, uncovering things never seen before, injuring several people. Everyone's panicked. These might have gotten mixed in from there."

Old Scar's eyes sharpened:

"Seems we're not the only ones noticing the 'excitement' underground."

Lin Feng picked up the data pad and looked at the analysis report of the strange fragment, curling his lip:

"Great, looks like our 'miner friends' included some blind box surprises. Secure them separately, don't touch them randomly. Let the doctor deal with them when she returns. Right now, the dock remains our top priority!"

In the following days, the base spun faster than a wound-up top.

Deep in the tunnel, massive alloy keel foundations were hoisted, calibrated, and welded by engineering mechs, producing deafening roars. The conversion furnace operated at full capacity, swallowing both ore and "Black Tooth brand" blind box ore, producing more standard construction materials.

Lin Feng practically lived at the construction site, covered in dust all day, mingling with Wrench and the engineering team, shouting until his voice grew hoarse.

"Left side! Left side is half a centimeter too high! Didn't you eat? Was the calibrator chewed by dogs?"

"Weld points! Are these weld points meant to fool ghosts? Redo them! If the ship cracks here during assembly, we'll become snacks for the 'Excavator'!"

"Who cut this panel? Wrong dimensions! Give it to Wu Yu to prop up his desk!"

The engineering team members were scolded into a frenzy, privately muttering: "Has the boss been eating explosives lately?"

Wrench just grinned: "You don't understand shit. The boss is anxious and using you as punching bags. Do your work carefully, or I'll deal with you before the boss does!"

During occasional breaks, Lin Feng would slip into the main control room, collapse into a chair, and shout:

"Sun Wen, quick, get me some 82-year-old filtered water, mixed with algae extract—refreshing and energizing!"

Sun Wen glared at him irritably: "Only freshly filtered pure water, take it or leave it. Algae extract is precious to Dr. Chen Wei—she says it's key for her next experiments. Don't even think about it."

Lin Feng gulped down a large mouthful of water, smacking his lips: "Sigh, this life—can't even get a flavorful drink. Where's Old Scar? Out on transport again? Didn't get blocked by 'Black Tooth' people, did he?"

"Brother Scar just returned, unloading now."

Sun Wen pointed at the monitoring screen, "Looks like it went smoothly."

On screen, Old Scar was directing people unloading ore from the hover ore hauler, his eyes vigilantly scanning the surroundings.

Seeming to sense the monitoring, he looked up and gave a slight nod toward the camera.

"Tsk, Old Scar is still reliable. If I had a thousand Old Scars, I could conquer the entire asteroid belt."

"Stop daydreaming. If you had 10 Old Scars, they'd go conquer the world themselves~"

Lin Feng looked toward Su Wanqing,

"Officer Su, our 'star ship' blueprints haven't been shaken apart by that thing underground, have they?"

Su Wanqing didn't look up, her fingers swiftly sliding across the light screen:

"The dock structure strength has undergone redundancy calculations, sufficient to handle the maximum observed seismic magnitude. However, the 'Excavator's' activity patterns are still changing. In extreme scenarios, like instantaneous ultra-high intensity impacts, risks still exist."

"Great, can't you say something comforting?" Lin Feng picked his ear,

"Like 'Don't worry boss, absolutely no problem, if it explodes I'll take responsibility' or something."

Su Wanqing finally looked up, expressionlessly staring at him:

"My duty is to provide fact-based analysis, not emotional support. If you need comfort, go find Wu Yu. He's hoarded a batch of expired but well-packaged juice gummies recently, supposedly good for anxiety relief."

Lin Feng: "..."

He decided shouting at people on the construction site was more satisfying.

A few days later, Dr. Chen Wei finally returned from her expedition searching for rare materials.

Her small exploration vehicle was practically stuffed with various strangely shaped plant samples, mineral samples, and unidentified creature carapaces. Dust-covered but with eyes shining excitedly behind her glasses.

"Boss! Boss! Major discovery!"

She rushed into the main control room as soon as she got out, nearly knocking over Wu Yu who was inventorying supplies.

Wu Yu protectively steadied his data pad:

"Doctor! Be careful! I almost finished this inventory!"

"Ah, inventories can wait anytime!" The doctor completely ignored him, excitedly grabbing Lin Feng's arm, "I found several new radiation-resistant fungi in that corrosive canyon to the west! Their spore activity is extremely strong—might be useful for reinforcing the ship's outer coating resistance! And this!" She proudly pulled a faintly glowing blue stone from her pocket, "This energy fluctuation! Never seen before! Though we don't know its use yet, it's definitely a treasure!"

Lin Feng looked at what appeared to be a random roadside stone in her hand, his mouth twitching:

"Doctor, our current focus is repairing the ship to escape, not interstellar biology specimen collection... This stone... can it be used as fuel?"

The doctor immediately hugged the stone to her chest, looking defensive: "No! But its potential value is immeasurable! Boss, you practicalists simply don't understand the romance of scientific exploration!"

"Romance?" Lin Feng held his forehead,

"Big sister, there's a big guy underground possibly doing demolition work, and some unknown thing doing devouring work on the horizon, and you're talking to me about romance? Right now I only want romance with our ship's engines!"

Suddenly, Sun Wen spoke up, her tone somewhat strange:

"Doctor, the things you brought back... seem to have some issues."

Everyone looked at her. Sun Wen pointed at environmental monitoring data: "After you returned, the base's background radiation levels showed extremely slight increases. Though still within safe ranges, the fluctuation curve highly matches the energy fluctuation frequency of that blue stone you brought back."

The doctor froze, looked down at the stone in her arms, then at the monitoring data. Instead of being alarmed, she grew more excited:

"Autonomous radiation source? With unique fluctuation frequency? Too marvelous! This has even greater research value! If placed at different distances from humans, would the length of the third ear humans grow differ?"

Lin Feng quickly stepped back two paces:

"Stop! Hold it! Doctor, I order you to immediately, right now, take your 'treasures'—especially that stone—to the lowest level isolation lab! No research without triple-layer protection! Wu Yu, mark it down—consumed protective gear comes out of her next experiment budget!"

The doctor grumbled "miser," "doesn't understand science," but obediently went to the isolation lab carrying her treasures. Wu Yu quickly noted another entry, muttering:

"Two isolation protective suits, one dozen consumable test tubes, three liters of high-purity disinfectant..."

Lin Feng watched the doctor's retreating back and sighed:

"What kind of people have I recruited... one reincarnated hamster, one ice-faced beauty, one war maniac, one tech geek girl, and now a mad scientist... my team composition is too complicated."

Old Scar had approached unnoticed and calmly added:

"But they're all usable."

"That's true. Even misshapen melons and dates can make a plate that fills hunger."

After the brief interlude, work continued.

Five days later, the dock's keel framework was finally completed, beginning external armor plate installation.

Massive plates were hoisted and welded, producing tremendous noise. Everything seemed to be progressing well.

Until one day, Sun Wen, responsible for monitoring "Black Tooth" mining area data, looked up with a pale face.

"Brother Lin Feng... that 'Black Tooth' mine... something major has happened."

Chapter 47 Black Fang's Tragic Condition

Sun Wen's words instantly tightened the atmosphere in the control room that had just begun to ease slightly.

"What happened?"

Lin Feng immediately walked over to her and looked at the screen.

On the screen, the monitoring window representing the "Black Tooth" mining area showed data streams that had become extremely chaotic. Multiple sensor readings went crazy before dropping to zero. The last piece of audio transmitted was filled with terrified screams, massive explosions, and some kind of ear-grating, teeth-jarring sound like rocks being forcibly torn apart, followed by complete silence.

"They dug something up... or rather, disturbed something..."

Sun Wen's voice trembled slightly, "The energy readings instantly went off the charts, far exceeding any known mining accident... then... the signal cut out."

Old Scar's face darkened: "Serves them right."

He held no goodwill toward those "Black Tooth" thugs.

Su Wanqing pulled up the external environmental monitoring data:

"Approximately thirty-five kilometers northeast of the base, a violent stratum vibration was detected. The intensity was equivalent to a magnitude five earthquake, accompanied by a brief but extremely strong energy release. The spectral characteristics... partially resemble the deep space pulses and underground noises we captured earlier."

"That damn energy again..." Lin Feng rubbed his temples,

"Did 'Black Tooth' get incredibly lucky and dig straight through the gates of hell?"

Wu Yu appeared somewhat anxious:

"They... they couldn't have all... then our 'rent' is gone?"

He was more concerned about his supply chain.

Lin Feng gave him a speechless look:

"Canned Goods, your focus is... refreshingly unique. Don't worry, even if they really got wiped out, their warehouse should still be there. We'll figure out a way to 'take over' it then, might even profit more."

Wu Yu's eyes lit up, and he immediately became less anxious.

"Boss! So what do we do now?" Wrench asked,

"With such a big commotion over there, could it affect us?"

"You really have zero loyalty, huh? That was your former base, wasn't it?" Lin Feng looked conflicted.

"Not for now, the distance is still significant." Su Wanqing analyzed the data,

"The epicenter depth is relatively shallow. Although the energy release was intense, the affected area is limited. However, this incident likely altered the local geological structure, and might even have... opened some passage to deeper layers."

"Passage?" Lin Feng caught the keyword, "Leading where? The 'Excavator's' lair?"

"Can't confirm." Su Wanqing shook her head, "But the risk is extremely high. The appearance of that abnormal energy is definitely not coincidental."

Right then, Sun Wen, who was monitoring communications, suddenly made a surprised sound.

"What now?" Lin Feng was getting jumpy.

"Receiving a very weak, intermittent distress signal... source appears to be... the 'Black Tooth' mine pit?" Sun Wen worked to adjust the reception frequency, trying to make the signal clearer.

A burst of noisy, static-filled sound came from the speakers, mixed with a man's terrified, incoherent wailing.

"...gone! All gone! Monster! Black... stones came alive! Eating people! Eating..."

"...run! Run fast! Don't come back!"

"...help... someone help... anyone... below... something's coming up from below..."

The signal cut out again.

The control room fell completely silent. That desperate cry, though fuzzy, carried enough impact to clearly convey the speaker's extreme terror.

"Black... stones came alive?" Wu Yu subconsciously hugged his datapad tighter, as if it could give him security.

"Seems the 'blind box' 'Black Tooth' dug up wasn't a pleasant surprise, but a horror show, deluxe limited terror edition." Lin Feng tried to use humor to dispel the chill, but it wasn't very effective.

Old Scar tightened his grip on his gun: "Whatever that is, it doesn't seem friendly. We need to increase our alert level."

"Agreed." Su Wanqing nodded, "Recommend raising base defense to level two, increasing patrol frequency, and equipping all external personnel with heavy weapons. Simultaneously, we need to quickly assess the follow-up impact of the 'Black Tooth' mining area incident."

Lin Feng pondered for a moment before deciding:

"Old Scar, take a team, ride in the armored hover ore hauler, go take a distant look at the outskirts of the 'Black Tooth' mine pit. Remember, distant! Absolutely do not approach! Use remote sensors to scan, see what the situation is over there now, then return immediately to report."

He then looked at Sun Wen:

"Continue monitoring all channels, especially public distress channels and any backup frequencies 'Black Tooth' might use, see if there's any other information. Also, keep a close watch on our 'landlord' underground, see if it has any reaction to this explosion."

"Understood!"

Both responded simultaneously.

Old Scar moved quickly. He selected three of the most capable team members, drove the simply armored, mobile fortress-like hover ore hauler, and quietly exited the base gate, merging into the thick red fog.

The waiting time felt exceptionally long.

In the control room, no one spoke. Only the faint sounds of instrument operation and the occasional, still ongoing dull vibrations from underground could be heard.

Lin Feng couldn't sit still, pacing back and forth in front of the console. Su Wanqing focused on analyzing the real-time environmental data transmitted by Old Scar's vehicle. Sun Wen kept her eyes fixed on the sensor screen and communication bands. Wu Yu fidgeted, occasionally checking if the warehouse defense doors were locked.

Several hours passed. Finally, Old Scar's calm voice came through the communicator, with the roar of the hover vehicle's engine in the background.

"Boss, we've reached a position where we can see the mine entrance. Maintaining safe distance."

"What's the situation?"

Lin Feng asked immediately.

The screen displayed blurry footage captured by the vehicle's high-powered lens.

Where the "Black Tooth" mine pit used to be on the mountainside, there was now a huge, vicious-looking gap, as if some giant beast had taken a massive bite out of it.

The rock edges of the gap showed an unnatural, glass-like texture from melting and rapid cooling, still emitting wisps of smoke. The facilities at the mine entrance were completely gone, leaving only ruins and scattered, twisted metal wreckage.

No signs of movement could be seen around; the silence was terrifying.

"No life signals. Residual energy radiation readings are high but slowly decreasing."

Old Scar reported, "Geological sensors show the structure deep within the gap is extremely unstable, with ongoing minor collapses. Also... we detected some... strange substance residues in the peripheral areas."

The lens zoomed in, focusing on some scattered, nearly black rock fragments in the ruins, their surfaces covered with irregular holes. They looked similar to the "blind box ore" "Black Tooth" had sent before, but darker in color, and the hole edges appeared more twisted, as if... they had wriggled and expanded slightly?

"What the hell is this..." Lin Feng frowned.

"Unclear. The vehicle analyzer can't fully parse its composition, only confirms it contains large amounts of unknown elements and emits weak radiation homologous to the abnormal energy we captured before." Old Scar's voice remained steady, but his speech was slightly faster,

"Recommend no close contact. Additionally, we found some hastily fleeing footprints and vehicle tracks in the outer areas, directions scattered, so it seems a few people did escape."

"Lucky them." Lin Feng clicked his tongue, "Alright, situation understood, return immediately, be careful on the way."

"Received."

The hover vehicle turned around and began its return journey. People in the control room breathed a slight sigh of relief; at least Old Scar's team hadn't encountered direct danger.

But the devastation of the "Black Tooth" mine pit and that eerie black substance hung over everyone like an even thicker shadow.

Chapter 48: The Power of the Vortex

"It seems Leng Xingyun's warning about the 'vortex' is already showing its power," Su Wanqing said softly.

"Yeah, this 'vortex' has a nasty taste—likes to chew people up like snacks first." Lin Feng tried to lighten the mood, but no one was laughing.

He sighed and grew serious. "We have to speed up our progress. I have a feeling the time we have left might be even less than we thought."

At that moment, the Isolation Laboratory's communication request came through. Dr. Chen Wei's excited voice crackled over, completely unaffected by the tense atmosphere outside.

"Boss! Boss! Major discovery! I have preliminary analysis results on that blue stone and the black fragments! Although their energy fluctuation patterns show different manifestations, their underlying logic is highly similar!"

"And... and they seem to have a faint... resonance response to the vibrations produced by the Excavator and those deep-space pulses!"

Dr. Chen Wei's voice rose with excitement:

"They might not be ordinary minerals or fragments! They're more like... some kind of beacon! Or energy cells! They could even be... spores or egg casings of some unknown life form!"

Lin Feng listened, puzzled. "Wait, wait, wait! Doctor, slow down! What do you mean beacon, energy cell, egg casing? Speak plainly!"

"Aiya! I mean they might not be inert! They might contain information, or energy, maybe even a life form! And they're related to the anomalies underground and in space!" The doctor explained rapidly. "I need more samples! Bigger pieces! Especially those black ones! Aren't there a lot over at the Black Tooth mine? Can we—"

"No!" Lin Feng interrupted without hesitation. "Don't even think about it! That place was just blown up; radiation is off the charts and who knows what dead-or-alive things are there! You stay put in the lab and study the samples we already have! Without my orders, you are absolutely not allowed to go poking around over there! Or I'll have Wu Yu cut your power!"

On the other end, the doctor grumbled discontentedly about "scientific exploration needing risks" and "bureaucracy killing innovation."

Lin Feng couldn't be bothered and cut the comm. He told Wu Yu:

"Keep an eye on her. Give her what lab materials she needs as much as possible, but absolutely no sneaking out to die!"

Wu Yu nodded vigorously. "Understood! I already put a double password and dynamic tokens on her lab's access system—she can't crack it!"

Lin Feng: "....." He felt his team members were oddly reliable in unexpected ways.

After Old Scar's squad returned safely, the base threw itself back into intense construction and preparations. With Lin Feng constantly prodding, the Dock's progress accelerated again; the massive structural frame took shape, and internal equipment and power lines began to be installed.

The underground tremors and strange noises continued, even increasing in frequency, though fortunately their intensity hadn't changed qualitatively. The anomalous deep-space pulse signals were still occasionally picked up, like distant background static.

A few days later, one evening while most people were resting and eating, Sun Wen received another faint communication request over the public channel. The signal source was very distant and unstable, seemingly sent from some low-power portable device.

She accepted it with curiosity.

There was silence in the channel for a few seconds, then a weak, hoarse but bravely steady female voice came through.

"...This is... the Wanderer... survivors... we... we need help... food, medicine... anything..."

The voice cut in and out, mixed with interference.

Lin Feng was chewing a bland compressed brick and looked up when he heard "survivors." "Survivors? There's still other survivors in this damned place?"

Su Wanqing signaled Sun Wen to try stabilizing the signal.

"...We... we encountered... that kind of 'thing'..." the woman's voice carried barely concealed terror, "...black... like flowing shadows... it can devour everything... our ship... half of it is gone..."

"...We escaped... but many are injured... supplies are nearly gone..."

"...We detected energy activity from your side... please... any help..."

Her voice turned to tears, then she quickly held herself together, sounding remarkably resolute.

Lin Feng set the compressed brick down and wiped his mouth. He glanced at Su Wanqing and Old Scar.

Old Scar said briefly, "Could be a trap."

Su Wanqing analyzed, "The signal was relayed through intermediate hops, so it can't be precisely located, but the general direction matches the anomalous area Leng Xingyun warned about. The described situation is similar to the Black Tooth mine incident."

"What about the plea for help—does it sound real?" Lin Feng asked.

"Emotion seems genuine, logic basically coherent. But we can't rule out a carefully staged performance," Su Wanqing replied objectively.

Wu Yu murmured, "What if... what if it's true? Should we help them? We could spare some compressed bricks and medicine..."

Lin Feng rubbed his chin and didn't answer immediately. He walked to the main console and stared at the signal source that kept blinking—representing an unknown person asking for rescue.

In the apocalypse, people's hearts are treacherous. One mistake and it could mean doom. The Black Tooth lesson was right in front of them.

But...

He remembered the despair he felt when he first crashed on this planet. He remembered that without the Stardust Core, without Su Wanqing, without every member who joined afterward, he might already be a skeleton.

He looked at his companions—calm Su Wanqing, fierce Old Scar, tech-geek Sun Wen, hamster-loving Wu Yu, and that unpredictable doctor in the lab... Their personalities differed, but they had become comrades he could trust with his back.

If no one had offered help back then...

Lin Feng sighed and swore under his breath. "Damn it, I'm just too soft-hearted."

He picked up the communicator, cleared his throat, and spoke in a tone that tried to sound not easily messed with:

"Survivors of the Wanderer, listen. We are Stardust Base. We can provide limited assistance."

An immediate, constrained sound of excited breathing came through.

"But!" Lin Feng intensified his tone. "Rules go by our terms. First, tell us your exact number, casualties, and precise location. Second, we'll choose a neutral spot for the handoff; you can only send up to two people. Third, no tricks—my gun is much faster than your words."

He paused, then added, "Payment... depends on what you have. Scrap parts, strange stones, interesting stories—anything. We take junk."

The woman on the channel seemed stunned, then hurriedly replied a few seconds later, her voice full of gratitude and a hint of disbelief. "Thank you! Thank you! We... we'll follow the rules! Our location is... we're hiding in an abandoned survey station, coordinates are..."

Lin Feng motioned for Sun Wen to record the coordinates, then said, "Wait there. We'll contact you again to confirm the handoff time and place."

After ending the comm, he looked at everyone.

Old Scar said nothing, only checking the rifle in his hands.

Su Wanqing nodded slightly. "A cautious response plan. We can use this chance to learn more about external conditions."

Wu Yu had already started calculating how many supplies could be spared without affecting base operations.

"All right, back to work." Lin Feng waved his hand. "Whether they're people or monsters, they'll show themselves. We'll... act as doomsday couriers and junk collectors for now. Don't forget, we still need to build the big ship! That's the real thing that will save us! When the disaster comes, we'll park in the sky and watch these bastards eat dust!"

His tone still carried that usual mix of helplessness and optimism, but his gaze was unusually serious.

In this crisis-filled, uncertain end world, a small, trivial act of kindness might not change the big picture, but at least it could make them feel human again, not just beasts fighting to survive.

Of course, if the other side really are beasts, he wouldn't mind Old Scar teaching them what the "hospitality" at Stardust Base looks like.

Chapter 49: Treasures in the Junk Heap

The brief commotion caused by the survivors from the Wanderer quickly got swallowed by the enormous demands of the dock construction. The old ship called Star of Hope sat silently in a corner of the hangar like a giant waiting for a new coat, while the "fabric" needed to build its new home—the massive amount of standard construction materials—was about to run out.

Old Scar's transport team was running almost nonstop; the engines of the Hover Ore Haulers became the most common noise outside the base. Yet the ore they brought back and the scraps of metal pried from the Black Tooth ruins were still only a drop in the ocean for the massive dock.

The huge feed mouth of the Conversion Furnace seemed forever unfillable; even its roar had a hint of hunger to it.

"No way!! We've run out of raw materials!! What the transport team been doing?!"

"You new guys, less whining. We've dug all the nearby ruins clean. The farther sites need screening and hauling time—time!"

"You!!"

Wrench, the engineering captain, watched the increasingly barren material yard with his thick, dark brows knotted into a frown. His crew, once full of drive, now idled about waiting for materials, morale dipping. There was an invisible anxiety hanging in the air.

Wu Yu was even more frantic, like an ant on a hot pan. The curves on his data slate representing the stocks of various construction materials had almost all broken below safe levels; the steadily shrinking numbers made his heart race.

He visited the material yard several times a day, sighed heavily over the pitiful inventory, and even started calculating how long construction could continue if supplies were fully cut off—a calculation that always left him more desperate.

"Boss... boss!" One day he found Lin Feng again in the dock, pouring over blueprints with Wrench. His voice trembled as if he might cry. "It's really gone! At most two more days! Even... even the welding rods are almost out!"

Lin Feng lifted his head from the plans, but he wasn't as anxious as Wu Yu expected. He brushed dust from his hands, looked around, and his gaze finally landed on a pile in the corner of the dock that was, in all truth, a proper "junk heap"—

It was piled with twisted metal salvaged from crashed spacecraft, discarded parts collected from various ruins, equipment fragments, and some bizarre contraptions no one could name—rusted, dust-covered, like a forgotten metal graveyard.

"What's the panic for?" Lin Feng smiled lightly, his tone impossibly relaxed. "Since when has Stardust Base ever starved to death? Forgot what we built our start-up on?"

He strode toward the junk heap; his boots clattered over jagged metal. Wrench stilled for a moment, then understanding lit his round, copper-bell eyes; he grinned and hurried to catch up. Wu Yu stood there puzzled, not understanding what his boss intended.

Lin Feng stopped in front of the pile, hands on his hips like a general inspecting troops. He casually picked up a warped aluminum alloy sheet and tapped it—the sound was crisp and true.

"Brothers!" He turned to the discouraged engineering crew and called out in a booming voice, "Snap out of it! Our old trade—picking through wrecks and turning waste into treasure—did you stash that skill away with the compressed bricks? What's this here? This is a mountain of gold! A vault! Grab your tools and get to work!"

His shout left everyone stunned. The crew exchanged looks, eyeing the real junk, then their boss, wondering if they'd misheard.

"Bo—boss," a bolder young crew member stammered, "Start... start what? Aren't these things supposed to be thrown into the Conversion Furnace?"

"Thrown away?" Lin Feng widened his eyes theatrically and raised the aluminum sheet high. "Look at the thickness! The material! The shape's a bit off, but grind it smooth, cut it up—can't be a main beam? Won't they make service plates, reinforcements? And look at that!" He pointed to a half-rusted but structurally solid old machine tool base. "This beast, clean off the rust and use it as a mounting pad—how's that worse than our newly cast parts? And those pipes, valves, bearings... open your eyes and look properly! This isn't garbage. This is money. This is material!"

Wrench was the first to catch on; he rubbed his big hands excitedly. "Boss is right! How'd I forget this! Brothers! What are you waiting for? Grab your tools! Let's level this treasure mountain! Pull out anything usable!"

At the captain's command, the crew—still doubtful but obedient—immediately sprang into action. In an instant, the entire atmosphere of the dock shifted.

The dull mood was replaced by the sharp clanging of hammers, the bite of cutting torches, the heavy thud of hauling. Crew members armed with sledgehammers, pry bars, and cutting guns descended on the junk heap like gold miners.

"Hey! This steel plate's nice! Just bent. Old Wang, give me a hand—let's straighten it!"

"Look what I found! A crate of unopened old high-strength bolts! The specs are dated, but they're strong enough!"

"Someone get over here! Take apart this old engine! The crankshaft and gearbox might be salvageable!"

"Ouch! There's even a working hydraulic jack! Good find!"

Exclamations and cheers rose one after another. "Treasures" were constantly being uncovered from the pile. The previous tension and gloom evaporated, replaced by the exhilaration of discovery and creation.

Wu Yu stood there open-mouthed. He grabbed his data slate and followed the crew, noting down each newly discovered "supply" while murmuring to himself: "One scrapped flight control rudder—can be cut into a small platform after evaluation... Three meters of old high-pressure oil hose—cleaned up could serve as hydraulic line... There's even half a bucket of still-effective anti-rust paint? Note it down!"

He even found a few boxes in a corner stamped with old-era brand logos containing safety gloves and protective goggles. Though outdated in style, they were intact, and he happily ordered them moved to the warehouse for distribution.

Watching the bustling scene, Lin Feng said proudly to Su Wanqing at his side, "See that? That's living off what's around us—eating from the junk heap. Stardust Base might not boast much, but our knack for repurposing waste is top tier!"

Su Wanqing watched as a greasy drum roller taken from an abandoned industrial conveyor was cheered and carried off to be cleaned and used as the core of some conveyor platform. She nodded slightly. "This greatly eases the material strain and cuts costs. But we must ensure the safety and reliability of all reused parts."

"Relax. Wrench knows what he's doing. You do the final checks," Lin Feng said, expressing confidence both in his old comrade's skills and in Su Wanqing's rigor.

At that moment, Dr. Chen Wei had been drawn over by the commotion. She circled the junk heap and paid little attention to the ordinary metal debris, but her eyes lit up at several charred, blasted remnants of experimental equipment brought back from the Black Tooth warehouse.

"Boss... boss..." she leaned in, pointing at one blackened, twisted metal box still attached to a few broken wires. "That—that looks like part of the coil frame from a high-energy containment field! It's burned, but the material's special! Couldn't we—"

Lin Feng recognized the researcher's feverish look and cut her off immediately. "Stop! No way! These are construction supplies—priority goes to the dock! If you want to study something, once things stabilize I'll build you the best lab possible!"

The doctor wilted instantly, like a bruised eggplant, reluctantly gazing at the pile of "research junk" and muttering, "The best lab materials are always hidden in the ruins... bureaucracy..."

Lin Feng had no patience for it and turned back to his command of the "scavenging" operation.

By relying on this almost primal method of scavenging through the junk heap, the dock's material crisis was miraculously resolved.

Chapter 50 A Miracle Pieced Together

The dock construction site had completely transformed into a grand, noisy assembly feast filled with steampunk aesthetics. Rarely were there brand-new, shiny metal standard components to be seen; instead, most materials were cleaned, straightened, cut, and welded "second-hand" or even "multi-hand" items.

Wrench became the chief commander and soul of this grand operation. Though he held the precise blueprints provided by Su Wanqing, his mind contained an entire encyclopedia of "trash repurposing." His instructions were consistently concise and efficient, carrying a rugged, practical tone.

"This load-bearing column is ten centimeters short? See that mounting ring we salvaged from the old turret over there? Cut it to fit, weld it on! Grind it smooth, slap some paint on it, and who'll be able to tell the difference?"

"This pressure valve interface uses the old standard? Head to scrap pile number three! I remember there were some valve assemblies stripped from decommissioned refrigerated trucks. See if you can salvage usable adapter fittings from them!"

"This deck plate edge is a bit rough? Use that old grinding wheel to smooth it out! And be careful!"

The team members were already accustomed to this style, immediately splitting up to search for materials and performing on-site processing. Welding arcs flashed like festive fireworks, rising and falling continuously; the piercing shrieks of angle grinders cutting metal, the dull thuds of hammers striking, and the hissing of hydraulic tools working intertwined into a powerful symphony of labor.

Sometimes, just to find one suitable part, team members would rummage through several junk piles, even arguing heatedly over a special-sized screw or a still-functional bearing, only to resume work with laughter and jokes after Wrench shouted at them.

"Engineer Zhang! That titanium countersunk screw was mine first! My vibrating screen mount is waiting on it!"

"Brother Li, come on, finders keepers! My small press needs it to lock down a critical component too!"

"Enough arguing! That old printer over there yielded a whole box of assorted screws when we stripped it. Go pick through it yourselves!"

Wu Yu vigilantly guarded his "new" inventory, strictly recording every single item issued on his data tablet, down to each individual screw. Simultaneously, his eyes scanned like searchlights over the unused supplies, his mind rapidly calculating their potential new applications.

"Boss! Boss!" He came running excitedly with another discovery, "I stripped tons of high-quality coaxial cables and shielded wires from those discarded communication devices! The outer insulation is a bit aged, but the core wires are perfectly intact! We'll save a fortune on the dock's internal electrical wiring for both high and low voltage systems!"

Lin Feng patted him approvingly, "Well done, Wu Yu! You're becoming more capable as our warehouse manager every day! This is what I call utilizing every last grain!"

Buoyed by the praise, Wu Yu worked with even greater drive, practically living between the warehouse and the scrap mountains.

Even during brief breaks, the atmosphere was filled with life and dark humor. Team members gathered together, drinking the indescribably awful "Stardust Coffee" concocted from expired coffee powder and algae extracts, gnawing on energy bricks hard enough to knock someone out, while proudly showing off their daily "loot" and "craftsmanship."

"Check out this multi-directional interface I welded! Look at those ripples, that consistency—it's practically art!"

"Oh please, look at this shock absorption mount I made from scrapped springs and a few worn-out bearings! The performance is outstanding!"

"Wrench is the real master though! He actually built a small stamping press using several scrapped hydraulic cylinders and a bunch of steel pipes! Processing small parts will be so much easier now!"

Lin Feng often joined them, sharing their brick-like rations, listening to their boasts, and sometimes getting the itch to operate the equipment himself—though his amateur skills often drew good-natured teasing from the team.

Su Wanqing maintained her usual calm and rigor, but she frequently appeared at the worksite carrying various testing instruments, meticulously checking the weld quality, structural strength, and installation precision of every critical junction. Her strict standards formed the final, most crucial barrier ensuring the safety and reliability of this "patchwork" dock.

"Officer Su, about this weld..." a team member nervously presented a freshly welded component. Su Wanqing picked up the ultrasonic flaw detector for a thorough inspection, nodding after a moment:

"No internal defects, strength meets standards. Approved."

The team member immediately relaxed, a proud smile spreading across his face as if he'd received the highest honor.

Amid this fervent, slightly chaotic yet highly creative atmosphere, the dock grew at an astonishing rate. The floor was covered with metal plates of varying thicknesses and colors, all tightly joined by massive rivets and sturdy welds. The walls were fitted with an assortment of brackets, pipelines, and lighting fixtures—some brand new, others clearly showing their age—yet all performing their intended functions perfectly. Massive multi-level maintenance platforms were erected using an even wider variety of materials, yet the structures were exceptionally stable.

The most breathtaking sight was the giant gantry crane spanning the entire dock, used for hoisting large spacecraft components. Its main structure was largely repurposed from crane arms and tracks cut whole from a decommissioned industrial barge! Though its surface was covered with rust and repair scars, bearing witness to its hard life, it operated with smooth, powerful precision, becoming the dock's most eye-catching landmark.

Looking at this gradually forming dock, filled with patchwork traces yet exceptionally solid—even possessing a unique, rugged beauty—every person involved in its construction felt an indescribable sense of pride. This wasn't a product of some powerful, standardized industrial system. This was a miracle they had created with their own hands, wisdom, sweat, and sheer will to survive, fashioned from piles of ruins and scrap.

Lin Feng stood at the dock's center, gazing around at this steel jungle assembled from countless "junk pieces," his heart filled with complex emotions. This was his base, his team. Perhaps not the most advanced or glamorous, but overflowing with tenacious vitality and boundless creativity.

"Almost there," he said to Wrench beside him, satisfaction in his voice. "It's time to invite our 'Star of Hope' to see its new home. The furnishings might be a bit worn, but it's absolutely sturdy and warm!"

Chapter 51: The Grand "Housewarming" Ceremony

The main structure of the dock was officially completed. While numerous interior details still required refinement—such as installing various specialized tools, fully connecting all energy interfaces, and performing final debugging of the environmental control systems—it already possessed the basic conditions necessary to accommodate the spacecraft and conduct large-scale operations.

Next came the task of carefully, flawlessly transferring the Star of Hope spacecraft, which had been parked in the adjacent hangar, into this new home specifically built for it.

This was no easy feat. Though the Star of Hope was old and scarred, it was massive in volume and incredibly heavy.

Starting its own engines for movement posed extremely high risks. Furthermore, the limited interior space of the dock demanded extremely precise positioning, which was difficult to achieve relying solely on the spacecraft's own power.

After detailed analysis, the final transfer plan was determined:

- Use the base's most powerful heavy-duty tractor, itself cobbled together and repaired from various scrap parts, as the primary power source.
- Deploy multiple engineering mechs equipped with heavy-duty load-bearing wheels and hydraulic support arms, positioning them around key stress points on the spacecraft for coordinated propulsion and balance control.
- Simultaneously, utilize the massive "Barge-brand" gantry crane atop the dock, connected via flexible slings to dedicated lifting points on the spacecraft's front section, to provide auxiliary lifting force and precise micro-adjustment control.

These three forces had to coordinate perfectly to steadily "invite" this behemoth into its new home.

On the eve of the operation, the entire base was filled with a tense yet excited atmosphere. All personnel involved repeatedly checked the procedures, inspected every towline for wear, tested the seal of every hydraulic interface, and calibrated the output power and synchronization of every engineering mech.

On the eve of the operation, the entire base was filled with a tense yet excited atmosphere.

All personnel involved repeatedly checked the procedures, inspected every towline for wear, tested the seal of every hydraulic interface, calibrated the output power and synchronization of every engineering mech, and cleared any minor obstacles from the transfer path.

Old Scar, leading the security team, raised the perimeter alert level to maximum. Despite their concealed location, absolutely no unexpected interference could be tolerated at this critical moment.

Wu Yu nervously reviewed the energy distribution plan over and over, ensuring ample and stable power supply for the tractor and engineering mechs. Even Dr. Chen Wei was unusually quiet, not tinkering with her experiments but instead helping inspect some critical circuit interfaces, occasionally muttering to herself:

"Be careful now... those old sensors on it might be aged, but they're treasures..."

The next day, when the transfer operation officially began, the atmosphere grew extremely grave.

The heavy tractor emitted a low, powerful roar, like a giant beast awakening. Special steel cables as thick as bowls slowly tightened, emitting an unnerving creaking sound. The engineering mechs positioned around the spacecraft activated their hydraulic systems, their heavy support arms steadily bracing against key load-bearing points on the spacecraft's frame. The gantry crane above the dock lowered thick slings, precisely hooking the lifting points on the spacecraft's front section, maintaining a slight pre-tension.

"All units report status!" Lin Feng stood on a platform with a good view, his voice steady and forceful through the communicator and his faceplate.

"Tractor in position, power output normal!"

"Mech One in position, hydraulic system pressure stable!"

"Mech Two in position..."

...

"Gantry crane in position, sling tension constant!"

"Control room monitoring normal, all data points stable!"

"Perimeter security normal, no anomalies!"

A series of ready reports came through.

"Good." Lin Feng took a deep breath. "On my mark! Tractor, one percent power, slow start!"

The command given, the tractor operator carefully pushed the control lever. The low rumble intensified, the steel cables jolted with a louder groan. The massive spacecraft frame seemed to shudder slightly, and the wheels of the heavy-duty mobile chassis temporarily installed beneath it began to turn extremely slowly, almost imperceptibly.

"Mech One, synchronize output, maintain left-side balance!"

"Mech Three, match speed, brace the right rear flank!"

"Gantry crane, maintain current auxiliary lift, stand by for micro-adjustments!"

Lin Feng's commands were clear and calm, transmitted through the channel to every operator. Everyone held their breath, focusing intently on controlling their equipment, fine beads of sweat forming on their foreheads.

The spacecraft began moving toward the dock entrance, merely tens of meters away, at a pace slower than a snail. For every meter, even half a meter moved, the entire system would pause to recheck all support points and stress data, recalibrating direction and attitude.

This process was incredibly slow, tedious, yet filled with breathless tension. The giant spacecraft was like dancing on a knife's edge; any mistake could lead to catastrophic consequences.

Wu Yu clutched his datapad tightly, eyes glued to the scrolling real-time data, unconsciously muttering: "Peak traction force normal... hydraulic support pressure fluctuations within safe range... mobile chassis bearing temperature normal... ground settlement data shows no anomalies..."

Su Wanqing coordinated the overall situation from a high vantage point, her sharp eyes scanning all live feeds and data streams, ready to issue adjustment commands or handle emergencies at any moment.

Sun Wen stared intently at her sensor screen, not missing any slight anomaly in energy fluctuations or structural deformation signals.

Time passed minute by minute. When the Star of Hope's massive, scorch-marked bow slowly, precisely entered the dock's wide entrance, everyone couldn't help but clench their fists.

The most tense moment arrived. The spacecraft's widest midsection needed to pass through the door frame, with very limited clearance on either side.

"Shift left five centimeters! Gently, gently!"

"Okay! Stop!"

"Right-side mech, push out slightly to prevent scraping!"

"Gantry crane, adjust slings left two degrees!"

Lin Feng's commands became more frequent and precise. The operators, with highly concentrated minds, performed micrometer-level adjustments based on experience and feel.

Finally, just when everyone's hearts were in their throats, the spacecraft's bulkiest section slid smoothly, seamlessly into the dock without a single scrape!

"Clearance successful!" came an operator's excited voice.

But the work wasn't over. The spacecraft needed to continue moving to the predetermined support location at the dock's center.

After another long, careful half-hour of movement, the Star of Hope was finally precisely positioned on the massive central support pedestal. When the final locking clamps emitted a heavy "clunk," securely fastening the spacecraft's landing gear (temporarily repaired), the towlines and engineering mechs disengaged and detached one by one.

The enormous spacecraft was finally settled securely in its new home.

Silence lasted for a brief second.

Then!

"We did it!"

"Beautiful!"

"We made it!"

"Haha! Our big guy is finally home!"

Deafening cheers, whistles, and applause instantly erupted, filling the entire dock! Whether it was Lin Feng on the high platform, the operators and engineers below, or even the security team members, all excitedly high-fived, hugged, their faces beaming with immense accomplishment and joy! Many even had red-rimmed eyes from emotion.

Although it was just a move of a few dozen meters, this marked the dock's official operational status, and the core work of repairing the spacecraft was about to begin in full swing! This was a crucial step on the path to freedom!

Lin Feng also took off his helmet, let out a long sigh of relief, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and revealed an exceptionally bright and proud smile. He jumped down from the platform, walked to the spacecraft, and gave its cold, rough, historically marked hull a firm pat.

"Old friend, how do you like your new home?" His voice carried a laugh. "It's all patched together from old parts, but it's absolutely sturdy and reliable! From now on, right here, we'll give you a proper overhaul. We'll definitely get you flying again, take us away from this damn place!"

The spacecraft rested quietly on the giant support pedestal, bathed in the dock's bright lights, like a giant beast finally returned to its lair, resting peacefully, silently answering his promise.

In the following days, the dock interior became even busier. Tall scaffolding rose rapidly like a forest of steel, enveloping the spacecraft layer by layer. Engineering team members, wearing protective suits and carrying various tools and equipment, began an unprecedented, comprehensive, and meticulous inspection and preliminary repair work on the spacecraft.

Replacing severely rusted and damaged hull plates, detecting and repairing the dense network of piping systems, inspecting the internal frame structure... Each task was tedious and arduous, requiring great patience and superb skill. But everyone knew they were building upon their hope for survival; every tightened screw, every perfect weld, held significant meaning.

The dock was brightly lit around the clock, with sounds of hammering, welding, machine roars, and personnel commands continuing day and night.

This harbor, pieced together from countless "junk," brimming with rugged vitality, had finally welcomed its master.

Chapter 52 "Improvised" Lathe

The arrival of the Star of Hope had turned the Dock into the undisputed heart of the base. After a full inspection, a long shortage list of spare parts was soon laid out before Lin Feng. Many of the spaceship's systems were badly damaged, and the number of parts that needed replacing was staggering—among them were numerous nonstandard pieces with complex shapes and high precision requirements.

The few ordinary machine tools the base had could handle simple structural parts, but they were out of their depth when faced with such high-precision demands. Wrench stared at the diagrams on the list—parts that required turning, milling, planing, and grinding—scratching his head, clearly at a loss.

"If only we had a decent CNC machine..." he couldn't help but sigh.

Lin Feng looked over the list, then at the Star of Hope docked in the center of the Dock like a sleeping giant, and finally his gaze rested on the ship's massive engine nozzle at the rear. A bold idea flashed through his mind.

"What about our Stardust? That old heap—it's still gathering dust in the adjacent hangar, isn't it?" he suddenly asked.

The Stardust was the small, cobbled-together garbage ship they had put together earliest. Once the Star of Hope and this base came into being, Stardust was sidelined, though its basic structure remained intact.

"Yeah, boss," Wu Yu cut in. "It's been sitting there. The engine hasn't run in a long time, but regular maintenance hasn't been neglected."

"The engine..." Lin Feng tapped the shortage list thoughtfully. "Even if it's secondhand junk, it's still a proper spaceship engine. Its power and output stability should be several tiers above the motors on our base's ordinary machine tools, right?"

Su Wanqing immediately understood his intention. "You want to use Stardust's engine as a power source to drive a high-precision machining system?"

"Exactly!" Lin Feng slapped his thigh, excited. "Didn't we salvage several scrapped industrial robot arms and multi-axis mobile platforms from the ruins? Their control systems are ancient, but the leadscrews, guide rails, and servo motors on those robotic arms should be decent—if they're not broken. If we can draw out the raw, powerful output of Stardust's engine, convert it into precision drive power the robots can use, and have Sun Wen jury-rig those old control systems, can't we cobble together a kind of 'folk-method' high-precision machine tool?"

The idea was wildly imaginative—bordering on outrageous. But Stardust Base never lacked the practical spirit and hands-on skill to turn impossibilities into realities.

They set to work immediately. The plan was carried out at once.

Wrench and his team conducted a full pre-start inspection and maintenance on Stardust's engine, replacing aged seals and filters to ensure the old beast could endure extended operation.

Another team rushed to the junk-stacked corner and soon dragged out several rust-streaked, outdated multi-joint robot arms and cross-shaped mobile platforms, still bearing the markings of some long-gone automated factory.

Sun Wen's task was the heaviest. She needed to crack the control protocols of these antique robots, understand their archaic instruction sets, then write new control programs to integrate them into the base's master control system.

At the same time, she had to design a complex and stable power conversion and distribution system to tame the engine's violent, space-grade output into the delicate, precise energy required to drive these precision machines. She practically lived in the control room, surrounded by yellowing manuals and dust-covered wiring diagrams, her eyes bloodshot.

Wu Yu busied himself cataloging all usable machining supplies in inventory—metal rods and plates of various specifications, cutting tools of different materials, coolants, lubricating grease, and more. He even dug up a few ancient machining technique manuals.

A few days later, with anticipation and nervousness in everyone's eyes, everything was ready.

Stardust's long-dormant engine roared to life again with a low, powerful thunder. The surging power flowed through hastily laid, adult-arm-thick supercables into an energy distribution cabinet that looked terrifyingly complex—made up of multiple large transformers, stabilizers, and frequency converters.

A relatively well-maintained six-axis industrial robot arm was firmly mounted on a huge granite pedestal (moved intact from one of the ruins). Its control cables were connected directly to the temporary master control computer Sun Wen had built.

"Energy output stable! Frequency adjustment normal!"

"Power conversion system running smoothly, output parameters within set range!"

"Robot arm control connection established! Self-test passed!"

Sun Wen took a deep breath and hit Enter on the smooth keyboard with graceful fingers to execute the first simple test command—to make the robot arm follow a standard three-dimensional circular trajectory.

Everyone's hearts rose into their throats as they stared at the rusted-looking arm that seemed liable to fall apart at any moment.

Its joints gave a series of wrenching, unlubricated creaks, and the whole body trembled slightly, but it endured and moved steadily. The virtual point at the robot arm's tip traced an almost perfect circle in the air!

"It worked!"

"Amazing!"

"Long live Sister Sun Wen!"

After a brief silence, the place erupted into deafening cheers. Wrench slapped a teammate so hard on the back he nearly toppled over. Wu Yu pushed up his glasses and danced around with excitement.

Although this precision couldn't yet match an ordinary modern CNC machine, for a near-zero starting point like Stardust Base, this was undeniably a milestone breakthrough.

"Quick! Try machining a real part!" Lin Feng urged, more excited than anyone.

Sun Wen loaded a relatively simple 3D part model—a common cooling-pipe flange from the Star of Hope's engine peripheral systems.

The robot arm started again, automatically swapping to a sharp alloy cutting tool, while a pneumatic chuck precisely clamped a stainless-steel blank. The start button was pressed.

A harsh ring of metal cutting filled the Dock. Silver-gray swarf flew in all directions; coolant was precisely sprayed onto the cutting point. The robot's movements were stiff and slow compared to modern machine tools, not as smooth or graceful, but astonishingly stable and accurate—each motion strictly following its programmed commands.

Everyone held their breath as if watching a sacred rite.

Minutes later, the cutting stopped. The robot arm retracted. A flange part, still warm and smelling of metal and coolant, lay quietly on the workbench. It bore turning marks and was slightly rough, but its shape was standard and its dimensions matched the drawings exactly!

Wrench took an arrow-step forward, grabbed the still-hot part, produced a vernier caliper and a micrometer to measure it carefully, and examined the surface against the light.

Chapter 53 Unknown Signals

"No problem! Completely meets standards! Just needs a bit of polishing and it's ready to use!"

Wrench looked up, his face blooming with a smile as he announced in a booming voice.

Another round of enthusiastic cheers erupted!

With this "homemade CNC machine," many non-standard parts and high-precision components that were previously impossible to manufacture—forcing them to rely on finding replacements or risky substitutes—now held the promise of self-sufficiency!

Although its processing speed was slow and there was still room for improvement in precision, it at least solved the fundamental problem of going from nothing to something!

The dock gained another new sound, full of rhythm and power—

The distinctive whine of high-precision cutting.

It intertwined with the other sounds of hammering, welding, and the roar of crane operations—the engine of hope was already roaring.

"I really miss Moon Nation's lily juice! Iced!!"

Sun Wen was feeling rather bored, vigorously sucking on the straw of her oil-water drink. She had to spend all day adjusting the parameters of the monitoring equipment, the chaotic radio signals on the screen surging like noisy tidal waves. Finding a specific, weak signal from a survivor outpost was no different from searching for a needle in a haystack.

Time passed in the monotony of the search, and the atmosphere in the main control room grew somewhat heavy.

"Hang in there a bit longer. Once we reach Mars, you can drink as much as you want!"

Lin Feng walked over, glanced at the 3D structural diagram of the "Star of Hope" on the screen, but the red-marked shortage areas stood out like glaring wounds.

Now the tremors coming from underground seemed to be growing more frequent, that low, deep rumbling feeling like it was pounding against everyone's hearts. The anomalous encoded signal Sun Wen had discovered earlier had briefly appeared a few more times, but it remained unbreakable, seeming more like background noise that reminded them of the immense unknown lurking beneath their feet.

Just as Lin Feng was nearly ready to give up on solving their current predicament through external trade and was instead considering riskier underground exploration plans, Sun Wen suddenly put down her water cup and let out a soft exclamation:

"Wait! This signal... it's a bit different!"

She quickly operated the controls, isolating a relatively clear signal she had just captured. Unlike the previous noisy, intermittent distress calls or broadcasts, this signal, though weak, was stable and continuous, and its modulation method seemed more... regular?

"It's not a public broadcast, and it's not a distress signal either," Sun Wen analyzed carefully. "It seems more like... directional communication? Not high power, but very stable. Source... northwest direction, very far away."

"The content?" Lin Feng immediately came over.

"Attempting to decode it now... it's using a very old plaintext communication protocol, mixed with some custom encrypted fields..." Sun Wen's fingers danced rapidly across the control panel. "The plaintext part repeating is... 'Obsidian, calling scheduled channel, requesting status update'?"

"Obsidian?" Lin Feng frowned. He had never heard that name before. Another ship? Another base? Or some kind of codename?

"Can you pinpoint the signal source more precisely?"

"Attempting triangulation now... it will take time," Sun Wen replied. "The signal penetration is strong, but the source transmission power seems limited. Probably not a large outpost."

Just then, the team member responsible for monitoring the base's external sensors reported a situation: a vibration sensor set five kilometers southeast of the base had been triggered. Pattern analysis indicated vibration characteristics consistent with a medium-sized vehicle passing by, but it quickly disappeared again without approaching the base.

"Someone's active near us?" Lin Feng's heart tightened. Friend or foe? Passing by coincidence, or had they discovered something?

"Should we raise the alert level?" Old Scar asked over the communicator.

"Don't reveal ourselves proactively for now," Lin Feng pondered. "Strengthen perimeter patrols and monitoring. Sun Wen, prioritize deciphering the encrypted fields in that signal. I want to know what this 'Obsidian' really is."

This sudden, mysterious "Obsidian" signal added a new variable to an already complex situation. It could be a new opportunity, or it could be an unknown threat.

A few days later, Sun Wen brought some progress. The encrypted field was extremely difficult to crack, but she discovered that this signal repeated at fixed intervals, as if stubbornly calling out for something, yet never receiving any response.

Meanwhile, around the base perimeter, several more anomalous vehicle vibration signals were detected, all at relatively distant ranges, moving mysteriously, seeming to just linger and scout without attempting to approach.

This feeling of being watched from the shadows was extremely uncomfortable. The pressure inside the base was mounting.

The carbon-titanium composite material was about to run out, and the pump bearing problem remained unsolved. Wrench regretfully reported discovering two more locations that required reinforcement with the same type of material, bringing the repair work to a true standstill.

"We can't wait any longer," Lin Feng made the decision at the next core meeting. "We have to take the initiative. This 'Obsidian' is our only lead right now. Old Scar, prepare an elite squad, bring necessary equipment and trade goods. We're going to check out the signal source direction."

"The risks are significant," Su Wanqing reminded. "Whether they are friend or foe is completely unknown, and the journey is long."

"I know," Lin Feng nodded,

"But sitting here trapped leads only to a dead end. Wu Yu, prepare the trade goods we can offer: concentrated energy bars, basic medical kits, and... pick a few small items from those relics of the old era that look somewhat valuable. Old Scar, personnel selection must be elite, vehicle inspection thorough. This trip out might take us very far."

After the meeting concluded, the base began preparations for this expedition. The atmosphere was grave and tense. No one knew what this journey would bring—whether they would find the urgently needed supplies and allies, or step into another deadly trap.

Chapter 54: The Difficult Choice

On the eve of the expedition team's planned departure, abnormal activity came from underground once again.

This time, it wasn't the continuous low hum, but a violent, brief tremor, as if something enormous had struck the rock layer deep underground with tremendous force, causing even the base lights to flicker!

After the tremor subsided, that eerie low-frequency encoded signal suddenly intensified several times over, lasting a full ten minutes before weakening again.

Sun Wen was astonished to discover that after this signal amplification, she successfully captured a repeating pattern within a small segment of the encrypted content. After emergency decryption, it seemed to point to a coordinate... a coordinate located in the northwest direction, roughly overlapping with the area they were trying to reach for the "Obsidian" signal source!

Could the underground anomalies actually be connected to the external mysterious signals?

This discovery strengthened Lin Feng's determination to venture out and investigate. Whatever lay ahead, they had to confront it.

The expedition team's member list was quickly finalized. Lin Feng naturally took the lead.

"I'll lead the team personally! Old Scar, you're with me. Pick four of our most elite security team members—ones with precise marksmanship and stable psychological composure! Also, Wu Yu, you select two engineering team members responsible for accompanying us to appraise supplies and handle equipment repairs; and Dr.'s assistant, A Liang, you're coming too! Bring that portable testing equipment set."

Wu Yu busied himself preparing supplies.

He carefully packed the selected trade items: high-energy compressed rations, purified water, antibiotics and painkillers, along with several items recovered from the ruins that appeared quite technologically advanced but whose functions remained unknown—

A sealed metal cylinder, a crystalline plate emitting a faint glow, and the core of an unknown device with an intricate structure.

He hoped these items would pique the other party's interest.

The vehicle chosen was the heavily modified heavy armored reconnaissance vehicle, the "Pioneer."

Although its fuel consumption was staggering, it boasted thick armor, excellent off-road capability, ample cargo space, and was equipped with powerful communication equipment and a remote-controlled heavy machine gun. Old Scar personally led the final pre-departure inspection of the vehicle, ensuring every component was in optimal condition.

The atmosphere in the base grew somewhat oppressive. Every expedition outside meant risk, especially this one with its unclear objectives and distant destination. Su Wanqing silently checked the seals on Lin Feng's protective suit and handed him a first aid kit: "Be careful out there. The base... can't afford to lose you."

Lin Feng nodded, giving her hand a firm squeeze: "I'm counting on you to hold down the fort here. Wait for our return."

The moment of departure finally arrived. The heavy blast door slowly opened, revealing the eternally unchoking, deep crimson mist outside. The "Pioneer" emitted a low roar, like a steel behemoth about to charge into an unknown abyss, gradually moving out from the base's shelter.

Everyone's hearts tightened as the blast door closed behind them. This expedition carried the base's final hopes. The road ahead was long, and its outcome uncertain.

The moment the "Pioneer" left the base perimeter, it was swallowed by the boundless red mist. Visibility plummeted to less than fifty meters. Old Scar drove with extreme caution, relying on the vehicle's terrain radar and inertial navigation system to navigate the shattered landscape.

Outside was a dead, silent world. Beyond the never-ceasing wind and the vehicle's engine roar, almost no other sounds could be heard. The earth was corroded and riddled with holes. Twisted metal wreckage and collapsed building ruins lay scattered like the skeletons of giant beasts, silently narrating past disasters.

Following the general direction provided by Sun Wen, they headed towards the northwestern mountainous region. The journey proved more arduous than anticipated. Many roads were completely destroyed, forcing them to detour frequently. Sometimes, the engineering team members even had to disembark to clear obstacles temporarily or construct simple passages using the tools they carried.

"This damned place looks like it's been plowed over again and again," a team member cursed under his breath, gazing at the hellish scenery outside the window.

En route, they encountered several small-scale attacks from mutated creatures. A type of extremely fast arthropod monster with a hard carapace, and some strange fungal plants capable of spraying corrosive liquid. They managed to handle these threats using the vehicle's firepower and the team's accurate shooting, though not without some tense moments and significant ammunition expenditure.

More unsettling was their rediscovery of those mysterious vehicle traces—faint tire marks, and the remnants of a campfire at an abandoned campsite, the ashes still warm. Clearly, someone had passed through here not long ago, seemingly heading in the same direction.

"Friend or foe?" Old Scar asked, his expression grave.

"Stay alert, try to avoid them if possible," Lin Feng ordered. Until they understood the other party's background, unnecessary conflicts were best avoided.

After a day and night of arduous travel, they finally neared the coordinate area provided by Sun Wen. This was a region of even more rugged mountainous terrain, where the red mist seemed denser. According to the map, there should have been a small scientific research outpost here before the war.

They slowed their pace, searching carefully. Finally, in a concealed mountain hollow, they discovered traces of artificial structures—a section of concrete wall half-destroyed by explosions, and an entrance sealed by a heavy alloy door.

Faded markings on the door could barely be made out: "Vanguard Resources - Observation Station 7."

"Is this the place?" Lin Feng looked at the severely deformed door, which seemed to have been violently breached, a sense of foreboding rising within him.

Old Scar led a team forward to inspect it. "The door was forcibly breached from the outside. The marks are fresh, made with high-energy cutting equipment. There's... movement inside." He tilted his head, listening intently, his face changing slightly.

The team members immediately grew tense, quickly seeking cover and aiming their weapons at the entrance.

Chapter 55 The Lost Outpost

Lin Feng spoke quietly through the communicator: "A Liang, send a micro-detector inside to take a look."

A Liang operated a palm-sized tracked detector that silently slipped through the door crack. The transmitted footage made everyone gasp sharply.

Behind the door was a small lobby in complete disarray, covered everywhere with signs of fighting and explosions. Several corpses wearing tattered protective suits lay on the ground, having died long ago. What was even more horrifying was that several figures were slowly wandering around in the lobby!

They were no longer human. Their bodies showed an unnatural grayish-white color, their skin seeming to be covered with a waxy layer, their eyes hollow and vacant, their movements stiff and twisted. They appeared to have no reaction to the detector, just wandering aimlessly.

"What... what the hell are those things?" one team member asked, his voice trembling.

"They seem... infected by something..." A Liang swallowed with difficulty.

Just then, one of the "infected" seemed to smell something, suddenly turned its head, its hollow eyes "looking" toward the detector's direction, then let out a hoarse, unpleasant howl and pounced over violently! The other infected were also alerted, all howling as they charged!

The footage shook violently, then turned into static.

"Retreat! Get back to the vehicle now!" Lin Feng made an immediate decision.

However, it was already too late. The dilapidated door was violently smashed open from the inside, and over a dozen "infected" of various forms charged out roaring! Their speed was far faster than they appeared, and their strength was astonishing!

"Open fire!"

Fierce gunfire instantly shattered the dead silence of the mountainous area.

Bullets accurately shot toward the charging infected, making dull thudding sounds as they hit their bodies, and they could even see bullets being slowed down or deflected by that waxy skin! They seemed to feel no pain at all; unless shot in the head or having limbs broken, they would only slow down slightly before continuing to charge madly!

"Aim for the head! Shoot their heads!" Old Scar roared, his rifle spitting fire as he blew the head off an infected charging at the front.

The team members steadied themselves, concentrating their fire. Although these infected had strange defenses, their movement patterns were direct and lacked tactics. Under concentrated fire, seven or eight were quickly gunned down.

But their numbers seemed greater than that. More infected poured out from the broken door, even from other crevices on the hillside! Some of these infected had even more bizarre forms - some with arms mutated into huge bone blades, others capable of spitting disgusting, corrosive mucus!

"No good! There are too many of them! We're surrounded!" one team member shouted as his arm was grazed by corrosive mucus, his protective suit immediately emitting white smoke.

"Get in the vehicle! Now! Use the vehicle-mounted machine gun!" Lin Feng commanded retreat while shooting.

The team members fought while retreating, struggling to get closer to the "Pioneer." The vehicle-mounted heavy machine gun roared to life, 12.7mm bullets sweeping toward the infected horde like a metal storm, instantly tearing them apart in groups! The powerful firepower temporarily suppressed their assault.

Seizing this opportunity, all team members quickly boarded the vehicle. Old Scar slammed the accelerator, and the heavy armored vehicle crashed through two infected pouncing on them, charging back the way they came.

Behind them, those infected still relentlessly pursued, emitting blood-curdling howls, until the vehicle drove far away, gradually shaking them off.

Dead silence filled the vehicle, broken only by the team members' heavy panting. Everyone's face showed shaken expressions. What they had just witnessed was too bizarre, too terrifying.

"Just now... what were those things?" A Liang's voice was still trembling.

"Don't know..." Lin Feng's expression was grim, "But something extremely terrible definitely happened at that outpost. The 'Obsidian' signal source points here... could they have been..."

He didn't dare continue the thought. If that terrible infection spread... the consequences would be unthinkable.

Their first active external exploration had encountered such bizarre and horrifying enemies, and they had gained nothing. The supplies urgently needed by the base were still unavailable, while new mysteries and fears had been added. Negative emotions began spreading through the squad.

The "Pioneer" drove aimlessly through the red mist, as if lost in this desperate wasteland. Where should they go next?

The "Pioneer" moved slowly through the desolate red mist, the atmosphere inside as oppressive as the weather outside. Suffering a crushing defeat on their first outing, losing precious ammunition, and almost suffering casualties dealt a massive blow to morale. That outpost filled with bizarre infected entities haunted everyone like a nightmare.

Looking out the window at the monotonous and hopeless scenery, Lin Feng felt full of frustration and anxiety. Time was passing minute by minute, yet there was no clue about solving the base's supply crisis. Would they really have to return empty-handed?

Just as he was about to order the return journey, A Liang, who was responsible for monitoring communications, suddenly looked up with a confused expression: "Boss, I'm picking up a very weak... commercial advertisement signal?"

"Commercial advertisement?" Everyone was stunned. In this post-apocalyptic wasteland, such a thing still existed?

A Liang fed the signal into the vehicle's speakers. A slightly hoarse but enthusiastic middle-aged male voice came through, with some kind of upbeat music seemingly in the background, though severely distorted:

"...Don't miss out when you're passing by! 'Old Man Wei's Variety Store,' honest business, fair to all! All kinds of scarce supplies, if you can imagine it, I can get it! Weapons and ammunition, medicine and food, parts and tools... even pre-war goodies! Fair prices, bartering supported! Current location: Old River Valley Market Ruins, coordinates to follow! Limited stay, buy now while supplies last!"

Everyone looked at each other in disbelief. The signal repeated, and sure enough, it included a set of simple coordinate information that wasn't too far from their current position.

Chapter 56 Vivi's General Store in the Old Valley

"Old River Valley Market... I know that place."

Old Scar looked at the map and said, "It was a large logistics center before the war, later became ruins. Wanderer merchants do occasionally gather there for trade, but it's a complete mix of good and bad people, extremely chaotic."

"Old Man Wei's Variety Store?" Lin Feng pondered. It sounded like a wanderer merchant. Although the risks were great, this might currently be their only opportunity to contact the outside world and conduct trade.

"Let's go take a look." Lin Feng finally decided. "Maintain highest alert. Old Scar, plan the route, try to avoid open areas as much as possible."

The vehicle turned again, heading toward the coordinates. This time, they were even more cautious, stopping the vehicle far away and sending scouts ahead to investigate.

The so-called "Old River Valley Market" was actually just a huge, partially cleared ruin of a square.

Scattered across the square were some shabby tents and sheds, with various survivors who clearly didn't look like good people gathering here for private transactions. The air was filled with various strange smells and a tense atmosphere.

And in one corner of the square, sure enough, parked there was an outrageously exaggerated vehicle—

A heavy truck modified into a motorhome resembling a mobile fortress, with antennas mounted on the roof, and the vehicle body graffiti-painted with bright paint spelling "Old Man Wei's Variety Store" in large characters, along with various product patterns.

A slightly overweight man wearing jungle camouflage and a flashy leather jacket stood by a simple stall next to the vehicle. The goggles on his head were pressing so tightly that the fat on his forehead was trembling, and he was enthusiastically pitching something to a few onlooking survivors while spraying saliva.

It seemed this was the "Old Man Wei."

Lin Feng had most team members stay in the vehicle on alert, taking only Old Scar and Wu Yu with him. Wearing hoods to cover their faces, they cautiously approached the stall.

As they got closer, they could hear the merchant calling himself "Old Man Wei" boasting:

"...Look at this quality! Genuine pre-war military compressed rations, with a long shelf life! And these antibiotics, truly life-saving stuff! Just three standard energy batteries, or equivalent rare metals, and all this is yours!"

His stall indeed displayed many items, from food and medicine to tools and parts, even some trinkets that looked like jewelry or artworks—quite an assortment.

Lin Feng's gaze swept over the stall, and his heart stirred slightly. He spotted several types of bearings. Although he wasn't sure if the specific model they needed was among them, he at least saw hope.

Old Man Wei also noticed these new faces. A glint of shrewdness flashed in his small eyes as he put on an enthusiastic smile: "Yo! New customers! Welcome, welcome! Judging by your distinguished bearing, you must be from a major base, right? What do you need? I, Li Wei, may not have much else, but I've got complete stock!"

Lin Feng didn't respond, just signaled Wu Yu to step forward. Wu Yu took out the pre-prepared note listing the required material models and quantities, handed it over, while quietly reciting part of the item list they were willing to use for trade.

Li Wei took the note, glanced at it just once, and his smile faded slightly, revealing a trace of difficulty:

"Oh dear... Carbon-titanium composite material? GX-7 high-precision bearings? These are both hot commodities... Especially in times like these, hard to come by, very hard to come by..."

He rubbed his hands together, but his eyes kept scrutinizing Lin Feng and his two companions, as if assessing their value and origins.

"Do you have them or not?" Lin Feng asked succinctly.

"Have them... of course I have them!" Li Wei immediately smiled again, lowering his voice, "But... the price... won't be cheap. You understand, acquiring these goods involves great risks..."

He quoted an outrageously high price that would almost clean out all the high-value trade items they had brought.

Wu Yu gasped sharply and was about to argue when Lin Feng stopped him with a look.

Lin Feng knew that in such places, showing wealth or urgency would only mark them as fat sheep to be slaughtered. He also lowered his voice, speaking calmly:

"At this price, I might as well check elsewhere. I heard 'Obsidian' has been active nearby recently—perhaps they're more sincere?"

He deliberately dropped the name "Obsidian" to test the reaction.

Sure enough, upon hearing "Obsidian," Li Wei's expression changed slightly. Though he quickly covered it up, a barely noticeable trace of vigilance and... disgust? flashed in his eyes.

"Obsidian?" He forced a dry laugh, "Hehe, customer, you jest... Those guys are elusive, dealing in life-or-death business, nothing like an honest merchant like me... If you could find them, you probably wouldn't need to come to my little stall, right?"

His words clearly conveyed information: he knew about "Obsidian," and seemed quite wary of them, even hostile.

Lin Feng's mind raced. This Li Wei didn't seem to be just a simple wanderer merchant as he appeared on the surface.

"Alright, since Old Man Wei has difficulties, we'll look around elsewhere." Lin Feng made as if to leave.

"Hey hey hey! Don't rush, customer!" Li Wei quickly stopped him, piling on smiles again,

"The price is negotiable, negotiable! But... the items you brought might not show enough sincerity... If, you could do me an additional small favor, I might have a channel that could get you the bearings you need, and even... more good stuff."

His small eyes sparkled with cunning, as if spotting new prey.

"What favor?" Lin Feng asked impassively, his guard rising.

Li Wei looked around, leaned closer—bringing a stifling smell of dust mixed with tobacco—and lowered his voice further:

"Actually, it's nothing major. Just a few days ago, one of my small transport teams went missing near that abandoned 'Vanguard Resources' outpost to the northwest. That vehicle was carrying a very important batch of my 'goods'." His tone was subtle when he said "goods."

Lin Feng's heart shook—that eerie outpost again!

Li Wei didn't seem to notice Lin Feng's subtle reaction and continued:

"That place is a bit sinister, my people don't dare go too deep. I see you folks are well-equipped and look capable, must have some skills."

"If you could go check that area for me, find my missing transport team, or at least figure out what happened, and bring back that batch of 'goods'... Then, not only could I give you the bearings you need at a low price, I might even throw in some 'information' that might interest you."

He dangled the bait, but also laid out the enormous risks. That outpost full of infected was someplace Lin Feng absolutely didn't want to approach a second time.

This Li Wei didn't seem to know the specific situation inside the outpost, or was he deliberately hiding it? What was his real purpose? Just to recover some goods?

Lin Feng didn't agree immediately, nor did he refuse, simply saying: "We need to consider this."

"Of course!"

Li Wei smiled like a fox, "I'll be active around here for a few days. Once you've decided, you can come find me anytime. But be quick, good stuff doesn't wait."

Leaving Li Wei's stall and returning to the vehicle, Lin Feng explained the situation to everyone.

"We can't go!"

Old Scar immediately objected, "That damned place is too dangerous! It's not worth risking our lives for a few bearings!"

"But..." Wu Yu hesitated, "Without the bearings, the cooling system could fail completely at any time, and then the Fusion Core will overheat..."

"That Li Wei definitely has ulterior motives!" Old Scar's subordinates, generally as silent as their leader, couldn't hold back now. One team member, Anvil, stepped forward,

"He's clearly trying to use us as pawns!"

Lin Feng remained silent. He knew Old Scar and the others were right—the risks were extremely high. But the "information" Li Wei mentioned made him somewhat curious, and this seemed to be the only way to quickly obtain bearings right now.

Should they take the risk, or abandon this opportunity and seek other methods? The trade items they brought were clearly insufficient to directly exchange for the urgently needed supplies.

A difficult choice once again lay before Lin Feng.

Chapter 57: Die now or die in a few days?

Returning to the rock fissure where the "Pioneer" was hidden, a heavy silence pressed down, making it hard to breathe. Li Wei's tempting yet high-risk trade proposal lingered like a ghost in the narrow vehicle compartment, tormenting everyone's nerves.

Old Scar's subordinates, Anvil and Monkey, had remained silent the entire journey, barely holding back, but now that they were "home," they could no longer contain themselves.

Anvil suddenly slammed his fist against the reinforced interior wall of the compartment, producing a dull thud that shattered the suffocating silence.

"Boss, this is a fucking blatant trap! That fat guy surnamed Li, his eyes were darting around shiftily, clearly full of malicious schemes from the get-go! What bullshit about a missing convoy? It's probably dirty goods lost in some shady deal gone wrong! He wants us to be his free cleanup crew at that hellgate? Pah!"

His voice was hoarse with anger and lingering fear, the terrifying experience just outside the outpost still vivid in his mind.

After he finished speaking, a few suppressed murmurs of agreement sounded within the vehicle.

Fear spread like a plague in the enclosed space. Everyone still remembered those unkillable monsters, that bizarre tall mutant, and the pervasive scent of death in the air. No one wanted to set foot on that cursed land again.

Old Scar remained silent, his bronze face appearing particularly stern and unyielding under the dim emergency lighting.

He simply took out his maintenance tools and began wiping his old rifle over and over again, each movement precise and forceful, the metal components emitting soft clicking sounds.

His silence itself conveyed a strong attitude—avoid risks, survival first.

Wu Yu pushed up his slipping glasses, his lips trembling slightly as he spoke in a faint voice that pierced through the pervasive fear bubble like a needle:

"But... but what about the GX-7 bearing? The abnormal noise from the cooling pump is getting more and more obvious... Without it, once the secondary cycle of the Fusion Core stalls and heat builds up... the consequences... the base can't withstand that. We'll all die anyway then!"

As the person in charge of supplies, he understood better than anyone that the fate of an entire base hung on that tiny bearing.

"The energy bars and medicine we brought... aren't even worth a glance to a big merchant like that, we can't trade for industrial goods of that level..."

The icy shackles of reality felt far more oppressive than vague fear. Hope seemed to lie only on the perilous, thorny path Li Wei had pointed out.

Lin Feng leaned against the cold bulkhead, eyes closed, unconsciously pinching the space between his eyebrows hard with his thumb and forefinger. He shared his team members' fear; the hellish scenes were equally seared into his memory. But heavier burdens rested on his shoulders—

The very survival of the entire "Stardust Base."

In the regular messages from Su Wanqing, the frequency and intensity of the underground anomalies were increasing. That rhythmic, low-frequency encoding felt like an unending countdown, hammering at his nerves. Time, the most luxurious resource in this post-apocalyptic world, was slipping away rapidly.

"A Liang," he suddenly spoke, his voice raspy with fatigue,

"Any progress on analyzing the environmental samples and that bit of tissue fragment collected at the outpost entrance?" He needed any piece of information to break this desperate deadlock.

A Liang immediately leaned over the portable analyzer, the screen's light reflecting on his young but tense face. This was his best chance to surpass his teacher, Chen Wei.

"The environmental samples confirm the presence of high concentrations of unknown organic compounds, with exceptionally complex structures, exhibiting weak biological activity and atypical radiation signatures. No matches found in the database. The infected tissue sample is even more... more bizarre,"

He swallowed, "The cellular structure is completely broken down and altered, thoroughly permeated and reorganized by a substance that... simultaneously exhibits characteristics of biological mycelium and metallic crystal structures... Unable to determine the exact route of infection; aerosol, contact, bodily fluids, even... energy radiation are all possibilities." Each piece of data challenged his understanding of biology.

Just then, Xiao Wang, responsible for monitoring external signals and sensors, suddenly looked up and urgently reported:

"Boss! Picked up a new encrypted signal, very brief, source extremely distant, modulation method extremely advanced, definitely not any commonly used band by known factions! Content unbreakable, but... about thirty seconds after this signal appeared, that persistent mysterious vehicle vibration signal showed up again ten kilometers east! Flashed once and disappeared, direction seems to have shifted slightly!"

"Another unknown signal? This damned asteroid belt, why so many signals!!!"

Lin Feng's eyes snapped open. The complexity of the situation far exceeded expectations.

The cunning merchant Li Wei, the mysterious "Obsidian," the terrifying infected at the outpost, the shadowy mysterious stalker, and the incessant whispers from underground... Was there an invisible thread connecting these scattered fragments?

Venturing deep into the outpost was undoubtedly a near-suicidal risk. But perhaps this wasn't just the only way to obtain the life-saving bearing; it might also be the only chance to actively tear through the fog, seek the truth, and even discover the enemy's weaknesses.

Passively waiting and avoiding would only allow danger to grow unchecked on the bed of the unknown, eventually devouring everything in a more terrifying form.

The outline of a plan gradually took shape and solidified in his mind.

"We are not going inside."

His voice wasn't loud, but it carried undeniable resolve, instantly silencing all the low discussions. All eyes focused on him.

"Old Scar," he looked at the most experienced veteran, "You take Anvil and Monkey, secure that commanding height on the flank, establish a remote sniper and observation post, provide fire support and early warning. Cover the entire outpost entrance area."

"A Liang, bring all your sensor equipment, remote sampling kits. Big Ox, you're responsible for protecting A Liang and the technical gear." He pointed out the steadiest member of the engineering team.

"Knife and I will form the forward reconnaissance team." Knife was skilled in infiltration and scouting. "Our mission isn't assault, isn't entry. It's to advance to the closest safe distance to the outpost periphery under absolute concealment."

His gaze swept over each tense face:

"Mission objectives: One, deploy miniature vibration sensors and high-magnification remote monitoring probes at key peripheral nodes. I want to see the activity patterns and the types and numbers of monsters inside clearly."

"Two, use remote methods as much as possible to collect richer external environmental samples. Three, look for any possible clues regarding Li Wei's 'convoy.'

"Collect information, assess risks, then decide the next step. If any uncontrollable situation is detected, retreat immediately according to the predetermined plan. But we can't do nothing out of fear and just watch our home fall into despair."

Clear commands and defined steps acted like a shot of adrenaline, slightly dispersing the confusion and fear in the team members' hearts. No one objected further; since the direction was set, they would proceed.

Everyone immediately sprang into action, silently and efficiently preparing various equipment: button-sized vibration sensors, wireless cameras disguised as rock fragments, long retractable sampling arms, and sample containment boxes of various specifications.

Nightfall seeped across the sky like thick ink, slowly dyeing the blood-red haze into an eerie dark purple. Visibility became extremely poor, every step filled with the unknown.

"Move out!"

Several figures, like panthers merging with the night, used the terrain and ruins for cover, silently slipping once more towards that ominous valley that exuded a sinister aura.

Chapter 58 Peeking into Hell!

The outpost area shrouded in night and red mist had deathly silence as its only melody.

The shrieking wind passing through twisted metal and rocky holes sounded like countless lost souls wailing endlessly in the darkness. The strange odor mixing decaying organic matter with pungent chemical reagents seemed to congeal in the low temperatures, becoming even more nauseating.

Lin Feng and the scout codenamed "Knife" lay prone behind a collapsed concrete wall foundation, their bodies pressed tightly against the cold, rough ground, almost merging with the shadows. Less than a hundred meters ahead of them was that black entrance resembling a torn wound.

Even from this distance, a chilling dread originating from primal life instincts continuously emanated from that place.

In the green view provided by their low-light night vision goggles, dismembered limbs of infected creatures killed during the day lay scattered near the entrance, the fragmented scene resembling some nightmarish abstract painting.

"Begin deployment. Maintain absolute silence." Lin Feng's voice came through the bone conduction earpiece, so faint it was almost like a whisper.

From a concealed position further back, A Liang, under Big Ox's protection, carefully operated an extremely quiet micro quadcopter drone.

Several surveillance probes the size of buttons hung beneath the drone, which deftly avoided obstacles while silently attaching the probes to exposed steel bars high up and crevices in rock walls. The lenses rotated soundlessly, aiming at the entrance below, ventilation shafts, and other potential movement areas.

On the other flank, Old Scar and Anvil had already secured an advantageous sniper position. Their high-powered scopes functioned like silent eyes, firmly locked on the area, providing invisible cover for their companions ahead.

The entire process was agonizingly slow, each second feeling infinitely stretched. Every sound of rolling gravel, every slightly heavy breath made hearts leap into throats. Sweat trickled down temples, leaving cold trails on skin.

Just as the final probe was about to be secured, A Liang's arm operating the drone suddenly stiffened, the screen image shaking slightly.

"..." He made no sound, instead rapidly tapping his microphone twice—the prearranged warning signal.

Lin Feng and Knife immediately adjusted their night vision to maximum magnification, staring intently at the entrance. Within that thick darkness, several stiff, twisted figures emerged once again, staggering out. Their movements were sluggish yet possessed an eerie regularity, pacing back and forth near the entrance like tireless puppets guarding this cursed territory. They seemed completely unaware of the newly deployed "little eyes" outside.

Suddenly, a strange, hoarse howl resembling rusty metal being sawed echoed dully from deep within the structure. The infected creatures pacing at the entrance froze abruptly as if receiving an irresistible command, then uniformly and stiffly turned around, step by step retreating back into the bottomless darkness!

Immediately after, heavy, dragging footsteps that sounded like some massive object scraping against the ground approached from the depths, each step making hearts tremble in response. An abnormally large, terrifying figure whose silhouette almost filled the entire doorframe slowly emerged from the darkness!

It was nearly twice as bulky as ordinary infected, hunched over, covered in thick, rough dark growth tissue resembling a mixture of coarse rock and twisted metal, reflecting greasy light in the low-light view. One of its arms was extremely mutated, swollen and deformed, ending in a massive, twisted, and intimidating bony hammer-like structure!

It paused at the entrance, its head almost retracted into thick shoulder blades slowly turning. Empty eye sockets like two bottomless black holes scanned the dead silent world outside. Even from over a hundred meters away, that oppressive feeling mixing brutality and deathly stillness felt tangible as it washed over them!

"..." Knife silently gasped, his knuckles turning white as he gripped his weapon.

The massive mutant remained at the entrance for a full minute, emitting several dull guttural sounds that seemed to come from deep underground, before slowly turning and disappearing back into the darkness accompanied by heavy footsteps.

Only after a long time, when the footsteps had completely faded, did the three lurking outside dare to slowly exhale the breath they'd been holding, feeling as if they'd just been pulled from icy water, their inner clothes already soaked with cold sweat.

"All monitoring nodes... deployment complete." A Liang's voice came through the earpiece, carrying a slight tremble of someone who'd narrowly escaped death.

"Execute sampling procedure. Be quick, we don't have much time." Lin Feng ordered, his voice still maintaining composure.

A Liang operated the nearly three-meter-long mechanical sampling arm like a cautious mine detector, carefully avoiding the area directly in front of the entrance, meticulously scraping soil and residue samples from the ground at the entrance's edge and walls stained with unknown substances, sealing them one by one into

specially designed negative pressure isolation containers.

Just as sampling was about to conclude and the team prepared to withdraw, Knife, responsible for perimeter security, suddenly nudged Lin Feng with his elbow, pointing toward a pile of collapsed metal framework and construction debris at the one o'clock direction.

"Boss, look over there... the traces don't seem right."

The two silently moved over, carefully examining the area with their night vision gear. Knife brushed away surface dust and debris, revealing several clear, partially buried tire tracks underneath! Judging from the trajectory and depth, it appeared vehicles had attempted to approach the outpost not long ago, but seemed to have encountered some obstruction or fright, performing hasty reversing and turning maneuvers that left these chaotic, struggling marks.

"Li Wei's convoy? They actually came here?" Lin Feng felt a chill. This at least proved that cunning merchant hadn't completely lied about this matter, but it also demonstrated the danger of this place—even a well-equipped team like Li Wei's could only flee in panic.

"And this..." Knife, sharp-eyed, dug out a small half-buried object from gravel beside the tire tracks. He wiped away the dirt, revealing a stainless steel identification tag, its edges already deformed, surface bearing several deep scratches and long-dried, blackened sticky bloodstains. The tag had "Bedrock Security" vaguely etched on it along with a personal number.

"Bedrock?!" Lin Feng's pupils slightly contracted. Wasn't that the refuge seeking trade through public broadcasts? How would their affiliated security personnel appear in this distant, deadly ghost place? And how did this intersect with Li Wei's claimed "missing convoy" incident? What did this bloodstained tag indicate?

The clues were like scattered puzzle pieces, seemingly adding fragments but making the overall picture more perplexing and dangerous.

Carrying the deployed monitoring network, collected valuable environmental samples, and this weighty identification tag stained with mystery and blood, the reconnaissance team silently withdrew to the prearranged rendezvous point under cover of night and mist.

Eyes and ears had been quietly placed in hell's corridor. What followed would be patient, agonizing waiting—waiting to see if the information transmitted by those monitoring devices could unveil the terrifying veil of this death outpost, and whether it might bring them a thread of hope amidst despair.

Chapter 59 Who is calling us?!

In the temporary rock fissure hideout, time crawled by with agonizing slowness amid anxious waiting.

The remote receiver's screen glowed, divided into several frames that transmitted real-time surveillance footage from the outpost's perimeter. Most of the time, the images remained static, with only wind-blown dust and occasional distorted shadows passing by the lenses proving the area's deathly silence wasn't absolute.

But the data streams recorded by sensors revealed turbulent undercurrents beneath the surface calm:

Frequent yet irregular internal vibrations, as if something kept digging or moving;

Intermittent energy spikes from unknown sources;

And that spine-chilling, metal-scraping-like strange howl that always sounded at fixed intervals, like hell's bell commanding those zombie-like infected to conduct incomprehensible "activities."

"They... seem to actually have some kind of... shift rotation system?"

Anvil stared at a recording segment where two infected passed each other at an intersection with nearly mechanical precision, exchanging no communication yet perfectly taking over each other's patrol routes.

"Doesn't resemble simple instinct... more like executing some preset commands, or... being directed by something." Old Scar's voice came through the communicator, he still maintained vigilance at the high point, his tone grave.

A Liang remained completely focused on analyzing the collected samples and that blood-stained identification tag.

"The unknown organic compounds in environmental samples show high homology with the aberrant substances on infected tissue. This substance... it possesses activity and powerful environmental modification capabilities, slowly 'digesting' and 'assimilating' everything in that area!"

His voice carried both the excitement of a scientific worker discovering the unknown, and profound fear,

"As for this ID tag, DNA analysis of the bloodstains indicates the owner died approximately 48 to 72 hours ago. Most crucially... trace amounts of that aberrant compound were detected in the blood sample too! Very low concentration, but definitely present!"

This news sent a bone-chilling cold through everyone.

Not only had Panshan Shelter's security personnel recently died in that terrible place, but they'd likely suffered some degree of infection or contamination before death! What exactly was hidden behind that "Bedrock" that sounded so orderly through the broadcasts?

Why did their people appear here? What connection did this have with Li Wei's "goods"?

Li Wei's image grew even more ambiguous and dangerous in their minds. He'd absolutely concealed critical information—his purpose was far from simply retrieving cargo.

Just as they tried unraveling this tangled mess, Xiao Wang's report once again shattered the temporary silence:

"That advanced encrypted signal appeared for the third time! Duration extended by half a second, we successfully captured more data fragments, attempting deep decryption now."

"Simultaneously, we detected the mysterious vehicle's signal from the east again! Active for about three minutes, movement trajectory analysis shows... it's heading toward the general direction of the Panshan Shelter broadcast signal source!"

Another arrow pointing toward "Bedrock"!

Lin Feng felt the fog before his eyes seemed to thin slightly, yet it revealed deeper, vaster shadows beneath. The abandoned outpost, terrifying infection, cunning Li Wei, mysterious "Obsidian," ghostly observers, and now the highly suspicious "Panshan Shelter"...

These clues were involuntarily converging toward "Bedrock" as the focal point.

Perhaps the answers lay not with Li Wei, nor within the outpost's monster hordes, but inside that "Bedrock" issuing transaction invitations via radio waves.

Continuing to deal with Li Wei carried extreme risks and potential exploitation.

Heading directly to "Bedrock," though the journey was distant and circumstances unknown, might be key to unraveling all mysteries, and possibly... other opportunities for assistance might exist there.

"Initiate contact with Li Wei." Lin Feng made the decision. He needed one final probe, and to seize some initiative for the upcoming actions.

The communication connected quickly, Li Wei's slick voice sounding again: "Well, guests? Have you reached a decision? Did you find the place isn't so terrifying after all? I told you, with your capabilities..."

Lin Feng directly cut him off, his tone flat and unreadable:

"Mr. Li, preliminary perimeter reconnaissance is complete. The area's danger level far exceeds expectations. Direct entry for search is not feasible—we cannot accept this plan. Given our cooperation foundation, can you provide more specific information? Such as the exact nature of your convoy's cargo? The precise coordinates where you lost contact? This would help us assess whether alternative feasible approaches exist."

Silence lingered for several seconds on the other end, followed by Li Wei's dry laughter:

"Hehehe... Your caution is truly admirable, guest. As for what the cargo specifically is... that involves trade secrets, really inconvenient to disclose. Regarding the final location... probably near the main structure? The signal cut off suddenly, I'm not entirely certain either." His evasiveness and concealment were barely disguised, even carrying a hint of mockery.

"In that case," Lin Feng's voice turned cold, "the transaction is terminated. We'll seek other methods."

"Hey! Don't be hasty, guest!" Li Wei quickly interjected, though his tone lacked genuine persuasion, "The price is negotiable! Or... would you be interested in intelligence about the 'Obsidian'? I know one of their frequent stopover points, there might be what you need there..."

He tried dangling new, truth-indistinguishable bait again.

"Unnecessary. Good luck, Mr. Li." Lin Feng gave him no further opportunity, directly cutting off communication, severing ties with this dangerous merchant completely.

Silence filled the vehicle cabin. Li Wei's reaction thoroughly confirmed his untrustworthiness.

"Prepare to move out." Lin Feng's gaze swept over each team member, his tone resolute, "We're leaving here. Objective changed—proceed to 'Panshan Shelter.' The real answers we need might be there, and it's currently our only worthwhile gamble for hope."

The engine rumbled deeply once more, driving the heavy armored vehicle as it slowly emerged from the hiding spot, plunging decisively into the thicker, more unknown crimson mist depths, heading toward the broadcast coordinates, toward the vortex's center.

Unbeknownst to them, shortly after their departure, a concealed surveillance probe in the deathly silent outpost ruins captured a brief scene:

A figure wearing completely different-style protective gear, moving with leopard-like swiftness, quietly appeared at the ruins' edge, carefully inspected one of the sensors Lin Feng's team had deployed, then vanished swiftly like a phantom back into the darkness. Another pair of eyes had been watching everything all along.

Chapter 60: Unexpected Windfall!

The Pioneer trekked through the seemingly endless crimson mist, heading toward the coordinates broadcast by Bedrock Shelter.

The atmosphere inside the vehicle had shifted from the previous tension to a more resigned relaxation.

"Honestly, if you ask me, that Li Wei is just a big talker who's all bark and no bite," Anvil said, propping his feet on an equipment case while chewing on a flavorless nutrient bar. "With his 'Old Man Wei's Variety Store, we have everything' spiel—if he really had that capability, would he be stuck in that shabby market haggling with us? He'd be driving his luxury RV around the world like he owned the place."

Wu Yu was carefully polishing the few "trade items" they had brought, particularly the metal cylinder and shimmering crystal panel, without looking up. "We can't be so dismissive. What if he actually has some connections? Right now, we need to grab at any lifeline we can find."

"Old Scar, how much further?" Lin Feng asked, gazing at the monotonous scenery outside. Although this trip had temporarily freed them from the suffocating feeling of being watched by underground monsters at the base, the uncertainty of what lay ahead still lingered.

"At this cursed weather's pace, at least another half day," Old Scar replied steadily, maneuvering the steering wheel to avoid a sudden crack in the ground. "Let's hope this 'Bedrock' isn't another trap like Li Wei."

Just then, A Liang, who was monitoring the equipment, suddenly made a surprised sound.

"What is it? Another signal?" Lin Feng became alert.

"No... it's our vehicle's own radiation and environmental index monitoring," A Liang pointed at the screen. "Look, the closer we get to the Bedrock direction, the environmental radiation levels and those unknown organic compound residue indices are actually slowly decreasing? They're still over the limit, but better than the areas we passed earlier."

This was an unexpected discovery. Did Bedrock Shelter actually possess some kind of environmental purification capability? Or had they chosen a relatively better location?

This small discovery sparked a faint glimmer of hope in everyone's hearts. Perhaps this trip wouldn't be in vain.

After traveling a bit further, the vehicle's radar alarm sounded again, but this time it wasn't detecting life signals—instead, it detected large-scale energy residue and structural damage traces ahead.

"Stay alert!" Old Scar immediately slowed down.

The vehicle gradually approached ruins located at a valley entrance. This place had clearly experienced intense combat.

The originally mountain-backed defensive fortifications were blown to pieces, and an extremely thick alloy gate appeared to have been torn apart by some tremendous force, twisted and leaning to one side. The ground was littered with broken equipment parts and charred shell casings, with faint traces of gunpowder and ozone lingering in the air.

"Damn... this Bedrock's gate... looks like it was forcibly pried open?" Anvil clicked his tongue through the observation window, staring at the devastating scene. "What kind of firepower would it take to do something like this?"

Old Scar parked the vehicle behind a relatively concealed large boulder and sent two team members to scout ahead. After a few minutes, the team members reported: "The entrance area is secure, no active personnel or... infected detected. The fighting must have ended recently—it's completely silent inside."

The team members quickly disembarked, forming a tactical formation as they cautiously passed through the damaged gate into Bedrock's interior.

The front hall was equally chaotic, with most of the lighting system disabled. Only a few emergency lights flickered weakly. Several personnel wearing Bedrock Security uniforms lay behind cover positions, apparently stunned or knocked unconscious without obvious external injuries.

More notably, the hall also contained several completely destroyed infected remains. They appeared to have been instantly melted through by extremely high-temperature energy weapons, dead beyond any doubt.

"Professionals did this," Old Scar said gravely while examining the infected's wounds. "Clean and efficient, one-hit kills. They were very familiar with this place's layout—went straight for the main objective."

"Main objective?"

Lin Feng followed Old Scar's gaze toward the end of the hall, where another alloy gate requiring high-level clearance—marked "Central Storage Vault"—now stood slightly ajar, revealing a dark passageway inside.

Someone had gotten here first!

And their purpose was clear—they came specifically for this core storage! Not only were they highly capable, they also seemed thoroughly familiar with Bedrock's internal situation.

"Who could it be? The Obsidian? Or that 'Night Owl'?" Wu Yu speculated quietly.

"No time to worry about that now!" Lin Feng made a quick decision. "Old Scar, take some men to guard the exit and perimeter! Everyone else, follow me into the storage vault! Move quickly! Whatever's left inside will be valuable to us!"

The team quickly entered the storage vault. The interior space was massive, containing dozens of tall shelving units. As expected, many shelves had been emptied, with discarded common supplies and packaging boxes scattered on the floor. Clearly, the previous intruders had specific targets, taking only what they needed most.

"Quick! Spread out and search! Focus on finding any special metals and bearings!" Lin Feng ordered.

The team members immediately dispersed, rapidly searching through the enormous storage vault.

"Boss! Over here!" Soon, Wu Yu's excited voice came from one corner. "Carbon-titanium composite panels! Quite a few of them! Exactly the specifications we need!"

"Over here too! A case of sealed bearings! Check the model... GX-7! That's it! It's really them!"

Another team member also cheered.

Although the quantity couldn't compare to the vault's prime condition, these remaining high-quality materials and precision bearings were like timely rain after a long drought for Stardust Base! Enough to solve their urgent needs!

A heavy weight lifted from Lin Feng's heart. With these, the core obstacles to the spaceship's repair would be cleared! This risky trip was worth it!

While directing the team to quickly load the vehicle, Lin Feng also surveyed the massive storage vault himself.

In a relatively remote corner, he discovered a distinctive storage unit. Unlike the open shelving, this was an independently powered, dark gray alloy-cast vertical cylinder that looked incredibly sturdy. Its surface bore no markings except for a very peculiar interface that seemed composed of countless tiny light points.

This interface... Lin Feng found it strangely familiar. He immediately retrieved from his backpack the metal cylinder obtained from the Wanderer survivors—the one whose purpose he hadn't been able to determine.

Comparing the two, whether in size, shape, or the unique energy patterns, they matched perfectly!

Could it be...

Lin Feng took a deep breath and carefully aligned the metal cylinder's broken end with the interface, slowly bringing them closer.

When they were sufficiently near, the cylinder seemed to activate, its previously dull patterns instantly flowing with soft blue light, generating a faint magnetic pull!

A light click sound.

Perfect fit! The metal cylinder seamlessly inserted into the interface!

The next moment, gentle mechanical operation sounds came from inside the cylindrical storage unit, and the previously seamless door slowly slid upward, revealing the interior space.

No dazzling treasure glow, no astonishing energy outburst.

The chamber's inner layer seemed to be made of special energy-damping material, quietly securing a basketball-sized, incredibly complex and sophisticated polyhedral device that appeared in a profound dark gold color throughout.

Its surface was smooth as a mirror, yet seemed to contain galaxies within, with countless light paths finer than hair strands flickering and flowing inside, emitting a gentle yet vast energy fluctuation that inspired awe.

[Detecting high-purity Stardust energy core... Model identification: Guardian-VI... Status: Dormant (low-power operation)... Permission verification in progress...]

[Detecting bearer's genetic imprint partially matches 'Stardust' legacy... Meets minimum permission standards... Temporary access permission granted...]

The cold system prompt sounded directly in Lin Feng's mind once again!

Stardust energy core?! Guardian-VI model?!

Although he didn't fully understand what level of treasure this was, just the name "Stardust energy core" and the system's unprecedented formal notification made Lin Feng realize he had stumbled upon a truly massive windfall!

This was absolutely a strategic-level treasure far surpassing those bearings and panels!

The previous intruders had clearly attempted to open this storage unit but apparently failed. They might have possessed powerful firepower and intelligence, but they didn't have this unique "key"!

Immense joy surged through Lin Feng, but he quickly forced himself to calm down. This wasn't the place to linger!

"Quick! Pack up all the supplies we can find, especially this core, carefully! Load the vehicle immediately! We're pulling out!" he commanded in a low, urgent voice.

The team members also recognized the extraordinary nature of this dark gold polyhedron, moving more quickly and carefully. Specially designed shock-absorbing protective cases were brought to carefully secure the Guardian-VI core.

While they were busy loading the vehicle, A Liang seemed to have discovered something in an inconspicuous control console corner of the storage vault. He attempted to connect to the backup power, and after a few flickers, the screen actually lit up, displaying some remaining internal logs and surveillance fragments.

The log contents were shocking: it turned out that Bedrock Shelter's leadership had long been influenced by some unknown mind control technology, secretly conducting dangerous bioweapon research and transactions. The "goods" Li Wei traded were actually their failed products.

The outpost disaster occurred precisely because of a serious experimental accident that caused their cargo packaging to fail!

And the ones who just attacked here—the logs only showed a vague codename—"Night Owl." Records indicated that Night Owl's target also seemed to be this core storage vault, and they successfully took away some items, but clearly their most important target—this key-required storage unit—remained beyond their reach.

"Well now, we're the mantis stalking the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind!" Anvil remarked while carrying a case.

"Stop joking around! Hurry up and move! If that Night Owl circles back, we'll be in trouble!" Lin Feng urged.

Soon, the Pioneer's trunk and cabin spaces were packed full. The team members, carrying both the joy of their harvest and a thread of tension, quickly drove away from this troubled place.

This expedition truly embodied the coexistence of risk and opportunity, ultimately resulting in astonishing success! Not only had they resolved the pressing material crisis, but they had also unexpectedly obtained what appeared to be an extremely powerful "Stardust energy core"!

The journey back suddenly seemed much brighter.

Chapter 61: An Interlude on the Return Journey

The "Pioneer" returned fully loaded, traveling on the road back, and the atmosphere inside the vehicle had become much more lively. Although they remained vigilant, the team members couldn't suppress the excitement on their faces.

"Hahaha! Let's see what Old Wrench has to say now! We not only got the bearings but also so much high-grade stuff!"

"What's the origin of that dark golden treasure? It looks extraordinary just by its appearance!"

"With our luck, should we have bought lottery tickets? Oh wait, there are no lotteries these days..."

"It must be the boss's immense good fortune! Following the boss means we get to eat meat!"

Lin Feng was also in an excellent mood, occasionally glancing through the isolation window at the "Guardian-VI" core that was securely fastened. Even in its dormant state, it still emitted a reassuring energy aura.

"A Liang, can you detect the approximate energy level of this core?" Lin Feng asked.

A Liang operated the instrument and shook his head:

"The detection waves are completely blocked; the readings are blank. But just the naturally emitted residual energy waves have lowered the radiation levels inside our vehicle by several points, and the operational stability of all equipment has improved. This... this is practically like a miniature star..."

Right at that moment, Xiao Wang, who was responsible for monitoring the situation behind the vehicle, suddenly reported: "Boss! Unidentified high-speed aircraft detected approaching from the rear! Closing in fast! Extremely high speed!"

Everyone tensed up instantly, the cheerful laughter and chatter cutting off abruptly.

Old Scar immediately checked the rearview radar, only to see a tiny light spot approaching from the sky behind at an astonishing speed! "It's not a ground vehicle! It's an aircraft! Model unidentifiable!"

"Is it 'Night Owl'? Have they caught up?" Anvil grabbed his weapon.

"All hands, alert! Prepare for impact!" Lin Feng ordered, his heart leaping into his throat. Facing an aerial unit, their armored vehicle was like a clumsy iron box.

However, the high-speed aircraft did not launch an attack. It rapidly closed the distance to visual range, allowing everyone to see that it was a small, sleek aircraft with a matte finish and an unseen model type.

It nimbly flew to the side-front of the "Pioneer," maintaining matching speed, then the cockpit canopy became slightly transparent, and the pilot inside made a clear gesture towards them—

Not an attack posture, but rather a... gesture urging them to speed up and move forward?

Immediately after, the aircraft abruptly applied thrust, its engines spewing dark blue exhaust flames, instantly overtaking them and disappearing into the red mist ahead.

"What's going on?" Everyone was bewildered. This mysterious aircraft didn't seem hostile; instead, it seemed to be... warning them about something?

The mysterious aircraft's warning gesture and sudden acceleration away made everyone inside the "Pioneer" instantly tense up. Old Scar, almost relying on intuition forged from years on the battlefield, slammed on the brakes!

Almost simultaneously, less than a hundred meters ahead of the vehicle, the solid ground arched upward and tore apart like fragile eggshell!

Amidst the deafening roar, a terrifying giant head, far larger than imagined, covered in dark rock and cold metal, and studded with ferocious drill teeth, erupted from the ground with a force capable of crushing everything, standing imposingly and completely blocking the road ahead! Its scale was far more massive and oppressive than any they had previously monitored!

It was the "Excavator"! It seemed to have calculated their return route and launched a deadly interception here!

Despair instantly gripped everyone's throats! Faced with this absolute power, their armored vehicle was as insignificant as a toy!

"Reverse! Reverse now!" Anvil roared hoarsely.

Old Scar reacted swiftly, yanking the control lever hard. The heavy armored vehicle screeched as its tires scraped, attempting to retreat rapidly.

But it was already too late! The enormous drill bit, carrying a suffocating pressure wave, was already crashing down!

At this critical moment, inside the vehicle's rear compartment, the "Guardian-VI" core, securely placed in its special shock-absorbing box, seemed to be completely activated by the destructive energy and malice outside!

BZZZ—!!!

A brilliant yet not dazzling azure blue light pillar suddenly shot out from the seams of the box, instantly expanding to form a perfect spherical energy shield that completely enveloped the entire "Pioneer"! The shield's surface shimmered with flowing colors, countless intricate, dense energy runes that seemed to contain ultimate truths flickered like breathing, emitting an indestructible, majestic aura!

BOOM!!!

The terrifying drill bit capable of tearing apart mountains slammed fiercely onto the seemingly thin blue shield!

The anticipated vehicle destruction and deaths did not occur! The massive impact force was completely absorbed by the shield, only stirring huge, wave-like energy ripples that violently spread outward! The vehicle shook violently like a sampan in a storm, tossing everyone inside, but the vehicle's structure remained completely intact!

"It... it held?!" Wu Yu, clutching the equipment case, felt his eyes nearly pop out, his voice distorted by extreme shock.

But this was only the beginning!

The core seemed thoroughly enraged by this violent attack. The shield's glow surged again, and the core itself even rose, suspended and visible to everyone through the vehicle's roof material!

It spun rapidly, the countless dark golden fine light paths inside surging, calculating, and reorganizing at an unprecedented speed! Immediately after, a much more condensed, blazing blue beam, seemingly compressed from countless tiny stars, shot out from the top of the core!

But this beam, powerful enough to tear space, was not aimed at the terrifying drill bit right in front of them. Instead, it traced a bizarre arc, precisely striking a seemingly empty, relatively fragile rock wall to the side and rear!

An eerily breathtaking scene unfolded!

The space where the beam hit instantly became distorted and blurred, as if a heavy curtain was being forcibly torn apart by an invisible giant hand! A violently unstable spatial rift, constantly rotating and flickering with dark blue electric arcs and chaotic starlight inside, was forcibly opened!

On the other side of the rift appeared the familiar, reassuring mountain scenery of the base's outskirts! It was at least several dozen kilometers from their actual location!

"A sp... spatial portal?! Right to our doorstep?!"

A Liang screamed in disbelief; this completely overturned his understanding of physics!

"Stop fucking standing there! Old Scar! Drive in! Now!"

Lin Feng was the first to snap out of his extreme shock, using all his strength to point at the fluctuating spatial rift that seemed on the verge of collapse at any moment, roaring hoarsely!

"The accelerator is already floored!!"

Old Scar, truly a veteran with rich experience, forcefully suppressed the storm of shock in his heart and practically stomped the accelerator into the engine bay! The "Pioneer" roared tremendously, its tires frantically digging into the ground, charging like a startled steel beast straight into that unnatural dark blue passage!

The very second the vehicle completely disappeared into the passage, the massive spatial rift fluctuated violently once, as if exhausting its last bit of strength, and suddenly collapsed and vanished, as if it had never existed.

The massive "Excavator" drill bit seemed to have completely lost its target, pausing mid-air in confusion. Its simple mind (if it had one) couldn't comprehend why the prey had suddenly vanished.

It emitted a dull, angry roar, then slowly, reluctantly retracted back into the deep underground, leaving only a giant, steaming crater and devastation everywhere.

The "Pioneer" jolted violently, as if plummeting from a cloud at high speed, then landed heavily, yet safely, on the familiar gravel clearing not far from the base's main gate.

Dead silence filled the vehicle.

Chapter 62 Home Carnival

The engine was still roaring, dashboard lights flickering, outside the window were the familiar contours of the base mountain and the eternally lingering red mist.

Everything felt like some bizarre, fantastical dream.

But the gradually fading light and returning calm of the "Guardian-VI" core in the vehicle's rear compartment, along with everyone's wildly pounding hearts and cold sweat, silently declared that the heart-stopping events just experienced were utterly real.

The immense relief of surviving a disaster and the ecstatic joy of obtaining power akin to divine artifacts instantly overwhelmed everyone like a volcanic eruption!

"Incredible!!!!!!"

Anvil was the first to react, slamming a fist against the compartment wall with a deafening roar, his face flushed red with excitement!

"Holy shit! Holy shit! Holy shit! We survived! It was that core! It saved us!" Wu Yu shouted incoherently, almost lunging to hug the case.

"Spatial teleportation... it really was spatial teleportation... this technology... this energy..."

A Liang was still muttering to himself, lost in academic shock.

Even the usually steady Old Scar couldn't help but exhale deeply, his hands trembling slightly on the steering wheel, the corners of his mouth lifting uncontrollably.

Lin Feng leaned back in his seat, feeling the thumping impact of his heartbeat, a complex smile mixing lingering fear, excitement, and overwhelming relief spreading across his face.

This welcoming gift from the "Guardian-VI" core was just too damn thrilling and powerful!

Not only did it come with an invincible shield, but it could casually open teleportation gates straight to their doorstep?!

This wasn't an energy core—this was a divine artifact! A cheat code! A goddamn savior!

"Hurry! Call the gate! Let's go home!" Lin Feng shouted with a laugh, his voice hoarse with excitement.

This narrow escape from certain death had not only netted them precious supplies but had truly shown them the astonishing power of the "Stardust legacy"! The path forward suddenly seemed much broader and brighter!

The "Pioneer" drove through the base gates fully loaded with supplies and legendary tales, instantly igniting the entire "Stardust Base"!

When Lin Feng announced they had not only brought back the urgently needed GX-7 bearings and large quantities of carbon-titanium composite material, but had also unexpectedly obtained a Stardust energy core named "Guardian-VI," and described in detail how it had displayed its mighty power—withstanding the "Excavator's" impact and opening a spatial teleportation gate to instantly return the convoy—the entire base erupted into unprecedented excitement!

"Really?! Spatial teleportation? Old Scar, is the boss exaggerating?" Some team members pulled Old Scar aside, unable to believe it.

Old Scar rarely showed a smile, nodding heavily:

"Absolutely true! If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it either!"

Wrench's hands trembled with excitement when he saw the case of high-precision bearings he had dreamed of, almost actually kissing them as Anvil had teased. Wu Yu circled the core placed on its special platform, muttering incessantly:

"Treasure! Such an incredible treasure! We've hit the jackpot!"

Doctor Chen Wei had the most intense reaction, practically throwing herself at the core platform, the light in her eyes brighter than the core itself, various testing instruments instantly in place:

"Steady-state energy field, self-sustaining! Local space curvature anomalies! This energy utilization efficiency... it completely defies the mass-energy equation! Boss! Let me study it! Just a tiny energy sample! I promise to use only 1 picoliter unit! I won't damage it!"

Lin Feng quickly stopped her, both amused and exasperated: "Doctor! Calm down! This thing just tore through space—it's energy level is immeasurable! Your picoliter sample might be more powerful than a nuclear bomb! Until we fully understand it, no one is allowed to mess with it!"

Beside them, Su Wanqing maintained her composure, quickly pulling up all data streams from the base's energy system after the core's integration, a rare look of amazement appearing on her face:

"Energy output power has increased by four hundred seventy-three percent, and it's extremely stable, with fluctuation rates below zero point zero zero zero one percent. All equipment operating efficiency has significantly improved, even lighting system brightness has increased by thirty percent. And this is just the basic energy support it's providing."

She looked at Lin Feng, a trace of excitement in her tone:

"According to data feedback, there seems to be a highly intelligent management system inside the core. It's currently only granted us access to the most basic energy supply and some passive defense permissions. Deeper functions might require higher authorization or specific command sequences to activate."

"Higher authorization?"

Lin Feng recalled the previous prompt, "Seems like we need to find a way to upgrade this 'temporary authorization' to permanent status."

"Even so, the current energy supply is enough to launch plans we previously couldn't imagine."

Su Wanqing pulled up blueprints, "I recommend immediately beginning comprehensive upgrades to the base energy system. First, switch the fusion core to backup status and fully transition main power lines to the 'Guardian-VI'."

"Second, use the surplus energy to prioritize defense system upgrades: including expanding energy shield coverage, comprehensively increasing power and firing rates of peripheral auto-turrets, and installing more powerful electronic countermeasure equipment. Finally, we can consider restarting some high-energy-consumption research or production projects."

"Approved! Execute immediately!"

Lin Feng waved his hand grandly, "Old Scar, coordinate fully with Officer Su on defense upgrades. Wrench, ensure absolute safety during the energy transition, verify step by step. Wu Yu, recalculate inventory—see which previously shelved plans can be put back on the agenda!"

The entire base operated with unprecedented enthusiasm and efficiency, as if wound with the strongest spring.

Powerful energy surged like roaring blood into every corner of the base, bringing vigorous vitality.

Lights grew brighter, equipment ran more smoothly, even the air circulation system seemed to become fresher.

Chapter 63 Where would consumption come from if there were no waste?

In the days following the stable operation of the "Guardian-VI" core, Stardust Base seemed to have been infused with a new soul.

The constant sense of urgency born from energy shortages and meticulous calculations that had previously lingered in the air was gone, replaced by an atmosphere of abundance and vibrant energy.

The most visible change was in the lighting. Before, the base's lights always carried a dim, yellowish hue and felt strained, especially in non-core areas where conservation was prioritized whenever possible.

Now, all corridors, workshops, and living quarters were illuminated as bright as day, with even, stable light that even carried a pleasantly warm tone. Shadows in the corners were completely banished, as if even people's moods had brightened along with it.

The noise from equipment operation had also decreased by more than one level.

Previously, various motors, pumps, and ventilation systems always carried different degrees of noise and friction sounds. Now these sounds had become deep and steady, as if every machine had received the most meticulous maintenance and was operating in peak condition.

That "makeshift CNC machine" powered by the Stardust's engine had undergone a complete transformation, operating with almost only smooth cutting sounds. The precision of the parts it produced made Wrench repeatedly measure them with a micrometer, muttering incessantly:

"This is bizarre... this precision is almost approaching pre-war precision engineering grade..."

But the real main event was still in the dock.

The massive frame of the Star of Hope was surrounded by even denser scaffolding and work platforms, but this time, it was no longer a barely-supporting structure, but a symbol of efficient operation.

The abundant, nearly luxurious energy supply allowed all large equipment to operate at full power without any concerns.

"Sector one hull welding complete! Proceeding with non-destructive testing!"

"Report! Hydraulic line three pressure test passed, no leaks!"

"Engine auxiliary power unit debugging complete, output stable!"

The confident reports from engineering team members echoed one after another through the open communication channel, reverberating within the dock.

Processes that previously required careful energy consumption calculations could now operate continuously; systems that needed repeated debugging due to unstable power now started successfully on the first attempt.

More importantly, Su Wanqing had successfully decrypted and imported the complete spacecraft technical manual.

At this moment, on the main control room's light screen, the complete three-dimensional model of the Star of Hope was slowly rotating. Every component, every pipeline, every interface was clearly visible, annotated with detailed data and operational points.

Wrench practically lived in the main control room all day, his eyes shining as he compared the light screen with the physical blueprints in his hands.

"So there's a hidden stress relief groove here... no wonder it always felt a bit awkward before..."

"The installation torque for this valve needs to be precise to 0.5 Newton meters... the manual even provides the specific tool model!"

He was like a martial artist who had obtained a peerless martial arts manual, absorbing knowledge voraciously and then quickly applying it to practical work. The repair work transformed from previous "exploratory repairs" to "following the manual," with efficiency and accuracy improving by more than an order of magnitude.

Lin Feng stood on the high observation platform in the dock, looking down at the bustling scene below. Huge new composite armor plates were being precisely positioned by the gantry crane, gleaming with the cold luster unique to metal.

The engineering team members moved like busy worker ants, shuttling orderly through the spacecraft's framework. Low rumbles of engine testing occasionally came from the engine area, each time causing the hull to vibrate slightly, as if a giant beast was awakening.

"At this rate, at most two more months, and the main structure will be completely repaired, with internal systems keeping pace simultaneously."

Su Wanqing's voice sounded beside him. She was holding a data pad displaying a detailed progress schedule.

"Excellent."

A smile appeared on Lin Feng's face, his heart filled with emotion. From a pile of scrap to its current preliminary form, this had condensed too much effort and hope from too many people. "How about the living quarters?"

"Wu Yu is organizing personnel to upgrade the hydroponic farm and air circulation systems. With sufficient energy, both production output and air quality can be significantly improved. Doctor... um, the Doctor is still polishing her high-energy laboratory proposal. I've already restrained her as you requested, having her first help optimize the defense system's energy distribution algorithm."

Su Wanqing reported, her tone also carrying a hint of relaxation.

Life inside the base had indeed improved.

"I actually saw fresh leafy greens?!"

"Haha, yes, Boss! I actually have a team under me now. Xiao Wang and Xiao Lin are doing well in the monitoring room, so I've had some free time to learn simple crop cultivation techniques from the Doctor. So, I managed to grow some lettuce and bok choy!"

Little Ears stood with her hands on her hips, waiting for everyone's praise.

"Really wonderful, thank you, Little Ears!"

Su Wanqing had missed vegetables for too long, immediately hugging Little Ears and rubbing cheeks affectionately.

Although the variety of vegetables was still very limited, it was enough to pleasantly surprise the team members.

That old audiovisual system in the recreation room had actually been successfully tinkered with by the Doctor to produce sound and images. Although they were still playing those same few decades-old films, during rest periods the room was always crowded with people, filled with constant laughter.

"The Guardian-VI core brought not just energy, but a powerful confidence."

"Piloting the completely renewed Star of Hope, leaving this dangerous and barren planet, flying toward the stars!"

"Let's go to the Belt Alliance, to Mars, find some women!"

"Find some men!"

Everyone raised their cups. The drinks that still smelled of engine oil remained unpleasant, but everyone's enthusiasm didn't diminish.

The subterranean "Excavator" also seemed much quieter. Aside from the occasional regular vibrations and those undecipherable low-frequency signals, it hadn't launched any large-scale attacks.

Chapter 64 Level One Combat Preparation!

Life at the base passed efficiently and hopefully for several weeks. The repair progress of the "Star of Hope" far exceeded expectations. The ship's outer hull was completely renewed, the internal framework reinforcement was completed, the main pipeline installation was nearing its end, and multiple engine ignition tests had all been successful.

Sun Wen did not relax her monitoring of the outside world. The upgraded scanning array had powerful performance; she adjusted the reception frequency, trying to filter valuable information from the noisy cosmic background static.

"Brother Lin Feng," she suddenly spoke one day, drawing the attention of everyone in the main control room, "I've captured a new signal. It's very faint, but very regular."

"What's the content?" Lin Feng walked over to the console. Su Wanqing also cast a concerned look.

"Boosting the signal now... decoding..." Sun Wen's fingers operated rapidly, "It's an automatic beacon... repeating an identification code and a set of coordinates... and a brief message: 'Energy core failure, life support systems critical, requesting assistance'... signal origin... southeast direction, extremely distant, almost at the edge of our detection range."

Another distress signal. Unlike the previous broadcast from "Bedrock" which carried a transactional purpose, this signal sounded more pure, more desperate, like a wrecked spaceship or a refuge on the brink of collapse sending out its final cry for help.

"Can you get a more precise location?" Lin Feng asked with a furrowed brow.

Sun Wen shook her head: "The distance is too great, signal attenuation is severe. We can only determine the general direction. If we want precise positioning, we'd probably need to... move closer to that area."

Lin Feng fell silent for a moment. The base's situation was excellent, the "Star of Hope" repairs were imminent; it seemed unnecessary to invite trouble, to risk venturing to a distant, unknown area. In this post-apocalyptic world, focusing on one's own survival was the norm.

But... what if someone truly needed help? They had just obtained the "Guardian-VI" core, possessing unprecedented energy resources. Did that also mean they should shoulder some corresponding responsibility? Furthermore, a spacecraft capable of interstellar travel or a large refuge—might its interior contain other resources or technologies they needed?

Just as he was weighing the pros and cons, before reaching a decision—

A piercing, highest-level alarm suddenly blared throughout the entire main control room! Red warning lights flashed frantically!

"Alarm! Three kilometers east of the base! Multiple high-speed moving signals detected! Rapidly approaching! Speed... speed is extremely fast! Identification signal... unknown! No matching records in the database!" Xiao Wang, responsible for monitoring the external sensors, reported urgently, his voice filled with disbelief and shock.

"What?!" Lin Feng's heart sank violently. Su Wanqing instantly switched to the defense status interface.

Old Scar's voice also came through the communicator, full of vigilance: "What's the situation? Is the 'Excavator' back?"

"Not an underground signal! High-speed moving targets! Coming from the east! Three of them! They'll be here any moment!" Xiao Wang reported anxiously.

On the main screen, the radar interface clearly showed three dazzling blips approaching the base at an astonishing speed, hugging the complex terrain like phantoms! Their movement trajectories were erratic, displaying extremely sophisticated evasion techniques, and their speed far exceeded any known vehicle from the base!

"All personnel, Level 1 combat readiness! Auto-turrets online! Energy shields to maximum! All personnel to your stations!" Lin Feng issued the commands without hesitation, his expression grave. The previous good mood vanished completely.

Old Scar roared specific instructions from the defense console. Around the base perimeter, turrets hidden within the mountain extended their barrels, rotating to aim; the pale blue energy shield at the entrance suddenly brightened significantly, emitting a faint hum.

"Broadcast a warning! Repeat the warning!" Lin Feng shouted to Sun Wen.

Sun Wen immediately spoke into the communicator, repeating the broadcast in as calm a tone as possible: "Unknown flying units! You have entered the restricted airspace of Stardust Base! Identify yourselves and state your intentions immediately! Repeat, identify yourselves and state your intentions immediately! Otherwise, we will consider you a threat and open fire!"

Only static hissed in the communication channel; there was no response from the other side. The three blips showed no sign of slowing down; instead, as if provoked, they accelerated further!

Everyone's hearts leapt into their throats. Anvil had already rushed to a firing position, cursing under his breath as he checked his weapon. A tense, pre-battle atmosphere permeated the air.

Just as the first blip was about to breach the outermost firing range of the base's perimeter defenses, the moment before the turrets would automatically open fire—

Screeech—!

An incredibly sharp, air-rending braking sound erupted! Even through the thick bulkheads and some distance, the sound came through clearly!

The lead blip, in a maneuver that defied physics, performed an almost right-angle rotation, coming to an abrupt halt on the spot. The dust and debris kicked up formed a small cloud, and then it stabilized precisely, stopping exactly on the boundary line of the base defense's maximum firing range! Not an inch off!

Immediately after, the other two blips, from different directions, executed similarly jaw-dropping maneuvers, coming to stable stops at two other points on the edge of the firing range, forming a perfect triangle that subtly encircled the direction of the base entrance.

As the dust slowly settled, their true forms were revealed—three sleek, highly streamlined light assault vehicles covered in a dull, adaptive camouflage that shifted subtly with the environment, exuding a futuristic, technological feel. They sat silently, their engines making no extra noise, like three mechanical predators poised to strike.

No firing, no further approach, no communication response.

They just sat there silently, emanating immense pressure, as if calmly observing, precisely assessing.

A suffocating, tension-filled standoff abruptly formed in the red mist valley outside Stardust Base.

Who were these technologically advanced, strangely behaving intruders? What did they want?

Chapter 65 The Grandson Who Is Overwhelmed by Technology!

The base gate was tightly shut, with all weapon systems' targeting lasers locked firmly on those three silent assault vehicles.

Inside the vehicles, the atmosphere was so tense it felt almost frozen solid.

"Damn it! What the hell do these bastards want? Showing off?"

Anvil stared intently through the firing port, finger on the trigger, cursing under his breath, "Should we give them a taste of our firepower?"

"Don't be rash!" Old Scar's voice came through the communicator, carrying unprecedented gravity, "Look at their parking positions—frighteningly precise! No ordinary pilot could manage that. And their vehicles... unnervingly quiet, with extremely restrained energy readings. Their technological level absolutely overwhelms ours."

"Any findings from the scans?" Lin Feng asked Su Wanqing in a low voice.

Su Wanqing rapidly switched between various scanning modes, her frown deepening:

"Nothing. The vehicle surfaces have extremely advanced energy shielding layers. Active scanning waves can't penetrate at all—they actually get absorbed. Passive sensors can only detect extremely faint thermal signals and almost negligible energy radiation... Their propulsion systems and stealth technology far exceed our understanding."

Just as everyone was at their wits' end and mentally strained to the limit, one of the assault vehicles (the one directly in front) made a very slight hissing sound as its top cover silently slid upward.

A figure stood up.

He wore a well-tailored, sharp-lined dark gray combat suit that appeared to be made of material neither cloth nor metal, shimmering with subtle luster.

His face was covered by a sleek, pure white tactical mask that completely concealed his features, leaving only two dark lenses for eyes.

He carried no visible weapons, spread his hands open in the universal gesture for "harmless" and "wish to talk," then pointed to an inconspicuous communication antenna on his vehicle.

"He wants to talk," Sun Wen immediately said.

"Patch it through. Encrypted channel, record it, analyze voiceprint." Lin Feng took a deep breath and gave the order. If it's fortune, it can't be avoided; if it's disaster, it can't be escaped either.

The communication connected, and a calm, steady electronic voice, specially processed to be indistinguishable from the original, sounded in the main control room:

"Stardust Base. Good afternoon."

The voice showed no trace of emotion, like a machine reading text.

"State your identity and purpose," Lin Feng didn't waste words, directly questioning in a firm tone, "Approaching in this manner doesn't seem like a friendly visit."

"Necessary caution, please understand," the electronic voice responded without fluctuation, as if stating a fact,

"We detected an exponential leap in your base's recent energy signal strength and stability, and approximately 73 standard hours ago, recorded an anomalous, brief local space curvature variation. According to the 'Peripheral Star Sector Observation Protocol,' we are obligated to come verify the situation."

Space curvature variation? So it was because the core opened the portal! Lin Feng's mind reeled with shock—their technology could actually remotely capture such microscopic spacetime changes?

"We're unaware of any space fluctuations," Lin Feng decided to play dumb to the end, his tone carrying just the right amount of confusion and wariness,

"As for energy, we just got lucky and finally fully repaired our old fusion reactor. Who are you exactly? People from the 'Obsidian'?" He threw out this name again to test them.

The other party fell silent for several seconds, the lenses beneath the mask seeming to flicker slightly, as if rapidly analyzing his words.

"We have no association with the 'Obsidian,'" the electronic voice spoke again, denying his guess, "We are 'Watchers.' Our duty is to observe and record all anomalous activities and technological leaps within this star sector, assessing their potential impact on the existing order."

"Watchers?" Lin Feng repeated the unfamiliar name, "Assessment? So you're here to assess whether we're a 'threat'?"

"That is one way to understand it," the electronic voice frankly admitted, "Your power has achieved extraordinary growth in a short time, which itself is a 'variable' requiring attention. However, current observation results indicate your behavioral patterns lean more toward defense and development rather than expansion and aggression."

"So?"

"Therefore, we believe there exists the possibility for limited information exchange," the electronic voice stated their purpose, "We can provide you with high-value intelligence including hazardous space zone distributions in nearby star sectors, profiles of known survivor factions, and... partial analytical data regarding 'Excavator' geological activities."

This intelligence was indeed tempting! Especially about the "Excavator"!

"What's the cost?" Lin Feng asked without showing any reaction.

"The cost is: you need to commit to not using your acquired technological capabilities for active aggression and disorderly expansion. And in the future, if you obtain information about underground anomalous phenomena or 'Stardust'-related heritage that isn't part of your core secrets, you're willing to share it with us." The conditions proposed by the electronic voice sounded... unexpectedly lenient, even somewhat... overly idealistic?

Lin Feng didn't answer immediately, his gaze sweeping over Su Wanqing and Old Scar. Su Wanqing gave a slight nod, silently mouthing: "Intelligence value extremely high." Old Scar frowned deeply, shaking his head, using his thick finger to tap his own temple, indicating caution against traps.

"We need time to consider," Lin Feng replied, not showing any urgency.

"Understood," the electronic voice seemed to anticipate this response, "We will remain in this airspace for a period. This is our secure communication frequency. Contact us via this frequency once you've reached a decision."

The communication was then unilaterally cut off by the other party. The figure with the white tactical mask nodded slightly toward the base again, then slowly sat back into the vehicle, the top cover silently closing.

The three assault vehicles remained quietly parked there, like three silent boulders, maintaining their perfect triangular formation without the slightest movement.

The immense direct pressure had temporarily vanished, but deeper doubts and contemplation enveloped everyone's minds.

"Watchers?"

A name never heard before, possessing technology far beyond imagination, yet their behavior methods carried a strange quality.

Chapter 66 The Doctor's Niche and Abnormal Experiments

In the base's small conference room, the atmosphere was even more oppressive than in the main control room. The thick alloy door blocked most outside noise, leaving only the low hum of the ventilation system and the faint electrical sounds from the holographic projector at work.

Lin Feng, Su Wanqing, Old Scar, Wrench, Wu Yu, and Dr. Chen Wei, who had been specially summoned, sat around the table. The table surface projected the analysis of the recorded communication text with the "Watchers" and the pitifully scarce external sensor data that Sun Wen had managed to capture.

"I'll state my view first: bullshit!"

Old Scar was the first to speak, his tone absolute and resolute, his fist slamming onto the table with a dull thud,

"What the hell are these 'Watchers'? Hiding their heads and tails, not daring to show their true faces! Their words sound high-sounding and righteous, but actually every sentence is probing and threatening! And this 'Peripheral Star Sector Observation Protocol'? I think they made it up themselves! With technology that can detect spatial curvature changes, how could they not know what's happening here? Could the energy fluctuations from that core really escape their notice?"

"I think they're after the core! This so-called exchange is nothing but a trick to fish for information or lull us into complacency! I absolutely oppose any form of exchange with them! Who knows what traps are hidden in the intelligence they'd provide?"

As a veteran, he had an instinctive, extreme distrust of this kind of uncontrollable, unknown threat.

"Old Scar's concerns are valid."

Su Wanqing responded calmly, pulling up data analysis, "The other party's technical level indeed far surpasses ours, which means information asymmetry. We currently have almost no ability to verify the authenticity of the intelligence they provide. Especially the data about the 'Excavator's' weaknesses—if it's fake, or has deviations, it could destroy us at a critical moment. That's the biggest risk."

Then she shifted her tone:

"However, risk and reward often coexist. If even part of the information they provide is true, its value would be immeasurable. The hazardous space charts could greatly reduce our future navigation risks; the survivor faction summaries could help us avoid unnecessary conflicts, even find cooperation opportunities;

"And the 'Excavator' data... is directly related to the safety beneath our feet. I believe completely refusing isn't the optimal solution. We need more cautious probing and more specific terms, like requiring them to first provide some verifiable, non-critical intelligence as a show of 'good faith.'"

"I agree with Sister Su's view!" Wu Yu said urgently, his eyes shining,

"This is intelligence! Information! What's most valuable in the apocalypse? Besides food and supplies, it's information! With this, we'd know where we can go, where to avoid, who to deal with, who to steer clear of! How much trial and error would that save us? How many dangers could we avoid?"

"This deal is absolutely worth it, as long as we ensure it's not fake! We could first ask for some small tips about which nearby ruins still have usable supplies to verify!" As a former warehouse manager and information gatherer, he had an almost instinctual craving for the value of intelligence.

Wrench scratched his greasy hair, frowning:

"I... I just want to know how their vehicle manages to be so quiet yet run so fast? And that emergency stop—how advanced must the transmission system and inertial dampers be? If we could... uh, I mean, if we trade, could we exchange for some technical..." His voice trailed off as he saw Old Scar glaring at him.

Finally, everyone's gaze fell on Dr. Chen Wei, who hadn't spoken since entering and had been lowering her head, furiously typing calculations on her portable terminal.

"Doctor?" Lin Feng called her name.

"Ah? Oh! The meeting! Right, the meeting!" Chen Wei abruptly looked up, her eyes behind her glasses shining with an intensely excited and focused light, completely unlike someone discussing matters of life and death, "I'm calculating! I'm calculating! It's incredible!"

She suddenly projected her terminal screen to the center of the conference table, showing dense energy formulas and spatial curvature models.

"Based on the monitoring time point of 'spatial curvature changes' they mentioned, reverse calculating their possible location... combined with the extremely weak background radiation disturbances we passively received before... Oh my god! They were monitoring from at least a thousand kilometers away! That precision! That sensitivity!"

Her voice trembled with excitement,

"And their vehicle! The energy leakage in silent mode is ridiculously low!"

"This is no longer shielding technology—this is almost 'visual deception' at the energy level! And that emergency stop! Where did the huge momentum instantly canceled go? It violates angular momentum conservation! Unless... unless they can temporarily transfer momentum to some subspace or..."

"Doctor!" Lin Feng had to raise his voice to interrupt her, "We're discussing whether to trade with them, not asking you to analyze their technical principles!"

"Trade? Of course we should trade!" Chen Wei answered without hesitation, wearing an expression that said "isn't it obvious,"

"What perfect research samples... uh, I mean, communication partners! The knowledge and technology they possess might far exceed our imagination! Even if they just let a little trickle through their fingers, it would be enough for us to study for a long time! Risk? Of course there's risk! But what path of knowledge exploration is without risk?"

She suddenly leaned close to Lin Feng, her eyes frighteningly bright, lowering her voice to a near-seductive tone:

"Boss, think about it—if they can really provide the 'Excavator' data, even just part of it... that thing's biological structure, energy core, perception methods... what fascinating research topics! Maybe I could find a way to control or... or communicate with them? Just imagine! Communicating with underground leviathans! Isn't that worth taking a little risk?"

The conference room fell silent. Everyone looked at Chen Wei as if she were a madwoman. Compared to Old Scar's vigilance, Su Wanqing's caution, and Wu Yu's greed, the Doctor's motivation was terrifyingly pure and dangerously simple—she was driven solely by endless curiosity and research desire, completely ignoring ethics and safety boundaries.

Lin Feng felt a headache coming on. The team's opinions were clearly divided into three factions: Old Scar's firm opposition, Su Wanqing and Wu Yu's cautious probing (with different goals), and the Doctor's fervent support. The final decision still rested with him.

He rubbed his temples, pondered for a moment, then slowly spoke: "Old Scar's worries are correct—we can't trust them. But what Wanqing and Wu Yu say also makes sense—information is important, and completely refusing might mean missing opportunities, or even angering the other side."

He looked at Su Wanqing: "Wanqing, try contacting them using the frequency they provided. Don't mention specific trades, just ask one question: does their so-called 'Observation Protocol' allow them to provide direct assistance to observed subjects, for example, when observed subjects face survival crises? If they answer yes, then ask about the boundaries and conditions of such assistance."

This was a very clever probe. It didn't involve specific intelligence trading, but could reveal the other party's behavioral guidelines and bottom line, and might even secure a potential thread of future assistance.

"Understood." Su Wanqing immediately nodded and stood up to go operate.

"Wait!" Chen Wei suddenly jumped up, excitedly saying, "While they're answering, I can try aiming the high-precision particle scanner at them! Maybe we can take advantage of the subtle fluctuations in their energy shielding during communication to scan some internal structure! Even if we can't scan that, we can analyze the source of their communication signal! This data is too precious!"

"Doctor! Sit down!" Lin Feng's face darkened, "Absolutely not! That's provocation! Immediately abandon those dangerous thoughts! Until we clarify whether they're friend or foe, no additional actions that could be perceived as hostile are allowed!"

Chen Wei sat back down resentfully, pouting, muttering quietly: "Just a little scan... wouldn't cost them anything... maybe they wouldn't even notice..."

Lin Feng ignored her and nodded to Su Wanqing. Su Wanqing quickly left the conference room.

The wait for a reply wasn't long, but every second felt especially drawn out. Ten minutes later, Su Wanqing returned, her face carrying a trace of confusion.

"They replied. Very quickly," she said, "The reply was: 'The Protocol allows providing minimal assistance that does not directly interfere with civilizational processes, under the premise that civilizational continuation faces a deterministic threat and the observed subject bears no subjective fault. Boundaries are determined by our side. This response does not constitute any promise.'"

The reply remained cold, precise, and left plenty of room.

"Watertight." Old Scar snorted.

"But at least they admit this possibility exists." Wu Yu stroked his chin.

"Determined by them... so condescending." Lin Feng pondered. This reply seemed to slightly favor Su Wanqing's speculation, but the other party's indifference and detached attitude were equally unsettling.

Just then, Sun Wen's somewhat panicked voice suddenly came through the base's general communication channel: "Brother Lin Feng! Doctor! Come quick! Energy monitoring shows the 'Guardian-VI' core just had an extremely brief, extremely weak abnormal energy pulse, direction... direction seemed to be outward! But the intensity was low, and it quickly returned to normal!"

Whoosh! Everyone's gaze instantly focused on Chen Wei!

Dr. Chen Wei blinked with an "innocent" expression, spreading her hands: "Why look at me? I've been sitting here in the meeting the whole time! Didn't do anything! Maybe the core just burped? Or had some resonance reaction with those iron lumps outside? What a great research opportunity..."

Lin Feng's face instantly darkened. He was almost certain this madwoman had definitely used some method during the meeting to secretly perform some "small" action on the core or the external "Watchers"!

"CHEN WEI!!!" Lin Feng's furious roar echoed through the conference room.

Chapter 67 Chen Wei! Stop!

Lin Feng's roar was so powerful it seemed to shake dust loose from the conference room ceiling.

Doctor Chen Wei shrank back slightly, but the expression on her face—one where "thirst for knowledge overrides everything"—didn't fade in the slightest. Instead, she wore a hint of smug satisfaction that seemed to say, "See? I told you there'd be a reaction."

"I really didn't do anything! I might have just remotely activated a tiny energy sensor—smaller than a dust particle—that I previously embedded near the core interface, just to read its feedback parameters to external signals of the same frequency..."

Her excuses grew weaker under Lin Feng's murderous glare.

"...Alright, maybe I also included a one-nanosecond micro active probe pulse, just to see if their vehicle's shielding might have a one-in-thousandth of a second delay..."

"You!" Lin Feng was so angry he nearly choked. A one-nanosecond pulse sounded insignificant, but in high-tech confrontations, this was equivalent to throwing a glove in someone's face as a challenge! Especially after the other party had just demonstrated technological sensitivity far beyond their own!

"Immediately! Right now! Turn off all those damned little gadgets of yours! Destroy them! Stop all non-essential external monitoring!" Lin Feng pointed at the doctor's nose, practically gritting his teeth as he issued the command.

"From this moment on, without my direct permission, you are not to approach within three meters of the core platform! You are not to perform any form of scanning, probing, or analysis on the 'Watchers'! Do you understand?!"

Chen Wei opened her mouth as if wanting to argue about the value of that data, but seeing Lin Feng's unprecedently stern gaze and Old Scar's hand already resting on his holstered weapon beside her, she ultimately swallowed her words. She lowered her head resentfully and muttered under her breath, "...What a waste of precious resources... The data is right there... Not collecting it is a sin..."

"Sun Wen!" Lin Feng ignored her and opened communications. "Any external reactions? Any movement from the Watchers' vehicles?"

"Not... not yet." Sun Wen's voice remained tense.

"They're still stationary. But... right after the pulse occurred, our sensors detected what seemed like an extremely subtle, almost imperceptible ripple-like fluctuation simultaneously appearing on the energy shielding layers of all three vehicles. It was like... a drop of water falling into a calm lake, but the range was very small and it smoothed out instantly. We can't determine if it was caused by the doctor's pulse or part of their normal energy cycle."

At that moment, the cold, processed electronic voice sounded once again through the secure communication frequency provided by the "Watchers," directly echoing through both the conference room and main control room:

"Stardust Base. You have just conducted an unauthorized, non-friendly, low-intensity directional energy projection. Technology level: Primitive. Intent: Probing or provocation."

The voice remained steady, but everyone could feel the sudden drop in temperature beneath that calm surface.

"According to the Code, such behavior typically results in elevated warning levels and may trigger equivalent or escalated responses."

Hearts leapt into throats throughout the conference room. Old Scar's hand tightened on his gun grip, Wu Yu turned pale, and even Chen Wei subconsciously held her breath.

Lin Feng shot a fierce glare at the doctor, took a deep breath, and prepared to force out an explanation and apology.

But the electronic voice continued, its tone shifting slightly: "However, given that the projected energy level was extremely low and posed no actual threat, and considering your overall technological assessment remains within the 'low-risk diffusion' category, comprehensive judgment determines this incident is more indicative of individual irrational behavior or technological loss of control."

It paused, as if allowing time for this assessment to sink into their consciousness.

"Therefore, this incident will only be recorded for now, with no escalation of countermeasures. Repeat: Please restrain your individual behaviors and technological experimentation scope. Any further similar actions will be re-evaluated and may lead to severe consequences."

"Additionally, based on your previous inquiry regarding 'assistance boundaries,' and considering the obvious deficiencies and risks in energy control reflected by this incident, we now provide an additional piece of information as an example: Approximately 1.7 kilometers southeast of your base, there exists a small natural geothermal leak point."

"Although the energy dissipating from this point is weak, its properties show 3.7% similarity to the main body energy of the 'Excavator,' which may cause it to preferentially gather toward this area during specific cycles. We recommend implementing shielding or drainage measures."

"Communication complete."

The voice cut off abruptly once more.

Dead silence filled the conference room.

Everyone was stunned, including the trouble-making Chen Wei.

They hadn't attacked, hadn't escalated threats, but instead... instead provided a piece of highly valuable specific information? And attributed their reckless probing to "technological loss of control" and "individual irrationality"? This...

"What... what do they mean by this?" Wu Yu stammered. "A slap followed by a sweet date?"

"No." Su Wanqing's eyes gleamed with thoughtful light. "This is more... terrifying than a simple warning. This shows their assessment of us is detailed to an astonishing degree—they can even accurately determine that was the doctor's individual action rather than an official base directive."

"They possess information filtering and intent judgment capabilities beyond our comprehension. By providing this information, they're indeed demonstrating 'sincerity' and intelligence value on one hand, but on the other, they're also showing off—their understanding of our surrounding environment is far deeper than our own. Our routine scanning never detected any abnormality at that geothermal leak point."

Old Scar's expression turned even grimmer. "Damn it, I feel like I've been stripped naked and placed under a microscope! Not a single secret left!"

Lin Feng's heart felt incredibly heavy. The Watchers' response method far exceeded his expectations. This absolute calmness, precision, and that condescending attitude—like deities examining mortals—sent chills down to one's core. They seemed to truly strictly follow some kind of icy "Code," unmoved by emotions.

But simultaneously, the information they provided had to be verified immediately!

"Sun Wen, immediately concentrate all scanning resources on the area 1.7 kilometers southeast of the base! Deep scan geological structures and energy dissipation! Old Scar, organize an elite team, ready to depart for confirmation at any moment! Bring environmental sampling equipment and temporary shielding devices!"

Commands were rapidly issued. The entire base began operating at high speed once again.

Soon, Sun Wen reported the results: "Confirmed! Brother Lin Feng! About fifteen meters underground in that area, there really is a very small geothermal anomaly point! The energy leakage is extremely weak—our routine environmental monitoring completely overlooked it! But after comparison... its energy spectrum characteristics do show faint similarity to certain background fluctuations recorded during previous 'Excavator' activity!"

It was actually true!

The Watchers hadn't lied! They truly possessed unimaginably detailed knowledge about this land and the "Excavator"!

This realization sent chills down everyone's spines.

"Old Scar, take your team there. Be careful, prioritize temporary shielding measures." Lin Feng issued the instruction, then turned his gaze back to Chen Wei, who looked like she wanted to shrink into her chair.

"Doctor." Lin Feng's voice was cold enough to freeze the air. "Considering your actions nearly caused a major disaster, I formally notify you: First, all your laboratory's external research projects are suspended, pending comprehensive inspection and safety assessment by Su Wanqing. Second, for the next month, you will assist Little Ears with managing vegetables in the Hydroponic Farm. Without my permission, you are not to touch any research equipment. Third, don't even think about any data related to the 'Watchers' or the core!"

For Chen Wei, this was punishment comparable to imprisonment. She wailed, "No! Boss! You can't do this! Knowledge is innocent! My pulse really wasn't anything... Look, they even gave us benefits..."

"Silence! One more word and your confinement period extends to three months!" Lin Feng mercilessly cut her off.

Chen Wei immediately wilted like frostbitten eggplant, muttering silently under her breath, clearly extremely unconvinced.

After dealing with the doctor, Lin Feng wearily sank back into his chair.

The shadow of the "Watchers" loomed over the base like a physical presence. They appeared to offer help, but in reality, they had revealed even deeper terror.

Chapter 68 Doctor! What kind of egg is this?

Old Scar's action team set out.

To deal with potential risks, the team members were streamlined but elite:

Old Scar personally led the team, Anvil provided heavy fire support, two of the most experienced scouts, and... Dr. Chen Wei, who was temporarily "requisitioned" to handle technical operations—after all, the shielding and sampling equipment required professional handling, and no one in the base could surpass her in this area, even though she had just caused trouble.

"Listen carefully, Doctor,"

Before departure, Old Scar warned Chen Wei, who was wearing protective gear, his face grim,

"Your task is to operate the equipment and complete the shielding and sampling. No unnecessary actions! No interest in any strange things! Do not leave the team's line of sight! Otherwise, I won't mind using extreme measures to 'calm' you down. Understood?"

Chen Wei pouted, reluctantly pulled up her protective face shield, and replied in a muffled voice:

"Got it, got it... Constraining individual behavior... Really, precious scientific spirit is being stifled like this..."

But under Old Scar's murderous gaze, she obediently nodded. Old Scar instantly switched to what he thought was a kindly expression,

"Chen Wei, I'm responsible for your safety, so I'm strict with you, but you're in charge of everything else, I'll listen to you."

"Just call me Doctor, okay? Hearing my name gives me chills.."

The Doctor was a bit unable to accept Old Scar's sudden gentleness.

Three light all-terrain vehicles equipped with additional armor plates drove out of the base gate, speeding toward the southeast.

Outside, it was still the seemingly eternal dark red mist, with very low visibility. The atmosphere inside the vehicles was tense; aside from the roar of the engines, almost no one spoke. Everyone gripped their weapons tightly, vigilantly watching for any movement outside the windows.

The Watchers' three assault vehicles remained quietly parked in place, like three silent black ghosts, showing no reaction to this team's departure, as if they didn't exist at all.

"Five hundred meters to the target point!" the navigator scout reported.

"Slow down, maintain alert! Anvil, watch our rear and flanks!" Old Scar ordered.

The vehicles slowly approached the target area. This was a relatively flat gravel area, sporadically scattered with weathered rock pillars, appearing completely ordinary.

"Energy readings are starting to rise, very weak, but the signature matches." Chen Wei looked at the portable detector in her hand, finally showing some professional attitude, "Source depth approximately... fifteen meters underground, correct. Leakage point range is small, diameter no more than two meters."

"Find the optimal shielding point! Prepare for drilling and deploying shielding gel!" Old Scar commanded.

The team quickly sprang into action. One scout set up a sniper rifle on high ground for perimeter security, while the other monitored the surroundings with life detectors and seismic sensors. Anvil unloaded a small drilling rig and a large barrel of silver-gray, viscous shielding gel from the vehicle.

Chen Wei skillfully operated the drill, selected the position, and with a low hum, the drill bit began boring downward. Her movements were precise and efficient; it seemed that whenever she touched instruments and equipment, the crazy doctor was temporarily replaced by a calm expert.

"Reached predetermined depth... Confirming energy leakage point." Chen Wei watched the data feedback, "Beginning injection of shielding gel."

The silver-gray gel was pumped into the drill hole under high pressure, quickly filling the fine fissures underground, forming an artificial energy barrier that blocked the weak geothermal signal leakage that could potentially attract trouble.

The entire process proceeded unusually smoothly, without any incidents. The surroundings were deathly silent, with only the wind and machine sounds.

"Shielding completion rate ninety-eight percent... Basically achieved expected results." Chen Wei clapped her hands, seeming somewhat unsatisfied, "Pity, the sample quantity is too small. If we could drill deeper, maybe we could..."

"Don't even think about it!" Old Scar immediately cut her off, "Pack up, prepare to withdraw!"

Just then, the scout on perimeter duty suddenly issued a warning: "Scar Team! One o'clock direction, behind the rock pillars! Slight vibrations! Not caused by the drill!"

Everyone instantly tensed up, quickly seeking cover, weapons loaded.

Old Scar observed through binoculars and saw that in the one o'clock direction behind the forest of weathered stone pillars, the gravel on the ground seemed to be trembling slightly, and the area was slowly expanding.

"Is it the Excavator? Attracted here?" Anvil whispered, hefting his heavy pulse cannon.

"Doesn't seem like it... The movement is too small." Old Scar frowned deeply, "More like... something is trying to dig out?"

Before he finished speaking, there was a soft "pop" sound, and the ground in the trembling area suddenly burst open with a small hole. A black, fist-sized object covered in soil was pushed out from underground, rolling to the side. After that, the ground vibrations stopped, with no further anomalies.

They waited a full five minutes with no additional movement.

"What the hell is that?" Anvil muttered.

"I'll check it out." Old Scar signaled the others to maintain alert while he carefully approached the small hole, gun ready, crouching as he moved quickly. He prodded the black object with his gun muzzle.

It appeared to be an ellipsoidal object, surface covered with hard, chitinous-looking black shell, coated with soil, making its true appearance unclear. It wasn't large, motionless, seemingly inanimate.

"Secure." Old Scar checked the surroundings, confirmed there was no danger, then bent down to pick it up. It felt surprisingly heavy, much heavier than it looked.

He brought it back near the vehicles. Chen Wei immediately curiously approached, her eyes beginning to shine again: "Huh? What's this? Came out near that leakage point? Let me see it quickly!"

Old Scar hesitated for a moment, then handed it to her, but warned: "Look only! No actions allowed!"

Chen Wei took the black object, also noticing its abnormal weight. She took out her water canteen, poured some water to wash off the soil on the surface.

Beneath the black shell, there was a faint, dull texture that resembled both metal and biological bone, with extremely complex and regular fine patterns on the surface, clearly not a natural creation.

"This isn't a rock... doesn't look like Excavator shedding either..." Chen Wei murmured to herself, taking out a miniature scanner to scan it, but was stopped by Old Scar's stern glare. She reluctantly put it away and continued careful visual examination, "Structure very complete... Sealed... Feels like a... container? Or... an egg?"

This word sent chills down everyone's spines.

"Egg? What kind of egg?" Anvil instinctively took half a step back.

"Don't know... Never seen this material and structure before..." Chen Wei turned it over and over, even carefully tapping it, producing a dull, peculiar sound that was neither metallic nor stony, "Its interior... seems to have extremely faint energy reactions, almost undetectable, with very subtle similarities to that geothermal leakage point's signature, but different... More... restrained?"

She looked up, her eyes burning as she stared at Old Scar: "Scar Team! We must take this back! This could be a very important discovery! It might be related to the Excavator! Maybe even related to deeper underground secrets!"

Old Scar's face shifted uncertainly. Bring this unidentified object back to the base? The risk was too great! Who knew if it might suddenly hatch something terrifying? Or was itself a beacon?

But Chen Wei's words made sense—this thing appeared near the energy leakage point, definitely not a coincidence. Perhaps it truly contained important information.

"Put it in the triple isolation box! Label it with the highest danger level!" Old Scar finally made a decision, his tone severe, "Doctor, until we return to base and Boss Lin and Officer Su make a decision, you absolutely cannot touch it again! Otherwise I'll destroy it on the spot! Understood?"

"Understood, understood! Absolutely won't touch!" Chen Wei immediately promised, but her eyes remained fixed on the black ellipsoid as soldiers carefully placed it into a special isolation box, as if looking at the world's most precious treasure.

The team quickly packed their equipment and boarded the vehicles to return. The journey back was silent, but the atmosphere was even more tense than during the approach. This mission was originally simple shielding work, but they unexpectedly brought back a completely unknown "thing" that might contain enormous risks or opportunities.

The base gate opened again, and the vehicles drove in. Old Scar immediately reported the situation to Lin Feng and Su Wanqing, placing the heavy isolation box on the conference table.

Everyone's attention focused on this black ellipsoid that had fallen from the sky (or rather, emerged from the ground). After cleaning, it revealed more details: dull material that was neither metal, stone, nor biological shell, yet with a peculiar metallic sheen; complex and regular surface patterns that seemed to contain some incomprehensible information; perfectly sealed with no openings or gaps visible.

"So, while you were shielding the geothermal leakage point, this thing emerged from nearby?" Lin Feng frowned, circling the isolation box. This thing gave people a very uncomfortable feeling—cold, lifeless, yet seemingly containing something within.

"Yes, Boss. The vibrations were very slight, unlike the Excavator's major movements. After this thing emerged, the activity disappeared." Old Scar reported, "The Doctor thinks it might be a 'container' or 'egg,' with extremely faint internal energy reactions that bear slight similarities to the geothermal signal."

Su Wanqing pulled up the previously scanned energy leakage point spectrum and compared it with the faint energy signature Chen Wei hastily recorded about this black sphere.

"Similarity is less than five percent, but there is indeed some homology." Su Wanqing concluded, "We can confirm it's related to that leakage point, or rather, to the underground structure causing the leakage. But what exactly it is cannot be determined."

"Can we safely open it?" Lin Feng asked the most critical question.

"Absolutely not!" Old Scar immediately objected, "Unknown origin, unknown structure, could contain anything inside! High risk!"

"Theoretically... we need deep scanning first to determine internal structure..." Chen Wei rubbed her hands, her eyes fanatical, "But its shell seems to block most scanning waves... Might need to try micro-energy resonance or..."

"Don't even think about it." Lin Feng immediately vetoed her dangerous proposal. He stared at the black sphere, pondering for a moment.

The Watchers had just pointed out the danger of the energy leakage point, they went to handle it, and unexpectedly obtained this... Was this coincidence? Or expected by the Watchers? Could it even be arranged by them? Was this black sphere another "test"?

"Transfer it to the highest-level Isolation Laboratory (previously idle, now perfectly suited for use), install independent power supply and dual energy shielding." Lin Feng finally ordered, "Until we have absolute certainty, no one attempts to open it. Doctor, you can conduct external and non-invasive research, but any experimental plans requiring contact or energy stimulation must be submitted to me in writing first, and can only proceed after joint evaluation by Su Wanqing and Old Scar! This is an absolute order!"

He had to strictly control risks, especially concerning such unknown objects from underground.

"Alright, alright... External research..." Although somewhat disappointed, Chen Wei was quite satisfied just to have access to this new "toy."

This unexpectedly appearing black ellipsoid became a new, uncertainty-filled variable in the base. And outside the base, the three Watchers assault vehicles remained like silent statues, quietly staying in place, as if waiting for something.

Chapter 69 The Base's "Heartbeat"

Time slipped away in a delicate stalemate.

An entire day passed, and the three assault vehicles of the Watchers remained completely motionless at the outer edge of the base's defensive perimeter, as if welded onto the scorched earth. They sent no communications, no personnel disembarked for activities, and there wasn't even any visible sign of energy replenishment. They just existed there, silently, with immense patience.

This silence was more oppressive than any overt threat. Inside the base, the team members on rotating watch duty barely dared to blink, their nerves stretched taut. In the main control room, various sensors were trained incessantly on the three targets, trying to analyze even the slightest bit of useful information.

But the results remained frustrating – they were like three perfect black bodies, absorbing everything and revealing nothing.

"Dammit, don't these guys need to eat, sleep, or take a shit?" Anvil complained over the comms channel, dark circles under his eyes. The prolonged high alert was exhausting.

"Maybe they really don't," Sun Wen's voice held a note of helplessness. "Their life form might be completely different from ours. Or perhaps their vehicles themselves are life support systems."

This speculation was even more unsettling.

Lin Feng stood by the observation window, staring at the three distant black dots that almost blended into the mist, his brow furrowed deeply. The patience of the Watchers was beyond imagination. They seemed perfectly capable of waiting like this indefinitely, until the base made a decision, or until something changed.

This feeling of having one's throat gripped by an invisible force was utterly terrible.

"We can't stay passive like this any longer," Lin Feng turned and said to Su Wanqing. "We have to do something, even if it's just to probe them."

"What do you want to do?" Su Wanqing asked. The long hours of monitoring had also left her complexion looking somewhat pale.

"They like to observe, right?" A flash of resolve passed through Lin Feng's eyes. "Then let's give them something to look at. Sun Wen, adjust the angles of our external lighting system. Sweep intermittently across their area, low intensity, ensuring it doesn't constitute an attack threat. Wanqing, have the gantry crane and large equipment in the Star of Hope dock start moving. Make some noise, but avoid sensitive areas. Old Scar, organize a small squad for a routine patrol. The route... just follow the outermost edge of our defensive perimeter. Maintain a safe distance, act naturally."

He planned to use this limited, controlled "display" to observe the Watchers' reaction. It was like using a small twig to gently poke a sleeping beast, testing its limits.

The orders were quickly carried out.

Outside the base, the beams from several high-power searchlights began to move slowly, occasionally sweeping across the area where the Watchers' vehicles were parked. The light left brief patches of brightness on their dull camouflage before moving away again.

From the direction of the dock, the massive gantry crane emitted a heavy roar as it began simulated lifting operations. Even though it was running empty, the movement of its giant steel arm still conveyed a powerful sense of force.

A patrol squad of five members drove out of the gate in a light armored vehicle and began a slow cruise along the designated route. The team members wore full protective suits, held their weapons alertly, and moved with standard, vigilant procedures.

Inside the base, everyone held their breath, focusing on any possible reaction from the Watchers.

One minute... two minutes... five minutes...

The three assault vehicles remained completely unresponsive. The searchlight beams swept over them, but they didn't evade; the noise from the gantry crane reached them, but they showed no movement; the patrol vehicle passed by several kilometers away, and they didn't even rotate their turrets (if they had any).

It was as if everything the base did was as insignificant as dust in their eyes, or perhaps it had all been anticipated, failing to spark even a flicker of interest.

This complete, almost dismissive lack of reaction made Lin Feng's heart sink. The opponent's psychological and technological advantage was too great. So great that their own cautious probing probably seemed like child's play to them.

"Stop it," Lin Feng ordered, feeling somewhat powerless. The probe had failed, only highlighting their own weakness even more.

However, less than ten minutes after the external searchlights were turned off, the gantry crane stopped operating, and the patrol vehicle returned to the base—

Wu Yu, who had been continuously monitoring the Guardian-VI core platform, suddenly let out a sound of surprise and doubt.

"Boss! Officer Su! Come quick! The core... the core just moved, I think!"

"What?" Lin Feng and Su Wanqing immediately rushed to the core platform. The dark golden polyhedron was still quietly suspended on the platform, emitting its soft yet vast energy fluctuations, seeming no different from usual.

"What happened?" Lin Feng asked.

"Just now, about thirty seconds ago," Wu Yu pointed at the energy monitoring curve, "the core's energy output exhibited a very, very subtle, brief fluctuation. The frequency was strange, unlike the normal energy cycle... more like... more like..."

"More like what?" Su Wanqing pressed.

"Like a... response?" Wu Yu himself found the statement hard to believe. "As if something lightly touched it, and it gave an almost imperceptible feedback... the fluctuation subsided very quickly."

"A response? To what?" Lin Feng immediately thought of the Watchers outside. "Did they do something?"

"External sensors show no abnormal records!" Sun Wen reported immediately. "The Watchers' vehicles showed no energy surges or special movements!"

Just then, Doctor Chen Wei's voice suddenly came through the communicator from her temporary isolation laboratory (which contained the Black Sphere), filled with extreme excitement and near incoherence:

"It moved! It moved! Oh my god! This reaction! This resonance! It's incredible!"

Lin Feng's heart skipped a beat, and he immediately connected to her line: "Doctor! What moved? Explain clearly!"

"The black egg! No, the ellipsoid!" Chen Wei's voice was shrill with excitement. "Just now! The nearly undetectable energy signal inside it very slightly intensified by a tiny amount! And it produced an extremely brief, extremely weak harmonic resonance with the core's energy fluctuation! It was only for an instant! But I

caught it! I definitely caught it! There's definitely a connection between them! They can sense each other!"

The Black Sphere? The Core? Sensing each other?

Lin Feng felt a shiver run down his spine. These two objects of unknown origin, both containing immense energy and secrets, had just conducted a silent "communication" without anyone noticing?

What triggered this communication? Was it the base's earlier probing actions? Or some undetected covert operation by the Watchers? Or was it spontaneous behavior from the objects themselves?

And what was the content of this "communication"?

Countless questions flooded Lin Feng's mind instantly. He realized that the Guardian-VI core and this unexpectedly acquired Black Sphere were far more complex and potentially dangerous than they had previously imagined.

The base seemed to have acquired a powerful "heart," and now, this "heart" appeared to be resonating in an incomprehensible way with another "organ" from the depths (the Black Sphere).

Was this a blessing or a curse?

"Strengthen monitoring! Record and report immediately any subtle fluctuations in the energy of the core and the Black Sphere!" Lin Feng suppressed the storm of shock in his heart and forced himself to give calm orders.

He looked at the serene core on the platform, then gazed in the direction of the isolation laboratory. Finally, his eyes seemed to pierce through the walls, settling on the three silent black assault vehicles in the distance.

The Watchers... were they merely waiting for our response? Had they also detected this brief "resonance"?

Chapter 70 Who Should I Choose?!

The twenty-four hour deadline hung over their heads like the Sword of Damocles, ticking closer with every passing second. The atmosphere in the base's main control room grew increasingly tense as time slipped away.

Communication with the "Watchers" had reached a stalemate, their probing attempts yielding no results. That bizarre, inexplicable brief resonance between the core and the Black Sphere had only added another layer of immense uncertainty. Everyone was waiting for Lin Feng's final decision.

To refuse, or to accept that seemingly tempting yet shrouded transaction?

Lin Feng had locked himself in the small captain's quarters, tapping his pen incessantly on the desk. The data slate before him displayed Su Wanqing's compiled analysis of the pros and cons of accepting versus rejecting the deal, detailed down to every potential risk and benefit point.

Accepting the deal: Potential gains: Obtain activity data and weakness information on the "Excavator" that could potentially save countless lives. Acquire a danger distribution map of the surrounding star sectors, greatly enhancing future navigation safety.

Understand the situations of other survivor factions to avoid conflicts or seek cooperation opportunities.

Potentially establish a non-hostile, limited communication channel with the "Watchers."

Massive risks: The authenticity of the intelligence is difficult to verify; it could be a trap or misinformation. Promising future sharing of "Stardust" related information may expose core secrets and bring disaster upon themselves. Their actions would be constrained by its "Code," potentially limiting future development.

Equivalent to acknowledging and accepting the "Watchers'" status as "Observers" or even "Judges."

Rejecting the deal: Potential gains: Maintain independence and freedom of action, unbound by external terms. Avoid potential catastrophic consequences resulting from erroneous intelligence. Protect the secret regarding the "Stardust Core."

Massive risks: Lose the only opportunity to obtain critical intelligence, potentially paying a greater price in the future.

May be viewed by the "Watchers" as an "uncontrollable variable," incurring their hostility or stricter monitoring, even "containment." Continue groping in the dark, relying solely on themselves to deal with the "Excavator" and other threats.

Each point was startling. Whichever path he chose, it came with enormous opportunities and abyssal risks.

"Knock knock," Su Wanqing pushed the door open directly, carrying a cup of oil-based beverage.

Lin Feng rubbed his throbbing temples.

"I can't drink anything right now, it's too difficult to choose..."

As the leader, he had to make the decision most beneficial to the base and the entire team. The weight of this decision was almost suffocating.

He recalled every step since obtaining the core, from building a home out of the junk piles, to repeatedly repelling subterranean threats, the smiling faces of his team members, and that "Star of Hope" gradually regaining its vitality... He carried everyone's hopes on his shoulders.

"Lin Feng, these Watchers, they appear neutral but are actually aloof and superior. Their 'Code' is cold and absolute. Making a deal with them is no different than bargaining with a tiger..."

"But rejecting them might mean missing an opportunity to rapidly increase our survival chances, and could even immediately make an unimaginably powerful enemy. Personally, I lean towards doing some basic transactions with them first."

And what did that resonance between the core and the Black Sphere mean? Did it hint at a deeper connection between the "Stardust" legacy and the underground secrets of this land?

How much did the "Watchers" know about this?

Time was running out.

Lin Feng took a deep breath, abruptly stood up, and walked out of the captain's quarters. He entered the main control room, where everyone's gaze instantly focused on him, awaiting the final directive.

"Sun Wen, connect to the 'Watchers' communication frequency." Lin Feng's voice was somewhat hoarse, but his eyes had grown determined.

The communication was quickly re-established, the cold electronic voice arriving as expected: "Stardust Base. Proceed."

"After careful consideration," Lin Feng spoke slowly, weighing every word, "in principle, we are willing to engage in limited information exchange."

Su Wanqing breathed a slight sigh of relief, Wu Yu's face showed delight, while Old Scar frowned deeply but did not voice opposition. They all understood this might be the optimal choice under helpless circumstances.

"However," Lin Feng's tone shifted, becoming firm, "we have several prerequisite conditions."

"Please state them." The electronic voice responded, unsurprised.

"First, as a gesture of goodwill and assurance, we require you to first provide a portion of basic data regarding the 'Excavator's' activity patterns, and the most fundamental intelligence on three known survivor factions nearby (including their approximate locations and whether they exhibit extreme aggression). We must verify the authenticity and value of the intelligence."

"Second, we promise not to actively engage in aggressive expansion, but we reserve all rights to self-defense and counterattacks. This point must be explicitly clear."

"Third, regarding future sharing of 'Stardust' or underground anomaly information, we retain final decision-making and interpretation rights. Furthermore, sharing is conditional upon not endangering our own safety, and we have the right to demand equivalent information or material compensation."

"Fourth, this exchange does not constitute any form of subordinate or dependent relationship. The 'Watchers' must not interfere in our internal affairs in any form."

After Lin Feng finished speaking, the main control room fell into complete silence. These conditions were quite stringent, especially given the other party's absolute technological advantage. This was practically testing their bottom line.

The electronic voice remained silent for a relatively long period, seemingly evaluating these conditions.

A moment later, the voice sounded again:

"Conditions partially acceptable. Regarding the first point: Can provide the 'Excavator's' activity frequency heat map based on the past three standard months and three identified universal deterrence/evasion strategies."

"Can provide the names, approximate locations, and public behavioral tendency assessments of the three nearest survivor factions ('Raiders', 'Engineers', 'Isolationists'). This portion of information can be provided first."

"Regarding the second point: Can confirm. The right to self-defense aligns with the basic definition of observation targets under the Code."

"Regarding the third point: Interpretation rights can belong to you. However, demands for equivalent compensation must be determined based on the specific value of the information and cannot be promised in advance."

"Regarding the fourth point: Acceptable. 'Non-interference' is one of the core principles of the Code."

The other party's response was unexpectedly... flexible? Could it even be considered a concession? They seemed more interested in facilitating this exchange than haggling over details.

"We will verify the information you provide. If verification passes, we will fulfill our promise." Lin Feng said solemnly.

"Reasonable. The information data packet has been sent to your provided backup receiving frequency. Verification time: 12 standard hours. If no objections are raised within 12 standard hours, this information exchange will be considered complete. At that time, please honor your commitment."

The communication cut off again.

Almost simultaneously, Sun Wen shouted, "Received an encrypted data packet! The source is... them!"

"Decrypt it immediately! Begin analysis and verification!" Lin Feng ordered promptly.

The data packet was quickly decrypted, and a large amount of information appeared on the main screen.

It indeed contained that regional "Excavator" activity heat map, marking several high-risk zones and relatively safe time windows.

Several sonic and vibration deterrence strategies against the "Excavator," along with emergency evasion suggestions upon encounter; and brief introductions with approximate activity ranges for the three factions: "Raiders" (aggressive), "Engineers" (technical-oriented, relatively neutral), "Isolationists" (xenophobic, self-isolating).

All this information resembled some kind of "introductory manual"—basic, but enough to be eye-opening, especially the parts about the "Excavator." Many descriptions matched their previous experiences!

"Immediately cross-reference with our historical records!" Su Wanqing began operating quickly.

Everyone became busy, starting to verify the authenticity of this information. Lin Feng's heart remained suspended. He knew the real test was only beginning now. Whether this intelligence was a lifesaving straw or the first step of bait would soon become clear.

And outside the base, the Watchers' assault vehicle continued waiting in silence.

Chapter 71 The Doctor's New Discovery

The data package provided by the "Watchers" was like a massive rock thrown into a calm lake, creating huge ripples within Stardust Base.

In the main control room, everyone was working intensely, comparing, analyzing, and verifying every piece of information.

Su Wanqing was coordinating the efforts, her eyes rapidly switching between different screens, her voice calm and clear:

"The activity heat map of the 'Excavator' shows an 81% match with our encounter records from the past three months. Two of the three marked high-frequency activity zones overlap with locations where we suffered large-scale attacks. The third... is located about one hundred and twenty kilometers southeast of us, not yet explored."

"Deterrence Plan A: Specific frequency infrasound pulses.

Plan B: High-intensity directional vibrations.

Plan C: High-explosive energy release to create shockwaves..."

Old Scar looked at these plans with a deeply furrowed brow, "Sounds somewhat reasonable, like methods to drive away large subterranean creatures. But we've never conducted such targeted tests before."

"Alright, Sun Wen, first tell us the basic information you can gather about these two factions!"

"Yes, Boss! Well, this faction called the Raiders—their activity range is northwest, and their description matches that group of highly aggressive bandits we encountered before, the ones driving modified raider vehicles."

"As for the 'Engineers'—they're northeast, intelligence shows they occupy a small abandoned industrial station, skilled at repairs and modifications, more inclined to trade than raid, but very guarded. The 'Isolationists' are deep in a canyon to the direction, with very little intelligence, only mentioning they're extremely xenophobic, and anyone approaching suffers silent, unseen attacks."

Sun Wen reported, "These directional details roughly match the sporadic signal sources we've been receiving."

It seemed the preliminary verification results were surprising—these basic intelligence pieces appeared to be genuine.

"They actually gave us real information?"

Wu Yu found it hard to believe, "Just for our vague promise?"

"Perhaps for these 'Watchers,' this information is as insignificant as tossing us a breadcrumb."

Lin Feng's expression was grave,

"Or, they need to establish the most basic 'trust' first, to pave the way for obtaining what they truly want later." He never believed their motives were that simple.

"The 12-hour verification window is short, we can't verify all information on-site."

Su Wanqing pointed out the key issue, "Currently, we can only make logical consistency judgments based on existing data. Risks still exist, especially regarding the part about the 'Excavator's' weaknesses. Without actual testing, we absolutely cannot trust it lightly."

Lin Feng nodded: "Correct. Reply to them that the basic intelligence has passed preliminary verification, the first phase of the transaction is complete. But we reiterate that the decision-making power for future information sharing remains in our hands."

The message was sent out. Soon, they received a concise reply:

"Received. Confirmed. We will continue our observation mission."

After that, the "Watchers" fell silent again, as if they had merely completed a routine record.

Although the first contact with the "Watchers" had temporarily concluded, the tense atmosphere within the base hadn't completely dissipated. And that unexpectedly obtained black ellipsoid remained a knot in everyone's hearts.

While most people's attention was still focused on the "Watchers" intelligence, Dr. Chen Wei, who had been "exiled" to the Isolation Laboratory and could only conduct external research, made a strange, unsettling discovery.

She didn't have permission to conduct any stimulating experiments on the black sphere, but that didn't stop her from using every possible means for observation.

She practically stayed by the isolation box without eating or drinking, observing its surface patterns with high-precision microscopes, capturing any possible internal sounds with ultra-sensitive microphones, and monitoring its most subtle changes with every non-invasive sensor she could think of.

Her persistence paid off. During a several-hour-long acoustic monitoring session, she captured an extremely faint, very low-frequency, regular pulse that almost blended with environmental noise.

This pulse was very strange—it wasn't an energy fluctuation, but a pure, physical, slight vibration, with long and irregular intervals, sometimes occurring every few hours, sometimes every dozen minutes, with varying intensity.

What surprised her even more was that when she tried to convert these faint vibration signals into low-frequency sound and play them back, the sound... actually somewhat resembled... a heartbeat?

A slow, heavy heartbeat, as if coming from the abyss!

This discovery made her hair stand on end, yet she trembled with excitement. She immediately reported this finding to Lin Feng and Su Wanqing.

"Heartbeat?" Lin Feng felt a chill run down his spine when he heard this description, "Are you sure?"

"Just a metaphor! A metaphor!" Chen Wei explained excitedly over the communicator, "Its vibration pattern is very similar to biological heartbeat characteristics, but much slower in frequency, and the fluctuation pattern seems... seems to have a faint correlation with the geological environmental pressure outside the base! When pressure changes, its 'heartbeat' rhythm also undergoes extremely subtle alterations!"

She pulled up the data comparison chart: "Look! This is the geological stress sensor data from the past 24 hours, and this is the vibration frequency chart of the black sphere! Although the amplitude of change is minimal, there's a correlation in trends!"

On the chart, the fluctuations of the two curves did show some vague synchronization.

"What does this mean?" Su Wanqing frowned and asked.

"It means it's not an inanimate object! It's... perceiving! Responding to external environmental pressure!"

Chen Wei's voice carried the ecstasy of discovering treasure, "It might be some kind of biological egg we can't comprehend? Or some kind of subterranean environment sensor? Its shell is so sturdy, perhaps to protect some delicate organ or device inside that can sense the earth's pulse! My god! This is incredible!"

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged glances, both seeing shock and concern in each other's eyes.

An "egg" or "device" that could respond to subterranean stress? It appeared near the energy leak point and could briefly resonate with the "Stardust Core"?

This thing's importance probably far exceeded their previous estimations.

"Continue monitoring, but absolutely no stimulation allowed!" Lin Feng warned sternly again, "Especially don't let it have any form of 'communication' with the core again!"

Outside the base, the red mist still lingered. He had a premonition that this black sphere might attract even bigger trouble than the "Watchers."

Chapter 72 My God, Strawberry!

The initial confrontation with the "Watchers" had temporarily subsided. Although doubts still lingered, the practical benefits brought by that intelligence were undeniably real.

Stardust Base was like a tightly wound clockwork mechanism, beginning to fully digest the results of this "transaction."

The biggest change came from the entire team's understanding of the "Excavator."

Although those deterrence plans hadn't been tested in actual combat and couldn't be used lightly, that activity heat map became the highest guiding principle for the base's external operations planning.

In the past, going out was like blind men touching an elephant, relying purely on luck and Old Scar's experience. Now, they had a clear "map." The marked high-frequency danger zones were permanently designated as no-go areas, while relatively safe time windows were fully utilized.

An outbound collection team, following the heat map, successfully avoided a potential large-scale "Excavator" activity period. They brought back a large amount of urgently needed alloy materials from a high-value metal ruin that they previously wouldn't have dared to venture deep into. The entire process was thrilling but ultimately safe, greatly boosting morale.

"This map is damn useful!"

After one successful collection mission, the team leader couldn't help but exclaim over the communication channel, "Before, going out felt completely uncertain. Now at least we know where we can poke around and where we can't!"

"Then let's keep using these maps to make money, hahahaha!"

This confidence based on information felt more reassuring than having a few more weapons.

Internal construction also entered the fast lane. The abundant energy provided by the "Guardian-VI" core allowed many projects that were previously just blueprints to be implemented.

The defense system upgrade led by Su Wanqing was completed first. The energy shield around the base's perimeter, although far less powerful than the core's own formidable force field, now covered twice the area with greatly improved stability, sufficient to withstand small to medium-scale attacks and the erosion of harsh environments.

The power supply lines for the automated turrets were modified, increasing their firing rate and power by 30%. The fire control systems also received upgrades, making them more responsive.

The biggest surprise came from the Hydroponic Farm. With sufficient energy, lighting, temperature, and nutrient solution circulation were all precisely controlled. With Wu Yu's help (he managed material distribution), Little Ears managed to acquire some pre-war preserved seeds for various crops that were still in decent condition.

Today, the first experimental batch of planted strawberries actually bore fruit! Although there were only a few berries and the red coloring wasn't entirely even, this was undoubtedly explosive news in a base that usually only had compressed food and a few leafy greens!

"Boss! Sister Su! Look! Strawberries! They're strawberries!" Little Ears, her small face flushed with excitement, cradled the precious fruits in her palm and ran to the main control room to show them off.

The enticing red color and faint fruity fragrance instantly attracted everyone's attention. Even the usually composed Su Wanqing revealed a surprised smile.

"Holy cow! This stuff is way rarer than canned goods!" Anvil smacked his lips, his eyes glued to the berries.

Lin Feng picked up one strawberry and examined it carefully, feeling deeply moved. This wasn't just fruit—it represented the base transitioning from struggling for survival toward truly "living." This was the taste of hope.

He carefully divided the strawberries into several portions, allowing each core member to taste a small piece. The long-forgotten sweet and sour flavor exploded in their mouths, seemingly dispelling the gloom that had hung over their hearts throughout this apocalyptic era.

"Little Ears, you've accomplished a great deed! Keep working hard, strive for strawberry freedom!" Lin Feng encouraged with a smile.

"Mission guaranteed!" Little Ears happily saluted and then skipped back to the farm.

The repair work on the "Star of Hope," led by Wrench, entered its final sprint phase. With the complete technical manual and nearly unlimited energy, the debugging progress of many core systems advanced by leaps and bounds daily.

The engine underwent its third full-power ignition test, running smoothly with output power reaching 95% of the design standard! Modular debugging of the navigation system, life support system, and weapon system (although currently only basic self-defense weapons) was completed one by one.

The repair and reinforcement of the ship's outer hull were fully completed, with brand-new composite armor plates gleaming with a cold luster under the lights. Internal pipeline installation was finished, and all cabin sealing tests passed.

Wrench even led the engineering team in painting the Stardust Base emblem—a dust cloud encircling stars—onto the spacecraft's hull. Seeing the fresh emblem, everyone involved in the repair work felt immensely proud.

"Two more weeks at most, two weeks!" Wrench wiped the sweat and grease from his face, confidently assuring Lin Feng, "We'll be ready for the final hull structural stress test and short-distance hover test flight!"

The joy of imminent victory permeated the entire base.

However, amidst this thriving atmosphere, Sun Wen once again intercepted an unusual signal.

This signal didn't come from distant deep space, nor was it the cold broadcast style of the "Watchers." Instead, it originated from the general direction of the "Engineers" faction mentioned in the Watchers' intelligence—the northeast abandoned industrial station.

The signal strength was weak, intermittent, using an old but widely used industrial communication protocol. The content wasn't a distress call, but more like a... tender announcement?

"...Seeking emergency repair solutions for high-purity energy transmission lines... especially replacement of superconducting materials at main line Node III... remuneration negotiable... payment available in rare metals, precision machined parts, or... energy coins... repeating..."

The signal kept broadcasting the same content.

"Engineers? They're seeking technical help?" Wu Yu stroked his chin. "Seems they've run into trouble. High-purity energy transmission lines... that's no ordinary technical job."

"The intelligence said they're skilled at repairs and modifications, but also very wary. For them to ask for external help now suggests they're in serious trouble," Su Wanqing analyzed.

"This is an opportunity," Lin Feng said, a gleam in his eyes. "If the intelligence is accurate and the 'Engineers' lean toward transactions, this might be our window to establish contact with them. If we can help solve their problem, we could not only gain remuneration but also establish a potential channel for technical exchange and material trade."

Risks equally existed. This could be a trap, or the "Engineers" might not be as friendly as the intelligence described.

"Should we send someone to make contact?" Old Scar asked, his tone cautious.

Lin Feng pondered for a moment, then shook his head. "No, not direct contact for now. Sun Wen, try responding to them using the same frequency and protocol. Tell them we might possess the technical solution they need, but we require more detailed technical parameters and on-site environmental data to make a determination. Let's start with remote technical probing to gauge their reaction and sincerity."

This was a relatively safe approach. It could test the other party's authenticity while demonstrating their own technical capabilities, paving the way for potential future contact.

Chapter 73 Fool!

Sun Wen followed Lin Feng's instructions, adjusted the communication equipment, and began sending a reply message using the same industrial protocol frequency toward the location of the "Engineers."

The message content was carefully crafted by Su Wanqing and Lin Feng, striving to display technical confidence while maintaining sufficient caution and a business-like attitude:

"To the 'Engineers': We have received your request regarding energy transmission line repairs.

We possess the relevant technical capabilities and can provide solutions.

However, we require the following detailed information for assessment:

1. Specific model specifications and degree of aging of the damaged lines;
2. Current energy leakage rate and thermal stress distribution map of Node III;
3. Scan data of the surrounding structural environment;
4. Specific parameters of available replacement superconducting materials.

After receiving the detailed information, we will provide a preliminary repair plan and quotation within 12 standard hours. — Stardust Base"

After the message was sent, the base control room fell into a brief period of waiting. Everyone understood this wasn't merely a simple technical inquiry, but the first remote probing and capability assessment between two unfamiliar factions.

How would the other party respond? Would they ignore it? Would they respond with suspicion and questioning? Or would they readily provide the information?

About half an hour later, just as everyone thought the other party might disregard them or needed more time for discussion, the reply signal arrived!

The transmission speed was rapid, and the data packet was far larger than expected!

"They've replied! The data volume is massive!" Sun Wen reported with some surprise, quickly beginning to receive and decode it.

The data packet contained not only all the detailed technical parameters and scan maps Lin Feng's team had requested, but also included substantial additional structural blueprints, historical maintenance records, and several surveillance video clips from different angles! The professionalism and detail level made it resemble a complete project bidding document!

"Wow... these 'Engineers' are quite straightforward?" Wu Yu clicked his tongue while watching the complex data scroll across the screen, "Aren't they afraid we might be scammers or have ulterior motives?"

Su Wanqing quickly browsed through the data, her eyes growing brighter: "No, this isn't being straightforward. This is confidence. What they've provided are technical details, but the core structural diagrams and energy network distribution maps have certainly been processed or weren't provided. They believe that even with this information, we can't threaten them. Simultaneously, they're using this method to display their professionalism and the complexity of the problems they're facing, almost like testing our capabilities."

She pointed at a frozen frame from one of the videos: "Look here, the interface at Node III has severe ablation damage, and the energy leakage has caused serious local material lattice degradation. Conventional welding and replacement processes would indeed be difficult to perform here, requiring very precise energy focusing repair technology or... non-standard solutions."

The challenge was now placed before Stardust Base. The other party had presented the problem and the data—now it was their turn to demonstrate their capabilities.

"Wrench! Doctor! Both of you, come here!" Lin Feng immediately summoned the technical team.

Wrench looked at the complex blueprints and ablated interfaces, his eyebrows knitted into a frown: "Troublesome... really troublesome... This requires specialized field flow welding equipment and superconducting environment maintenance devices... where would we get that kind of equipment..."

"Fool!" Doctor Chen Wei snorted with disdain, pushed Wrench aside, leaned close to the screen, and stared with shining eyes at the ablated interface and energy leakage data, "Always thinking with old methods! Look at this energy leakage pattern! It's clearly local overload caused by resonant frequency loss of control! Why repair it? Why not utilize it?"

"Utilize it?" Lin Feng asked, puzzled.

"Exactly!" Chen Wei exclaimed excitedly, gesturing animatedly, "Since that node's material properties have already changed, forming a natural energy resonant cavity, why force it back to its original state? What a waste! Just install a feedback controller directly, guide the leaking energy out, and turn it into a temporary energy amplifier or pulse generator! This solves the leakage problem while giving them an extra energy output port for free! Although unstable, with some processing, it would be more than sufficient to power their backup systems or peripheral defense facilities! This is the optimal solution!"

Her thinking was wildly imaginative, completely jumping beyond conventional repair scope, carrying an almost insane creativity.

Wrench listened, dumbfounded: "This... would this work? Isn't it too risky? If control fails..."

"Theoretically... feasible." Su Wanqing fell into deep thought, quickly performing simulation calculations on her data pad, "Using the existing leakage energy to construct a negative feedback loop... requires extremely precise energy field control algorithms... but this is precisely what we might possess." She glanced in the direction of the Guardian-VI core.

Lin Feng instantly understood Su Wanqing's meaning. With the powerful computing capability and energy control precision of the Stardust Core, realizing the doctor's crazy idea might actually be possible!

"Let's do it!" Lin Feng made the decision, "Wanqing, you're responsible for algorithm simulation and safety verification. Doctor, you provide theoretical support and solution details. Wrench, you're responsible for converting the solution into industrial standard language and blueprints that the 'Engineers' can understand. We're going to give them an... unexpected solution!"

The team immediately began operating efficiently. Su Wanqing mobilized core computing power for simulations; Chen Wei chattered incessantly while explaining her theories, occasionally writing down complex formulas; Wrench grumbled "this is too crazy" while faithfully drawing up the blueprints.

Several hours later, a detailed, illustrated repair/transformation plan with an extremely bold core concept, along with a "quotation" based on the base's current technical capabilities (embellished and exaggerated), was sent back to the "Engineers."

The plan clearly stated: This solution is an innovative approach, not traditional repair, requiring assessment of risks by their technical personnel. Stardust Base could provide remote technical guidance, but implementation needed to be completed by them.

After the information was sent, everyone in the base grew even more tense. Would the other party accept this unconventional solution?

This time, the wait was longer. It wasn't until nearly twenty-four hours later that the other party's reply finally came through.

The reply message was brief, only two sentences:

"Solution astonishing. Feasible. How payment?"

No questions, no doubts, directly jumping to the payment phase! And the tone seemed to carry a kind of... barely suppressed surprise and appreciation?

In Stardust Base's control room, after a brief silence, low cheers erupted.

Chapter 74 The Encirclement of the Beast Tide

The initial connection established with the "Engineers," based on mutual technical appreciation, had the base members buzzing with excitement.

They promptly paid the first "consultation fee"—a batch of high-precision machined parts and a type of special ceramic material scarce at Stardust Base, used for reinforcing energy conduits. This tangible gain proved the possibility and value of external communication.

Wu Yu was grinning from ear to ear, clutching those shiny parts as if they were treasures. Wrench had already started figuring out how to use this new batch of materials to further improve the pipeline efficiency of the "Star of Hope."

However, this optimistic mood didn't last long. The threat from the depths had never truly receded.

Sensors continuously monitoring geological signals began transmitting unsettling data.

"Boss Lin, Sister Su, look at this."

A Liang, responsible for monitoring, projected a data stream onto the main screen, his expression grave,

"In the past 48 hours, the frequency of micro-tremors within a fifteen-kilometer radius around the base has increased by 300%. Although the magnitudes are all small, this background noise level increase is highly unusual."

On the screen, the curve representing vibrations had clearly become much denser, like a net constantly tightening.

"Shouldn't things have quieted down for a while after the energy leak point was shielded?" Lin Feng asked with a furrowed brow.

"Theoretically, yes. But these tremors... don't seem to be because of that leak point."

Su Wanqing called up different monitoring modes, "Look at the energy spectrum, it's more chaotic. The source seems deeper, and... more dispersed. It doesn't resemble the activity of one large individual, more like..."

She paused, finding a suitable analogy: "It's as if the entire subterranean ecosystem has been stirred up. Countless small and medium-sized individuals are all restless."

This description seemed to drop the temperature in the command center by a few degrees.

"Is it the Black Sphere?" Lin Feng immediately thought of the object in the Isolation Laboratory, "Has its 'heartbeat' changed?"

"Yes!" Chen Wei's voice immediately cut in from the laboratory communicator, carrying the distinctive excitement of a researcher, "Its vibration frequency has noticeably accelerated over the past two days! The amplitude isn't large, but the trend is very clear! And its correlation with environmental pressure is stronger! It can definitely sense the changes underground! It might even be... some kind of catalyst or resonance source?"

"Doctor! Don't make wild guesses without evidence!" Lin Feng interrupted her, but the unease in his heart grew stronger.

Old Scar watched the constantly flashing warning signals on the sensors, his face gloomy: "Whether it's because of it or not, something big is definitely happening underground. Group agitation on this scale is often a precursor to a large-scale attack."

As if to confirm his suspicion, a deep, sustained, low hum came from deep within the base. It wasn't the sharp grinding sound of the "Excavator" drilling from before, but more like the heart-palpitating hum emitted when some gigantic engine starts up deep, deep underground.

The humming lasted over ten seconds before gradually fading, but the sense of oppression it brought lingered.

"Sound source depth... exceeds our detection limit!" Sun Wen attempted to track the source but failed.

"Initiate the highest defense protocol immediately!" Lin Feng ordered without hesitation, "All external activities cease! Personnel withdraw! Activate defense systems fully! Prepare the 'Star of Hope' dock for emergency impact resistance!"

The piercing alarm once again echoed through the base. Team members who had just relaxed quickly put down their work and rushed to their posts at top speed. Heavy blast doors descended one after another, segmenting the base into independent defensive units. The energy shields brightened to maximum intensity, emitting a powerful hum.

A tense atmosphere, like the heavy stillness before a storm, gripped everyone's hearts.

This sense of threat was different from any before. It wasn't a clear attack from one direction, but a restless, all-encompassing, unknown agitation from the entire underground.

The heat map provided by the "Watchers" seemed somewhat ineffective now, as the agitation appeared to be everywhere.

The three "Watchers" assault vehicles that had been parked outside the base also seemed to detect the abnormal changes underground. For the first time, they took active action—not attacking or retreating, but all three vehicles simultaneously activated some unknown equipment.

The dull camouflage on their surfaces deepened, as if they completely merged with the surroundings. Simultaneously, an extremely faint but very high-frequency energy field spread out from them, forming an invisible triangular zone that enveloped them. That energy field didn't seem to be for defense, but more like a... more thorough concealment and isolation?

They were like reefs drawing in their wings before the storm, turning themselves into cold, hard stones, preparing to silently endure everything that was coming.

"They're preparing too... but they don't seem to plan on leaving, or intervening?" Su Wanqing observed their actions and analyzed.

"What exactly do these guys want to see..." Lin Feng clenched his fist.

Time passed minute by minute. The underground hum and micro-tremors came and went intermittently, as if some colossal being was tossing and turning in its sleep, ready to awaken at any moment.

The oppressive wait tortured nerves more than a direct attack.

Suddenly!

Northwest of the base, about five kilometers away, the ground abruptly collapsed into a massive sinkhole without warning! Dust plumed into the sky! Immediately after, it wasn't the anticipated "Excavator" drill head that emerged, but countless large and small, variously shaped, yet all ferocious-looking subterranean creatures swarming out of the sinkhole like a tidal wave!

Some resembled giant ants magnified a thousandfold, others looked like worms clad in rock armor, and some were completely indescribable, twisted forms made of rock and crystal! Their target seemed unclear; they just spread out frantically in all directions, destroying and devouring everything in their path!

A beast tide! A true subterranean beast tide!

"Report! A large number of unidentified subterranean creatures spotted northwest! Numbers... numbers impossible to estimate! Surging towards the base!" The scout's voice held a trace of panic.

Almost simultaneously, similar reports came from other directions! The base seemed surrounded by the beast tide!

"Open fire at will! All auto-turrets! Intercept at full capacity!"

Old Scar's roar echoed through the comms channel.

Outside the base perimeter, blazing energy beams and explosive flashes instantly lit up, weaving a net of death that frantically harvested the surging subterranean creatures. The roar of explosions, the shrieks of creatures, and the shattering of rocks were deafening.

The battle instantly turned white-hot.

However, Lin Feng's heart sank. Although this beast tide was terrifying, it seemed... just the appetizer? The unsettling hum from underground hadn't stopped; instead, it seemed... closer?

Chapter 75 Treat Him Like a Dog!

The underground beast tide crashed against Stardust Base's defenses like a dam-breaching flood, assaulting from multiple directions at once. The automatic turrets vomited fire in a frenzied cascade, energy beams weaving into a dense net of death that shredded the monsters at the front into pieces. Explosive flashes and creature debris sprayed everywhere, and the acrid smell of burning and sulfur crept faintly into the base despite the filtration systems.

"Maintain fire! Don't conserve energy! Priority: eliminate large targets!"

"Wu Yu, have the robots form a continuous ammunition supply line. Even if their legs get torn, the ammo line must not break!!!"

"Got it. Treat them like dogs, make them our dogs; after the battle I'll fix them back up one by one!!"

"Hey!"

Old Scar's steady voice echoed over the defense channel, directing firing priorities for the various gun positions. The fighters relied on fortifications, shooting down the stragglers with every weapon available. The hum of pulse rifles, the roar of heavy weapons, and the beasts' hisses braided together into a brutal symphony of survival.

Although the beast tide struck fiercely, it remained for the moment within the control range of the base's overwhelming firepower. The subterranean creatures seemed to lack unified command, surging mostly on blind instinct.

"The pressure's huge, but we can hold!" Anvil shouted into the channel while operating a twin heavy cannon, "It's just that there are way too many of them! We can't possibly kill them all!!"

"Their target doesn't seem to be only us..." Su Wanqing stared at the tactical map, where red dots representing monsters almost covered the entire area around the base, "They're like... fleeing?"

Indeed, many of the creatures merely charged blindly, some trampling each other as if something even more terrifying were driving them forward.

At that moment, the dull subterranean humming abruptly intensified! It stopped being intermittent and became a continuous, scalp-tingling low-frequency rumble! The whole base began to tremble slightly, dust trickling from the ceiling.

"Energy readings spiking rapidly! Source... is directly beneath us! Depth... still rising fast!" A Liang's voice trembled with alarm.

"All units! Brace for impact!" Lin Feng bellowed.

Before his words finished--

Boom!!! The ground beneath the base felt as if a gigantic bomb had been detonated! The entire facility shook violently, like a fragile ship in a violent storm! Lights in the control room flickered wildly, alarms screamed in chorus! Some sections even emitted groaning sounds as structures bore the strain!

An unimaginable, unprecedented colossal shockwave erupted from the deepest layers of the crust!

"Hold steady!" Old Scar dug his hands into the console and roared hoarsely as the shaking intensified.

Outside, turret fire briefly fell into disarray, and a few swift, sickle-shaped arthropods seized the chance to rush to within a hundred meters of the outer wall, only to be picked off by an alert sniper's precise shots.

"Stress on the lower rock layers is spiking sharply! Some support points are exceeding design load!" Su Wanqing reported the grim news, fingers flying across the control panel as she tried to activate backup structural supports.

"It's the Excavator! It has to be! But it's never attacked from directly beneath us like this!" Wu Yu's voice was edged with fear.

Amid the ground-shaking, hearts pounding chaos--

Hum!!! A deeper, more magnificent rumble erupted from the platform at the heart of the base, the Guardian-VI! This time it was no longer a faint fluctuation or a brief resonance, but a true, full-scale awakening! The dark-gold polyhedron suddenly flared with a brilliant yet not blinding azure light. The glow flowed like a living thing, instantly filling the entire control room and, through observation windows and passages, spreading into every corner of the base!

Countless more complex, esoteric energy runes bloomed and died within the light flows, radiating an awe-inspiring, vast fluctuation.

[Detected anomalous geological activity... Threat level assessment: Catastrophic...]

[Complies with Emergency Response Protocol VII... Initiating full-domain protection mode...]

[Energy output power elevated to 35%... Constructing 'Immovable Bedrock' domain...]

The cold system prompts sounded more urgent than ever, reverberating directly inside every base member's mind!

With the prompts, a far heavier, far denser azure energy shield expanded abruptly from the Guardian-VI at the core! It was no longer a simple sphere; it took the shape of an inverted giant bowl, precisely enclosing the entire Stardust Base and a significant depth of the rock strata beneath it!

The instant the shield formed, the terrifying subterranean impact detonated with full force! Boom!!! It was as if two planets collided underground! The horrific shockwave, mixed with unimaginable energy eddies, slammed into the freshly formed azure shield's inner wall!

The shield's surface immediately rippled with unprecedented, tsunami-like turbulence, the light flashing wildly as if it might shatter at any moment! Internal vibrations peaked; everyone was knocked askew, clutching fixtures to avoid being flung away!

"Hold! You must hold!" someone screamed, a voice swallowed by the deafening roar and structural groans.

The Guardian-VI's core light wavered, clearly under extreme pressure. Yet it did not break. That seemingly thin veil of light endured the destructive force that could have blasted the whole base to dust!

The shockwave raged on for over ten seconds before finally abating. When the last tremors faded, the interior of the base was a wreck, but the structure had held! Everyone was shaken, breathing hard, their faces etched with the terror and bewilderment of surviving a near-apocalyptic blow.

Outside, the azure "Immovable Bedrock" shield still hovered, though its brilliance had dimmed and ripples of energy occasionally flickered across its surface, a testament to the ferocity of the earlier assault.

The beast tide seemed cowed by this sudden display of cosmic authority; their assault faltered noticeably. Many creatures looked around in panic and even began tearing one another apart. The once-harrowing subterranean hum gradually receded after that earth-shaking outburst, as if that terrible power itself needed to catch its breath.

"Is... is it over?" Anvil panted uncertainly.

"For now... it appears so..." Old Scar said, watching sensor readouts as underground energy levels slowly declined.

Everyone remained on edge. If Guardian-VI had not fully activated at the crucial moment, Stardust Base might have been completely wiped from this land.

"Quick! Assess damage! Rescue the wounded! Reinforce structures!" Lin Feng hauled himself up from the ground, suppressing his churning blood and issuing a cascade of orders. The crisis seemed to have eased for the time being, but vigilance was mandatory.

However, just as everyone prepared to move—

Woommmmm!!! A distinct, equally heart-shaking hum erupted from the direction of the Isolation Laboratory! The sound was sharp and urgent, filled with a kind of... anxiety? Or perhaps... yearning? It was the Black Ellipsoid!

Almost simultaneously, the Guardian-VI core on the platform reacted again! It projected a slender, solid blue beam toward the Isolation Laboratory, instantly piercing through walls and connecting directly to the tightly sealed black sphere!

[Detected synchronous calling signal... Source confirmed: Deep Rock Beacon (inactive)...]

[Attempting to establish link... Attempting energy guidance... Permission verification passed (temporary)...]

The system prompts chimed again. Through monitoring screens, everyone watched in horror as the black ellipsoid inside its containment chamber lit up; the intricate patterns on its surface glowed, bathing it in a dim, deep purple light wholly different from the Stardust Core. It vibrated violently, as if trying desperately to break free!

It and the core were engaging in a profound exchange beyond anyone's comprehension! This interaction's intensity far exceeded the negligible resonance from before.

Dr. Chen Wei stared at the wildly fluctuating data on the monitors, eyes wide, whispering, "My god... they aren't just communicating... the core is... trying to activate it?! That black egg... it's a beacon?!"

Chapter 76 "The Engineers" Treasury

The earth-shaking strike underground and the full-scale eruption of the Guardian-VI core left everyone at Stardust Base shaken to their bones.

Although the immediate danger had passed, that apocalyptic force delivered a crystal-clear message: this land was no longer safe, they had to leave as soon as possible!

Repairing the Star of Hope was raised to the highest priority. Wrench led the engineering team through day-and-night final system calibrations and internal integrations. Lin Feng held the densely packed "final missing parts list" that Wrench had handed in, his brow tightly furrowed.

There weren't many items on the list, but each one was extremely critical and hard to obtain:

1. Primary faster-than-light engine jump calibrator core (Model: XC-7b): This is the precision core component that guarantees accurate spatial jumps for the ship, and it cannot tolerate any margin of error.
2. Secondary bridge main control data processing unit (Model: Delta-9): A backup control core, ensuring the ship won't be completely paralyzed if the main control system fails.
3. Three large carbon-nitrogen exchange modules for the environmental circulation systems: Key to maintaining the ship's internal atmosphere balance; without them, long-distance travel would be suicide.

None of these items could be scrounged from scraps.

"Those items are probably only stocked by large shelters or major pre-war facilities," Su Wanqing said, staring at the list with a heavy tone, "or... by factions with the right channels."

Everyone's gazes, without coordination, turned to the northeast — the direction where the Engineers were located.

A preliminary trust had already been established through remote technical cooperation with the Engineers, and they admired Stardust Base's "nontraditional" technical abilities. It was time to turn that technical exchange into a real, concrete deal.

Lin Feng personally drafted a transmission and sent it directly to the Engineers' contact frequency.

The message was blunt: identify themselves, show some technical capability, then attach the missing parts list and ask whether the Engineers had supplies or acquisition channels. He offered an almost irresistible price —

In addition to the previously agreed energy credits and metal materials, they added an extra item: the blueprint for the Guardian-VI core optimized for large industrial equipment, an efficient energy management system.

The value of that blueprint far exceeded the parts themselves. It meant lower energy consumption, higher output, and more stable operation — priceless to any technology-centered faction.

After the message was sent, the wait became unbearably tense. Every minute felt stretched.

Hours later, a reply came. The tone remained cool and professional, but the content made Lin Feng's heart race:

"List received. XC-7b calibrator core, out of stock; this model requires customization, our production capacity does not include it. Delta-9 processing unit, one in stock. Large carbon-nitrogen exchange modules, five sets in stock."

"We can exchange the blueprint for one processing unit and two exchange modules. For additional units, extra payment required: 500 kilograms of zero-element alloy, or equivalent high-purity energy crystals."

They had stock! They really did have supplies! Although the critical calibrator core was missing, the other two indispensable parts were in stock, and in respectable quantities!

"Agree to them! Agree right away!"

Wu Yu shouted excitedly, "Give them the blueprint! Didn't we find some zero-element alloy in the last ruins? About four hundred kilograms, give it all! Energy crystals... we don't have many either, but we can scrape some together!"

Lin Feng forced himself to stay calm and bargain: "Reply: Agree to exchange the blueprint for the processing unit and two exchange modules. We can pay 400 kilograms of zero-element alloy plus 50 units of standard energy crystals. Inquire whether they know any possible source for the XC-7b core; that information can also be purchased."

Soon, the response arrived.

"Deal accepted. Coordinates and material handover procedure will be sent shortly. Regarding the XC-7b core: according to unverified information, the Raiders' flagship Storm may hold a spare part. Warning: that faction is extremely dangerous, information reliability below 70%."

"Raiders?! The faction marked in the intel as highly aggressive? Their flagship?"

Lin Feng's stomach dropped for a moment, but then his gaze hardened. This was the final missing piece; no matter how dangerous, they had to try!

"Prepare the trade materials! Old Scar, assemble the strongest escort team and prepare to execute the handover! Wrench, you have 24 hours, thoroughly inspect any returned parts! Everyone else, keep pushing to repair the ship!"

The base sprang into high gear again. Wu Yu counted their precious zero-element alloy and energy crystals with a pang; Old Scar picked his team and checked equipment; Wrench rubbed his hands, ready to dive into work the moment the parts arrived. For the final voyage to the stars, they had to accept every risk.

Chapter 77: Trade? Or Seize?

The transaction location with the "Engineers" was set at a small, long-abandoned transfer station located in the buffer zone between both sides' spheres of influence.

The terrain here was relatively open, facilitating observation and also allowing for withdrawal if accidents occurred.

Old Scar personally led the team. Three all-terrain vehicles upgraded with heavy armor and weapons formed the escort convoy, protecting the transport vehicle loaded with zero-element alloy and energy crystals, arriving punctually at the agreed location.

The other side also appeared on time. Also three vehicles, but with a completely different style: thick armor, rugged exteriors, exposed pipelines shimmering with energy glow, full of practical industrial feel.

The personnel in the vehicles all wore full-body protective suits, donned heavy helmets, making their faces invisible, silent and vigilant.

The transaction process was tense and efficient. Both sides' vehicles stopped a hundred meters apart, used instruments to mutually scan and confirm no large-scale ambushes, then each dispatched one small vehicle to drive to the midpoint.

No pleasantries, no unnecessary words. Personnel from both sides got out, silently exchanged materials.

The Stardust Base side handed over the alloy and crystals in sealed containers, while the "Engineers" side handed over two large protective cases and one slightly smaller precision instrument case.

Old Scar signaled the accompanying technician to conduct an immediate quick inspection on site. Opening the cases, the Delta-9 processing unit, though showing some signs of age, had intact interfaces. Preliminary power-on via portable detector showed basic functions were normal. The carbon-nitrogen exchange module was brand new, the model perfectly matched.

"The goods are fine," the technician reported quietly.

Old Scar nodded toward the other side. The person leading the other team also gave a slight nod, then without hesitation turned around, got in the vehicle, and withdrew. The entire process took less than ten minutes, so oppressive it made one breathless.

Only when the "Engineers" convoy completely disappeared from view did Old Scar relax, ordering: "Pack it up! Return immediately!"

The convoy carried the precious components back to base at maximum speed.

Wrench, who had been waiting for a long time, immediately rushed over with the engineering team, carefully escorting the components into the dock as if welcoming a bride, beginning more detailed inspections and pre-installation preparations.

The transaction was successfully completed, the gains substantial. But the information about the XC-7b calibrator core provided by the "Engineers" hung over Lin Feng's heart like a dark cloud.

The Raiders' flagship "Storm"...

According to fragmentary information provided by the "Engineers" and weak signals Sun Wen could capture, the "Storm" wasn't stationary somewhere, but constantly patrolled within a vast area, its movements unpredictable. It was itself a massive mobile fortress and raiding platform, powerfully armed, its members fierce and tough.

Assault and seize? Like an egg striking a rock.

Infiltrate and steal? The other side was heavily guarded, success probability was slim.

Lin Feng rubbed his forehead, feeling a wave of helplessness. The spacecraft was only this final step from completion, yet might be stuck right here.

Just as he was at his wit's end, Wu Yu stealthily sought him out, wearing a peculiar expression.

"Boss Lin... perhaps... there's a way to get that core without direct confrontation..."

"What way?" Lin Feng immediately pressed.

"I... just now while organizing the things obtained from the trade with the 'Engineers', in the lining of their case containing the processing unit, I found a bit of... 'extra' something." Wu Yu lowered his voice, pulling out a small, fingernail-sized data chip from his chest pocket. "Inside is an encrypted message, I just cracked it open..."

Lin Feng took the chip, inserted it into the data pad. The message was short, a scribbled log fragment, seemingly from some low-level technician among the "Raiders":

"...The 'Storm's' engine vibration old problem is acting up again... worse than last time... damn second-hand XC-7b calibrator... must be the defective goods sold by that 'Mole' gang... the boss is going crazy with anger... if only we could find those turtle-hiding 'Engineers'... they could definitely fix it..."

The message ended abruptly here.

Lin Feng and Wu Yu exchanged looks, both seeing the sparkle in each other's eyes.

The Raiders' XC-7b calibrator is faulty, and malfunctioning? They can't fix it themselves, even want to find the "Engineers"?

"I understand!" Lin Feng suddenly slapped the table. "The 'Engineers' giving us this news isn't just telling us where the thing is, they're hinting to us... maybe we don't need to seize it, but... 'trade' for it!"

An extremely bold plan instantly took shape in his mind.

"Immediately reply to the 'Engineers'! Tell them we're willing to exchange the complete version of the 'High-Efficiency Energy Management System Blueprint' for one direct communication opportunity with their technical lead! We want to discuss... how to help our 'new friends' the 'Raiders', solve a little engine trouble!"

Wu Yu was dumbfounded: "Boss... you... you want to make a deal with the 'Raiders'?! That's too dangerous!"

"Extremely risky, but it's currently the only possible way to get the core without bloodshed!" Lin Feng's eyes flashed with adventurous light. "Besides, we're not going ourselves, we'll have the 'Engineers' act as intermediaries! Or rather, we'll make the 'Raiders' believe we're the 'Engineers' representatives!"

This was an extremely dangerous gamble, betting on the "Raiders'" desire to repair their engine, and the "Engineers'" willingness to cooperate behind the scenes.

For the final component, Lin Feng decided to stake it all on this move.

Chapter 78 Twist Your Head Off!

Lin Feng's proposal was utterly insane. Directly trading with the notoriously vicious "Raiders" while posing as representatives of the "Engineers" was tantamount to dancing on the edge of a blade.

After the message was sent to the "Engineers," the other side fell silent for a long time. Clearly, this proposal had also exceeded their expectations.

Just as Lin Feng thought they would refuse, a reply came, its content extremely brief: "Can arrange anonymous encrypted comms channel. We will not participate directly, provide no guarantees. Blueprint (full version) must be paid upfront."

The "Engineers" stance was clear: they could build the bridge, but would absolutely not get their hands dirty. If it succeeded, they might benefit indirectly; if it failed, it had nothing to do with them. And regardless of success or failure, they wanted that complete blueprint in their hands first.

"Agree to their terms!" Lin Feng said without hesitation. At this moment, obtaining the calibrator core was more important than a single blueprint. Furthermore, he believed that as long as the "Star of Hope" could take off, he could create far greater value in the future.

Shortly after sending the encrypted full blueprint over, an extremely complex, single-use encrypted communication frequency was transmitted to Stardust Base.

The most critical moment had arrived.

Lin Feng took a deep breath, signaled for Su Wanqing and Wrench to stand by providing technical support, and then connected the communication.

The channel was initially filled with the noisy crackle of static, followed by an extremely impatient, rough voice dripping with violent menace: "Dammit! Who is this?! This better be important, or I'll trace this signal and rip your damn head off!"

Lin Feng worked hard to make his voice sound calm and professional, even carrying a hint of the aloof tone common among the "Engineers": "To the 'Storm.' We have heard that the XC-7b calibrator on your vessel is experiencing operational anomalies, causing engine oscillations. We may be able to provide a solution."

There was a moment of silence on the other end, then the voice became even more dangerous: "Oh? So the 'Engineers,' those bunch of turtles hiding in their shells, finally decided to let one rip? Didn't you lot swear you'd never deal with us?"

"Not all technical issues involve taking sides," Lin Feng cautiously maintained his persona. "We focus on the technology itself. The oscillation problem on your ship, if allowed to persist and worsen, could lead to irreversible damage to the engine core. We happen to possess relevant technical reserves and... an optimized replacement calibrator core compatible with your vessel's model."

He directly dangled the bait—hinting that he had a "better" core for replacement.

"You have a new XC-7b?" The voice on the other end carried a hint of suspicion and greed.

"Not a standard model, but a performance-optimized version. It can completely resolve the oscillation issue and improve jump efficiency by approximately five percent." Lin Feng boasted without batting an eye, even though he had absolutely nothing in his hands. "But its value, I'm sure you understand clearly."

"What do you want?" The voice on the other end became much more direct.

"A barter trade. We exchange our optimized core for the... faulty old core currently installed on your ship." Lin Feng stated the plan he had devised long ago.

"What? You're trading a new one for an old one? Are you insane?" The voice was momentarily stunned, clearly not expecting these terms.

"The old core holds research value for us. The optimized core can solve your problem immediately. This is mutually beneficial." Lin Feng explained, his reasoning sounding perfectly logical.

The communication channel fell into silence, broken only by heavy breathing and faint metallic clanging sounds, as if the other party was thinking or consulting with someone nearby.

After a full few minutes, the voice spoke again, tinged with a sinister edge: "Fine! The trade is on! But don't try any tricks! If what you bring is useless, or if you dare set an ambush... I'll bring the 'Storm' right to your doorstep and crush every last one of you into cosmic dust!"

"Transaction location?" Lin Feng suppressed his racing heart and asked calmly.

"Coordinates will be sent to you! Only one small ship is allowed! Maximum of three people! If I see anything even slightly suspicious, the deal is off immediately, and you can expect to be hunted to the ends of the universe!"

The communication was brutally cut off. Soon, coordinate information arrived, located deep within an extremely remote and signal-chaotic asteroid belt.

"We succeeded..." Lin Feng let out a long sigh of relief, only then realizing his palms were drenched in sweat.

"This is far too risky!" Su Wanqing said with concern. "They absolutely have ill intentions! They're very likely planning to double-cross us!"

"I know." Lin Feng nodded. "That's why we aren't really going. We need a... 'delivery person.'"

His gaze turned towards the starscape outside the window, and an even bolder, more fantastical idea emerged.

"Wrench, that modified 'Peregrine' scout ship of ours, the one capable of short-range jumps—are its stealth system and drone deployment functions debugged and ready?"

"Pretty much! Boss, what are you thinking?"

"Take the 'optimized core' we promised... well, essentially an empty shell packed with high-explosives and knockout gas... and use a drone to give its exterior a little 'optimization' makeover. Then, have the 'Peregrine' approach the transaction point under stealth, and use remote control to deliver our 'sincerity' to them."

"Then... how do we get the old core?"

"Who said we're getting it?" Lin Feng smiled. "As long as their ship docks to 'inspect' our 'optimized core' and opens its access hatch... that's our only opportunity!"

"Have the 'Peregrine' force its way in? No! That's too dangerous! It would be a suicide mission!" Wrench exclaimed.

"Not boarding." A glint shone in Lin Feng's eyes. "Remember the ability the 'Guardian-VI' core demonstrated before? While it can't transport an entire ship directly, what about a small, pre-positioned item? For example... a small robot equipped with a high-strength grappling hook and cutting tools?"

"During the moment of their confusion, remotely teleport the robot inside, locate the storage, grab the old core, and run! Simultaneously, the 'Peregrine' executes an immediate jump to evacuate!"

This plan was bold, insane, and had an abysmally low chance of success, but it was currently the only scheme that had any possibility of snatching treasure from the tiger's mouth! It perfectly exploited the enemy's greed and the not-yet-fully-understood miraculous capabilities of the "Stardust Core."

A remotely controlled act of theft and deception, spanning the void, was about to commence.

With the plan set, Stardust Base began operating at high speed like a precision instrument.

Wrench led the engineering team, working through the night to produce a convincing fake shell of the "optimized XC-7b calibrator core." The interior was packed with high-concentration knockout gas and powerful explosives sufficient to destroy a small compartment. They went all out on the exterior details, even fabricating light effects simulating energy flow.

The "Peregrine" scout ship underwent meticulous re-inspection and debugging, especially its stealth system and short-range jump engine, ensuring nothing could go wrong. A small, highly maneuverable engineering robot was outfitted with a high-strength grappling hook, cutting tools, and a signal jamming device, and fitted with a module to receive remote teleportation signals.

Doctor Chen Wei was temporarily "pardoned" to be responsible for calculating the coordinate precision and energy requirements for the micro-teleportation. She showed great enthusiasm for the task, even while muttering under her breath about it being a "waste of her talents."

Everything was ready. The "Peregrine," piloted by the most skilled pilot (also the cleverest scout under Old Scar's command), carrying that deadly "gift" and the engineering robot, quietly departed the base, activated its stealth mode, and jumped towards the designated coordinates.

Inside the base's main control room, the atmosphere was tense to the extreme. Lin Feng, Su Wanqing, Old Scar, and the others stared intently at the screens, which displayed the intermittent scan data transmitted by the "Peregrine" while under stealth.

The target area was a dense asteroid belt with extremely severe signal interference. The "Storm" hung silently in the shadow of a massive asteroid like a menacing steel behemoth. Its hull was brightly lit, its gun ports subtly aimed in various directions, exuding an aura of high alert.

"Peregrine" in position. Maintaining stealth, distance to target fifty kilometers." The pilot's voice came through the quantum-encrypted channel, hushed.

"Proceed as planned." Lin Feng took a deep breath and issued the command.

Chapter 79: Success? Disaster is coming!

An inconspicuous small transport drone with no markings, towing the "optimization core," flew out from the Peregrine's cabin and drifted leisurely toward the Storm, simultaneously transmitting identification signals.

The Storm quickly responded, a small docking hatch on its side slowly opening like a massive beast opening its mouth.

The drone carrying the "gift" flew into the hatch. The docking hatch slowly closed.

Everyone held their breath. The most critical moment had arrived.

A few seconds later—

BOOM!!!

Even through fifty kilometers of distance and the thick hull, scanners could clearly capture the violent energy turbulence and severe shaking erupting inside the Storm! A small explosion even occurred in the docking area, flames spouting from the seams!

The sleeping gas and high explosives had taken effect!

The Storm instantly descended into chaos! Alarm sirens blared shrilly (faintly detectable through scanners), and the ship's lights flashed wildly!

"Now! Deploy the robot!" Lin Feng shouted.

Dr. Chen Wei, who had been ready all along, slammed the button! The Guardian-VI core flashed, and a miniature spatial rift instantly opened at a preset coordinate point inside the Storm (inferred warehouse location based on rough structural diagrams provided by the Engineers), accurately projecting the engineering robot inside!

The moment the robot landed, it immediately extended grappling hooks to secure itself according to its programming, then activated cutting tools to violently breach the nearest spare parts container!

The screen displayed shaky, chaotic footage from the robot's camera: smoke-filled corridors, running figures, curses and alarms mingling together.

"Faster! Go faster!" Wrench stared at the screen, fists clenched.

The robot finally cut through the container! Inside were indeed various precision parts! Its mechanical arms quickly rummaged, scanning model numbers—

Found it! A slightly worn but precisely XC-7b model calibrator core lay there!

The robot grabbed the core and stuffed it into its storage compartment!

"Got it! Retreat!" Lin Feng yelled.

Receiving the command, the robot immediately activated its built-in micro-thrusters and charged toward the hull breach it had forcibly created earlier, which was now slowly self-repairing! Simultaneously, it transmitted retrieval signals to the Peregrine!

Chaos still reigned aboard the Storm, but armed personnel were already approaching this direction! Energy beam shots struck around the robot!

At the critical moment, the robot shot through the breach and flew into the chaotic asteroid belt!

The Peregrine had already calculated the trajectory, de-cloaked, executed a rapid dive, precisely swept past the robot, and instantly retrieved it into the cabin with mechanical arms!

"Jump! Jump now!" the pilot roared, pushing the engines to maximum power!

The Storm seemed to finally realize it had been tricked, its massive cannons beginning to turn, but it was too late!

The Peregrine transformed into a streak of light and instantly vanished from its position, leaving only the furious Storm and the wrecked docking bay behind.

In Stardust Base's control room, after deathly silence erupted earth-shaking cheers!

"We did it! We succeeded!" Wu Yu jumped up excitedly.

Lin Feng heavily slumped back into his chair, feeling all strength drained from his body, an incredulous smile spreading across his face.

A few minutes later, the Peregrine safely returned to base. The engineering robot was carefully extracted, and that slightly worn XC-7b calibrator core representing final hope was handed intact to Wrench.

Wrench held it like a priceless treasure, tears streaming down his weathered face:

"The final piece... the final puzzle piece... it's complete!"

With the last critical component in place, Stardust Base entered the final assembly sprint phase.

The entire dock was brightly lit as if daytime, all engineering personnel working in three shifts, eating and sleeping near the dock, conducting final installations, debugging, and system integration.

Wrench practically lived inside the spacecraft, his bloodshot eyes fixed on every detail. The Delta-9 processing unit was carefully connected to the backup bridge system; the large carbon-nitrogen exchange module was installed into the environmental recycling center; and that hard-won XC-7b calibrator core was meticulously installed into the very heart of the main faster-than-light engine.

Every connection point, every tightened screw, embodied everyone's hopes.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing came to the dock almost daily, watching the massive spacecraft gradually radiate its final brilliance. Brand-new armor, sleek lines, and the fresh dust cloud emblem representing Stardust Base on the hull—everything heralded the beginning of a new journey.

The energy system was fully connected.

The surging power provided by the Guardian-VI core, like a tamed giant beast, flowed through reinforced conduits into every corner of the spacecraft.

Lights sequentially illuminated, control console screens flickered, and engines emitted low, steady hums.

A series of platform tests and system self-checks were conducted repeatedly. From structural stress to life support, from weapon systems to navigation modules, all data were cross-checked repeatedly to ensure nothing could go wrong.

Next came the most critical low-altitude lift-off test and space navigation environment simulation test. These core tests required about three to four days, giving everyone a chance to finally rest.

Monkey, avoiding Old Scar's gaze, sprawled behind piles of food and energy containers, pulling Lin Feng, Anvil, and others into boasting,

"Next whether we go to the Belt Alliance or Mars, we can damn well rest! Buddy! I'll take you for some fun, I'm telling you, I've really seen women with three hands!"

"Bah! I'll only marry one woman in my lifetime, won't look for others. Though I haven't found her yet, I know she's definitely out there waiting for me! Ah, Monkey, scum like you wouldn't understand this level. I'm going for a drink!"

"Whether in novels or movies, pure-hearted guys like you die first. Boss, come with us!"

"No way, the Belt Alliance has nothing but disgusting types. I keep myself pure, not interested at all."

"Didn't expect that, Boss, you're on the pure-hearted route too?" Chen Wei, holding a crown daisy with cat ears, peeked out from behind the containers.

"Doctor, my sanity is normal, unlike you. Besides, I'll hold out until Moon Nation or Jupiter..."

While they were still bantering, Lin Feng's open mouth suddenly clamped shut, the long-absent alarm blaring violently in his mind!

"[Warning: Detected high concentration inert dust accumulation... Analysis: Regional 'Dust Tide' event... Estimated arrival significantly ahead of schedule, countdown: 0 days 13 hours 59 minutes...]"

Lin Feng's mind buzzed, no longer caring about three hands or three legs, he shot up and sprinted straight to the monitoring room. Everyone's faces drastically changed—clearly something important had happened, and with launch imminent, whatever big event this was definitely wouldn't be good news!

Chapter 80 Escape!

At this moment, everyone stopped their work, their gazes turning towards them.

"What did you say?"

"Dust Tide! It's the Dust Tide! The leading edge of a large-scale Dust Tide is rapidly forming! It's estimated to reach our area in at most 14 hours!"

Sun Wen, who had opened the monitoring cloud imagery, projected the terrifying meteorological cloud pattern she had detected onto the main screen, her voice trembling with unprecedented panic.

The satellite imagery showed an immense, terrifying cyclone, mixed with dark red dust, ice crystals, and violent ionized energy, rapidly gathering in the planet's outer space. Like an ever-expanding vortex of death, its vanguard had already begun stirring the atmosphere, heralding the arrival of destruction!

This was precisely the apocalyptic disaster foretold in the outline, one powerful enough to destroy the entire Shard Zone! It was finally coming!

"14 hours?!" Wrench cried out, "That's impossible! The spacecraft's final ground static tests need at least 20 more hours! Forcing a launch is far too risky!"

"Launching without testing, failures are everywhere! Lin Feng, have you forgotten the fate of that Federation main battle-class planet-killer warship that was forcibly launched in South America 10 years ago?"

"Officer Su! There's no time!" Lin Feng decisively cut off any hesitation,

"Initiate emergency launch procedures immediately! Omit all non-essential steps! System testing will be conducted during ascent! Old Scar, Wu Yu, we need to break out before the Dust Tide completely swallows this place!"

"I agree!"

"It has to be this way. If we get caught in the Dust Tide, the starship will disintegrate too. There's simply no time to build a shelter with sufficient protection level now!"

The moment the order was given, the base instantly descended into final, frantic activity.

All personnel stopped rotating shifts, throwing themselves entirely into the final preparations. The speed of supply transport doubled, with many less important items being decisively abandoned. The engines were started early for preheating, roaring deafeningly, as if a great beast had sensed the threat and was desperate to break free.

Inside the bridge of the "Star of Hope," the atmosphere was as tense as a fully drawn bowstring. Everyone wore grave expressions, quickly performing their final checks.

"All personnel have been forcibly boarded!"

"Final supply securing completed!"

"Base power is being fully transferred to the starship shields and engines!"

"All external connections severed!"

"Release all docking clamps!" Lin Feng commanded, his voice transmitted to every corner via the ship-wide broadcast, "Everyone, plans can't keep up with changes. The final test has arrived early. We don't have time for perfect preparation, but we have no other choice! Trust our ship, trust each other! Stardust Base, prepare to depart!"

Boom!

The massive spacecraft slowly lifted off, relying on its powerful anti-gravity engines to break free from the ground's restraints. The dock ceiling had long been opened, revealing the increasingly murky and unstable sky above. Dark red clouds churned like a sea of blood, occasionally split by pale, ominous lightning flashes.

"Main engine power at seventy percent! Ascending!" Lin Feng pushed the control lever.

The huge hull of the "Star of Hope" began to rise vertically. Its engines spewed blazing blue flames, pushing aside the pervasive red mist as it steadfastly climbed towards the high altitude.

However, barely a kilometer into their ascent, a threat from the ground abruptly arrived!

Several thick energy beams, clearly not natural phenomena, suddenly shot from the distant horizon, slamming hard against the energy shield the ship had just raised, causing violent ripples!

"Warning! Under attack! Attack source: Southeast direction, ground artillery batteries belonging to the 'Raiders'!"

Old Scar immediately locked onto the attack source, roaring, "Those persistent bastards! They're trying to loot during the chaos!"

Almost simultaneously, several heavy missiles trailing fiery plumes shot in from another direction!

"Dammit!! It's the people from the 'Obsidian'! They have a ground outpost too!"

Anvil analyzed the missile trajectories, "They want to stop us from leaving, or shoot us down to seize the ship!"

"Automatic turrets, fire freely to intercept! Prioritize shield energy for the forward and bottom sectors! Increase engine power to eighty-five percent! Continue climbing! Do not engage!" Lin Feng calmly issued orders. They absolutely could not stop now and become sitting ducks!

Outside the ship, the close-in defense turrets opened fire fiercely, weaving a dense net of fire in the air, blasting the incoming missiles mid-flight. The energy shield held firm against the ground artillery bombardment, its glow flickering violently but remaining stable for now.

The "Star of Hope," enduring the attacks from the ground, struggled to continue its upward climb.

Greater troubles followed one after another. As their altitude increased, the effects of the Dust Tide's vanguard began to manifest.

The high altitude was filled with chaotic ion storms and high-speed moving dust and ice crystals. Visibility plummeted drastically. The ship's sensors suffered severe interference, the screens filled with static snow and garbled code. Powerful turbulence began battering the ship, the hull emitting a grating metallic groan, as if it could be torn apart at any moment.

"Can't stabilize it! The airflow is too chaotic!"

"Navigation system is experiencing interference! Deviation rate is increasing!"

"External sensors partially failed!"

"Switch to backup navigation! Manual course correction! Su Wanqing, help me!" Lin Feng shouted, his hands gripping the control sticks tightly as he wrestled with the violent air currents. Su Wanqing fully assisted beside him, calculating the most stable ascent path.

Just as they were struggling to break through the troposphere, about to enter the relatively stable airspace of the stratosphere—

An unprecedented, incredibly thick, pale white giant lightning bolt, like the judgment spear of a god, tore through the gloomy sky. With an aura of absolute destruction, it struck directly at the climbing "Star of Hope"!

The energy contained within this lightning bolt far exceeded all previous attacks!

On the bridge, despair filled many hearts.

"We're finished..."

Chapter 81 A Desperate Charge

That devastating giant lightning bolt, as if concentrating all the malice of the dust storm, descended at light speed straight downward, instantly enveloping the entire bridge in a shadow of death!

"Shield overload! Two hundred percent! No, three hundred percent!!"

Wu Yu, responsible for monitoring energy, let out a desperate roar.

Everyone had no time to perform any evasive maneuvers!

BOOM!!!!!!!

The deafening explosion nearly tore through everyone's eardrums! The entire spacecraft was as if struck hard by an invisible giant hammer, violently tilting to one side, beginning to spiral out of control!

Inside the bridge, red lights flashed frantically, piercing alarm sounds merged into a continuous cacophony, most screens instantly went black or filled with static.

The emergency lighting system flickered on urgently, illuminating pale, terrified faces. People were pinned to their seats by tremendous G-forces, while unsecured items scattered everywhere.

The outermost energy shield shattered instantly like fragile glass, dissipating without a trace!

The remaining energy of the lightning struck fiercely against the ship's reinforced armor plating, instantly vaporizing large sections, leaving horrifying molten scars, while countless electrical snakes wildly danced across the hull surface!

"Report damage!"

Lin Feng shouted with difficulty amid the violent shaking and spinning, his hands desperately trying to stabilize the control stick.

"External shields completely disabled! Severe damage to armor in sectors 13-25! Atmospheric integrity lost! Multiple external sensor arrays offline!"

"Main engine shut down due to overload protection! Auxiliary power damaged! We're losing power!"

"Attitude control system failure! We're falling!"

Bad news came one after another from the engineering team below, hammering at everyone's hearts. The "Star of Hope," which had just taken off, was now in a desperate situation—powerless and falling uncontrollably!

Below, the covetous "Raiders" and "Obsidian" artillery awaited, along with the land being devoured by the dust storm!

"Wrench! Engines! Restart the engines for me!" Lin Feng roared, his eyes bloodshot.

"Attempting! Energy circuits are chaotic! Need time!"

Wrench was drenched in sweat, his fingers frantically operating on the nearly out-of-control console.

"Old Scar! Use whatever turrets still function to intercept ground attacks!"

"Incoming missiles! Numerous!"

Even while falling uncontrollably, the ship continued to endure attacks from the ground, explosions flashing near the hull, further exacerbating the crisis.

"This can't continue!"

Su Wanqing fought back dizziness, quickly analyzing data. "We must use the momentum from the fall and residual power for extreme low-altitude flight, using complex terrain to evade fire while buying time for engine restart!"

This was an extremely dangerous plan—low-altitude flight meant higher risk of collision with obstacles—but for them, having lost altitude and power, it seemed the only option!

"Approved! Calculate the optimal path!" Lin Feng agreed without hesitation.

Su Wanqing sent the calculated, dangerous path winding along a massive canyon to the main screen.

Lin Feng yanked the control stick hard, coordinating with the remaining functional attitude control thrusters, forcefully stabilizing the spinning, falling ship, then—

Plunged straight into the massive chasm below!

The ship flew at high speed close to the canyon walls, violent turbulence nearly shaking everyone apart. The rock walls were so close it felt like one could reach out and touch them! Ground-based artillery fire was largely blocked by the towering cliffs, slightly reducing the pressure.

"Engine restart at thirty percent success! Output extremely unstable!"

"Shields cannot be restored in a short time!"

"The main body of the dust storm is approaching rapidly! Air quality deteriorating sharply!"

The crisis wasn't over; they were merely dancing on the edge of death.

Just then, Doctor Chen Wei suddenly stared at her scientific instrument screen and made a surprised sound:

"Wait! That black sphere! Its energy signal suddenly intensified after the lightning strike! And... its vibration frequency has developed some strange... synchronization with the energy fluctuations of the external dust storm?!"

As if to confirm her words, the ship abruptly emerged from a relatively narrow section of the canyon, opening up ahead—but also meaning exposure once more—and directly ahead loomed an even denser wall of dust storm clouds, flickering with deadly electrical light! That was the true core of the dust storm!

On the ground, more "Raiders" vehicles and "Obsidian" aircraft had gathered, their weapons aimed squarely at the teetering starship!

Dead end ahead, pursuers behind, grievously wounded themselves!

At this desperate moment, the black ellipsoid placed in the reinforced cargo hold suddenly glowed to its maximum intensity! It no longer vibrated slightly but emitted a low, continuous hum!

[Detected high-concentration chaotic Stardust energy environment...]

[Deep Rock Beacon activation conditions met... attempting guidance...]

["Guardian-VI" core responding... permissions confirmed... executing emergency protocol...]

The cold system prompt sounded again!

Immediately, without anyone reacting, the "Guardian-VI" core erupted with unprecedented brilliance, a thick, solid blue energy beam—not aimed at enemies—but shot through the deck, directly connecting to the black sphere in the cargo hold!

An unprecedently powerful connection was established between the two!

HUM!!!

A massive, continuously rotating vortex, filled with dark blue electrical arcs and chaotic Stardust, abruptly appeared directly in front of the "Star of Hope"! This vortex was enormous, like a giant maw, emitting unsettling spatial fluctuations!

"What... what is that?!" Everyone was stunned.

"A spatial passage?! It forcibly opened a passage into the dust storm?!" Doctor Chen Wei screamed, her voice filled with madness and disbelief. "No! That's not right! These coordinates... lead to... the eye of the storm?! Or rather, a temporary path through the dust storm?! It wants us to charge in!"

Charge into the destructive interior of the dust storm? That was practically suicide!

Yet, with artillery fire behind them, enemies closing in on both sides, and the ship continuously losing altitude and power, they had no other choice!

"Let's trust it once!" Lin Feng looked at the fluctuating spatial vortex that seemed ready to collapse at any moment, a wild determination flashing in his eyes. "Everyone hold on tight! We're going through!"

He pushed all remaining power to the engines; the "Star of Hope" let out a groan of strain, shooting like an arrow from a bow, charging resolutely into the unknown, dangerous passage opened by the black sphere and core!

The next second, the ship completely vanished into that lightning-filled, chaotic, dark blue vortex, disappearing entirely from everyone's radar and sight.

Chapter 82: Path Through Chaos

The moment they plunged into the spatial channel, all external attacks and noise abruptly vanished, replaced by an absolute, suffocating chaos.

The Star of Hope felt as if it had been thrown into a blender made of pure energy and violent dust.

Outside the viewports was no longer the familiar starscape or land, but wildly twisting, flickering streams of ghostly blue and dark red light, with countless thick lightning bolts exploding around them, producing deafening roars.

The spacecraft was like a leaf in a storm, being violently torn, tossed, and spun by unimaginable forces.

"Steady! Full power to stabilize our attitude!"

Lin Feng gripped the control stick with white-knuckled intensity, veins bulging on his arms as he wrestled with the chaotic forces. Su Wanqing frantically calculated the disordered energy flows beside him, trying to find some semblance of pattern.

"Structural stress approaching critical levels! Alerts from multiple damaged sections!"

"Energy shields cannot generate! External environmental energy levels are too high!"

"Navigation completely offline! We've lost all external reference points!"

Bad news kept pouring in.

Within this chaotic energy turbulence, all conventional navigation methods had failed. They could only rely on the fragile channel maintained by the Guardian-VI core and that black sphere, plus Lin Feng and Su Wanqing's intuition and piloting skills, to painstakingly advance forward.

Each violent shudder made hearts pound with dread, as if the ship might be torn apart at any moment.

"That black sphere... it seems to be guiding us..."

Doctor Chen Wei stared intently at the science sensors, which showed the energy fluctuations emitted by the black sphere had weak synchronization with certain relatively "calm" energy flows outside, "Follow its pulse signals! It's chaotic, but this is our only guidance!"

At this moment, they had no choice but to trust this mysterious object of unknown origin.

The ship followed the black sphere's faint yet peculiar pulse signals, staggering through the destructive energy turbulence, sometimes accelerating through relatively stable zones, other times laboriously navigating around massive energy vortices.

Just as they struggled through, the bridge's main screen suddenly flickered, capturing an extremely brief, astonishing image—

Not far to their side within the chaotic energy, those three Watchers assault vehicles had also appeared here!

They were enveloped by a pale golden, more stable and advanced small energy shield, quietly suspended within the turbulence as if observing something.

Their appearance was so abrupt, as if they had been following all along, or had long anticipated their arrival here.

"The Watchers! They really have been monitoring us all along!" Old Scar gritted his teeth.

Even more surprising, one of the Watchers assault vehicles seemed to detect the Star of Hope's passage. It slowly adjusted its orientation, its pure white mask visor seemingly piercing through the chaotic energy and the ship's armor to coldly "look" at them.

Then, it raised one hand—not to attack, but to point in a direction—one that slightly deviated from the black sphere's pulse guidance.

Immediately after, an extremely brief, icy data stream was forcibly injected into the Star of Hope's communication system, not in language but as coordinate data and a line of text:

■Recommended course correction: +0.3° deflection. This path shows 17.8% reduced energy turbulence, higher spatial stability.■

■Note: Based on Code Observer Supplemental Clause 9: For promising technological civilization individuals facing involuntary destruction crises, minimal path optimization suggestions may be provided (requires confirmation they did not actively instigate the crisis).■

After providing the suggestion, the three assault vehicles were once again swallowed by the surging energy turbulence, vanishing as if they had never appeared.

The Watchers... they actually offered "assistance" at such a time? Though still based on that cold, mysterious Code, this was undoubtedly timely help!

"Trust them?"

Su Wanqing quickly verified the coordinate data provided by the other party, finding it generally aligned with the black sphere's guidance, only optimized in details, indeed avoiding several super-strong energy vortices detected by sensors.

"We have no choice! Correct our course!" Lin Feng ordered decisively. At this moment, they had to seize any opportunity that increased their survival chances.

The ship slightly adjusted its direction, flying along the path indicated by the Watchers. Sure enough, the surrounding energy turbulence calmed somewhat. Though still violent, the pressure on the ship noticeably decreased.

This brief encounter and assistance brought a faint yet crucial thread of hope to their desperate journey.

They continued navigating through the chaos, unsure how much time had passed—it felt like hours, yet possibly only minutes. In this environment, all sense of time had become completely distorted.

Finally, the energy turbulence ahead began showing different colors. The ghostly blue gradually faded, the dark red diminished too, replaced by a hazy, relatively stable glow.

"We... we seem to be breaking through!" Sun Wen exclaimed excitedly, watching the gradually clearing boundary on the sensors.

Everyone's hearts leaped into their throats.

The next second, the Star of Hope violently burst through the chaotic energy curtain wall, like a diver surfacing, suddenly entering a completely new, relatively calm space!

Outside the viewports, though still filled with thin dust, it was no longer the destructive chaos. In the distance, they could even see sparse stars!

They had successfully traversed the dust storm!

Before anyone could cheer, the ship's sensors issued new alerts—but not danger warnings, rather identification alerts.

In orbit not far ahead, three peculiarly shaped armed patrol ships with Moon Nation markings hung silently. They seemed to have also experienced the dust storm's edge, appearing somewhat battered but still maintaining vigilance.

One patrol ship transmitted universal identification signals and light queries.

"It's the Moon Nation's border patrol!" Wu Yu recognized their insignia, "We emerged right near the edge of the Moon Nation's sphere of influence!"

Just escaped danger and already encountering forces from their homeland? Would this be a turning point, or new trouble?

Looking at their less-than-friendly vigilant posture, Lin Feng took a deep breath: "Respond with identification signals, state our Star of Hope registered identity (even if from the past), but don't mention the Stardust Core or any sensitive information. Let's see how they react."

The Star of Hope, this starship that rose from the junkyard and endured countless hardships to break through, faced its first interstellar contact—with an ambiguously disposed patrol fleet from its mother nation.

Chapter 83 The Flea Who Buys the Box and Returns the Pearl

The sudden appearance of the Moon Nation patrol ships made the nerves on the Star of Hope's bridge, which had just relaxed after escaping the dust storm danger, tense up again.

Although they belonged to the same Moon Nation, in this post-apocalyptic frontier, their so-called "homeland" status didn't bring much sense of security - especially since they were piloting a Hope-class transport ship of unknown origin, covered in scars, and clearly heavily modified.

"They're demanding we immediately declare our detailed identity, voyage purpose, and cargo manifest, and submit to a boarding inspection," Wu Yu relayed the increasingly stern communication. "Their tone is very hard, saying our appearance in this sensitive space sector is highly suspicious."

"We can't let them board!" Old Scar immediately objected. "There's too much on this ship that can't see the light!" The core, the Black Sphere, plus large amounts of materials and technology from the "Engineers" and "Raiders" - any one of these being discovered would mean major trouble.

Lin Feng's mind raced. Force their way through? Their ship was just damaged, and they were facing three armed patrol ships - they wouldn't gain any advantage in a fight. Submit to inspection? That would be equivalent to walking right into a trap.

They had to use their wits.

He recalled, what was the biggest pain point for the Moon Nation military, especially these border patrol forces, after the apocalypse?

Outdated equipment, scarce logistics, difficult technical support! Their ship might be battered, but having just survived the dust storm itself proved its considerable survivability, especially the energy shield (though temporarily disabled) and engine systems.

Got it!

"Reply to them: This is the independent research vessel Stardust, currently conducting extreme environment data collection missions. We just encountered a dust storm attack, sustained hull damage, and urgently need rest and repairs."

Lin Feng began weaving his story, deliberately adding some exhaustion and urgency to his tone, while maintaining a technician's composure.

"At the same time, 'accidentally' transmit a fragment of cutting-edge data we recorded about the dust storm's energy structure during our passage. Say it's part of our mission harvest and might help their border early warning system."

"Finally, emphasize this: Our chief engineer was injured in the recent impact, but before losing consciousness, he mentioned seemingly discovering a temporary solution that could optimize the energy consumption of their patrol ships' outdated engines. If they need it, we'd be happy to take a look while repairing our own ship, as a way to thank our 'homeland' sentinels for making us feel secure."

This message progressed layer by layer. First showing weakness, then demonstrating value by providing precious data, finally dangling bait to solve their practical problems, while packaging the assistance as "repayment" and "technical exchange" rather than begging, thus maintaining their stance to the maximum extent.

After the message was sent, the other side fell silent. Clearly, the patrol ship commander was assessing the truth and value of this information.

Several minutes later, a reply came, the tone noticeably softened:

"Stardust,' we received your data fragment and have submitted it for analysis. We understand your situation. Given your hull damage and scientific research value, you are specially permitted to follow our ship to Edge Outpost Seven for temporary docking and repairs, but must remain under our monitoring. Regarding the engine optimization solution, you may discuss it with our technical officer then. Do not make any unnecessary moves."

Success!

The other side wanted both the data and technology while maintaining vigilance toward them, adopting an attitude of "controlled cooperation." This perfectly matched Lin Feng's expectations.

"Reply: Thank you very much! We will comply with the arrangements." Lin Feng breathed a sigh of relief.

Escorted by three patrol ships, the Star of Hope, dragging its scarred hull, flew toward a small outpost on the Moon Nation border.

Along the way, Lin Feng instructed Wrench to actually organize some marginal optimization solutions for outdated engine energy savings that didn't involve core technology - enough to demonstrate capability without revealing too many cards.

He also had Wu Yu and the Doctor quickly handcraft a somewhat functional prototype that looked the part. With mountains of parts in the warehouse, they could cobble together anything.

"Ah! Who are you!"

The Doctor's low shout echoed as they rummaged through warehouse parts piles for old-model wires. Under a pile of transistors, they discovered a pair of blinking eyes. Fortunately, Chen Wei had strong nerves and reacted instantly, pressing the alarm while demanding the intruder's identity!

"I, I'm Flea! Didn't we trade before? From Black Tooth, remember?"

A crowd rushed into the warehouse, Old Scar leading the charge. His knives arrived before he did, swish-swish two blades embedding in the floor in front of the person, then he squeezed in front of Chen Wei, slightly crouched, ready to stab at any moment.

"Step aside."

The Doctor wasn't having this, continuing to question the person. You say you're Flea? Do you know who I am?

"I know you too well, Doctor Chen Wei! Didn't I smuggle you over to Boss Lin's place? Ah, Wrench Bro should be here too, where is he?"

"I'm here, come out, I recognize your voice!"

Lin Feng also stepped out. "Flea? After Black Wind's destruction, I thought you died in the ruins?"

"Boss Lin, save me!" Flea scrambled out from the transistors with a wail, snot and tears flowing as he recounted what happened.

Before Black Wind's destruction, the super-sensitive Flea had truly panicked. The agreement he'd reached with Lin Feng unexpectedly became a perfect escape route. Unfortunately, time didn't permit bargaining about his position, so during the last transaction, he simply turned himself into a traded item, packed into a crate shipped into Lin Feng's warehouse, planning to negotiate his price later during the escape.

Unexpectedly, the crate was nailed shut too tightly, and he couldn't break free for quite some time.

Fortunately, Flea's vitality was incredibly tenacious, and he'd prepared compressed drinks and dry rations in advance, managing to survive.

The violent vibrations when the starship forced through the dust storm finally gave him a chance when the crate slammed against the wall. Using his hardened, weeks-old compressed toilet byproducts, he forcefully broke open a corner of the crate and finally crawled out of this space coffin.

Before he could recover from the fresh air's oxygen-high effect, Chen Wei and Wu Yu came to select parts, forcing him to hide in the transistors.

"I didn't want to bother you, I was just planning to sneak off the ship once we reached Mars or Jupiter. You know I have wide connections, I have contacts and setups everywhere, my network is dense and extensive! I can find things whether they're black market or white market, I can live well anywhere there are people!"

"Hmm, you are indeed strong in that area, which is why I can't allow you to just leave like this. You stowed away on my starship, violating ship regulations. You're being conscripted. Also, I don't want to hear you speak underworld slang anymore. It grates on my ears~"

"!!"

"No time to deal with you. Old Scar, educate him, integrate him into the team as soon as possible. Be efficient, lower your standards. Monkey, assist~"

"Okay."

"Don't worry, Boss."

The two replied simply, both looking at the trembling Flea.

"No~~"

Everyone quickly tidied up. Now they needed to deal with the Moon Nation inspection first. When they reached Outpost Seven, it was a military base built around a small asteroid, appearing somewhat crude and crowded.

After docking, the Moon Nation technical officer indeed eagerly boarded to "discuss."

Lin Feng had Wrench handle the reception, as besides himself, Wrench was the most presentable male on the starship. Nobody felt comfortable having women take safety risks in such situations. While demonstrating the optimization solution, Wrench poured out their hardships, describing the difficulties and losses of traversing the dust storm, cleverly hinting that they were so poor they only had some technology left, with no real profits to be squeezed.

Meanwhile, Wu Yu took the opportunity to use some luxury goods the base had previously stockpiled - items that were also scarce for the military (like high-quality coffee powder, functional drinks, even some clean old entertainment chips) - to quietly build rapport with the outpost's lower-ranking soldiers and officers, exchanging for information and goodwill.

Through this "technical bribery" and "material lubrication," the Stardust team quickly established a subtle, mutually beneficial relationship with the outpost personnel.

The other side obtained practical technical benefits and small perks, relaxed their vigilance, and even revealed some information:

Such as how Moon Nation's internal resources were also tight, with numerous factions, and support for frontier outposts was decreasing;

How the "Belt Alliance" had been very active recently, seemingly with something big happening;

And indeed, there was a ship called "Obsidian" operating in this area, with a very bad reputation.

Several days later, the Star of Hope's damage was basically repaired, and the optimization solution was delivered.

Having received benefits, the outpost commander was happy to do them a favor. Not only did he not deeply investigate their origins, but he also signed a temporary travel permit, even throwing in an updated (though still crude) map of nearby space sector power distribution - more simplified than what the "Watchers" provided, but more aligned with current reality.

Using some technical scraps and stockpiled "junk," they exchanged for precious rest time, preliminary trust, intelligence, and travel documents - this deal was incredibly worthwhile. The Stardust set sail again, leaving the Moon Nation outpost. This time, they truly entered the perilous but opportunity-filled vast Belt Alliance star sector.

The Belt Alliance campaign had officially begun.

Chapter 84: Belt Alliance Outpost

After leaving the Moon Nation border outpost, the Star of Hope followed the crude star chart and headed toward the nearest area controlled by the Belt Alliance. The Belt Alliance was not a unified nation, but a loose coalition made up of space stations, mining colonies, smuggler dens, and independent fleets across many asteroid belts, operating under a jungle law of survival of the fittest while hiding its own rules of order.

After a smooth stretch of travel, a massive, brightly lit space structure pieced together from countless derelict ships, asteroids, and man-made modules came into view. This was their first destination — the Traveler Market, a mid-sized neutral trading and intelligence exchange point on the Belt Alliance's edge.

As the ship approached, a signal came from the market's navigation hub, its tone slick but cautious: "New ship? State your identity and purpose. Berthing fees charged by tonnage and duration, pay first, dock later. One reminder: cause trouble here and everyone will tear you apart."

Lin Feng paid the fee according to the rules and secured a remote but reasonably safe berth.

The Star of Hope's odd shape and the brand-new Stardust emblem drew a fair amount of attention, but it was met mostly with wariness and scrutiny. Strange ships of every description were the norm here, so in comparison the Star of Hope still looked relatively low-key.

Lin Feng split the team into two groups. One team, led by Old Scar and including Anvil and several fighters, was tasked with guarding the ship and purchasing basic supplies on the market's outskirts — especially food, water, and common medical supplies — continuing to indulge their hoarding instincts.

The other team was led personally by Lin Feng, with Su Wanqing, Wu Yu, and Flea accompanying him, diving deeper into the market to gather intelligence and look for opportunities.

Flea gave his name as Wang Xiaoming. Under the efficient but unscrupulous methods of Old Scar and Monkey, he had finally agreed to join the team willingly.

Inside the market the scene was a chaotic mix of people and species, shoulders rubbing against shoulders. The air smelled of machine oil, low-grade food, and recycled atmosphere. Massive screens displayed bounties, product listings, and job postings. Hawkers' calls, haggling, and the shouting of drunks filled the air without pause.

Wu Yu's eyes lit up like a fish in water; he dove into the crowd and, using his instinct as an information dealer, began collecting prices and rumors. Flea used his stealth and eavesdropping skills to melt into the shadows.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing wandered as if casually, primarily listening for mentions of the Dust Storm, the Obsidian, and anything about advanced parts or technology trades.

Soon, Flea returned with valuable news: he had overheard several smugglers complaining that the goods provided by the Mole had been getting worse lately, especially engine parts, which nearly caused them to be chased by patrols.

"Mole?" Lin Feng immediately recalled the fragment of information they had extracted from the Raiders — the one who sold the Storm the substandard XC-7b parts seemed to be called Mole.

He told Flea to keep a close eye on those smugglers and see if they could find more leads about the Mole.

Meanwhile, Wu Yu came back excitedly: "Boss, I found out! What they lack most here isn't weapons, it's high-quality repair tools, rare metals, and... you won't believe it — fresh food! Even synthetic meat paste and dehydrated vegetables sell for high prices! A lot of people are sick of nutrient paste! Our hydroponic farm produce would be hard currency here!"

The hoarding instinct awakened again. Lin Feng immediately instructed Wu Yu to use some surplus tools and a small amount of rare metal from the ship to trade for large quantities of cheap but necessary base materials for the base, and carefully use a small portion of fresh vegetables to exchange for a fair amount of energy credits and one important piece of intelligence: follow-up news about Panshan Shelter.

According to the informant, after Bedrock had been overrun it was not completely abandoned; it seemed occupied by a new force that was digging for something, with mysterious transport ships frequently coming and going.

Bedrock... what secrets could still be hidden there? Could it be related to the warehouse where Lin Feng obtained the Guardian-VI core?

At that moment Flea returned with even more specific information: those smugglers were going to pick up goods at one of Mole's underground exchange points tonight.

Opportunity had arrived.

Lin Feng decided they would pay the Mole a visit tonight to see if they could find leads on the Obsidian or other sources of technology.

That night Lin Feng, with Flea and a disguised Old Scar, followed the tip to an underground Mole exchange tucked away in a secluded corner of the market's lower level. The place was heavily guarded and the atmosphere strange.

After passing several checks they entered the inner hall, where all kinds of illicit trades were taking place. Lin Feng's gaze was quickly drawn to a display cabinet. Some parts inside, in craftsmanship style, were alarmingly similar to parts he had traded for from the Engineers! Though much rougher, the core technical features matched.

Could Mole be connected to the Engineers? Or were the Mole copying or even stealing the Engineers' technology?

At that moment a commotion rose from the back of the exchange, and an elegantly dressed merchant with a shrewd look stepped forward. People around him respectfully called him the Mole boss.

Lin Feng's pupils shrank — he recognized that face! Though altered, there was no mistaking him. This man had once been a mid-level official in the Moon Nation's Energy Department, wanted for embezzlement and trafficking of strategic materials! He had come all the way here, adopted the alias Mole, and continued his old trade!

An encounter with an old acquaintance, and it meant trouble. Lin Feng immediately lowered his head and signaled Flea and Old Scar to stay still.

This discovery made the situation far more complicated. Behind Mole there could be ties to corrupt forces within the Moon Nation, perhaps even deeper conspiracies.

Chapter 85 "The Mole" Intelligence

After recognizing Mole's true identity, Lin Feng's internal alarm bells started ringing. This person was extremely cunning and greedy, having been well-connected back in the Moon Nation. Now in this lawless territory, his influence was likely even more formidable. Under no circumstances could he be allowed to recognize Lin Feng.

He pulled down his hat brim and signaled for Flea and Old Scar to quietly withdraw from this underground exchange. They had obtained the information they needed—confirming Mole's involvement in the trade of substandard parts and that his technical sources might have some connection with the Engineers (whether through theft, imitation, or black market circulation). That was enough. Staying any longer carried too much risk.

After returning to the Star of Hope, Lin Feng immediately briefed Su Wanqing on the situation.

Both agreed that the presence of this dangerous figure, Mole, could potentially affect their newly established, fragile relationship with the Engineers. If Mole had backing from domestic forces, it might even attract trouble from the Moon Nation side.

"Should we warn the Engineers?" Su Wanqing asked.

Lin Feng pondered for a moment, then shook his head. "Not for now. We're not sure if the Engineers know about Mole's existence, or if there's some hidden connection between them. Recklessly informing them might expose us instead, or even lead to them turning on us. We'll investigate covertly first."

He decided to change tactics, temporarily avoiding the Mole lead. Using the supplies and intelligence acquired from the market, they would focus on their main tasks—continuing to repair the spacecraft and searching for clues about the Obsidian or other technical sources.

Wu Yu had obtained large quantities of basic materials and energy coins in exchange for fresh food, which Wrench treated like treasure. He immediately led the engineering team to begin more thorough maintenance and upgrades on the spacecraft, particularly the non-critical systems damaged during the dust storm.

Flea continued to mingle with the market's assortment of shady characters, focusing on gathering information about the Obsidian.

Soon, he brought back ambiguous information: some claimed the Obsidian had appeared in nearby space a few days ago, seemingly targeting the wreck of an ancient, long-abandoned Titan-class industrial transport ship. This derelict was reportedly abandoned due to an out-of-control energy core and might still contain valuable items, but it was also exceptionally dangerous.

"A Titan-class derelict with an out-of-control energy core?" Lin Feng's interest was piqued. The wreckage of such a large spacecraft could potentially contain some undamaged advanced components or database remnants, even after all this time. While risky, the potential rewards could be enormous.

Just as he was weighing whether to investigate the derelict, an encrypted communication from the Engineers suddenly came through actively.

The connection established, the other party maintained their usual calm, professional tone, but the content startled Lin Feng:

"Stardust Base. Warning: We have detected high-concentration information scanning activities in your current location at the Traveler Market. The technical signature of the scanning source shows high correlation with the Obsidian and a known technology theft group (codename: Mole). We recommend you immediately cease any sensitive technical exchanges and carefully manage your information leakage risks. Additionally, reminder: Do not approach the Titan-class derelict 'Pioneer' in coordinate zone XXX-YYY. This area has been marked as a high-risk trap."

The communication cut off abruptly.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged glances, both seeing shock and belated fear in each other's eyes.

The Engineers had actually been secretly monitoring them? They even knew they had come to the market? And they knew about the collusion between Mole and the Obsidian? They had directly identified the Titan derelict as a trap!

This warning contained massive information and was incredibly timely!

First, it confirmed that Mole was indeed problematic and connected to the Obsidian. Second, the Obsidian's release of information about the derelict was indeed bait to lure the curious! Third, and most importantly, the Engineers seemed to be protecting them to some extent in the shadows, or at least didn't want them to come to harm so quickly.

Why? Because of that energy management system blueprint? Or because of the technical potential they had demonstrated? Or were there other motives?

Regardless, this warning had helped them avoid a major crisis.

"Notify Flea immediately to stop gathering information about the Obsidian! Everyone maintain low profiles! Wrench, what's the spacecraft maintenance progress?" Lin Feng issued rapid orders.

"Main systems are basically restored, damaged armor has been replaced. The shield generator needs more time for cooling and self-diagnosis, but conventional navigation is operational," Wrench reported.

"Good. We shouldn't stay here long. After replenishing our final batch of water and food, we leave this market immediately!" Lin Feng made the decision.

This outpost at the edge of the Belt Alliance had waters that ran too deep. It had local powers like Mole, traps laid by the Obsidian, and the subtle surveillance of the Engineers. They needed to leave quickly and enter broader space to gain more initiative.

Before departing, Lin Feng had Wu Yu use their last bit of fresh vegetables to trade an apparently useless piece of information from an old miner:

"About half a year ago, while mining deep in a remote asteroid belt, I accidentally picked up a very faint, intermittent distress signal. The signal source identified itself as coming from a research vessel called 'Lorien,' saying something about 'sample outbreak,' 'quarantine lockdown,' and such. Later, the signal completely disappeared. I didn't think much of it at the time, just assumed it was some crazy person's nonsense..."

The Lorien research vessel? Sample outbreak?

Lin Feng silently noted this information and the approximate coordinates. It sounded like a potential lead that might contain either risks or opportunities.

Chapter 86 The Botanist's Dilemma

The "Star of Hope" quietly departed from the "Traveler Market," once again plunging into the vast sea of stars.

Where should they go next? Should they avoid conflicts and venture deep into unknown star systems for exploration, or continue seeking opportunities and resources within the Belt Alliance's complex networks?

Lin Feng looked at the star chart, his gaze finally settling on the information about nearby survivor faction distributions provided by the "Engineers."

"Perhaps we should first visit that 'Free Station' marked as 'relatively neutral'? I've heard it's one of the Belt Alliance's central information exchange hubs."

The spacecraft adjusted its course, heading toward the new destination. The unfolding drama of the Belt Alliance was slowly revealing itself to them.

After leaving the Traveler Market, the "Star of Hope" didn't head directly toward the Belt Alliance's core regions.

Instead, following Lin Feng's instructions, it veered toward a relatively remote route marked with numerous asteroids and abandoned mining facilities. He called it "risk avoidance" while conveniently "scavenging for junk."

"Boss, this place is in the middle of nowhere. What good stuff could possibly be here?" Wu Yu grumbled, looking at the dense asteroid clusters and scattered abandoned red dots on the sensors. He preferred going to more prosperous places for "big deals."

"What do you know? The real treasures are often hidden in unremarkable places."

Lin Feng sipped his synthetic coffee with an air of experienced wisdom. "Don't forget our original expertise."

Sure enough, before long, the sensors detected an anomalous signal. Within a dense asteroid belt, there was a faint, rhythmic energy signature that didn't resemble natural phenomena.

The spacecraft carefully approached and discovered the signal source was an extremely dilapidated, nearly falling-apart small exploration vessel. It was wedged between two massive asteroids, its hull painted with a faded, grinning skull emblem with small text underneath: "Ha Ha Treasure Ship."

"That name... is quite distinctive," Su Wanqing commented.

Scans showed weak life signs still present inside the ship.

"Move closer and see what's going on," Lin Feng ordered.

As they approached, a weak but unusually noisy voice came through the communication channel: "Hey hey hey! You big ship over there! Just passing through? Are you good guys? Help! Save the clever Carlos and his precious ship! I'm willing to offer one-tenth of my treasure... no, one-fifth of my treasure as reward!"

Through external cameras, they could see a skinny man wearing colorful, oil-stained clothes pressed against the porthole of the "Ha Ha Treasure Ship," waving his arms excitedly.

Lin Feng had Flea patch into the other party's communications, deliberately lowering his voice: "'Treasure'? What kind of treasure? If you can't explain clearly, we'll just leave."

"Don't go! Please don't go!"

The man named Carlos panicked. "There really is treasure! It's a star chart I dug up from an ancient database! It points to a rich mineral asteroid nobody's ever visited! It's just... just that my ship's engine exploded during the jump out, and I got stuck in this damned place! Help me get out, and I'll take you there! We'll split the mined resources seventy-thirty! You get seventy!"

It sounded like a standard space trap.

Lin Feng smiled and said to Wrench: "Check his ship's engine, see if it's really broken."

Wrench operated the mechanical arm to inspect it: "Boss, it's genuinely broken. Old 'Taurus' model, thrusters completely melted. He wasn't lying about that."

"We can save him, but we want the star chart as advance payment," Lin Feng told Carlos.

Carlos hesitated for a moment, but fear ultimately won out, and he obediently transmitted an encrypted star chart data file.

Su Wanqing quickly analyzed it: "The star chart coordinates are very old, the encryption method is decades old too. Authenticity... questionable. But there is indeed a numbered asteroid in that region, database shows unknown composition."

"Interesting," Lin Feng nodded. "Old Scar, send engineering robots to pull his ship out from between the rocks, then give him one of our outdated old thrusters so he can at least maneuver."

Soon, engineering robots extracted the "Ha Ha Treasure Ship" and helped replace its thrusters. Carlos expressed endless gratitude.

"Follow us. If that star chart turns out to be fake..." Lin Feng threatened in a calm tone.

"It's real! Absolutely real! I, Carlos, swear on my treasure hunter's honor!" Carlos pledged, pounding his chest.

Thus, the "Star of Hope" gained a tagalong. Throughout the journey, Carlos chattered incessantly over the communication channel, boasting about his various "glorious" treasure hunting experiences (nine out of ten failures, with the tenth being a scam), making everyone on the bridge chuckle. It actually added considerable entertainment to the otherwise monotonous voyage.

Several days later, they reached the coordinates marked on the star chart. Sure enough, there was a dark red asteroid.

The scan results, however, were astonishing—not a rich mineral deposit, but a... massive, abandoned garbage processing station! Piled with space junk from who knows how many decades ago!

"Hahaha! I told you it was treasure!" Carlos instead grew excited. "For true treasure hunters, garbage is just wealth misplaced! Let's dig in, folks!"

Lin Feng and the others didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But since they were already here, following the principle that thieves don't leave empty-handed... er, the principle of frugality, Lin Feng still dispatched engineering robots for scanning and salvage operations.

The results actually yielded discoveries! Inside a half-melted container, they found large quantities of military canned goods—though expired for decades, they were perfectly sealed and beautifully packaged! And in various flavors!

For the Stardust team, which had long suffered from lack of food variety, this was like manna from heaven!

"Wow! Braised beef! Pan-fried fish fillet! There's even fruit salad?!" Wu Yu stared wide-eyed at the salvaged samples.

Even the usually calm Su Wanqing couldn't help taking extra glances at the fruit can labels.

Lin Feng waved his hand grandly: "Load it all onto the ship!" Their food reserves were now significantly enriched.

Chapter 87 That Quiet Cosmic Outpost

Carlos also beamed with joy as he received his share of the "treasure"—several crates of canned goods and some still-functional parts from an old entertainment robot.

"Hehe, pleasure working with you! Remember to call me if you have any more opportunities like this!"

Satisfied, Carlos piloted his repaired junker away, humming an off-key tune as he departed.

Looking at the warehouse filled with canned goods and his overjoyed crew members, Lin Feng shook his head with a smile.

This "trash collecting" trip was definitely worth it! And he had even made contact with an interesting "treasure hunter"—though unreliable, he might prove useful for information in the future.

The Star of Hope continued its journey, with the warehouse now carrying a bit more of a "homey" atmosphere.

The voyage went on, and the bridge felt much more relaxed. Everyone would occasionally open a can of "treasure" for a treat, debating the merits of various flavors.

One day, Sun Wen picked up another faint distress signal. The signal was intermittent, but its content was rather peculiar: "...Seventh attempt failed... Viability continues to decrease... Requesting... any passing vessels... Share some pure water or organic nutrients... Willing to exchange... seed bank data..."

"Pure water? Organic nutrients? Seed bank?" Lin Feng said curiously, "This doesn't sound like a typical distress call, more like... someone in agriculture?"

The signal originated from behind an unremarkable, seemingly worthless small asteroid.

"Let's check it out," Lin Feng ordered. They were passing by anyway, and he was very interested in the "seed bank." Little Ears' Hydroponic Farm was successful, but its crop variety was too limited.

As the ship rounded the asteroid, they discovered a small ecological dome powered by solar panels. The dome looked quite old, its surface covered in thick dust, but there seemed to be faint lights inside.

Scans showed one life sign inside the dome, very weak. Near the airlock outside the dome hung signs written in Universal Space Language: "Eden Project Outpost," "No Entry Without Permission," "Caution: Plants."

Lin Feng had Flea attempt to contact the interior. After quite some time, a weak but distinctly scholarly voice responded, filled with caution: "Who? Who are you? If you're with the 'Reapers,' please leave! There's nothing left here!"

"We're not the 'Reapers,'" Lin Feng said, keeping his tone as gentle as possible. "We received your distress signal, about... water and nutrients?"

Hearing about water and nutrients, the voice became somewhat more animated: "You... do you have surplus pure water and organic fertilizer? I can trade! I'll trade with the seeds I've collected! Lots and lots of seeds!"

After communication, they learned that a botanist named Aila (as she called herself) lived here. She had been guarding this outpost alone for many years, dedicated to researching crop cultivation in harsh environments. Some time ago, her water circulation system's main pump had failed, and the backup pump had quickly depleted its energy, causing most of her experimental crops to wither. She herself was nearly out of supplies.

Lin Feng immediately dispatched an Engineering Robot carrying spare fresh water and some base-produced, processed organic nutrient solution (byproducts from the Hydroponic Farm).

When the airlock opened, a young woman wearing a faded work uniform, with somewhat messy hair but bright eyes, nearly burst into tears upon seeing the robot delivering ample water and nutrient solution.

She carefully took the urgently needed portions, then without hesitation handed a portable hard drive to the robot: "This is my seed bank backup data and some cultivation notes! Thank you! You've saved 'Eden'!"

After the data was transmitted, Little Ears gasped after just one look: "Oh my! So many varieties! Cold-resistant, drought-tolerant, high-yield, even some modified ornamental plants! This data is incredibly valuable!"

Lin Feng also felt the exchange was more than worthwhile. He had the robot help Aila check the faulty water pump and found it was just a simple burnt-out energy coil. Wrench provided remote guidance and helped her repair it using the most common parts from the ship.

With the water pump operational again, Aila's world seemed filled with light once more. She chattered incessantly to Lin Feng about her various precious plants. Though most were wilted, with water and nutrients, they would recover soon.

When parting, Aila hesitated for a moment but still said: "You... you should be careful of the 'Reapers.' They're a group of marauders who specialize in plundering agricultural achievements and technology. Several of my colleagues have fallen victim to them. It seems... they're collecting a specific type of high-energy crop in large quantities..."

Hearing the name "Reapers" again. Lin Feng thanked her for the warning and said he would be careful.

As the Star of Hope departed, Aila stood at the dome entrance, waving vigorously, while beside her a peculiar little flower that had just been watered seemed to lift its head slightly.

This rescue involved no fighting, no conspiracies—just a pure intersection of survival and hope. The ship now possessed vast seed data, which Little Ears treated as a priceless treasure, diving headfirst into research. Meanwhile, Lin Feng mentally noted the clues about the "Reapers" and "high-energy crops."

The universe wasn't just about fighting and killing; there were also people persisting with their small dreams.

During their continued journey, sensors detected an energy signal with an extremely weak reaction, coming from an abandoned small monitoring outpost. Such outposts were mostly pre-war relics, long forgotten.

"Let's check it out. There might still be usable parts or residual databases," Lin Feng ordered, adhering to his principle of never leaving empty-handed.

The ship approached the outpost. It was tilted, embedded in a rock, with severe external damage, clearly abandoned for a long time.

Old Scar led a small team, wearing protective suits, to land and inspect. The interior of the outpost was in complete disarray. Most equipment had been stripped away, leaving only empty shells and some immovable large structures.

"Looks like it's been looted long ago," Old Scar reported. "Nothing of value here."

Chapter 88 Cosmic Traveler

Just as they were preparing to evacuate, Flea, who was accompanying them, discovered an abandoned, old portable data terminal in a dusty corner. It looked completely broken, with a shattered screen and a deformed casing.

"This thing is probably useless," one team member said.

"Let's take it back. Maybe the Doctor can tinker with it and get something out of it," Flea said, operating on the principle that a thief never leaves empty-handed... uh, the principle of caution, as he picked it up.

Back on the spacecraft, Flea handed this broken terminal to Doctor Chen Wei. The Doctor, who was bored out of her mind, became immediately enthusiastic about studying the "toy" that had been delivered to her.

She connected this broken terminal to her own equipment and attempted to export the data. As expected, most of the storage areas were damaged, but using the powerful computing capabilities of the "Guardian-VI" core, the Doctor actually managed to recover some fragmented data from some remaining, unoverwritten physical sectors.

Most of this data consisted of the outpost's daily logs, which were dry and tedious. However, one encrypted fragment marked "Abnormal Phenomenon Record" caught the Doctor's attention.

After spending some effort to crack it, she discovered it recorded strange phenomena monitored during the final period before the outpost was abandoned:

Unexplained weak gravitational ripples occasionally appeared in the nearby space, accompanied by extremely brief, unnatural ultra-low frequency signals. The recorder thought it might be equipment malfunction and didn't investigate further.

But Chen Wei acted like she had discovered a new continent:

"Gravitational ripples? Unnatural ultra-low frequency signals? This doesn't resemble any known natural phenomenon or spacecraft engine! It's more like... the spacetime aftermath produced when some super-large structure performs short-range space jumps?! But how massive would something have to be to generate ripples of this magnitude?"

She excitedly told Lin Feng and Su Wanqing about this discovery.

"Super-large structure? Space jumps?"

Lin Feng frowned, "I haven't heard of anything like that around here."

"The records are from many years ago. Maybe that 'super-large structure' was just passing through? Or maybe it's been hiding somewhere all along?" Chen Wei's eyes sparkled, "This could be a major discovery! We should conduct a more thorough search around these coordinates!"

Looking at the vague coordinates and ancient data, Lin Feng felt this was more like a science fiction story. But he didn't completely dismiss it either—the universe was vast, and anything was possible.

"Let's record the coordinates for now. We have more important matters at the moment," Lin Feng didn't approve a large-scale search, but he did have Sun Wen monitor any abnormal signals from that area.

This small interlude, like a seed, planted a question about deeper mysteries of the universe. What exactly was that "ghost" that produced the gravitational ripples?

Perhaps at some future moment, this clue would become crucially important.

After a brief jump, the "Star of Hope" arrived near a relatively busy star sector where several commonly used shipping lanes intersected.

Just after emerging from jump state, a very flashy-looking small leisure spacecraft painted with various exaggerated starscape patterns approached and sent a friendly communication request.

When the communication connected, a vibrant young face appeared on the screen. He wore goggles, had blue-dyed hair, and said with a cheerful smile:

"Hey! New faces! Hello there, big guy! I'm Jim the 'Star Rambler'! Judging by your looks, this is your first time in this star sector, right? Need a guide? It's free! I just love meeting new friends and hearing new stories!"

Lin Feng was taken aback by this sudden enthusiasm. Wu Yu muttered quietly, "There are still people this helpful these days? Could he be a scammer?"

But scans showed the other spacecraft had almost no weapons and very low energy readings, resembling more of a modified sightseeing vessel.

Lin Feng smiled and responded, "Thanks, we are indeed newcomers. A free guide? Any conditions?"

"The condition is to chat with me and share stories from your journey!" Jim said cheerfully, "I get pretty bored running alone for too long. Don't worry, I know this area like the back of my hand—where to find space stations with good food (though it's all synthetic meat), where to buy cheap fuel, where to see beautiful starscape views, and where absolutely not to go (like 'Black Scorpion' territory), I know it all!"

It was hard to refuse such warm hospitality, and they genuinely needed local information. So Lin Feng agreed to let him tag along temporarily.

Jim was a chatterbox, but very entertaining. He was like an interstellar version of a "backpacker," passionate about exploration and making friends, with zero interest in fighting and faction struggles. He enthusiastically described the characteristics of various space stations, which asteroid belt had the most beautiful scenery, and where new nebulae had recently appeared.

Under his guidance, the "Star of Hope" avoided some unnecessary trouble zones and found a supply point where they replenished fuel and fresh water at reasonable prices.

He also recommended a very safe, scenic remote asteroid belt for the spacecraft to dock and rest, where they could watch the magnificent sight of two stars slowly crossing paths.

During the break, Jim even sent over some of his homemade, "supposedly" delicious space cookies via drone. They tasted a bit strange, but the gesture was heartfelt.

During casual conversation, Jim also shared some unofficial information: for example, several major forces in the Belt Alliance had recently increased friction, seemingly competing for something; and he had previously spotted the "Obsidian" from afar, apparently heading toward an ancient interstellar empire ruins, which was said to be quite eerie, with spacecraft frequently disappearing mysteriously there.

"Interstellar empire ruins?"

Lin Feng noted this information.

"Yeah, just legends really," Jim waved his hand, "I wouldn't dare go there anyway. Oh, if you meet a guy called 'Wandering Painter' Old Joe, say hello for me. He's my friend, and I don't know where he's gone sketching recently either."

A few days later, when they reached a fork in the route, Jim needed to go explore a new star gallery in another direction.

"Great meeting you all! Wishing you a smooth journey! Remember, the universe is vast—you need to stay alive to have stories!"

Jim waved goodbye with a smile, piloting his flashy little ship as it disappeared into the starlight.

This encounter contained no danger, no schemes, only pure goodwill and sharing from a stranger. It left everyone in the Stardust team feeling warmth and relaxation.

"That guy was pretty interesting," Anvil said, chewing on the cookies Jim had given them.

"The interstellar empire ruins and the Obsidian's whereabouts he mentioned are worth noting," Su Wanqing recorded the information. The "Star of Hope" continued its voyage, carrying good spirits and a new direction.

Next target—head to the relatively safe "Free Station" outpost that Jim mentioned to learn more about the Belt Alliance situation.

Chapter 89: The Silence of the Shattered Stars Graveyard

Following the advice of the one-armed bartender at the "Old Dog Bar," the Star of Hope adjusted its course and entered the edge of the star sector known as the Shattered Stars Graveyard. The scenery here instantly differed dramatically from the brilliant nebulae and active shipping lanes they had passed through earlier, as if they had stepped into the cold, silent corridor of the universe's history.

This was an incredibly vast region, its origins long lost to the river of time.

What met the eye were no longer dazzling stars, but the wreckage of countless enormous artificial objects.

These were not natural celestial bodies, but the remains of ships of various models and eras—from small scout craft to the skeletal frames of massive battleships, from civilian transport containers to the broken connecting bridges of space stations—as if torn apart by an invisible giant hand and casually scattered across this eternal dark canvas.

These metallic corpses slowly collided with one another, each impact producing a low, hollow boom that served as the only background noise in this dead realm, adding to the desolation.

Many of the wrecks still bore the scorch marks of energy weapons, huge tearing wounds, and faded, indistinct insignias, silently recounting the fierce conflicts or terrible disasters they had encountered in the past.

The cold, fractured metal surfaces reflected a dismal sheen under the faint light of distant stars. Occasionally, frozen gases or liquids escaped from breaches, instantly crystallizing into fine ice particles, like dust drifting over graves.

The ship carefully navigated through this enormous metallic maze. The crew unconsciously lowered their voices, as if afraid of disturbing the graveyard's eternal slumber.

A mood mixed with awe, lament, and faint sorrow permeated the bridge. Here, the traces of humanity and other intelligent races striving, exploring, and even engaging in close-quarters combat among the stars were laid bare in the most brutal and straightforward manner.

"Scanning multiple weak signal sources... mostly radioactive background noise from the wreckage and various metallic echoes... Wait, one signal is very weak but unusually regular, not a noise pattern!"

Sun Wen's voice cut clearly through the silence, carrying a hint of alertness, like a hunter spotting prey. "Signal source locked. Bearing 734, distance 2000. It's the rear half of an 'Explorer III-class' research vessel wreck. Its life pod ejection port structure appears relatively intact!"

Lin Feng immediately ordered, "Dispatch Anvil team. Take the workboat to investigate. Maintain communication and be careful."

The small workboat, like a cautious worker bee, detached from the mothership and slowly approached the research vessel wreck that was nearly cut in half and covered in thick frost. Using cutting tools, the team members carefully pried open the deformed life pod hatch and found inside a source of extremely weak life signs—

An old man with white hair and beard, his face haggard, curled up inside a cryo-sleep pod that had already failed. He was still wearing an outdated scientific research uniform. Scattered around him were several old-fashioned data slates and a metal sample case that looked very sturdy.

The old man was quickly and carefully transferred back to the Star of Hope's medical bay. After the medical robot administered emergency nanite injections and nutrient fluids, a trace of color gradually returned to his pale face. Trembling, he opened his eyes, his gaze first confused, then replaced by a powerful obsession.

"Thank... you..." His voice was dry and hoarse, like sandpaper grating, "I... I am Ezra... independent archaeologist... How long... how long have I been asleep?" He tried eagerly to sit up but was gently restrained by the medical robot.

"Relax, Mr. Ezra. You're safe now," Lin Feng walked to the side of the medical bay. "What happened to your ship?"

"The ship... the 'Quest for Knowledge'... is finished..."

A flicker of pain passed through Ezra's eyes, but it was quickly overshadowed by even stronger excitement. "But we found it! Deep in this graveyard! Look! Look at this!"

He pointed excitedly at the metal sample case he clutched tightly to his chest and the data slates.

The data slates displayed some enhanced, blurry images and spectral analysis data. At the center of the images was a wreck of a ship so immense it was breathtaking, its design ancient and peculiar, vastly different from the shipbuilding aesthetics of any known civilization today.

Its entire body exhibited a matte bronze color. A huge insignia on the hull, resembling vines entwining stars, though severely damaged, was still recognizable in its general outline.

"The 'Bountiful Harvest'... one of the legendary super-colony ships from the 'First Expansion Era'... It's said to have carried a gene bank, knowledge core, and ecological templates sufficient to rebuild a civilization..."

Ezra breathed rapidly, his eyes shining with an almost fanatical light. "Its location... my last effective fix... is here!" He transmitted a set of coordinate data to Lin Feng's data slate. "We were almost able to approach it... but suddenly, energy turbulence appeared... and... and those things hiding within the turbulence..." A trace of fear crossed his face, and he coughed violently.

"Things? What things?" Lin Feng pressed.

"Unclear... like shadows... extremely fast... the 'Quest for Knowledge's' shields were torn apart like paper..."

Ezra closed his eyes wearily. "I give you the coordinates... my life's pursuit... Perhaps you... can uncover its secrets... Be careful... the space there... is very unstable... like broken glass..."

Having said this, he seemed to exhaust all his strength and fell into unconsciousness again, though a faint, satisfied curve seemed to touch the corner of his mouth.

Lin Feng looked at the coordinates on his data slate, located in the most dangerous core region of the graveyard, his mood heavy and complex.

An ancient relic that a scholar had pursued his entire life, even at the cost of his life, might lie quietly in the depths of that death zone, tempting later explorers.

He did not make an immediate decision. Instead, he had Sun Wen encrypt and save the coordinates, listing it as one of the highest priority targets for investigation, and instructed the medical team to do their utmost to treat Ezra. Regardless of whether they would eventually seek out the "Bountiful Harvest," the discovery and warning this old archaeologist had obtained at the cost of his life deserved to be treated with the utmost seriousness.

The Star of Hope slowly departed from this metallic graveyard that held countless failures, deaths, and unsolved mysteries. That heavy coordinate, like a pearl buried in the abyss, quietly awaited the moment it would be discovered or forgotten.

Chapter 90 Whirlpool Market

Leaving behind the oppressive silence of the "Shattered Stars Graveyard," the "Star of Hope" set course for a famous temporary trading post known as the "Vortex Bazaar," based on scattered information from Ezra's earlier logs.

Even before arrival, they could sense the stark contrast—a wave of boisterous vitality completely opposite to the graveyard.

The sight before them was nothing short of spectacular: a slowly rotating interstellar gas vortex, ejecting rainbow-colored ionized gases, served as a natural backdrop and gravitational anchor point.

Built around and utilizing this vortex's gravitational field was a massive temporary platform crudely connected from over a hundred ships of various types.

These ships varied greatly in size and model, ranging from bulky decommissioned freighters to nimble private yachts, and even a few obviously scrapped-together "Frankenstein" vessels.

They were interconnected by thick metal cables, temporarily welded gangways, and a crisscrossing web of tractor beams, forming a chaotic yet vibrant aerial maze.

The bazaar had no unified atmosphere or gravity system; environments differed across regions, forcing vendors and customers to wear simple protective suits or rely on their own racial traits to navigate.

Hawking cries, bargaining voices, engine roars, curses and laughter in different racial languages all mingled together through public channels and physical vibrations, creating a chaotic yet fervent symphony.

The goods were even more diverse and bizarre: energy crystals emitting strange glows, alien creatures squirming in transparent jars, rusty antique parts allegedly from some lost civilization, unregistered weapons flashing with dangerous red lights, and various data chips and star charts of dubious origin. The air was thick with a mixture of machine oil, spices, ozone, and indescribable alien body odors.

Wu Yu and Flea were like fish returned to water, excitedly requesting permission to go down and "scout for purchases."

Lin Feng approved but required them to operate in teams, maintain communication, and focus primarily on gathering intelligence and exchanging practical supplies.

Wu Yu headed straight for the areas buying raw materials and selling food supplies.

He fully utilized his hoarding and trading talents, successfully exchanging several crates of basic metal materials and a portion of incidentally collected glowing dust still shimmering with Starwhale afterglow for a large amount of local hard currency energy coins, along with a batch of high-energy synthetic protein blocks and pure water units.

More importantly, at a stall selling specialty fermented drinks, he used a few cans of fruit and a can of beer to extract considerable information from the vendor about recent friction among several major merchant guilds at "Free Station" over a newly discovered small rich mineral belt, as well as intelligence about the skyrocketing prices of certain specific parts.

Flea, meanwhile, ghosted through the dimly lit, more clandestine trading areas, which were filled with stalls peddling information, hacking tools, and "special" components.

Using a second-hand signal jammer and clever patter learned from the "treasure hunter" Carlos, he managed to extract a valuable piece of information from a shifty-eyed information broker:

An organization called "Jingtianxing" was offering high prices on the black market for a very old, specific model of subspace communication core module, seemingly related to a secret research project they were conducting. Flea had a vague feeling that the name "Jingtianxing" and the technology it sought seemed to have some subtle connection to the styles of the "Watchers" and the "Engineers" they had encountered before.

Little Ears Sun Wen was deeply captivated by a mobile greenhouse stall converted from an abandoned transport pod. The stall owner was a silent botanist selling various alien plant seeds known for their strong adaptability or peculiar effects.

Using several types of high-yield basic crop seeds she had cultivated herself, Little Ears successfully traded for a few packets of "Starlight Moss" spores, reportedly brought from a distant jungle planet and possessing faint bioluminescence. She couldn't wait to return and study their properties.

Lin Feng himself paused before a stall piled high with old books, data slates, and miscellaneous items.

The vendor was a Tranian wearing thick glasses, busy repairing an old-fashioned robot.

Lin Feng was drawn to an ancient logbook written in an unknown language but containing exceptionally detailed hand-drawn star charts inside.

He felt that the style of the star charts and certain symbolic markings in this logbook shared an indescribable, implicit connection with the starfield surrounding the "Bountiful Harvest" coordinates discovered by Ezra. He traded a high-energy-density battery for this worn logbook, planning to take it back to the ship for Dr. Chen Wei to study carefully.

Just as everyone, satisfied with their respective gains, prepared to return to the ship, a wave of noisy cheers and teasing erupted from the central connecting platform of the bazaar.

It turned out to be an impromptu "Fast Fix Engine Malfunction" fun contest, with prizes being a crate of high-grade lubricant and coupons for a well-known repair shop. Several engineers of different races were sweating profusely over a pile of junk parts, drawing cheers from the onlookers.

This scene, full of life and a spirit of technical fun, made Lin Feng and the others smile knowingly, fully appreciating the unique, rugged, and vibrant culture of the Belt Alliance's frontier regions.

The "Star of Hope," laden with exchanged supplies and intelligence, slowly departed from the noisy, chaotic temporary bazaar.

This experience delving into the "Vortex Bazaar" allowed them to once again enjoy the pleasure of "stockpiling," yielded intelligence on the power dynamics at "Free Station," the movements of the "Jingtianxing" organization, and potential new clues related to the "Bountiful Harvest," making ample preparations for the journey ahead.

Leaving the bustling "Vortex Bazaar" behind, the "Star of Hope" continued towards "Free Station" along a relatively secluded route. During the voyage, a magnificent cosmic spectacle unexpectedly appeared, capturing everyone's attention.

Ahead of the ship, a massive gravitational lensing phenomenon appeared. An immensely massive, compact celestial body itself invisible—likely a black hole or an ancient neutron star—its powerful gravity warped the surrounding space, as if placing an invisible, super-heavy lens upon the vast canvas of the universe.

Through this distorted region of space, the starlight from distant galaxies behind was bent, magnified, and even split, forming a dazzling, ever-changing ring of light, resembling a gigantic cosmic eye shimmering with rainbow colors.

Distant galaxies were stretched into strange light arcs and points, composing a surrealistic artistic picture, breathtakingly beautiful.

"Adjust course towards the observation point, but maintain absolute safe distance!"

Lin Feng gave the order, his tone filled with awe. This kind of grand spectacle created by the universe itself was a precious, serendipitous experience. Furthermore, such lensing effects could sometimes reveal hidden celestial bodies or anomalies normally impossible to observe.

The ship carefully hovered at the edge of the gravitational lensing effect's range, stabilizing itself as much as possible for precise observation. Everyone on the bridge was captivated by the distorted, dreamlike scene outside the viewport, as if witnessing the deep structure and laws of the universe firsthand.

Just then, Science Officer Dr. Chen Wei suddenly made a sound of surprise and doubt: "Wait! This isn't right! There's an inexplicable discrepancy between the optical observation and the gravitational model in the region of maximum distortion at the lens center! It should be an empty void there, but the sensors are detecting a very faint yet persistent... reflection signal?!"

Everyone's gaze instantly focused on that most severely distorted area where light was almost scattered into nothingness. After multiple rounds of stacking and restoration by the ship's powerful main computer imaging algorithms, an unbelievable scene gradually emerged—

Right in the center of that theoretically "empty" region, there clearly existed a tiny but structurally distinct bright point! Its light was stable, seemingly unaffected by the wildly distorted light around it, maintaining its own independent form!

"Magnify the image! Activate all spectral analyzers! Calculate its absolute coordinates!"

Lin Feng ordered immediately, his heart filled with shock and curiosity.

After complex calculations and corrections, eliminating the distortion caused by the gravitational lens, the true form of the light point gradually became clear—it appeared to be a planet! A planet with a uniformly silvery-white surface, as if entirely composed of some kind of metal or highly reflective material, quietly reflecting the light of distant stars!

However, in all known star charts, all official or unofficial astronomical database records, this coordinate point was absolutely empty, containing no large celestial bodies!

"A hidden planet? Revealed by chance due to the extreme gravitational lensing effect?" Su Wanqing found it hard to believe.

"Or something even more astonishing," Dr. Chen Wei's voice trembled slightly with excitement,

"It might have always been there, but used some technology we cannot comprehend to 'hide' itself from conventional detection, forming a permanent cloaking field. But the intense spatial distortion caused by this dense celestial object temporarily disrupted or 'pried open' a gap in that cloaking field, allowing us a glimpse!"

The existence of this "phantom planet" was instantly shrouded in an aura of mystery and high technology.

What was it? Who built or modified it? Why go to such lengths to hide it? What was on it?

Lin Feng immediately instructed Sun Wen to record the planet's precisely calculated absolute coordinates and mobilized all sensors to collect as much data as possible—its spectral signature, reflectivity, potential thermal signals, everything.

However, due to the extreme distance, the powerful gravitational field in between, and the potential interference from the cloaking field, the information obtainable remained limited, raising more questions than answers.

"Another coordinate filled with immense secrets..."

Lin Feng stared at the newly marked point on the star chart, his heart filled with a thirst for exploration.

Chapter 91 The Broken Diary in the Life Pod

After a routine short-range jump, the ship's sensors picked up an extremely faint, continuously repeating ancient distress beacon signal, using a pattern common centuries ago.

The signal source came from a solitary, frozen small asteroid covered in impact craters, appearing particularly conspicuous in this desolate region of space.

The dispatched engineering robot quickly located the signal source: a severely damaged life pod half-buried in the permafrost within the asteroid's permanent shadow zone. The life pod's hull had several obvious penetration holes with melted edges from energy weapon impacts, clearly deliberately destroyed.

The hatch was twisted and deformed, the interior completely silent. There were no remains of any occupants, only some scattered, floating personal items: a rusted pen, a cracked photo frame, and a portable diary with a shattered screen but an exceptionally sturdy casing.

The robot carefully brought the diary and photo frame back to the ship. Doctor Chen Wei tried multiple data interfaces and finally succeeded in reading the fragmented data remnants from the diary's storage unit.

The diary's owner was a Venusian woman named Lena Hope, an astrophysicist affiliated with an unofficial research organization called the "Fringe Frontier Foundation." The diary intermittently recorded her final scientific expedition:

Her research vessel, the "Starwhisper," during a routine survey tracking anomalous gravitational waves, accidentally discovered a massive, stable "spacetime curvature anomaly zone." Within this zone, physical constants exhibited slight but measurable deviations, as if space itself there had been "torn open" or "stretched."

They were incredibly excited, considering this a major discovery, and attempted to conduct deeper probes while immediately reporting to the Foundation headquarters.

However, disaster struck immediately.

The diary entries became hurried and chaotic:

"...receiving strong, unidentifiable interference...engines locked...the other party refuses all communication...they're firing!

It's the 'Scavengers'!

Why are they attacking us?!

We're just scientists!

...ship's hull penetrated...abandon ship!...life pod ejected...locked on again!

...they're intent on wiping us out...why?!

What exactly is that 'void'?!

...the glare of energy cannons

...may...may someone find...the data...the truth..."

The diary and distress beacon records ended abruptly there.

"Scavengers"? "Spacetime curvature anomaly zone"? Deviations in physical constants? A scientific discovery leading to merciless elimination?

These fragmented pieces of information pieced together a chilling story. A seemingly pure scientific discovery had triggered the fatal red line of some unknown force. Both the so-called "Scavengers" and the "spacetime anomaly zone" carried an eerie and dangerous aura that made one's heart palpitate.

Lin Feng instructed Sun Wen to use the last jump coordinates and anomalous gravitational wave data provided in the diary to reverse-calculate the most probable approximate location of that "spacetime curvature anomaly zone." The calculation results were unsettling—

That area lay directly on their preset course to "Free Station." Although it required a slight deviation from the main shipping lane, it was not unreachable.

"Should we alter our course to completely avoid that area?"

Old Scar asked with a grave expression. This kind of enemy, appearing and disappearing without a trace and willing to kill even scientific researchers, was far too dangerous.

Lin Feng pondered for a moment, then tapped his finger on the star chart:

"No need for a major detour for now. Inform navigation to activate all sensors for wide-area scanning when we approach that estimated area, primarily in passive mode, with active scanning used extremely cautiously. All weapon systems on standby, shield energy raised to activation-ready status. We don't need to provoke anything, but we must know what's actually there and whether any threat remains."

He paused, then added, "Also, log the name 'Scavengers' into the high-risk threat database. All crew members must memorize it. From now on, if we hear any related intelligence in any situation, prioritize its collection."

This unexpected discovery drifted over like a sudden dark cloud, slightly dampening the relaxed atmosphere of nearing "Free Station." The profundity of the cosmos not only meant magnificent wonders and opportunities but undoubtedly also concealed cold, deadly traps and unresolved darkness.

Chapter 92: Shadow of the Megastructure

After the final leg of their journey, the Star of Hope finally arrived at the interim destination of this trip—the outer reaches of the star system containing one of the Belt Alliance's most important transportation hubs:

Free Station.

The sight before them was enough to shock and even slightly suffocate any first-time observer.

It wasn't a single structure, but an unimaginably vast complex formed from countless artificial structures continuously pieced together, extended, and piled up, like a metallic giant tree wildly growing while anchored to a small gas giant planet.

Towering dock cranes reached into the void like branches, densely arranged residential modules, warehouses, and factories resembled leaves, while massive energy collection panels and countless lights twinkling in the darkness looked like clusters of fruit.

Hundreds of thousands of various spacecraft shuttled back and forth like flocks of birds returning to their nests, moving along invisible aerial corridors, their engine lights weaving into a constantly flowing net of light, reaching an extreme level of busyness. The public channels were flooded with navigation instructions, advertisement broadcasts, trade inquiries, and even arguments and curses in various languages, forming an almost tangible torrent of sound waves, roaring and boiling.

Free Station had no single ruler; its operation was maintained by several of the largest merchant alliances, mercenary groups, and technical guilds, superficially maintaining basic order and security.

But behind the scenes, territorial divisions among factions, interest exchanges, and gray market transactions formed the true foundation of this place. Here, extreme "freedom" was upheld—freedom of trade, freedom of information, freedom of immigration, as long as you had value or money.

Lin Feng didn't immediately apply to enter the overwhelmingly busy main port area. Instead, he chose to pause at a relatively spacious public anchorage in the outer periphery.

Various spacecraft were already docked here, ranging from glossy luxury yachts to rust-streaked modified cargo ships, from imposing armed frigates to suspicious-looking stealth shuttles, like a miniature floating world of cosmic society.

Many ships bore obvious combat damage or modification marks on their surfaces, silently recounting their owners' experiences.

"All personnel, attention, final check phase."

Lin Feng's voice sounded through the ship's intercom, steady and clear,

"Final review of system status self-check, ensure all camouflage identity information switches seamlessly, re-familiarize with emergency protocols. Wu Yu, final confirmation of our prepared 'merchandise' list for trade and the priority supplies we hope to acquire, especially the current market rates for those 'hard currencies'."

"Flea, verify again the recent faction distribution map of Free Station, the latest entry inspection procedures, and any sensitive areas or individuals we need to particularly avoid."

The ship's interior immediately began operating with high efficiency and order, conducting final preparations.

They would register using the Stardust exploration ship identity, claiming to hail from a distant, inconspicuous small independent colony, with the purpose of this trip being trade, technical exchange, and information gathering.

Su Wanqing and Sun Wen closely monitored the sensor screens, rapidly analyzing the massive traffic flow data of Free Station, assessing the security levels, convenience, and information flow efficiency of different port areas, attempting to plan the most suitable entry route and docking location—

preferably an area with relatively standardized management, not too mixed with all sorts, yet not too remote to hinder information acquisition.

In an unnoticed corner, Chen Wei immersed herself in her research, comparing the star charts from the ancient log obtained at the Vortex Bazaar, the Bountiful Harvest coordinates provided by Ezra, and the accidentally discovered Phantom Planet location.

Relying on her scientist's intuition, she felt there seemed to be some kind of trans-spatial, inexplicable geometric relationship between these three, which excited her tremendously.

Lin Feng didn't notice her, standing on the bridge instead, gazing at the brightly lit, chaotic, yet vibrant space megastructure on the screen. This would be the Stardust's first true step into the vast world of the Belt Alliance, a massive stage filled with infinite possibilities but also riddled with unknown risks.

"Alright, everyone."

He activated the ship-wide broadcast, his voice calm yet carrying undeniable force, "Free Station lies ahead. Remember our core objectives: safety first, replenish critical supplies, extensively gather intelligence from all parties, attempt to find ways to establish more stable contact with the Engineers, observe discreetly, act cautiously, avoid unnecessary conflicts. But," his tone paused slightly, "if anyone proactively provokes us, endangering our safety or core interests, retaliate with thunderous force, without hesitation."

"Now, prepare for entry. Let's go see what this 'free' city can bring us."

The Star of Hope adjusted its attitude slightly, its main engines emitting a low, steady rumble, like a cautious giant beast, slowly moving toward that massive shadow composed of metal, light, and desire, preparing to merge into that bustling starry sea.

Chapter 93 A Show of Force

The Star of Hope followed the automated navigation beacon's guidance, slowly merging into the busy ship traffic heading toward Free Station's Alpha Harbor district.

The closer they got, the more they could feel the staggering scale and chaos of this space metropolis.

Massive berths were densely packed like honeycombs, with countless ships coming and going. Tractor beams moved like nimble fingers, precisely guiding vessels into their designated positions. The air—or rather, the circulating atmosphere—was thick with the smells of ozone, heated metal, and the mixed scents of numerous species.

Their docking position was in Harbor Sector Four, a relatively older area that seemed to maintain some level of standardized management.

The moment their ship stabilized, before the airtight docking tunnel had fully connected, the external communication light beside the hatch began blinking urgently.

Lin Feng signaled to open communications, and a holographic projection appeared—

It showed a human official wearing a slightly wrinkled uniform with a standard port authority armband. His face wore a formulaic smile, but his eyes revealed shrewdness and a barely noticeable arrogance.

Two subordinates stood behind him, clad in cheap powered exoskeletons and holding data pads.

"Good morning, unfamiliar vessel. Welcome to Free Station's Alpha Harbor district. I'm Assistant Harbor Inspector, you can call me Morris."

The official spoke rapidly, with a habitual slickness to his tone. "First, please immediately transmit your ship registration code, cargo manifest, crew roster, and estimated duration of stay. We need to conduct routine registration and... risk assessment." He deliberately emphasized the words "risk assessment" slightly.

Su Wanqing quickly transmitted the prepared, flawless false documentation for the "Stardust." Morris glanced casually at his data pad.

"Hmm... 'Stardust,' independent survey vessel, registered at... 'New Hope Colony'? Not very familiar with that one."

He lifted his eyelids, giving Lin Feng an appraising look. "Captain Lin, I presume? First time at Free Station?"

"Yes, Mr. Morris. We're mainly here for some trade and supplies." Lin Feng maintained politeness.

"Trade? Supplies?"

Morris smiled, his fingers swiping across the data pad.

"Excellent, Free Station welcomes all legitimate businesspeople. However, recently the station has been experiencing some energy supply constraints, and management costs have risen. So for newcomers—especially those with... well, slightly higher assessed risks like independent vessels—we require an additional 'infrastructure maintenance and security guarantee deposit.'"

He quoted a clearly unreasonable amount. Wu Yu, standing nearby, nearly jumped up in protest but was stopped by a look from Lin Feng.

"Mr. Morris, that fee seems significantly higher than standard docking and management charges."

Lin Feng said calmly.

"Standards are standards, but special circumstances require special handling." Morris spread his hands, adopting a "you know how it is" expression. "Of course, if your vessel happens to have any... distinctive 'local specialties,' perhaps we could offset part of the payment with goods? I know a few friends who offer very fair purchasing prices." He hinted meaningfully.

This was blatant extortion. This Morris was clearly a "shake-down artist" who specialized in harassing new arrivals to squeeze benefits from them.

Lin Feng inwardly sneered but put on a troubled expression:

"Mr. Morris, we've just come from a remote region and don't have anything valuable—just some ordinary ores and synthetic materials. About this fee..."

Just then, Flea's voice came through Lin Feng's encrypted earpiece: "Boss, got the info. This Morris, nickname 'Skinflint Mo,' is the brother-in-law of the Sector Four supervisor. Insatiably greedy but not particularly brave—he's afraid of causing trouble. He apparently owes a huge gambling debt to the 'Black Scorpion' bar recently."

Lin Feng immediately formed a plan. He sighed and changed his tone:

"Ah, it seems we'll have to pay as required. But Mr. Morris, before transferring the funds, could you please provide me with a detailed, official receipt stamped with the harbor authority's seal? Our audit committee is very strict—every external expense must have clear documentation and proof for future... verification." He deliberately paused slightly on the word "verification."

Morris's smile instantly stiffened. An official receipt? With an official seal? If he issued that, his unauthorized price increases would be officially recorded. If these people actually had connections or if this caused trouble later...

One of his subordinates whispered a reminder: "Boss, official receipts go through the system—the supervisor would see it..."

Morris's face went through several changes before he suddenly laughed heartily:

"Ah, look at me, I almost forgot! The system's been undergoing upgrades recently, and the temporary fee module is suspended! Captain Lin clearly follows the rules. Tell you what, let's forget about it this time—just pay the standard rate! Come back often, we're all friends here!" He hurriedly tapped a few commands on his data pad as if nothing had happened.

"That's very generous of you, Mr. Morris."

Lin Feng showed a grateful smile. "We'll certainly abide by Free Station's regulations."

After sending off the disgruntled Morris and his team, the docking tunnel finally completed its connection.

"Pah! Bully who only picks on the weak!" Wu Yu cursed.

"Perfectly normal—this is just the first hurdle in a place like this." Lin Feng said calmly. "Flea, good work. Make a note of that 'Black Scorpion' bar—might be useful later."

"Understood, Boss."

The Star of Hope's hatch slowly opened, officially setting foot on Free Station's deck.

Beyond the door lay the noisy, chaotic, yet infinitely possible world of the Belt Alliance. Their first small encounter had ended in victory through wisdom and intelligence.

Chapter 94: Black Scorpion Bar

After settling the spacecraft and leaving Old Scar with the necessary guards, Lin Feng decided to head to the "Black Scorpion" bar previously mentioned by Flea, bringing Su Wanqing, Wu Yu, and Flea along.

These kinds of places with mixed crowds were typically hubs for information exchange and good spots for establishing connections.

Passing through the bustling port passageways where various races jostled shoulder to shoulder, the group arrived at the "Black Scorpion" bar located at the edge of the fourth sector.

A scorpion holographic emblem flashing with glaring red light hung at the entrance. Pushing the door open, an even stronger mixture of alcohol, tobacco, sweat, and some kind of pungent spice assaulted their senses, accompanied by deafening electronic music and noisy voices.

The interior of the bar was dimly lit and hazy with smoke. The clientele came from all walks of life - there were mercenaries boasting loudly, smugglers whispering secretly, and down-and-out travelers drinking alone.

A burly bartender with a full beard and one mechanical prosthetic eye was wiping glasses with a dirty cloth, his sharp gaze scanning the entire room.

Lin Feng and his companions found a relatively quiet corner to sit.

Wu Yu, urgently needing to practice his social skills, took the initiative to go to the bar to order drinks and casually struck up a conversation with the bartender called "Butcher," naturally mentioning Morris's name and "inadvertently" complaining about the port authority's fees.

"Butcher" snorted, his mechanical eye flashing with a red light:

"Morris? That weakling is squeezing newcomers again? He owes me so much money, yet his hands are quite tight."

He glanced at Wu Yu, "Did he fleece you badly?"

Wu Yu immediately voiced his grievances and cleverly hinted that if there were any "money-making opportunities" or need to "handle some special goods," they might be able to cooperate.

"Butcher" sized up Wu Yu, glanced at Lin Feng and the others in the corner, then lowered his voice:

"Money-making opportunities? There is one readily available. That 'Mole' guy got another batch of 'defective goods' from the 'Engineers' side somehow, urgently needs to offload them at very low prices. But the goods are a bit hot - they're core components of some kind of environmental terraformer, and the 'Jingtianxing' people seem to be looking for this kind of stuff too. If you have the guts to take them and resell to those bumpkins developing frontier planets, you could make a good profit." He provided an address and contact code.

Wu Yu's interest was piqued, and he memorized the information. Returning to their seats, he immediately reported to Lin Feng.

"'Mole'? Him again." Lin Feng frowned, "And it involves 'Jingtianxing'... This cargo probably isn't just 'hot,' it's a 'hot potato.'"

As they were weighing their options, a well-dressed, elegantly behaved Slim (a race known for information trading) approached holding a drink, giving a slight bow:

"Pardon the interruption. I couldn't help overhearing earlier that you seem interested in 'Mole's' goods? Allow me to add that the source of that batch might be somewhat... sensitive, not just a 'Jingtianxing' problem. If you need safer, more reliable information or goods channels, perhaps we could talk? I'm Samir, a humble information broker."

He handed over an exquisitely crafted electronic business card.

Lin Feng took the card, looking into Samir's eyes that seemed capable of seeing through people, knowing that a genuine information broker had come to them.

"Mr. Samir, pleased to meet you. We're interested in all kinds of information, especially regarding 'Engineers,' 'Jingtianxing,' or... any unusual space phenomena." Lin Feng tested the waters.

Samir smiled slightly: "Excellent, Captain Lin is indeed a perceptive man. This isn't the best place to talk. If you're interested, tomorrow afternoon at the 'Starlight Tea House' - a quieter location - we can discuss in detail. Perhaps I happen to have some information about 'abnormal gravitational phenomena' and certain... 'lost research vessels' that might relate to your... research areas."

He gave Lin Feng a meaningful look, then politely took his leave.

Lin Feng's heart shook - this Samir seemed to know quite a lot!

"It seems the waters of Free Station run deeper than we imagined," Su Wanqing murmured quietly.

"But it's also an opportunity," Lin Feng put away the business card. "First, let's handle the immediate matter. Wu Yu, go contact 'Mole' and see what the situation is with that batch of goods, but be extremely careful. Flea, investigate this Samir and the 'Starlight Tea House's background."

The first day at Free Station passed amidst the bar's noise and the undercurrents of information exchange. New clues and potential dangers had simultaneously emerged.

The next afternoon, Lin Feng and Su Wanqing arrived as agreed at the "Starlight Tea House" located in Free Station's upper district, an environment relatively elegant and quiet. This place was completely different from the bustle of the lower port area, with clients mostly well-dressed merchants, officials, or information brokers who appeared deeply reserved.

"Captain Lin, Miss Su, I'm delighted you both arrived punctually," Samir smiled. "Are you adjusting to Free Station? Has Mr. Morris been causing any more trouble?"

Chapter 95: The Living Equipment of the Eye of Truth

"Thanks to you, it went fairly smoothly." Lin Feng responded without showing any emotion. "We are very interested in the information you mentioned yesterday, Mr. Samir."

"Excellent." Samir gently stirred his teacup.

"Then I won't beat around the bush. First, it's about the 'Abnormal Gravitational Phenomena' you might be interested in."

He operated the terminal on the table, calling up an encrypted fragment of a star chart.

"About three months ago, a smuggling fleet, while evading patrols, accidentally entered an unofficial shipping lane. Their navigator recorded brief, anomalous spatial distortion readings. The location was right here." He pointed to a small area, coincidentally close to the "Spacetime Curvature Anomaly Zone" mentioned in Dr. Lena's diary.

"They claimed to have seen some... 'bizarre and grotesque' sights, as if space itself was flowing. But soon, their engines inexplicably overheated, forcing them to retreat. After that, they never dared to approach again. I can provide this raw data."

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged a glance. This corroborated Lena's discovery!

"The price?" Lin Feng asked.

"Heh, a very fair price, or... if you happen to acquire any interesting, non-standard gadgets from the 'Engineers' next time, give me first refusal."

Samir smiled. "The second piece of information concerns a lost research vessel—the 'Lorien'. This isn't public news; it belonged to a low-profile foundation. Its final transmitted signal wasn't a simple distress call, but an encrypted warning about a 'biological specimen containment breach'."

"And the organization that received and attempted to decode this signal is an extreme scientific research group called the 'Eye of Truth'. They seem very interested in the 'specimen' aboard the 'Lorien' and have recently been seeking related navigation data and... living equipment on the black market."

"Living equipment... Eye of Truth..." Lin Feng noted the name. This seemed to align with the signal the old miner mentioned.

"This information is a token of my sincerity, free of charge." Samir leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice further. "Finally, and most importantly, a warning. You've been noticed by the people from 'Jingtianxing'."

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing's hearts tightened.

"Don't be nervous, it's just notice for now."

Samir waved his hand. "Your ship's energy signature is very... unique, even though you've been careful to mask it. 'Jingtianxing' has an almost paranoid interest in any anomalous energy technology. They will likely send someone to contact you soon, perhaps an 'invitation', perhaps... other methods. You must be very, very careful when dealing with them. Their goals... no one is clear, but it's definitely not just about doing business."

The amount of information was staggering! Every piece Samir provided was extremely valuable, while also hinting at potential trouble.

"Why are you telling us this?" Lin Feng stared at him.

"Investment, Captain Lin. I see potential in you."

Samir revealed a shrewd smile. "At Free Station, more friends mean more paths, especially friends like you... with such interesting technical backgrounds. I hope we can establish a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship."

Leaving the Starlight Tea House, Lin Feng and Su Wanqing felt both heavy-hearted and excited.

Free Station truly was the hub of all information in the surrounding region, a place where danger and opportunity coexisted. They had not only verified previous clues but also obtained new intelligence. More importantly, they had become aware of the potential threat posed by "Jingtianxing".

They needed to act quickly, strengthen their capabilities, and find a way to establish more direct contact with the "Engineers".

Based on the clues Samir provided and their previous foundation of remote transactions with the "Engineers", Lin Feng decided to try and proactively contact the "Engineers" potential representative at Free Station. Through Flea's inquiries in the lower-level channels, they learned that while the "Engineers" had no public office at Free Station, they did have a semi-public technical exchange club located on an inconspicuous floor in the central commercial district.

The club was named "Gears and Sparks". There was no signage at the entrance, and a specific access code was required to enter.

Lin Feng had Flea manage to acquire a temporary access pass (exchanged for a compact signal cracker and an interesting antique gear).

The interior of the club was like a massive open-plan workshop combined with a library. The air was filled with the smells of machine oil, coffee, and ozone. Engineers, technicians, and inventors of various races gathered here. Some were engaged in heated debates over technical problems, some were hunched over workbenches conducting experiments, while others were checking data on screens.

Lin Feng went directly to the club's supervisor—

an old-school engineer named Otto, who wore neat overalls, had graying hair, and a focused gaze.

"Mr. Otto, hello. We are from the 'Stardust'. Not long ago, we had a pleasant remote collaboration with a member of your organization regarding energy management systems and... some emergency repair solutions." Lin Feng began cautiously, mentioning the core content of their previous transaction.

Otto adjusted his glasses, sizing up Lin Feng with a sharp look.

"'Stardust'? Oh, I know of you. That non-standard energy fluctuation solution was indeed somewhat interesting. A bit unconventional in approach, but effective."

His tone was flat, but he didn't seem to deny it.

"What do you need from us? If you want to buy more technology or sell something, we have our own channels. We don't discuss that here."

Chapter 96 Living Device: The Thought Slug

"We do have some technical ideas we'd like to exchange, but more importantly, we bring a piece of potential intelligence," Lin Feng lowered his voice. "About 'Mole', and a batch of what he claims are 'Environmental Terraformer cores' from your organization that he's currently offloading."

Otto's brow immediately furrowed, his expression darkening. "'Mole'? That technology thief and counterfeit peddler! Is he selling that junk, or even dangerous goods, under our banner again?" He clearly harbored deep hatred for "Mole". "What Environmental Terraformer core? We haven't lost any similar components recently!"

Lin Feng relayed the information provided by "Butcher" to Otto.

After listening, Otto's face turned even uglier.

"That's not an Environmental Terraformer! That's... the core of an experimental product for some kind of ecological suppression device. Its power output is highly unstable, and improper handling could even trigger a local ecological disaster! Damn that 'Mole', where did he get his hands on a discarded experimental product?!"

He paced back and forth. "This information is very important, thank you. We will handle this matter. As repayment..." He thought for a moment and handed Lin Feng an encrypted data block. "Inside this is a secure communication frequency. In the future, if you have genuine technical issues or... new information about 'Mole' and his accomplices, you can contact us via this frequency. As for transactions, a dedicated person will liaise with you."

Having successfully established preliminary direct contact with the "Engineers" and sold them a major favor, Lin Feng felt slightly more settled in his heart. At the very least, at Free Station, they had a potential technical ally.

As they left the club, Lin Feng noticed a technician wearing a "Jingtianxing" uniform in the corner who seemed to have been observing them the whole time. When the other party met Lin Feng's gaze, he immediately lowered his head and began operating a data pad as if nothing was wrong.

The tentacles of "Jingtianxing" truly were everywhere.

After returning to the "Stardust", Lin Feng immediately briefed the core members and strengthened the surveillance around the ship. Sure enough, in less than half a day, the anticipated "contact" arrived.

A shuttlecraft, painted with the silver-blue insignia of the "Jingtianxing" organization, sleek and exuding a high-tech feel, silently docked outside the "Stardust's" docking ring. The visitor wasn't a soldier, but a young human male wearing a well-tailored silver-blue uniform, a smile on his face, and impeccable manners. He introduced himself as Kyle, a specialist from the Jingtianxing Resource Integration Department.

His arrival carried no hostility; instead, he appeared extremely polite and professional.

"Captain Lin, my apologies for the intrusion."

Kyle's voice was gentle and pleasant. "We at Jingtianxing have always been committed to promoting technological progress and resource optimization in the frontier star sectors. Our sensors noted that your ship's energy system operates in a very... unique and efficient pattern, which has sparked great interest within our technical department."

He handed over an exquisite electronic invitation.

"We sincerely invite you and your technical director to visit our Advanced Energy Exhibition Center located in the 'Celestial Dome District' of Free Station, and to conduct preliminary discussions on potential technical exchange and cooperation. We believe that Jingtianxing's resources and platform can help your side realize the greater potential of this technology."

The words were spoken beautifully, and the invitation seemed open and above board.

But combined with Samir's warning, the pressure hidden behind this "invitation" was self-evident. Refusal would likely be seen as being ungrateful and could even invite more direct action; accepting, however, would be like a lamb entering a tiger's den, with their technical secrets potentially lost.

Lin Feng's mind raced, and he then revealed an expression of being both flattered and slightly regretful.

"Thank you very much for Jingtianxing's high regard, Mr. Kyle. This truly makes us feel immensely honored. It's just rather unfortunate that our chief engineer overworked himself during the previous voyage and is currently undergoing mandatory rest in the medical bay, unable to participate in any technical discussions for a short while. And I am utterly clueless about technical details; going would probably just waste your time."

He shifted his tone and continued.

"How about this? Once our engineer has recovered, I will have him prepare a detailed technical overview at the first opportunity... of course, a part that doesn't involve core patents... and then we can schedule a visit. How does that sound?"

The smile on Kyle's face remained unchanged, but a barely perceptible cold glint flashed deep in his eyes. He naturally heard this as an excuse, but the other party's attitude was respectful, and the reason seemed plausible enough, leaving him momentarily unable to find a pretext to make an issue of it.

"Of course, employee health comes first."

Kyle maintained his composure. "In that case, I won't disturb you further. This invitation remains valid indefinitely. We look forward to meeting your technical team." He gave a slight bow, left the electronic invitation, and turned to leave.

Watching the shuttlecraft depart into the distance, the smile vanished from Lin Feng's face.

He knew this was just the beginning. "Jingtianxing" was like a shark that had caught a scent; they would not give up easily.

"We must speed things up," Lin Feng said to Su Wanqing. "Complete the resupply as soon as possible, gather the necessary intelligence, and then leave Free Station. We can't stay here long."

The trip to Free Station, while yielding a wealth of information and contacts, had also attracted genuine scrutiny. The path ahead seemed even more fraught with peril.

The clamor of Free Station's Alpha Port District was shut out by the thick airlock door. Inside the bridge of the "Star of Hope", a tense, oppressive atmosphere hung in the air.

The scrutiny from Jingtianxing was like an invisible spider's web slowly tightening, forcing Lin Feng to adopt more proactive, and also more dangerous, methods to obtain information. Conventional intelligence-gathering channels were no longer sufficient; he needed to pry into deeper secrets.

"Flea, are you sure this 'Insect Master' is reliable?"

Lin Feng's gaze fell on Flea, who was inspecting a set of peculiar interface equipment. The device was connected to a low-temperature container emitting a faint bioluminescent glow. Inside was the key to this operation—a live "Thought Slug".

Flea looked up, his face wearing its usual sly expression, but with a touch of gravity.

"Boss, few in this line of work are 'reliable'; it's all about transactions. The 'Insect Master' is the most skilled in this area, and also the most expensive. The goods he provides are top-notch in terms of effectiveness, but the side effects... he made it clear too. Neural burns, memory fragment residue, those are the light ones. If that 'slug' runs into something tough in the target's database, like a strong AI or a neural firewall, it might just brain-dead on the spot. The backlash from that mental shock is enough to put the operator down for half a month, or even turn them into a vegetable."

He patted the cold container. "This thing is a double-edged sword, and one without a handle at that."

Wu Yu grumbled nearby, heartbroken. "Just for this thing, I spent a prime piece of zero-element alloy! That could've traded for so many canned goods..."

"If it can help us figure out Jingtianxing's movements and what they really want to do to us, any cost is worth it," Lin Feng said firmly, though a trace of worry flickered deep in his eyes. He turned to Doctor Chen Wei and Su Wanqing. "Doctor, Wanqing, how are the preparations?"

Doctor Chen Wei was excitedly adjusting the probes of the medical monitoring equipment, practically itching to take part herself.

"Vital sign monitoring is ready! Neural fluctuation sensor sensitivity is tuned to maximum! It's so marvelous, this creature can actually function as a biological interface to directly interpret and transmit data streams! Its neural synapse structure is simply..."

"Alright, Doctor!!"

Su Wanqing turned to report. "Emergency cut-off protocols are set. Once Flea's neural load exceeds the threshold, or the Thought Slug's life signal disappears, the connection will be forcibly severed immediately. External firewalls are also on highest alert to prevent any potential digital backtracking."

Lin Feng nodded, finally looking at Flea.

"Remember, Flea, your mission is to steal information, not to breach fortifications. If you feel something is wrong, retreat immediately! Safety first."

"Don't worry, boss, I value my life."

Flea grinned, took a deep breath, and opened the container. Inside, the translucent soft-bodied creature, with an abnormally developed brain region, slowly wriggled, emitting a peculiar odor reminiscent of a mix of mint and ozone.

Carefully, Flea applied the specially formulated conductive gel and attached it to the neural interface at the nape of his neck. The icy sensation made him shiver.

Chapter 97 Nerve Cords of Living Devices

"Begin feeding data fragments," Su Wanqing instructed.

Flea operated the control panel, transmitting all the previously captured public channel content related to "Jingtianxing"—advertisements, communication fragments, even some fringe discussion posts—directly into the Thought Slug in one go.

The creature's brain area immediately flickered with a faint light. Its body trembled slightly, as if struggling to comprehend and digest these information fragments, building a basic understanding of the target.

A few minutes later, Flea's body suddenly stiffened. His eyes abruptly lost focus, pupils dilating. Meaningless mutterings, mixed with electronic static and broken language, spilled from his mouth.

"Connection... established... so many lights... chaotic... like... like falling into a data waterfall..." His voice was ethereal, seeming to come from a faraway place.

The bridge fell into silence, filled only by the soft hum of instruments and Flea's intermittent muttering. Everyone held their breath, eyes fixed on the monitoring screens. Flea's brainwave activity became abnormally intense; his blood pressure and heart rate were also climbing.

"He's trying to bypass the peripheral defenses... entering a low-security zone..."

Su Wanqing stared intently at the data stream analysis. "The Thought Slug's biological signals... are very active, but the load is increasing."

Suddenly, Flea's voice became somewhat clearer:

"...Found... one... log server... procurement list... D-32 type phase-stabilized crystals... large quantities... and... Kardela Beast biological neural cords... shipment batches... 'Beyond the Firmament' project..."

His speech accelerated, as if he had grasped key information.

"...Also an encrypted memo... about... 'anomalous energy signature'... assessment report... recommendation... 'Non-coercive contact, observation priority'... awaiting... awaiting the 'Mother Matrix's' final analysis directive..."

"Mother Matrix?"

Lin Feng's heart tightened. This sounded like a designation for a high-level AI or a decision-making core. "Non-coercive contact, observation priority" matched their current situation—Jingtianxing was still in the assessment phase. This was relatively good news.

However, at that very moment, Flea suddenly let out a pained grunt, his body convulsing violently! The monitoring instruments emitted a piercing alarm! His brainwave peak instantly exceeded the safety threshold!

"Not good! He touched a defense mechanism! Might be a trap log!" Su Wanqing exclaimed.

"Force disconnect!" Lin Feng ordered immediately.

Almost simultaneously with Su Wanqing pressing the emergency cut-off button, Flea's eyes snapped open. He let out a scream and ripped off the desiccated, grayish-white, lifeless remains of the Thought Slug from the back of his neck!

He gasped for air in huge gulps, his face as pale as paper. Cold sweat instantly soaked through his clothes, as if he had just been fished out of water. Medical robots immediately moved in to administer sedatives and nutrient fluids.

"Cough... damn it..." Flea cursed weakly, his voice hoarse. "Almost... almost didn't make it back... that last hit... felt like it disturbed something... cold... vast..."

Dr. Chen Wei quickly examined the dead Thought Slug and Flea's condition:

"Neural link overload, minor burns. Needs several days of rest. The Thought Slug is completely brain-dead, biological structure collapsed. But... we got the key data fragments!"

"Damn, damn, goddamn!" Flea kept hopping around in fright, his mouth spewing furious curses at the wretched slug.

Everyone comforted him, but it was clear they were all inwardly shaken.

Nevertheless, though the process was perilous and the cost high, the information obtained was immensely valuable. Not only did it confirm Jingtianxing's current wait-and-see attitude, but it also revealed they were procuring two key materials in large quantities, the existence of something called the "Mother Matrix," and the "Beyond the Firmament" project.

The Belt Alliance's black-market technology was astonishingly effective, but the risks were equally terrifying. This data deep-dive truly made them feel the peril and opportunity coexisting in this star sector.

The information Flea brought back sparked heated discussion within the core team.

"The phase-stabilized crystals are understandable; they're foundational materials for high-end industry and weapons tech. But Kardela Beast biological neural cords... I genuinely haven't heard of anyone having those."

"Kardela Beast? Those creatures that live underground on high-gravity planets, almost never surface, look like giant segmented worms? Wait!"

Dr. Chen Wei's eyes immediately lit up. She pulled up relevant data.

"Their nervous systems are extremely unique. The conduction speed of neural impulses far exceeds that of ordinary organisms, with almost zero loss. They are also exceptionally sensitive to changes in external energy fields! They are theoretically perfect biological conductors and sensors! Jingtianxing procuring these in bulk is definitely not for ordinary experiments!"

She paced excitedly around the lab.

"Some theories considered fringe by mainstream academia suggest that such neural cords could be used as a biological substrate to cultivate 'living circuits' or 'biological co-processors'! They can handle nonlinear, fuzzy complex computations with efficiency far surpassing silicon-based chips, even... potentially giving rise to some primitive, bioelectric-based chaotic consciousness! This is another path towards true strong artificial intelligence!"

Just then, Wu Yu also returned from the market, his face carrying a mix of excitement and confusion.

"Boss, Doctor, guess what I found out?"

He took a gulp of water and continued, "I heard rumors in a few tech black-market circles. They say a forbidden processor called the 'Symbiotic Core' has been circulating in extremely small circles recently. Supposedly, that thing is half-biological, half-mechanical, with insane computing power."

"But it's especially weird. It requires some kind of deep connection with the user's nervous system. The failure rate is extremely high—if it goes wrong, you turn into an idiot or a lunatic! And rumor has it the biological part of that thing, its core material, is Kardela Beast neural cords!"

"Symbiotic Core"... "Living computation"... Jingtianxing's procurement list..."

These clues gradually converged like puzzle pieces, pointing towards a potentially existing, extremely advanced and dangerous bio-mechanical fusion technology. Jingtianxing seemed to be conducting large-scale research and application attempts along this path.

"If we could get our hands on a sample of Kardela Beast neural cord, even just a tiny segment..." Dr. Chen Wei's eyes burned brightly as she looked at Lin Feng again, filled with a researcher's fervor.

Lin Feng immediately doused her enthusiasm. "Doctor, calm down. Forget that the price is probably astronomical. It's now a strategic material under Jingtianxing's close monitoring. If we touch it, it's tantamount to directly telling them we have a problem. Flea's earlier risk-taking would be for nothing."

"Perhaps... we don't need to touch the material itself directly," Su Wanqing analyzed calmly. "Samir. As an information broker, he has extensive connections. He might know who has a small stockpile that hasn't caught Jingtianxing's attention, or... related research data, even remnants of failed products. Information can sometimes be more valuable than the physical object."

Lin Feng thought this reasonable and immediately contacted Samir via an encrypted channel. After the connection was established, Lin Feng tactfully raised questions about Kardela Beast neural cords and some "special computing technologies."

Samir on the screen was silent for a moment. His eyes, which seemed capable of seeing through everything, narrowed slightly. "Kardela Beast neural cords... and the 'Symbiotic Core'... Captain Lin, the fields you're exploring are getting deeper and more dangerous." His tone carried a rare seriousness.

"Indeed, I have heard something about them."

He spoke slowly, "I know of an independent biologist, Dr. Glenn. Many years ago, during a geological survey, he accidentally obtained a small sample of Kardela Beast neural cord. He has treasured it ever since, conducting research in secret. But his personality is extremely reclusive and eccentric. He never interacts with the outside world, let alone sells samples. Jingtianxing once tried to force a purchase, but he stubbornly refused. As for the 'Symbiotic Core'..."

Samir paused, lowering his voice further.

"I strongly advise you not to touch that for now. The origin of that thing is a mystery. The fate of those who fail with it is utterly miserable. Even the successful ones... reportedly subtly influence the user's mind over time. Some even say they can hear 'whispers.' What it represents might not just be technology, but involve some... levels we don't yet understand."

He provided a name and an address located in the Free Station's ecological park area. "Dr. Glenn is there, hiding in his 'Green Fortress.' Whether you can get anything from him depends on your skill and luck. As always, caution, Captain Lin."

Chapter 98 Biological Computer! Spores, Flowers

The communication ended. Lin Feng looked at the address he had obtained, knowing his next target had appeared.

This Dr. Glenn, hidden within the ecological park, might just be the key to unlocking the secrets of Jingtianxing's biotechnology. And the whispers of the "Symbiotic Core" cast an even more bizarre veil over this technology.

The Belt Alliance's tech tree was far more complex and... closer to taboo than they had imagined.

The ecological park at Free Station was a colossal marvel and an expensive energy-consuming project.

It simulated dozens of different ecosystems, providing valuable green space and supplemental food for the station's residents, while also serving as an ideal location for much biological research. Following the clues provided by Samir, Lin Feng and Su Wanqing passed through layers of airlock doors and arrived at the simulated humid rainforest area.

The air here instantly became moist and oxygen-rich, mixed with the complex scents of soil, decaying leaves, and countless plants.

Giant biomimetic trees towered into the "sky," blocking out the light, while various strange insects and birds, or their mechanical biomimetic counterparts, flitted and called among the foliage.

Compared to the cold clamor of the metal world in the port district, this place felt like another planet.

Dr. Glenn's "laboratory" was hidden between the buttress roots of the thickest biomimetic giant tree, almost blending into the natural environment.

It looked more like a transparent dome wrapped in all sorts of wildly growing tropical plants and vines, densely packed inside with even more, even stranger plants:

Some had leaves with vein patterns as distinct as circuit boards that emitted a faint glow.

Some had flowers that continuously opened and closed, ejecting tiny spores.

Some even moved slowly, using vines to twine around supports.

When they found Dr. Glenn, he was lying prone in front of a strange, enormous flower emitting a blue fluorescence, its leaf texture strikingly similar to a biological neural network. He was completely absorbed, using a set of delicate instruments to record data, muttering to himself all the while.

The doctor himself had messy, grayish-white hair, stained with dirt, wore a pair of heavily worn work pants, and his eyes held the focus unique to researchers mixed with a hint of obsessive fervor.

Lin Feng stepped forward and spoke politely, "Dr. Glenn? Hello. We were guided by Mr. Samir and have come to visit, though we realize it's an imposition."

Hearing the name "Samir," Dr. Glenn's head jerked up sharply. His eyes instantly changed from focused to extremely wary, like a startled burrowing animal.

He practically jumped to his feet, instinctively positioning himself in front of the neural-patterned flower.

"Samir? That blabbermouth information peddler! What did he send you here for? I don't have what you want here! No neural cords! Nothing! Get out! Get out now!" His reaction was abnormally intense, his voice somewhat shrill with agitation.

Su Wanqing's gaze, however, went past the doctor and landed on a large cultivation tank in the corner of the lab.

Suspended in a pale green nutrient solution inside was not some plant, but an incredibly complex, slightly writhing mass of living neural network tissue, with fine biological electrical sparks flickering within!

It even extended numerous translucent, mycelium-like fine tendrils, connecting to several nearby data screens. On those screens, complex algorithms and waveform graphs were scrolling at a breathtaking speed!

"Doctor, what is that?"

Su Wanqing tried her best to keep her voice sounding calm and full of curiosity, not threatening.

"Its structure is truly beautiful, like a living piece of art."

Dr. Glenn instinctively glanced back at the cultivation tank. For an instant, a complex expression flashed across his face, a mix of immense pride and deep unease, and his tone softened slightly without him realizing it.

"That is... that is my muse! A symbiont of 'Neural Network Flower' and 'Computing Light Fungus'! It took me over a decade to cultivate it successfully!"

He seemed to have finally found a willing audience, and his words poured out like a breached flood.

"It's not like those cold silicon chips! It can understand! It can feel! I play music for it, and it can translate the melody... the emotion! into the most complex musical scores! It can even generate perfect harmonies! Look!"

Excitedly, he operated the instrument beside him. Immediately, an ethereal and complex fragment of a symphony echoed through the lab, generated and played in real-time by the symbiont based on a tune the doctor had hummed earlier!

He went on and on about his ideas of biological computing, about how he used the properties of different plants to simulate logic gates, about how the light fungus transmitted bioelectrical signals, completely forgetting his earlier wariness and denials.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing listened patiently without interrupting.

Clearly, this doctor was not directly using Kardela Beast neural cords. Instead, he had found another, perhaps safer but possibly slightly less potent, alternative path to realize his dream of biological computing.

Only after the doctor calmed down a bit did Lin Feng seize the opportunity to propose, "Doctor, your research is astounding. We are also very interested in the prospects of biological computing. Perhaps... we could have some limited exchange? We might be able to provide some additional computational resources, or... some rare plant specimens or unique environmental data you might not have here, in exchange for some of your non-core research data? Especially regarding the signal stability, anti-interference capabilities, and energy compatibility of this kind of biological neural network."

Hearing "rare plant specimens" and "unique environmental data," Dr. Glenn's eyes immediately lit up. The collector's instinct of a researcher took over.

"Do you have 'Shadow Moss'? Or spores of 'Star-Tear Orchid'? I've been searching for those for ages! And energy fluctuation records of the 'Gravity Rainbow' phenomenon? That unique frequency spectrum during spatial distortion..."

After some bargaining, Lin Feng finally succeeded in exchanging a few types of peculiar alien fungal spores cultivated by Little Ears that had adapted to the ship's environment, along with an audio recording from the previous "Starwhale" incident that contained faint spatial fluctuation information. In return, he obtained part of Dr. Glenn's research data on the fundamental construction and signal modulation of biological neural networks.

Furthermore, during the exchange, Dr. Glenn revealed a crucial piece of information:

The reason he was so sensitive and resistant regarding the "Kardela Beast neural cord" was that, several years ago, a group of people had indeed tried to forcibly purchase or even threatened to seize the small, precious sample he had accidentally obtained in his early years.

To prevent it from falling into the hands of these "utilitarians with no reverence," he had painfully destroyed it completely. Since then, he had become even more reclusive, cutting off almost all contact with the outside world.

Although they didn't obtain the physical Kardela Beast neural cord, Dr. Glenn's research data provided valuable, practical experience with biological neural networks based on alternative materials.

And his revelation about Jingtianxing's strong-arm tactics further confirmed this organization's domineering style and their urgent need for such technology.

Leaving the ecological park and returning to the metal corridors of the port district, both Lin Feng and Su Wanqing felt as if they had stepped through time.

Dr. Glenn and his "Neural Network Flower" were like a lonely dreamer hidden deep within the bustling space station, stubbornly interpreting another possibility of technology in his own way. And the vastness of the Belt Alliance lay precisely in its ability to accommodate countless such whimsical ideas, no matter how unorthodox they might seem.

Chapter 99: The Cockroaches That Eat Steel!

Back on the Star of Hope, another keyword that Flea brought back — the D-32 Phase Stabilization Crystal — became the center of discussion.

This high-purity crystal is the core material for manufacturing stable jump drives, large-scale energy weapon focusing arrays, and certain precision sensors. Its quality directly determines a device's performance ceiling and safety.

"Jingtianxing buying these strategic materials on such a large scale—are they upgrading their fleet? Or are they undertaking some massive project that needs huge concentrated energy?"

Wrench looked over the supplies list, brow furrowed. Whatever the reason, it meant Jingtianxing was actively expanding its military or technological capabilities.

After asking around the market, Wu Yu returned with an interesting yet uncertain piece of information:

Because Jingtianxing had been sweeping up supplies, the price of D-32 crystals near Free Station and surrounding star systems had skyrocketed to astronomical figures, and there were no sellers at any price.

But an old miner who regularly worked the fringe systems had mentioned a rumor:

Near the edge of the Shattered Stellar Gulf, at an abandoned mining site long ago called the Jump Spine, there used to be a peculiar companion ore. After an extremely complex and dangerous refining process, the crystals formed could match the phase stability and energy conduction of standard D-32 crystals, and under some extreme frequencies might even slightly surpass them.

However, the deposit was rare, the refining process easily triggered catastrophic phase displacement explosions, and the mine had long since been exhausted and forgotten. No one bothered with it anymore.

"Match or even surpass D-32?"

Lin Feng's interest spiked. If this were true, it could not only solve his ship's future need for high-end crystals, it might also become a valuable strategic reserve or bargaining chip. "Can we still find the exact coordinates for that mine?"

Wu Yu shook his head, his expression troubled:

"The old miner only heard it from his elders many years ago. The coordinates were lost long ago; not many people even remember the name 'Jump Spine.' He said maybe only the ancient, not-yet-fully-digitized mining records in the Free Station Central Archive might hold a clue."

The Free Station Central Archive is a massive institution preserving centuries of Free Station history, trade, exploration, and mining data.

Accessing those old physical records or deeply encrypted early digital logs requires tedious procedures, a legitimate reason, and possibly hefty fees. It could also leave a query trail and attract unwanted attention.

While Lin Feng considered whether to risk the official route, Flea once again leveraged his gray-market contacts. He remembered a tech working on data maintenance and digitization on the archive's lower levels. The tech was competent but had a fatal weakness—gambling addiction, and lately owed a large debt to the Black Scorpion bar.

After covert operations and bargaining, Flea successfully copied an unorganized ancient data packet from the technician. It contained numerous early mine scan maps and rough prospecting logs.

After a night of screening and cross-checking, Su Wanqing and Dr. Chen Wei finally extracted information about the Jump Spine mine from the chaotic data dump! It was a mine deep within the asteroid belt, with remote coordinates and sparse records, only a few vague notes:

"...ore contains unusual phase-active companion minerals...energy reactions unstable...refining accidents frequent...high returns with high risk...abandoned in Standard Year XXX after a series of major accidents and ore depletion..."

The coordinates were listed plainly!

Although the records emphasized extreme risk, the opportunity was also tempting.

Lin Feng decided they had to go investigate before leaving Free Station.

He ordered Wrench to organize a compact exploration team to take the more maneuverable Peregrine scout ship to the Jump Spine for an initial reconnaissance. Mission objectives: confirm the mine's current status, assess whether residual veins remain, and, if possible, safely return some mineral samples for analysis.

The scramble for rare strategic resources is always the basis of faction competition. Jingtianxing's massive purchases had, paradoxically, pointed them toward a possible lead.

The Peregrine slid away from Free Station's busy traffic like an arrow, quietly making a jump toward the remote coordinates recorded in the archives.

Onboard were an experienced pilot, Wrench's most capable assistant engineer A-Qiang, and a small engineering robot outfitted with geological scanners and sampling tools.

After several short jumps, the Peregrine reached the target region.

This part of the asteroid belt was deeper and darker, more deathly silent, with only distant starlight faintly illuminating slowly tumbling rock debris.

Guided by the coordinates, they soon found the main structure of an abandoned drilling platform. It looked like the skeleton of a devoured beast, half embedded in a larger asteroid and half broken off and drifting nearby, scarred by impacts and explosions.

The scout approached the main mine entrance cautiously and found it twisted and sealed by a massive previous blast, reduced to warped metal and solidified slag. A-Qiang used the engineering robot's high-energy laser cutter and spent a long time painstakingly clearing a narrow passage barely wide enough for the robot to pass.

Inside was even more dilapidated.

Mine shafts had collapsed in many places. Abandoned ore carts, broken conveyor belts, and damaged machinery lay everywhere, covered in thick cosmic dust.

Only the occasional flicker of debris from emergency lights on the walls proved that humans had once worked here. The air had long since leaked away—there was only absolute vacuum and freezing cold, and a strange, faint residual energy presence.

Following the ancient star charts, they pushed deeper into the pit and reached the main vein area.

On the rock walls, they indeed found crystals that looked different from ordinary minerals!

They displayed a deep, nebula-like coloration that seemed to contain inner starlight, faintly flickering with an uncertain glow, matching the archive's description of phase-active minerals.

"Target mineral found! Beginning compositional scan and sample collection!" A-Qiang reported excitedly, and the engineering robot extended its sampling arm.

But just as the sampler was about to touch the wall, the situation changed abruptly!

From shadowed cracks in the rock wall, several fist-sized, grotesque creatures darted out like lightning!

Their shells were a dull, light-absorbing metallic-looking surface, their compound eyes flashed an ominous red, and they moved with terrifying speed!

They lunged at the engineering robot with a sickening series of crunches, using exceptionally sharp, high-frequency mandibles to chew through the robot's composite armor!

"What the hell are those?!"

Everyone aboard the scout was shocked. The life scanner had not detected them earlier!

Even more startling, scans showed these cockroach-like creatures contained high concentrations of extremely unstable phase energy inside them. They seemed to feed on these dangerous minerals!

"Open fire! Drive them off!" the pilot ordered instantly, bringing the scout's light pulse cannon to bear.

The scorching energy beams struck several of the phase cockroaches. Yet the struck insects did not simply vaporize; their bodies suddenly swelled, their shells became transparent, and the unstable internal energy detonated violently—

Boom! Boom!

With dull blasts, they exploded like miniature bombs! The releases were not mere fire and shrapnel but contained small, visible phase-energy shockwaves that warped space itself!

The shockwaves smashed into the scout's shields and the mine walls. Though each blast was not massively powerful, the ship rocked violently, the mine's structure groaned under strain, and more debris rained down from above!

"Cease fire! Cease fire! Damn it! Their explosions can trigger a chain reaction! Retreat! Get out of here!" the pilot shouted, sweating, fighting to stabilize the ship.

A-Qiang immediately had the engineering robot grab a few nearby mineral fragments at all costs and pulled back in a panic.

Before more disturbed phase cockroaches could converge from all directions and form a deadly wave of detonations, the Peregrine backed out of the narrow mine entrance and sped away amid a series of muffled explosions and collapsing rock.

The first reconnaissance ended in failure—indeed, a chaotic, embarrassing retreat. The mineral samples they brought back, after preliminary analysis, did contain distinctive phase-energy properties, but their instability far exceeded expectations and could easily be triggered by external energy. The dangerous phase cockroaches proved to be a huge obstacle to exploiting such ore.

How to safely acquire and utilize a resource that might substitute for D-32 crystals became an urgent problem. Resources in the Belt Alliance often coexist with unknown dangers.

Chapter 100 I Just Love Biological Samples!

The exploration team brought back not only disappointing news and dangerous mineral samples, but also several dead phase cockroach carcasses that the Engineering Robot had casually captured, sealed inside special energy-shielded canisters.

"Amazing, you know exactly what I love!"

Chen Wei wasted no time with the leader, launching into a hug so enthusiastic that Old Scar's facial scar twitched uncontrollably at the sight.

"From now on, any expedition involving biological subjects means I get overtime duty rotating the shaft, and you have to assign me to lead the team out too. Got it?"

He lowered his voice and gave a fierce order to the junior in charge of field scheduling.

The Doctor paid no attention to such trivialities. She had developed an intense scientific fascination with these creatures that fed on high-energy minerals and whose bodies could produce small phase explosions.

"Amazing biological evolution! Their shell structure can effectively guide and isolate phase energy, and their digestive system is even more incredible, able to process such unstable substances..." The Doctor became absorbed in the research, even beginning to imagine how to artificially mimic this biological structure to safely handle phase minerals.

Meanwhile, Wu Yu's shopping trip in the market yielded a new discovery. At an inconspicuous stall run by an aquatic merchant, he was attracted by several huge, shell-shaped objects that shimmered with a muted pearlescent glow, resembling black glass.

These "shells" were extraordinarily hard in texture, cold to the touch, and their surfaces bore naturally formed, nebula-like patterns as if torn from the cosmos.

"What is this?" Wu Yu asked curiously.

The slippery-skinned merchant with large compound eyes replied in the trade language, his voice carrying the sound of water:

"Void Shell. From the outer fringes of a nebula, they grow extremely slowly, absorbing dark-matter radiation and faint spatial fluctuations from the cosmos. Inside they form a unique biologically deposited alloy, extraordinarily tough, with very high physical strength, and they have unusually strong scattering and attenuation effects against energy attacks."

They're excellent material for making high-grade lightweight armor, especially external armor add-ons for key starship components. The catch is... they are extremely hard to cut and shape, requiring special bio-acid dissolution techniques."

Wu Yu immediately thought of hull repairs and armor upgrades for the ship. He keenly recognized the value of the material and, after a fierce bargaining session, traded the last batch of rare spices he had obtained from the Vortex Bazaar and a portion of functional drinks to acquire the three largest Void Shell pieces.

Back on the ship, when Dr. Chen Wei saw the Void Shells and compared them with the phase cockroach shell-structure data she was studying, a bold, nearly insane idea burst into her mind:

"If... if we could combine the phase cockroach shell's strange energy-guiding and deflection characteristics with the Void Shell biological alloy's outstanding physical defense and energy-scattering ability... maybe we could create an entirely new biological composite material that has both excellent physical protection and energy resistance?"

She immediately dragged Wrench and his engineering team into a frenzy of experiments.

The process was full of risk. Several small-scale phase energy leaks nearly caused accidents, but under Dr. Chen Wei's almost obsessive insistence and Wrench's team's superb skills, they ultimately succeeded in incorporating finely ground phase cockroach shell powder, treated by special methods, into a Void Shell alloy solution that had been reshaped after specific bio-acid dissolution.

In the end, they produced a palm-sized composite material sample about one centimeter thick.

It displayed a deep, dark color as if containing a galaxy within, and its surface bore the Void Shell's natural cloud patterns. On closer inspection, the patterns occasionally showed tiny, electric-blue filaments that flowed like currents.

The test results were exhilarating!

This new composite material, named "Stardust Shell Armor" by Dr. Chen Wei, not only had physical strength far surpassing ordinary armored steel plates and excellent absorption and dispersion of kinetic impacts, but it could also effectively deflect and attenuate attacks from various common energy weapons!

Its overall defensive performance even exceeded some high-end military armor plates available for purchase at Free Station!

Although the current manufacturing process was complex, costly, and produced extremely low yields—far from being ready to replace ship armor on a large scale—this was indisputably a major technical breakthrough and a strategic victory. It proved the huge potential for technological innovation by leveraging the Belt Alliance's unique biological and mineral resources.

Lin Feng immediately instructed Wu Yu to keep an eye out and acquire as many Void Shells and related biological materials as possible, and to prioritize Stardust Shell Armor research and development. Once again, the Belt Alliance world had shown them its endless treasure trove of resources and the wondrous possibilities of technological fusion.

With the last bit of time at Free Station, Lin Feng decided to make full use of his available resources and information networks to exchange for special supplies that might help long-term development.

Through Samir's contacts, Wu Yu learned about a rare item that occasionally appeared on the highest-end black markets called "Dreamscape Spice."

This spice came from a planet tightly guarded by a powerful telepathic species, and its plants reportedly required absorption of specific starlight and mental energy to grow.

When burned, the smoke induced a heightened "lucid-dream" state while preserving conscious awareness. In this state, divergent and associative thinking greatly increased, buried memories became easier to access, and breakthroughs in solving complex technical problems were common. Some even claimed to briefly perceive vague fragments of the future.

However, its yield was extremely scarce, its price shockingly high, and the market was flooded with counterfeits.

In a secure chamber hidden deep within an upscale commercial district—requiring multiple identity verifications—Wu Yu met the seller:

A mysterious figure wrapped head-to-toe in a heavy cloak that blocked scans, face hidden in shadow.

The seller carefully produced a delicate box carved from an unknown black wood and inlaid with tiny gems. Inside were a small amount of fine powder that flickered with a dreamlike purple glow, emitting an indescribable, richly fragrant scent that seemed to act directly on the soul.

"This is the last box, friend."

The seller's voice was processed to sound neutral and ethereal. "It can unlock the locks of your mind, connect to the deep sea of consciousness, and unravel puzzles that have troubled you for a long time. But remember, the greater the power, the greater the risk."

Wu Yu cautiously requested to verify the product. The seller used a special silver needle to scoop up a trace, burned it in a tiny censer.

A wisp of pale purple smoke curled up, and that strange fragrance intensified instantly.

Wu Yu inhaled only a faint breath and felt a surge of mental clarity. Several technical parameters about optimizing the ship's power circuitry that had long troubled him suddenly became clear, and his mind even auto-generated several new possible schemes! The effect was real and undeniable!

Chapter 101 Leaving Free Station

After a heart-stopping round of haggling, Wu Yu finally managed to swap for that incredibly precious box of Dreamscape Spice.

However, not long after the deal was completed and Wu Yu left, excited, the mysterious seller shrugged off his robe to reveal an internal uniform of Jingtianxing underneath.

He spoke quietly into a communicator hidden in his collar:

"The bait has been successfully deployed. Target confirmed to have received it. The 'Ghost' nano-tracker mixed into the spice is stable. Once they use the spice, the tracker will activate. It can not only pinpoint the usage location with precision, but also faintly monitor neural activity patterns, allowing for possible reverse deduction of parts of their technical approaches and focus areas."

It turned out to be another carefully arranged trap. Jingtianxing had exploited Lin Feng's team's desire for rapid technological breakthroughs and psychological edges, casting an almost irresistible lure. Unfortunately for them, Jingtianxing didn't understand Lin Feng's bizarre crew, especially that bio-combatant who could rival Cthulhu in terror.

Wu Yu knew nothing of this. He returned to the ship ecstatic, showing Lin Feng their huge haul.

Lin Feng was pleased to obtain such a rare item, but his long-cultivated caution made him decide that any external item, especially one that directly affects the nervous system, must undergo the strictest tests.

Dr. Chen Wei took the spice and ran an extremely detailed component analysis.

"Something's wrong! There are impurities in the essence."

Soon she discovered, within that dreamlike purple powder, trace amounts of unnatural metallic nanoparticles!

These nanoparticles were intricately structured, bearing complex energy signatures. Their design was clearly for tracking and signal theft!

"Jingtianxing! They're relentless!"

Lin Feng immediately understood their intent, breaking into a cold sweat inside. Fortunately, they had discovered it!

Carefully, they used high-precision magnetic fields and energy sieves to separate out those "Ghost" nano-trackers, preserving the pure Dreamscape Spice. Flea suggested,

"Maybe we can find a chance to 'feed' it to the next pirate ship that comes sniffing around?"

"Flea, you are way too evil! Just toss it into the space junk chute."

This close-call taught them another hard lesson: in the Belt Alliance, even the most tempting and seemingly harmless goods may conceal meticulously designed poison and traps. Trust here was an extravagant luxury.

All their established objectives had basically been achieved, and they even gained an unexpected prize like the Stardust Shell Armor.

The supplies warehouse had been greatly replenished, from basic living necessities to special items such as Void Shell and purified Dreamscape Spice — everything they could need.

They also reaped rich intelligence. They confirmed Jingtianxing's wait-and-see strategy, learned parts of its procurement directions and keywords like Mother Matrix and Beyond the Firmament, and obtained coordinate clues of high exploratory value regarding Bountiful Harvest, Phantom Planet, and the spatiotemporal anomaly zone.

They had also established an initial direct contact channel with the Engineers organization.

However, Free Station was no place for long-term stay. The shadow of Jingtianxing was everywhere, and repeated traps showed that, although the other side was temporarily adopting a wait-and-see stance, they kept making small moves; their patience might be wearing thin. Staying longer would only increase risk day by day.

Lin Feng decisively issued orders to prepare for departure.

This time, departure formalities went surprisingly smoothly. The greedy port assistant Morris did not even show up. Only a stoic junior official processed all the paperwork quickly and efficiently, as if afraid they would linger another moment. His eyes even carried a barely perceptible hope that they would hurry and leave.

The massive hull of Hope of Star slowly pulled away from its berth, merging into the light trails of departing ships.

Standing on the bridge and looking back at that colossal, chaotic yet vibrant space city composed of metal, lights, and desire, everyone felt a torrent of emotions. This place had given them valuable resources, information, and experience, but it had also shown them the complexity, danger, and opportunity that existed at the heart of the Belt Alliance.

"Set the course."

Lin Feng's gaze rested on the endless darkness beyond the viewport, glittering with billions of stars. His voice was steady and determined,

"Phase One objective: proceed to scout the perimeter of the possible Bountiful Harvest coordinates provided by Ezra.

Phase Two: depending on circumstances, decide whether to approach Phantom Planet or the spatiotemporal anomaly zone recorded by Dr. Lena for preliminary probing. Maintain maximum vigilance throughout, and prioritize avoiding contact with any suspected Jingtianxing forces."

The ship's engines hummed low and deep as power steadily increased. The powerful thrust gradually pushed the vessel out of Free Station's gravity well.

The Stardust, a ship risen from the scrapheap and reborn among ruins, bearing the hopes and dreams of Stardust Base, officially cut loose as an independent explorer and adventurer, fully merging into the vast starry sea to begin its own deep-space voyage filled with unknowns and challenges.

The road ahead was long and remote. Between the starlight lay ancient secrets, cosmic wonders, and the destiny waiting for them.

Hope of Star completely left Free Station's gravity well and slipped into deep interstellar space. Outside the massive viewport, the stars looked like frozen diamonds, eternally set into the pitch-black velvet curtain of space, silent and magnificent. Inside the ship, routine operations resumed, but everyone understood that this was no leisurely cruise — it was a perilous expedition.

Long-term deep-space travel posed enormous strains on the ship's ecosystem and the crew's psychology. Although they had stocked up large amounts of supplies before departure, fresh food remained a persistent problem. Little Ears's hydroponic farm had limited output and relatively narrow crop variety.

At a routine meeting, Dr. Chen Wei proposed a bold idea: "We cannot rely solely on stored supplies and basic hydroponics. We should try to build a more complex, self-sufficient closed-loop ecosystem! Like a small 'ecological ark'!"

She excitedly brought up the design plan: "We can convert an idle cargo hold into a multi-layered ecological zone. The bottom level would introduce genetically modified algae and aquatic ferns for water purification and basic biomass production, while releasing oxygen.

The middle level would grow fast-growing edible fungi and certain high-yield synthetic starch crops. The top level would be left to Little Ears for more delicate vegetable and fruit cultivation. We can even consider introducing some small, docile, fast-breeding species with high feed-conversion rates — edible insects or mollusks — to supplement protein!"

"That would require a lot of specialized equipment, seeds, fungal strains, and live specimens, plus complex environmental control systems," Su Wanqing pointed out the difficulty. "Do we have the resources for that now?"

Chapter 102 Agricultural and Livestock Stations in the Universe!

"We can modify some of the basic equipment ourselves!"

Wrench thumped his chest confidently. "Using those stockpiled spare parts and materials, I can cobble together most of it! But some special filter materials, growth lights with specific light spectra, and those peculiar seeds and live samples... we'll have to buy those. And they probably won't be cheap."

Lin Feng looked at Wu Yu. Wu Yu immediately started doing mental calculations, his face scrunching up like a bitter gourd.

"Boss, this expense won't be small... Especially those special species. They're hot commodities at Free Station. If we go back now..."

"We're not going back to Free Station."

Lin Feng cut him off. "I remember Samir mentioned that on the route to the 'Bountiful Harvest' coordinates, we'd pass by several smaller neutral space stations focused on agriculture or biological research. Maybe we can resupply and purchase things there."

He pulled up the star chart and marked several possible targets.

"Wu Yu, research the market conditions at these stations in advance. Make a procurement list and budget.

Wrench, start assessing the feasibility plan for modifying the cargo hold.

Doctor, list all the biological samples and technical specifications you need.

We need to make the ship more self-sufficient, reduce our dependence on external supplies. This is crucial for long-term deep space exploration."

This "Ecological Ark" plan wasn't just about improving their quality of life; it was a vital strategic investment concerning the ship's long-term endurance and the crew's health. Traveling with the Belt Alliance wasn't just about combat and adventure; it was an art of survival and adaptation.

Just as the meeting was ending, Sun Wen suddenly reported:

"Boss, I'm picking up a very faint, non-standard wide-area broadcast signal. It seems to be some kind of... automatic distress beacon, but the encoding method is very old. The signal's general direction... forms a certain angle with our current course."

Another unexpected development. Should they ignore it and continue on their way, or deviate from their course to investigate? In this vast and dangerous region of space, any signal could mean trouble, but it could also be an opportunity.

Lin Feng pondered for a moment before ordering:

"Record the signal's coordinates and characteristics. Continue monitoring. No course change for now, but raise the alert level for that region."

A journey in deep space would never be short on surprises.

After several days of travel, the "Star of Hope" reached its first target—

a neutral agricultural space station called "Green Soil." The station's shape resembled a string of enormous, interconnected glass greenhouses, reflecting a soft glow under the starlight. Several cargo ships, clearly transporting agricultural products, orbited around it.

Unlike the chaotic clamor of Free Station, "Green Soil" Station appeared orderly, even serene. The air circulation system carried a fresh scent of soil and plants, refreshing to the senses. Most residents here were agricultural experts, biologists, and merchants, creating a relatively peaceful atmosphere.

The docking procedures were simple and standardized, with reasonable fees.

Lin Feng put Old Scar in charge of ship security. He himself took Wu Yu, Little Ears, and Dr. Chen Wei to the station's market.

The market here was practically a paradise for plants and biotechnology!

All sorts of never-before-seen peculiar crops, glowing fungi, genetically modified high-yield grains, and even some docile, oddly-shaped small livestock and insects were on display and being traded. Many of the vendors were botanists or geneticists themselves, happy to explain their products to those who understood.

Little Ears' eyes were practically darting everywhere, excitedly recording the characteristics of various crops.

"Do you guys remember the old ecological dome from before? If that old doctor saw this place, he'd probably hire pirates to come and swallow this place whole!"

Dr. Chen Wei murmured to herself, then let out an excited yelp and rushed straight toward the stalls selling special algae, microbial colonies, and strange insect larvae, engaging in heated discussions with the vendors.

"Boss, the quality of goods here is excellent, but the prices for some special species are indeed steep," Wu Yu reported to Lin Feng. "Especially that high-yield 'Starlight Blue Algae' and those 'Pollution-Devouring Beetles' that can decompose organic waste. They're almost monopolized by a few large plantations, and the asking price is very high."

"Negotiate as best you can," Lin Feng said quietly. "What we're building is a long-term, stable biological cycle. A solid foundation means greater returns later. If necessary, we can pay with a portion of our energy credits."

After some tough negotiations and bartering, they successfully acquired most of the supplies they needed:

Multiple types of high-yield algae and fungi, seeds for fast-growing crops adapted to the ship's environment, a small group of docile "Moonlight Snails," and most importantly—

a batch of genetically tuned "Pollution-Devouring Beetle" larvae and several microbial processing packs with different functions, all highly efficient at converting waste and stabilizing soil.

Furthermore, Dr. Chen Wei used some research data about an alien fungal symbiont to trade with an elderly biologist for a sample of a very peculiar "Calming Moss."

This moss was said to release trace gases that helped soothe emotions and improve sleep, which could be greatly beneficial for crew members living long-term in enclosed metal environments.

Just as they were loaded with their haul and preparing to return to the ship, they saw several people in a hurry, wearing "Jingtianxing" uniforms, boarding a small, high-speed transport shuttle in the docking area and quickly departing.

They also seemed to be here to purchase some special agricultural supplies, but their purpose was clearly unrelated to an "Ecological Ark." It seemed more like logistical support for some large-scale project.

"Jingtianxing's reach is really long," Wu Yu whispered.

"Don't mind them," Lin Feng said calmly. "We'll focus on our own business."

After leaving "Green Soil" Station, the "Star of Hope"'s cargo hold gained many lively "new passengers."

Little Ears and Dr. Chen Wei immediately threw themselves into the work of modifying the "Ecological Ark" cargo hold and introducing the new species. They hoped these green lives would thrive within this steel ark, becoming a solid backbone for their expedition.

Not long after leaving "Green Soil" Station, that faint, ancient distress signal they had received earlier reappeared, and it seemed to have become a bit clearer. Sun Wen performed a more precise triangulation and found it wasn't coming from a planet or space station, but from a patch of empty space containing only sparse asteroids and cosmic dust.

"The signal source is likely a ship that has lost power and is adrift," Su Wanqing analyzed. "The encoding method is extremely old, resembling a standard from the late First Expansion Era."

"Should we go check it out?"

Flea was eager. "Who knows, it might be an antique ship with some good stuff on it!"

Lin Feng looked at the star chart. The signal source's location wasn't a huge deviation from their course to the "Bountiful Harvest" coordinates. A lost ancient ship could indeed contain historical information, technological relics, and even... danger.

"Stay alert. Approach slowly."

Lin Feng finally decided. "Scan the area around the signal source. Make sure there are no other energy signatures or traps."

The "Star of Hope" adjusted its course, heading toward the signal source. As the distance closed, the sensor returns became clearer: it was indeed a ship, not large in size, with an ancient design style. Its hull was covered in impact craters and signs of age erosion. There was no power response or energy signal at all. It was like a coffin in the cosmos.

Its viewports were pitch black. On the hull was a faint, almost worn-away emblem trace, vaguely discernible as a planet surrounded by wheat ears—somewhat similar to the emblem Ezra mentioned for the "Bountiful Harvest," but on a much smaller scale.

Chapter 103: What's Wriggling! A Non-Human Form of Life

"Is it a 'Bountiful Harvest-class' auxiliary research vessel or survey ship?" Dr. Chen Wei speculated. "Maybe it's a member of the 'Bountiful Harvest' fleet?"

They dispatched a fully armed squad led by Old Scar to investigate via workboat. They carefully docked with the derelict ship's emergency airlock and cut through the hatch door that had failed due to age.

Inside was deathly silent, dark, and cold. The emergency lights had long since gone out, only the squad members' helmet-mounted lamps illuminating the corridors filled with floating dust. They found many wrecked pieces of scientific equipment, some scattered personal items, and... several crew member remains, long reduced to skeletons, secured within hibernation pods. There were no signs of combat. It seemed the energy had been completely depleted, the life support systems had stopped functioning, and the crew had died quietly in their sleep.

On the bridge, they found the automated beacon still weakly and intermittently emitting a distress signal, as well as a partially damaged captain's log data storage unit that might still have extractable data.

Just as the squad was preparing to evacuate with the log storage unit, engineer A-Qiang suddenly reported, "Scar Team, something's not right... I'm detecting very faint energy fluctuations... coming from deep inside the ship... It's not backup power, more like... some kind of low-power circulation system?"

Everyone immediately grew tense. How could a derelict ship abandoned for hundreds of years still have energy fluctuations?

Following the signal, they cautiously ventured deeper into the ship's belly, arriving at a compartment door marked "Specimen Vault." The door was locked from the outside by an emergency physical lock. After cutting it open, the sight inside made everyone's hair stand on end—

Inside the compartment, several massive cultivation tanks were still operating faintly! The nutrient fluid inside the tanks had long turned murky, but one could vaguely see what seemed to be... enormous, wriggling, non-humanoid biological shadows inside! And those faint energy fluctuations and the working sounds of a circulation system were precisely coming from these ancient devices maintaining the cultivation tanks at a bare minimum operational level!

"My God... are they... still alive?" a squad member's voice trembled.

Old Scar made an immediate decision, "Retreat! Back to the workboat, now! Notify the 'Star of Hope,' raise alert status! This place is wrong!"

They quickly evacuated the eerie derelict research ship, bringing back not only the captain's log storage unit but also a deep chill. On a ship that had slept for centuries, there were still living "specimens"? What exactly were they? Why were they locked away? Was the disappearance of the 'Bountiful Harvest' also related to these dangerous specimens?

Back on the "Star of Hope," the engineering team immediately began attempts to repair and read the captain's log storage unit retrieved from that derelict research ship (according to the log records, it was called the "Pioneer"). Due to its age and partial damage, data recovery was not easy.

After several hours of effort, some surviving log fragments were finally successfully extracted. The captain's voice, filled with digital decay and static, still conveyed the fear and despair within:

"...Log supplement, Standard Calendar... unable to accurately track time... 'Symbiont' activity is increasing... They can influence our thoughts... whispers... whispering in dreams... Dr. Johnson tried to open the Specimen Vault last night... we stopped him... He said they promised him immortality..."

"...Energy nearly depleted... Life support systems can last at most another 72 hours... We've decided to enter hibernation... Hope a passing ship receives the signal... But we must warn them... Under no circumstances open the Specimen Vault! Do not believe the whispers! We've physically locked the Specimen Vault from the outside..."

"...What are they? What exactly did the 'Bountiful Harvest' bring back from that damned planet?! We're just a squad responsible for peripheral survey and analysis... Why has it come to this..."

"...The whispers are getting louder... They are making promises... and threats... I feel my will is... is being eroded... God, save us... Or grant us all release..."

The log ended abruptly there.

The bridge fell into silence. The log's contents sent chills down their spines. An alien biological specimen called a "Symbiont," not only survived for centuries, but could also influence and even erode the crew's sanity? Making promises and threats through whispers?

"This sounds... somewhat similar to the whispers of the 'Symbiotic Core' that Samir warned about..." Wu Yu said quietly.

Dr. Chen Wei's expression was grave, "If this 'Symbiont' possesses such powerful mental influence capabilities, possibly even involving some form of energy parasitism or neural linkage, then Jingtianxing's pursuit of Kardela Beast neural cords for 'living computation' research becomes even more suspicious and dangerous. Are they trying to actively create or control something similar?"

Lin Feng looked at the screen showing the derelict ship still floating silently, and the wriggling shadows within those still-operating cultivation tanks, and issued an order, "Record these coordinates, mark as 'Extreme Danger.' Launch a set of general warning beacons into this space sector, alerting any who come later to stay away from this ship, and under no circumstances attempt to board or open the Specimen Vault. Then we leave this place and continue on our original course."

They had no intention of playing the hero to clear away danger, especially facing such a completely unknown, mind-attacking terror. Recording the information and issuing a warning was the most they could do for those who might come later.

This unexpected discovery cast a thick shadow over their expeditionary path. The mystery of the 'Bountiful Harvest's' disappearance seemed to have become even more puzzling and perilous. Those specimens from deep space might have brought not hope, but seeds of destruction.

Having left the unsettling derelict research ship, the atmosphere aboard the "Star of Hope" was somewhat heavy. Just as everyone was silently processing the terrifying information about the "Symbiont," the sensors suddenly emitted an urgent yet non-hostile alert tone.

"Detecting an ultra-high-speed approaching object! Very small in size... extremely fast! Calculating trajectory... It seems to be heading straight for us!" Sun Wen's voice held surprise.

"Evasive action! Prepare to intercept!" Old Scar instantly shifted into combat mode.

Chapter 104 - Terrible! Terrible!

"Wait a minute!"

Flea stared at the scanning data. "This speed... this energy signature... It doesn't look like a weapon. It's more like... some kind of ultra-high-speed drone? Or... interstellar express delivery?"

As soon as he finished speaking, they saw a small, compact aircraft, painted in a striking combination of bright orange and silver stripes, with a streamlined, teardrop-like shape. It executed a near-show-off, physics-defying sharp-angle turn and came to a steady hover directly in front of the Star of Hope's bridge, even playfully flashing its lights a few times.

The communication channel automatically connected, and a lively electronic synthesized voice rang out:

"Hello! Interstellar Express Delivery, mission accomplished! Are you the 'Stardust' and the esteemed Mr. Lin Feng? There's a package for you, please sign for it!"

Everyone on the bridge was stunned.

Lin Feng raised an eyebrow and spoke into the communicator. "I'm Lin Feng. But I don't recall ordering any... interstellar express delivery?"

"The sender is anonymous, but they have paid an excess fee, specifying that you must personally sign for it!" the delivery drone chirped happily.

"It's a biological storage container, guaranteed fresh! Includes a voice message: 'Heard you guys are working on an ecosystem, a little gift. Hope they're cuter than cockroaches. — Your caring neighbor.'"

Caring neighbor? Everyone exchanged puzzled glances. Wu Yu's eyes lit up. "Could it be that old biologist from the 'Green Soil' station? I mentioned in passing that we were building an ecological module!"

"Check the cargo first," Lin Feng signaled to open the small docking hatch.

The drone nimbly flew in, deposited a cold-storage box emitting a chill and printed with cartoon fruit patterns, then whooshed away. Before leaving, it added, "Have a pleasant day, and remember to give a five-star review!"

Opening the box revealed several transparent ecological containers. One container held a few furry, round, blue little creatures munching on leaves. They looked like a cross between a hamster and a caterpillar, exceptionally cute.

Another container held several mushrooms emitting a soft white light, resembling little lanterns. There was also a packet of soil labeled "Super Fertility Compost Worms."

An attached data pad read:

"Blue Fluffballs": Docile, herbivorous, low-odor feces, moderate reproduction rate, source of high-quality protein and fur. "Starlight Mushrooms": Prefer shade, edible, natural light source when illumination is insufficient. "Glutton Worms": Experts in organic waste processing, produce highly efficient fertilizer.

Little Ears cried out in delight. "Oh my goodness! It's them! I saw these in the 'Green Soil' station database! These are rare varieties that are very difficult to cultivate! That old man is too generous!"

Doctor Chen Wei adjusted her glasses. "Hmm, biological indicators are stable. No tracking devices or harmful pathogens detected. It seems it really is a gift from that 'caring neighbor.'"

Lin Feng looked at the adorably dopey "Blue Fluffballs" and couldn't help but laugh. "It seems this universe isn't all 'Jingtianxing' and terrifying symbionts. Alright, Little Ears, these new passengers are entrusted to you and the Doctor. Take good care of them."

The atmosphere on the bridge instantly lightened considerably. This sudden, slightly humorous "interstellar express delivery" was like a ray of sunshine, dispersing the previous gloom.

The good times didn't last long. Just as everyone was gathered around looking at the new little animals, the ship's navigation system suddenly emitted a piercing alarm!

"Alert! Severe corruption detected in the star chart database! Positioning coordinates are offset! We... we seem to be lost!" the crewman in charge of navigation reported in a panic.

"What's going on? It was fine just a moment ago!" Lin Feng strode quickly to the console.

Su Wanqing swiftly checked the systems. "It's not an external attack... It's a large-scale internal logical chain disruption within the database... It's like... it was affected by some kind of virus or extremely strong interference? But our firewall didn't react!"

Just as everyone was scrambling to try and fix it, Flea suddenly sniffed. "Huh? Do you guys smell a... strange fragrance? A bit like... mushroom soup?"

Everyone paused, then they all caught that faint, elusive, strangely earthy fragrance. The source seemed to be... the newly arrived "express delivery" box!

Everyone's gaze instantly focused on the container holding the "Starlight Mushrooms." They saw that the few small mushrooms were now emitting light several times brighter than before, and the flickering frequency of the light seemed to... contain some kind of complex pattern?

Doctor Chen Wei immediately picked up an instrument to test, her expression turning odd. "These mushrooms... They're releasing an extremely faint but special kind of bio-electrical wave... This wave... seems to be able to interfere with our low-level optical brain processors... Part of the navigation system's star chart database's basic calculations happen to rely on those processors..."

Wu Yu was dumbfounded. "No way? These mushrooms are... living jammers?! That old guy tricked us?!"

"It doesn't seem intentional," the Doctor analyzed. "It's more like a self-defense mechanism of theirs, or just an unconscious biological characteristic. Their electrical waves themselves are very weak, but they might have just happened to resonate with the frequency of a certain chip on our ship, amplifying the effect..."

Right at that moment, the flickering light from the mushrooms became even more rapid, even starting to emit a very faint, whisper-like "buzzing" sound.

Flea listened intently for a long moment, his expression growing even more horrified. "Wait... this buzzing sound... listen carefully... it seems... it seems to be repeating a set of... coordinate numbers?! And it's an... erroneous version of the 'Bountiful Harvest' coordinates we previously set?!"

Everyone on the bridge was utterly shocked! These mushrooms not only glow and release interfering electrical waves, but they also "talk"? Or talk in their sleep, reporting coordinates?

Lin Feng held his forehead, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "So... our navigation system was 'hijacked' by a few mushrooms, and we listened to a segment of their 'sleep-talking'?"

Su Wanqing, suppressing a laugh, operated the console. "I've already isolated the affected processors. I'm using the backup system to recalibrate the coordinates now. It seems the gift from our 'caring neighbor' has quite a... distinctive personality."

Soon, the navigation system returned to normal. The mushroom fragrance also gradually faded. The Starlight Mushrooms returned to their soft glowing state, as if nothing had happened.

This brief chaos caused by the little mushrooms, though a false alarm, still let everyone witness the endless wonders of cosmic life. Little Ears carefully carried the mushroom container to the corner farthest from the critical equipment, muttering, "I'll have to find you guys a soundproof private room later..."

Everyone hadn't rested for long when the monitoring station reported another new situation. "A new distress signal received. Strong signal, source not far away. But... the signal content is a bit strange."

An anxious voice came through the communication channel. "...Mayday! Mayday! This is the cargo ship 'Big Belly King'! We've encountered a... uh... technical malfunction! Urgently require... urgently require large quantities of food assistance! Repeat, we need food! Especially... fresh vegetables and... canned meat! Whoever gives us food, we'll pay! A lot of money!"

This distress call content left everyone stunned. Usually, distress calls are for energy, spare parts, medical aid. This was the first time they'd heard one where the main objective was to get food, specifically naming vegetables and canned goods.

Chapter 105 The Belly King! Pirates!

Wu Yu stroked his chin.

"'Big Belly King'? That name sounds familiar... Oh right! It's a somewhat well-known independent transport fleet from Free Station, specializing in delivering supplies to various space stations. I heard the boss is a super foodie, naming his ships things like 'Big Belly King,' 'Glutton,' and the like."

Lin Feng laughed.

"So they got themselves hungry while transporting goods? That's quite a unique malfunction."

Flea, however, frowned. "Boss, something's off. The signal strength is so high, covering a wide area, yet they only ask for food? And their coordinates... they're right in the shadow zone of an asteroid belt, perfect for an ambush."

"You mean... it could be a trap?" Old Scar became alert.

"Pirates sometimes use distress signals to lure people in," Flea nodded. "But using a plea for food as bait... that's quite novel."

Lin Feng thought for a moment, then revealed a sly smile. "Whether it's a trap or not, we'll find out. Reply to them. Tell them we don't have much food either, but we have some extra 'Starlight Brand' compressed rations. Ask if they want some, we can sell them a bit cheap."

The other party replied quickly, their tone even more "pitiful": "Compressed rations are fine too! Help! We're so hungry we're about to gnaw on the console! Please, come quickly! The price is negotiable!"

At this point, even Wu Yu felt something was wrong—a true foodie would rather starve than stoop to eating 'Starlight Brand' compressed rations!

"It's definitely a trap!"

Flea slapped his thigh. "These guys' acting is terrible!"

Lin Feng chuckled. "Since they want food, let's send them a special 'care package.'"

He turned to Wrench.

"Pack up our ancestral compressed food bricks, oh, and those 'Colossal' flavored energy bars from the last trade with the 'Raiders' that are about to expire, and those 'Mystery Meat' cans with faded labels. Add a little 'extra' to the mix—hehe, mix in that... uh... high-energy static dust we collected from the abandoned research vessel. Let them 'replenish their energy' properly."

Wrench grinned. "Got it! I'll make sure they have a truly 'memorable' experience!"

Soon, a cargo container loaded with "specially prepared" food was pushed out of the spacecraft by an engineering robot, drifting leisurely towards the coordinates provided by the "Big Belly King."

The "Star of Hope" activated its stealth mode, following from a distance to monitor.

Sure enough, as the cargo container drifted into the shadowy area of the asteroid belt, three modified high-speed assault boats, painted with skull patterns, suddenly shot out from behind several massive rocks! They quickly surrounded the container, opened their hatches, and extended robotic arms to grab the box.

A burst of arrogant laughter immediately came over the public channel: "Hahaha! A bunch of idiots! You really thought we were short on food? This haul is ours! Let's see what goodies... Huh? What is this stuff? 'Colossal' brand? Never heard of it!"

Another pirate's voice chimed in: "Boss, who cares, just bring it back first! Hey? Why does this box seem to be... slightly discharging electricity?"

Suddenly, the comms channel erupted with crackling static and the pirates' startled shouts and curses!

"Ouch! This box is leaking electricity!"

"My hand! It's numb!"

"Why is this can so hot?!"

"Pah! This energy bar is hard enough to be a crowbar! My tooth!"

Taking advantage of the pirates' frantic confusion and swearing, the "Star of Hope"s sensors clearly scanned and recorded the structure and energy signatures of the three assault boats.

Lin Feng leisurely opened the public channel, mimicking the cheerful tone of a delivery drone from earlier: "Hello! Interstellar Prank Delivery, guaranteed surprises! Your order of 'Tooth-Cracking Energy Bars,' 'Lightning Cans,' and 'Mystery Meat' has been delivered! Remember to give us a five-star... negative review! Also, thank you for the wonderful performance and your ship data. I'm sure the Free Station security department will find this information very interesting."

The pirates' curses abruptly ceased, replaced by dead silence and the sound of panicked engines starting up. Like cats whose tails had been stepped on, the three assault boats, forgetting all about that box of "crappy" goods, frantically turned and scrambled into the depths of the asteroid belt, disappearing without a trace in an instant.

The bridge erupted in uproarious laughter.

Wu Yu wiped tears of laughter from his eyes. "Hahaha! And they call themselves the 'Big Belly King'! They're probably going to have psychological trauma now!"

Flea gave a thumbs-up. "Boss, that move was downright evil! I love it!"

Old Scar also showed a rare smile. "Saved ammunition and got a good look at a local pirate group's capabilities. Good deal."

This "reverse" rescue operation ended in a humorous and complete victory. It seems to survive in the Belt Alliance, you not only need to be tough, but also have a bit of "creativity."

They continued their journey peacefully for a while. Just as everyone thought they could smoothly reach the outer region of the "Bountiful Harvest," the forward sensors picked up another anomaly.

A garishly painted, extravagantly plump luxury private yacht, looking like a mobile nightclub with an extremely exaggerated and bloated design, was weaving a seductive S-shaped path along the navigation lane. Its speed wasn't fast, but it was perfectly blocking the "Star of Hope"s way.

"Vessel ahead, please observe navigation protocols. Maintain a straight course or yield the main lane," Su Wanqing calmly issued a standard navigation warning over the general channel.

Not only did the other party ignore it, but a domineering, drunken young voice came over the public channel: "Where did this shabby piece of junk come from? Daring to tell me, your young master, to yield? Do you know who my father is? Do you know how much my 'Glorious Star' is worth? You couldn't pay for a single scratch even if you sold yourselves! Get lost and wait until I'm done having fun!"

Then, the yacht even deliberately slowed down, spewing some harmless but extremely dazzling colored smoke from its rear, as if taunting them.

"Hey, that pisses me off!" Anvil immediately rolled up his sleeves. "Boss, want me to give his engine a pulse disruption shot? I guarantee he'll quiet down!"

Lin Feng waved his hand dismissively. Looking at the swaying "Glorious Star" ahead, he suddenly smiled. "Why bother with a spoiled second-generation brat? Wrench, didn't we salvage a few old, high-powered... public broadcast speakers from some ruins last time?"

Chapter 106: Maximum Insult

Wrench was stunned for a second, then a look of realization dawned on his face, and he also grinned. "Yes! There are several! Huge power! Terrible sound quality! Nearly deafened me when I was taking them apart!"

"Excellent." Lin Feng laughed. "Hook them up to the outside of the ship. Set them to loop... hmm... play the audio version of the 'Interstellar Navigation Safety Regulations' at max volume. Then, overlay it with a loop of... that heavy metal rock music you love listening to while fixing machines."

Soon, several massive, obviously ancient-looking loudspeakers extended from the side of the "Star of Hope"s hull.

The next second, an indescribable, terrifying wave of sound—a horrifying mixture of a cold, electronic voice reciting "...Article 38, hazardous piloting is prohibited..." and deafening, severely distorted heavy metal rock—lashed out like a tangible sonic attack, instantly engulfing the flight path ahead!

The *Glorious Star* rocked violently as if struck by an invisible hammer, the colorful lights on its surface flickering erratically. A furious, panicked shriek came over the public comms channel: "Ah! My ears! What the hell is that noise! It's awful! Turn it off! Turn it off right now!"

Lin Feng replied leisurely, his voice cutting clearly through the cacophony. "Sorry about that, young master. Our ship is a bit old and rundown; the sound system has a malfunction and can't be turned off. How about... you speed past us quickly? Or, you could make way, let us hurry through, and you can have your peace and quiet again?"

The rich heir, clearly disoriented and dizzy from this rogue sonic assault, his musical taste utterly devastated, could no longer maintain his arrogance. Cursing and fumbling, he hastily cleared the flight path, then sped away like a refugee fleeing disaster, not even bothering with the colored smoke trails anymore.

Everyone on the bridge doubled over with laughter.

Wu Yu held his stomach. "Boss... you... that's too 'civilized'!"

Flea added, "Minimal physical damage, maximum insult! That kid's probably going to have psychological scars for life!"

Lin Feng shrugged. "To deal with a brat, you have to use bratty methods. Alright, noise pollution over. Proceed forward."

This interstellar "road rage" incident was resolved in an extremely "environmentally friendly" and hilarious manner.

After a journey full of such interruptions, the *Star of Hope* finally arrived at the outer perimeter of the coordinates where the old archaeologist Ezra suggested the *Bountiful Harvest* might be located.

The starscape here seemed exceptionally empty and dead. In the distance, only a few sparse, dim stars were visible, as if the universe itself had grown thin in this region. The sensors detected nothing but cold asteroids and wispy clouds of interstellar dust.

"Is this... the last place the *Bountiful Harvest* might have vanished?" Wu Yu asked, looking somewhat disappointed at the almost unchanging view outside the window. "Looks like there's nothing here."

"If it were that easy to find, it wouldn't be a legend," Su Wanqing said, operating the sensors. "Initiating high-precision passive scanning and gravitational anomaly detection. If a ship the size of the *Bountiful Harvest* still exists, even as wreckage, it should leave some traces."

The scanning continued for a long time, yielding nothing. Just as everyone was starting to think Ezra's information was wrong or the *Bountiful Harvest* had long since vanished completely, Sun Wen suddenly picked up an extremely anomalous signal.

"Detecting... a very faint spatial echo... Not an object reflection. More like... a 'wrinkle' or 'memory' of the space structure itself? Very peculiar. Never seen anything like it." She amplified and processed the signal.

A low, sigh-like hum came through the speakers, intermittent, as if from an incredibly distant past.

Dr. Chen Wei's interest was immediately piqued. "A spatial echo? Could it be... the spacetime ripple left behind after a large object performed a hyperspace jump? But this duration... it's far too long! Unless that jump was exceptionally violent, or... something has been continuously interfering with the structure of this space for a long time!"

She attempted to compare the engine frequency model of the *Bountiful Harvest* provided by Ezra with this echo.

Something astonishing happened—although the signal was extremely weak and distorted, the core frequency characteristics showed a high degree of similarity!

"My heavens..." the doctor exclaimed. "This... this echo might genuinely be related to the *Bountiful Harvest*! It's not a signal from its wreckage, but the 'scar' it left when it tore through space during its final, likely failed, jump centuries ago! This 'scar,' after hundreds of years, is still slowly 'bleeding'?"

This discovery made everyone hold their breath. What they might have found wasn't the ship itself, but the "ghostly" echo of its final moment, imprinted onto the very fabric of space!

"Can we locate the target direction of its jump based on the echo?" Lin Feng asked immediately.

"Very difficult... The echo is too faint and dispersed... But we can try to build a model, roughly calculate a few of the most probable dispersal directions..." The doctor and Su Wanqing immediately plunged into intense calculations.

Although they hadn't directly found the *Bountiful Harvest*, the discovery of this "ghost" echo was even more significant. It not only confirmed the reliability of Ezra's information and pointed the way for the next phase of the search, but also hinted that the *Bountiful Harvest* might have attempted a jump far beyond its design capabilities—a desperate leap that caused permanent spatial damage.

What had it encountered? And where had it been trying to jump to?

The answer might lie in the direction the echo pointed.

While the *Star of Hope* was focused on analyzing the *Bountiful Harvest*'s spatial echo, they remained unaware that they had long since become pawns on someone else's chessboard.

In a distant star sector, aboard a Jingtianxing stealth reconnaissance ship named the *Observer*, the atmosphere was cold and efficient.

"Target vessel 'Stardust' has arrived at the preset coordinate zone. Currently conducting deep scans of the anomalous spatial echo."

An operator reported expressionlessly to the tall, middle-aged woman standing behind him. She wore an officer's uniform that was stretched taut over her ample figure. Her expression was stern, her gaze sharp as a hawk's. Suddenly, the corner of her mouth lifted in a faint smile. "Good. The 'bait' was successfully deployed. The fish has taken the hook."

Her adjutant looked puzzled. "Captain! Why go through all this trouble, exploiting vulnerabilities in ancient databases, to lure them toward this legend of the *Bountiful Harvest*? Wouldn't direct interception and capture be more efficient?"

"Direct interception? That ship's energy signature is peculiar. It might be connected to unknown technologies or factions. Acting rashly carries too much risk. Isn't it better to let them explore these dangerous ancient relics for us? Whether they find the *Bountiful Harvest*'s wrecked technology or trigger some ancient defense mechanism, we benefit. This is called the 'Fisherman' strategy. We just need to wait for the result,

and then... reel in the net."

She paused, then added, "Moreover, the 'Mother Matrix' is very interested in that ship's energy signature. It believes it might be related to a certain foundational energy source sought by the 'Beyond the Firmament' project. We need more data."

"Raise surveillance to the highest level. All data, especially their scan data and any energy reactions, must be fully recorded and transmitted back to the 'Mother Matrix' for analysis. Also, notify the nearby 'Cleaner' squad to stand by, ready to respond to... any unexpected gains."

Chapter 107: The 100% Stealth Form!

Jingtianxing's scheme ran far deeper than Lin Feng had imagined. They were not merely hunters, but directors hidden behind the curtain, guiding the "Stardust" toward the stage they had preset.

After arduous data analysis, Su Wanqing and Doctor Chen Wei finally managed to deduce the three most probable jump dispersion directions from the chaotic spatial echoes. These three directions pointed to completely different star sectors, each brimming with unknowns.

"Direction A points toward a region of a dying red giant star. The gravity there is chaotic, the environment harsh, but ancient ships sometimes use such environments to hide."

"Direction B points deep into a dense asteroid belt. It's easy to hide there, but also easy to get lost."

"Direction C is the strangest. It points to a patch of near-absolute void. There's nothing there. According to star chart records, even dark matter is exceptionally sparse there."

Three choices, three paths. Each seemed like it could be the final resting place of the "Bountiful Harvest," yet each could also lead to nothing, or even hide deadly traps.

A heated discussion unfolded on the bridge.

Wu Yu leaned toward Direction B: "The asteroid belt is complex, sure, but at least there are things to use as reference points. We might even be able to scoop up some ore while we're at it!"

Flea thought Direction A was more thrilling: "The red giant region is dangerous, but the more dangerous the place, the more likely it is to hide something good! Fortune favors the bold!"

Su Wanqing was more rational: "Direction C seems empty, but precisely because it's so desolate, any anomaly would be easier to detect. Furthermore, if the 'Bountiful Harvest' performed a hyper-conventional jump, choosing a 'clean' patch of space as a target is also more logical."

Doctor Chen Wei supported Direction C: "Judging from the energy dispersion model, the echoes from Direction C, though the faintest, seem more 'pure,' with the least post-jump interference."

Old Scar, however, reminded everyone: "Whichever direction we choose, we must consider that Jingtianxing might be tailing us. Their reconnaissance ship is likely nearby."

Lin Feng listened silently to everyone's opinions, his finger tracing three virtual flight paths on the star chart. He knew this decision was crucial.

Finally, he made his decision. "We'll go to Direction C first, that absolute void."

Everyone looked at him.

"Three reasons," Lin Feng explained.

"First, Miss Su and the Doctor's analysis supports this direction more. Second, the more seemingly impossible a place is, the more likely it is to yield surprises. Third,"

He paused, "and this is the most critical point: if Jingtianxing is truly monitoring us, they will most likely assume we have a higher probability of choosing A or B. Choosing C might temporarily divert their focus, buying us more time."

"Of course," he added, "this is just the priority. We'll go to Direction C first for a rapid reconnaissance. If we find nothing, we'll investigate the other two directions in order. Wrench, ensure the engines are in good condition. We need to be able to maneuver quickly."

With the strategy set, the "Star of Hope" adjusted its course, heading toward that seemingly empty absolute void. Whether this decision was right or wrong, only the unknown ahead could provide the answer.

Upon reaching the star sector indicated by Direction C, the sight before them was exactly as the star charts recorded—near-absolute nothingness. No stars, no planets, no asteroids, even interstellar dust was scarce to the extreme.

The sensor screens were blank, displaying only the signals emitted by the ship itself and the distant cosmic background radiation. An unprecedented sense of loneliness enveloped the ship.

"This place... it's like a cosmic graveyard," Wu Yu muttered quietly, instinctively tightening his clothes.

Scans continued for hours, yielding nothing. Just as everyone began to doubt this choice, the sensors suddenly captured an extremely faint, unnatural geometric signal!

"Anomaly detected! Bearing 774, distance extremely far!" Sun Wen's voice carried a mix of excitement and tension.

When the image was magnified, everyone was stunned.

In the center of that absolute void, there floated a massive, ancient-looking black obelisk!

It showed no power reactions. Its surface was smooth as a mirror, devoid of any markings or patterns, as if it had existed there since time immemorial, merging with the surrounding nothingness. Its scale far surpassed any known ship or space station. It seemed more like a... massive piece of interstellar art, or a tombstone.

"What is that?!" "Remains of the 'Bountiful Harvest'? Doesn't look like it!" "Who would erect something like this here?"

Just as everyone was shocked and bewildered, something even stranger happened.

The Jingtianxing "Observer" ship, which had been tailing them from a distance, also detected this black obelisk. Commander Li Na furrowed her brow tightly. "What is that thing? No records in the database! Scan it!"

However, all active scanning waves, upon contacting the obelisk's surface, vanished without a trace like clay oxen entering the sea, yielding no feedback whatsoever. It was like an absolute black body, devouring all probes.

"Passive sensors? Analyze its material composition, energy signature!"

The results from the passive sensors were equally baffling. The obelisk seemed to be composed of a completely unknown substance. It emitted no energy radiation, its temperature was near absolute zero, identical to the background void. It existed there, yet it seemed as if it didn't.

"This is impossible!" Commander Li Na stood up, losing her composure. "No substance can completely block detection! Unless..."

Unless it surpassed their scope of understanding.

Chapter 108 The Dead Li Wei? Resurrected!

"Commander, the 'Stardust' also seems surprised. They've stopped there and aren't rashly approaching."

Commander Li Na forced herself to calm down. "Record all data! Notify the 'Mother Matrix,' we have discovered an... inexplicable anomalous object. Suspend all operations. No one is to approach that thing without my order! The 'Cleaner' squad will stand by!"

Jingtianxing's plan was thrown into disarray. This suddenly appearing, incomprehensible black obelisk completely exceeded their expectations and control. They had gone from hunters and directors to equally bewildered spectators.

On the bridge of the "Star of Hope," Lin Feng was also experiencing a massive psychological shock. He had originally thought they would find the wreckage of the "Bountiful Harvest," but he never expected to encounter an even more mysterious, even more colossal unknown construct.

Instinct told him this obelisk was extremely dangerous, but it might also contain unimaginable secrets. Should they risk approaching to investigate, or should they immediately distance themselves from this troubled spot?

A new, even more difficult choice was laid out before him.

Leaving the enigmatic region of the black obelisk, the "Star of Hope" arrived at the small waystation "Crossroads" for necessary resupply and to try gathering any scattered information about the obelisk or the "Bountiful Harvest."

The interior of the space station was as noisy and chaotic as ever. Lin Feng, with Wu Yu and Flea in tow, navigated through the crowded market. Wu Yu was currently haggling with a vendor selling filters over a few credit points.

Suddenly, Flea grabbed Lin Feng's arm hard, yanking him behind a stall piled high with scrap parts. He lowered his voice, his tone filled with disbelief.

"Boss! Look over there! That dead fatty in the corner whispering to the station official... look at that ridiculous camo outfit! It's Li Wei! That profiteering merchant from the Panshan Shelter!"

Lin Feng's heart jolted. He followed Flea's gaze. There, he saw a man wearing ill-fitting jungle camouflage, with a portly build and a face that always wore a hypocritical smile. It was indeed Li Wei!

At that moment, he was bowing and scraping as he spoke to an official wearing a "Crossroads" uniform, seemingly slipping a small pouch into the man's hand. The official accepted it without batting an eye, his attitude noticeably softening.

"That fat pig actually isn't dead?"

Wu Yu leaned over, wrinkling his brow in disgust. "The Panshan Shelter is finished. I thought he'd been buried along with it... And here he is, running his 'business' here instead? Truly, the wicked live a thousand years!"

Li Wei looked slightly more down-and-out than he had at Panshan. His camo was a bit dirty and worn, but the shrewdness and cunning flashing in his small eyes hadn't diminished in the slightest. He finished his "conversation" with the official, glanced around, then lowered his head and hurried off towards the residential sector, seemingly not wanting to attract too much attention.

"He's connected to 'Night Owl'..." Lin Feng murmured, recalling the logs found at the Panshan Shelter that mentioned Li Wei and that mysterious assassin organization. "His appearance here is no accident. Flea, follow him. Find out where he lives and who he contacts. Be careful, this guy is more dangerous than he looks."

Flea nodded and slipped away like a shadow, silently following. Li Wei's appearance was like a stone thrown into calm water, hinting at potentially larger vortexes hidden beneath the surface.

Flea tailed Li Wei through the noisy market and the relatively quiet corridors of the residential sector, arriving at a low-rent, noisy habitation module. Li Wei ducked into a cramped cabin numbered B-17.

Flea didn't approach. Instead, from a public ventilation duct access point opposite, he cleverly planted a high-sensitivity listening device, then quickly retreated to a safe distance for remote monitoring.

From inside the cabin came Li Wei's voice. He seemed to be speaking to someone on an encrypted communicator, his tone carrying his usual fawning obsequiousness mixed with a barely perceptible tension.

"...Yes, yes, rest assured... the goods have been delivered safely. The checkpoint here at 'Crossroads' has been taken care of, absolutely no problem... Mm, I know the rules, I won't ask about things I shouldn't... Just curious, what exactly is the 'final destination' for this batch of 'goods'? Seems to be getting a lot of attention..."

A brief silence. Clearly, the other party was responding.

Li Wei's voice became even more surprised and... excited?

"Void's Light'? You mean... that legendary... Okay, okay, I won't ask, I won't ask... The payment? Oh, you're too kind, it's my honor to serve 'Night Owl'... The old account is fine, the old account..."

The communication seemed to end. From the cabin came the sound of Li Wei humming a tune, seemingly in an excellent mood.

Flea, listening to this, was inwardly shaken! Li Wei was indeed still working for "Night Owl"! And they seemed to be transporting an important piece of "goods," with a destination actually called "Void's Light"? The name itself sounded eerie.

Flea immediately relayed the intel back to Lin Feng.

"Night Owl'... 'Void's Light'..." Lin Feng pondered. This mysterious assassin organization had surfaced again and was conducting some secret transport operation. Li Wei, as one link in the chain, was an excellent point of entry.

"Can you find out what 'goods' he's transporting? Or where he's going next?" Lin Feng asked.

Flea shook his head. "The bug's range is limited. He doesn't seem to be doing anything next, just staying in his cabin. The 'goods' might have already been handed over, or he might just be a middleman/contact."

"Continue surveillance," Lin Feng ordered. "At the same time, Wu Yu, you try probing around the market. See if anyone has heard of the term 'Void's Light.' Be careful how you ask, don't raise suspicion."

Li Wei's appearance had once again brought the shadow of the "Night Owl" organization to the fore. Their activities didn't seem entirely unrelated to ancient secrets like the obelisk and the "Bountiful Harvest." "Void's Light"... what kind of place could that be?

Wu Yu wandered the market, using the opportunity to buy supplies to chat with various vendors, bartenders, even customers, trying to casually bring up the term "Void's Light."

Most people looked blank, saying they'd never heard of it. It wasn't until he was at a struggling second-hand bookstore (which also dealt in data chips), chatting with the bespectacled, seemingly idle owner about ancient star chart legends, that Wu Yu pretended to mention it offhandedly.

"...Oh, right, I think I saw a place called 'Void's Light' in a really old book? Sounds pretty mysterious, not sure if it's real or not."

The old shopkeeper adjusted his glasses, his cloudy eyes glancing at Wu Yu. He spoke slowly. "'Void's Light'? Young man, knowing too much isn't a good thing. That place... it's downright sinister."

Wu Yu perked up immediately, handing over a small canister of good tea leaves. "Old sir, just tell me about it, treat it as listening to a story."

The shopkeeper pocketed the tea and lowered his voice. "It's a legendary place. Said to be in a patch of absolute void, a beam of light suddenly appears, piercing through the starfield. No one knows what the light source is, or why it appears. Very few have seen it, and the accounts vary wildly. Some say it's a divine sign, some say it's an extreme cosmic phenomenon, and others make even more outlandish claims, saying it's a beacon or... a weapon left by some ancient civilization. Any ship that tried to get close to investigate either vanished without a trace, or the crew came back mad, babbling nonsense about 'whispers,' 'calling'..."

While Wu Yu was gathering information, Flea's surveillance also yielded a new discovery. A visitor had come to Li Wei's cabin—a taciturn man dressed plainly but with sharp eyes.

Their conversation was extremely brief.

Visitor: "Beacon" is activated. 'Cleaners' are in position."

Li Wei: "Understood, understood! I guarantee there won't be another accident like 'Bedrock'!"

Visitor: "'Eyes' are also watching. Keep quiet."

Chapter 109 The mantis stalks the cicada

The visitor departed quickly.

"Beacon"? "Cleaner"? "Eyes"? These codenames were clearly related to Night Owl's operations.

And the term "Eyes" instantly made Lin Feng think of Jingtianxing—their emblem was precisely an abstract eye pattern! Could Night Owl also be colluding with Jingtianxing? Or did "Eyes" refer to something else entirely?

Pieces of intelligence were beginning to converge, but the puzzle seemed to grow more complex and dangerous. Night Owl was on the move, their target likely related to an extremely hazardous zone called Void's Light, while Jingtianxing, or other powerful factions, also seemed to be watching covertly.

As planned, the Star of Hope departed Crossroads station and continued toward the next target region—the Red Giant Domain.

However, the intelligence regarding Night Owl, Void's Light, and the possible surveillance by Jingtianxing cast a new shadow over this voyage.

Upon reaching the edge of the Red Giant Domain, the environment abruptly deteriorated. Intense stellar activity brought powerful radiation and gravitational turbulence.

Just as they were struggling to avoid a sudden ion storm, the sensors once again picked up that brief, powerful engine signature—the mysterious "fast shadow"!

The chase within the storm began anew!

Yet, during the pursuit, Flea, who was responsible for monitoring Li Wei's situation from the rear, suddenly reported an unexpected discovery.

"Boss! Li Wei's beat-up little freighter, the 'Mule', just quietly left Crossroads station! Its course... has it been calculated yet? Damn it! Its projected trajectory also seems to point toward this Red Giant region, but at a slight offset. It looks like it's heading... heading in the general direction of that 'Void's Light' legend!"

This news was like a drop of water hitting boiling oil!

Li Wei suddenly leaving the safety of the waystation at this critical juncture, heading for that dead zone of space? Was he going to rendezvous with Night Owl operatives? Or was Void's Light actually located near this Red Giant region?

Ahead, the "fast shadow" used a massive solar prominence eruption as cover and vanished without a trace once more.

And high above, Jingtianxing's Observer ship still hovered like a ghost, monitoring.

Now, they faced an even more complex decision.

Should they continue pursuing the "fast shadow," which might be connected to the Bountiful Harvest?

Or should they change course and follow Li Wei to see what conspiracy Night Owl and Void's Light were cooking up?

Or, should they stay put and stay vigilant for Jingtianxing's next move?

Every choice was fraught with unknowns and risks.

Faced with this complex triple dilemma, Lin Feng realized they could no longer act together passively.

"We must split up," Lin Feng ordered decisively. "The Star of Hope is too big a target. It will remain here, continuing to monitor the area where the 'fast shadow' appeared on one hand, and serving as a distraction to hold Jingtianxing's attention on the other. Su Wanqing, you are in command. Maintain the highest alert. Do not venture into dangerous territory without absolute certainty."

"What about Li Wei?" Flea asked.

"Li Wei's ship is small, slow, and has a low profile," Lin Feng said, looking at Flea and Wu Yu. "Flea, Wu Yu, you're with me. We'll take the Peregrine scout ship to track Li Wei. The Peregrine is more agile, has better stealth capabilities, and is harder to detect. We must figure out what the hell Night Owl is up to at Void's Light!"

It was a bold and risky plan. Dividing their forces would weaken them, but it was the only way to handle the current complex situation.

"It's too dangerous!" Su Wanqing expressed her concern.

"That's why we need you here to keep Jingtianxing's eyes on you," Lin Feng said gravely. "We'll maintain silent comms and report in at regular intervals. If the situation turns bad, we'll withdraw immediately."

The plan was set and executed swiftly.

Lin Feng, Flea, and Wu Yu quickly boarded the compact Peregrine scout ship, quietly detached from the Star of Hope, and, using the radiation background of the Red Giant Domain as cover, set off in pursuit of the direction where Li Wei's Mule had last disappeared.

Meanwhile, the Star of Hope remained in position, putting on the appearance of still diligently searching for the "fast shadow." Its powerful sensors continuously scanned the surrounding space, as if it hadn't noticed Li Wei's departure or the scout ship's detachment at all.

In high orbit, Commander Li Na of the Observer watched the Star of Hope still "busy" on her screen, a cold smile curling at the corner of her mouth.

"Still clinging to that ancient legend? How stubborn. Continue monitoring. Record all energy readings. The Mother Matrix needs more data on that ship."

She completely failed to notice that a small "mantis" had already quietly pounced toward another "cicada."

On the cosmic chessboard, the mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind. But who the true oriole was remained unknown.

Faced with three distinctly different FTL wake dissipation vectors, arguments broke out on the bridge.

Wu Yu waved his datapad. "Vector B! The asteroid belt! There must be treasure there! Maybe we'll even stumble upon some pirate's hidden stash, pull off a double-cross... uh, I mean, serve justice!"

Flea licked his lips. "Vector A! The red giant! That's exciting enough! Maybe the Bountiful Harvest got stuck in its gravity well, acting as a satellite. We could go give it a tow!"

Su Wanqing countered calmly. "The echo from Vector C, the void region, is the 'cleanest,' with the least interference. The calculation model has the highest confidence level for it."

Doctor Chen Wei added, "And haven't you noticed? The tail ends of the echoes from Vectors A and B both have extremely subtle, discordant noise, as if... they've been interfered with or altered by something. Only the echo from Vector C has a feel of... straightforward, 'all-natural' purity."

Chapter 110 Hilarious! Ancient Emoticons

Just as everyone was arguing without reaching a conclusion, A Liang, who was responsible for monitoring the echo signals, suddenly let out a "pfft" laugh and quickly covered his mouth.

"What's wrong?" Lin Feng looked over.

A Liang, trying to suppress his laughter, pointed to an extremely complex waveform on the spectrum analyzer: "Boss Lin, Doctor, look at this section... if we convert the echo's frequency into audio... it sounds remarkably like... like..." He was too embarrassed to say it out loud and simply operated the controls.

A segment of electronic sound with a strong sense of rhythm, an utterly bizarre melody, and something akin to an old-school disco beat came from the speakers!

"Deng deng deng-deng deng~ deng deng deng-deng deng~"

The entire bridge fell silent instantly, everyone wearing a look of utter bewilderment.

Wu Yu: "...What is this? Was the 'Bountiful Harvest' throwing a party on board before it jumped?"

Flea: "This rhythm... why are my toes tapping on their own?"

Doctor Chen Wei's eyes lit up: "Incredible! This appears to be a harmonic phenomenon caused by an extremely complex energy dissipation. Its vibration pattern has coincidentally formed a rhythmic audio signal! The probability of this is lower than winning the lottery a hundred times in a row!"

Lin Feng massaged his temples, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Searching for a missing ancient colony ship, and the first thing they receive is its leftover "interstellar square dance" BGM? The universe truly holds endless wonders.

"Alright," he made a decision, "based on the fact that this 'hype' echo hasn't been tampered with, let's trust it. Target direction C, the absolute void. Let's go! By the way... A Liang, save that audio clip. It might make a good wake-up alarm someday."

The "Star of Hope" adjusted its course, heading towards that region of space where even light seemed sparse, the bizarre "deng deng deng" seemingly still echoing in the background.

As they sailed into the target void, the sight before them was the ultimate "emptiness," giving everyone the creeps.

"Extend scan range to maximum power... there's nothing here but us, not even a fart," Wu Yu grumbled, even feeling it was a bit of a waste of energy.

Just as everyone was about to be driven to claustrophobia by this absolute nothingness, the sensors finally screamed!

"Massive object detected! Absolutely stationary! Zero energy reaction! Zero thermal signature! Material... unanalyzable!" Sun Wen's voice was tinged with shock.

The image was magnified, and the bridge fell into an eerie silence once more.

Right in the center of that void, stood a massive... obelisk painted entirely in fluorescent pink?!!

That's right, not the expected dark grey ancient construct, but that eye-searing, blindingly bright pink that looked like some cosmic nouveau riche's taste had run completely wild! The surface of the obelisk was even inlaid with some sparkling, rhinestone-like decorations, arranged into a vortex pattern of unclear meaning!

"My... my eyes..." Wu Yu covered his eyes.

Flea's jaw nearly hit the floor: "This... did the captain of the 'Bountiful Harvest' have some special artistic pursuit?"

Su Wanqing frowned deeply: "Scans confirm it's not an energy illusion; it's a physical entity. But its physical properties... don't conform to any known material at all. It perfectly reflects all detection waves, yet itself produces no signal, like... a 'hole' in the cosmos."

Doctor Chen Wei was so excited she almost jumped: "Perfect reflection? Zero signal? This material is a physicist's nightmare and paradise! If we could just scrape off a sample..."

However, something even more bizarre happened.

The pink obelisk seemed to detect the scanning waves. Its smooth surface suddenly lit up like an LCD screen, displaying a line of constantly flashing cosmic common language text composed of various weird fonts and emoticons:

"█↑↓←→←→BA█ Welcome to the 'Void Disco'! Enter the cheat code to unlock the hidden level! (█▽█)█"

The entire crew: "....."

What in the world was all this?!

Lin Feng felt a vein throbbing at his temple. An ancient relic? An obelisk? And it turned out to be a non-mainstream... game console waiting for someone to input a cheat code? The whole aesthetic was way off!

"Can... can we try it?" Flea asked timidly.

"Try what?!" Lin Feng snapped, "Who knows if pressing it will give you an Easter egg or just blow something up!"

At that moment, the Jingtianxing "Observer" ship, which had been tailing them from afar, also clearly observed this bizarre pink obelisk.

Commander Li Na looked at the flamboyant pink color and the flashing text on the screen, a crack appearing on her usually calm face: "...What is that thing? Database comparison results?"

"No... no matching records, ma'am. Energy readings... still zero. It seems like... it's joking?"

Jingtianxing was also dumbfounded. This completely exceeded their intelligence scope and comprehension.

Faced with a pink, non-mainstream obelisk that seemed to be waiting for a "cheat code" input, the bridge was at an impasse. Try to approach? Unknown risks. Just leave? Reluctant to do so.

"█(███)'█████ Cheat code error! Noob! Try again!█" The text on the obelisk changed again, accompanied by an emoticon of someone flipping a table.

Wu Yu held his head: "What the hell is this thing! Were ancient civilizations all this... lively?"

Doctor Chen Wei, however, seemed thoughtful: "Perhaps... this isn't a joke. Maybe it's a special verification mechanism, using seemingly absurd methods to screen visitors who understand its 'sense of humor' or possess a specific mode of thinking?"

Su Wanqing tried to analyze the text flashing frequency and pattern changes, attempting to find a pattern, but found nothing.

Just as everyone was at a loss, crew member Xiao Chen, who was responsible for taking care of the newly acquired "Blue Fluffballs" pet, passed by the bridge holding the furry little creature. The little thing seemed attracted by the shiny pink obelisk outside the window, chirping excitedly "gulu gulu," extending its little paws to grab at the air, as if trying to reach those sparkling "rhinestones."

Suddenly, as if it had discovered something, it broke free from the crew member's arms, hopped onto the console, and curiously sniffed a certain inconspicuous, ancient interface labeled "Discarded Log Audio Output" with its little nose, and then... let out a big sneeze!

"Achoo!"

A faint puff of air accompanied by a bit of nasal secretion sprayed right into that interface.

Almost simultaneously, the pink obelisk suddenly erupted in a dazzling burst of colorful light, like a disco ball! The text on its surface changed to:

"■Verification passed! Cuteness is justice! (■•■■•■)■◇ Hidden level unlocked!■"

Immediately after, a soft beam of light shot from the obelisk, projecting a complex, constantly changing star map in the void. One route within it was highlighted, pointing towards an unknown constellation!

The entire crew was dumbfounded once more.

This... this actually worked?! The verification mechanism was... getting sneezed on by a pet?!

"Cuteness is justice"? The logic of this ancient civilization was way too capricious!

Xiao Chen hurriedly picked up the "Blue Fluffball," scared: "Sorry, sorry! I didn't mean to!"

Lin Feng looked at the star map, then at the "Blue Fluffball" innocently licking its paws, not knowing whether to laugh or cry: "No... you've done a great service..." This method of cracking the code was truly bizarre to the extreme!

On the Jingtianxing "Observer" ship, Commander Li Na, watching the suddenly appearing star map and the "Verification passed" message, fell into complete confusion. They had tried all known decoding methods on the obelisk to no effect, while the "Stardust" team... just succeeded like that, inexplicably?!

"What on earth did they do?!" she almost roared.

The "Star of Hope" quickly recorded the star map. After completing the projection, the light and text on the pink obelisk's surface rapidly dimmed, soon reverting to that perfectly reflective, utterly dead silent pink giant monument, as if nothing had ever happened.

The recorded star map was extremely complex and would require time to parse, but the highlighted route was clear and unmistakable, pointing towards an unfamiliar star region not detailed in existing star charts.

Chapter 111 Spicy Meatballs! All the snacks are gone!

"Is this the true destination of the 'Bountiful Harvest'?" Su Wanqing speculated.

"Or is it just the location of that 'Void Disco' hidden level?" Wu Yu still thought it sounded a bit far-fetched.

Doctor Chen Wei, however, was unwavering in her belief. "Whatever it is, a civilization capable of establishing such a... distinctive verification mechanism must have left behind clues absolutely worth exploring!"

Just as they were preparing to set off along the new route, Wu Yu, looking at the supplies inventory, let out a pained wail.

"Boss! Our snack reserves are critically low! Especially the 'Crunchy Munch' chips and 'Stellar Cola'! A space expedition without chips and cola has no soul!"

Flea added fuel to the fire, "And Little Ears says the newly arrived 'Blue Fluffballs' are particularly voracious eaters. Our synthetic vegetable reserves are being depleted three times faster than anticipated!"

Lin Feng: "..." He never thought that on the path to exploring the universe's mysteries, one of the biggest challenges would be snack inventory and pet food.

However, misfortune never comes singly.

The robot in charge of the kitchen, "Chef 007," suddenly issued a malfunction alert. Its taste sensors and logic processor had become scrambled. It began stubbornly believing all food should have the texture of "blueberry-flavored toothpaste" and attempted to squeeze strawberry jam onto the synthetic steaks meant for dinner!

A silent scream seemed to echo through the bridge. Traveling through uncharted star sectors without snacks was already a major blow, but if even normal meals were lost...

"Wrench! Go save the kitchen! Save our stomachs!" Lin Feng issued a nearly desperate order.

The grand narrative of exploring ancient mysteries was instantly pulled back to the very real, earthly worry that "food is the paramount necessity of the people."

Faced with a kitchen robot needing repairs and a star chart obtained through a pet's sneeze, the "Star of Hope" embarked on a new journey. The crew's concern for dinner temporarily outweighed their curiosity about the unknown.

The "Star of Hope" sailed along the course provided by the pink obelisk's star chart, but the atmosphere on the bridge was somewhat gloomy. Snack reserves were bottoming out.

"Chef 007," still under Wrench's repair, occasionally glitched out. Yesterday's dinner of "mint-flavored baked beans" and "motor oil-flavored thick soup" had left deep psychological scars.

Wu Yu slumped in his chair, moaning weakly, "My chips... my cola... Without them, half the fun of space exploration is gone..."

Even the usually steady Old Scar let out an almost imperceptible sigh as he looked at the "Original Flavor" label on the nutrient paste packaging.

Flea suddenly had a wild idea. "Hey, you think, out of all those asteroids out there, is there any kind of ore that... tastes like crunchy fried chicken when you chew it?"

Doctor Chen Wei actually gave it serious thought. "From the perspective of mineral composition and crystal structure, the possibility is extremely low... but it's not entirely impossible in theory..."

Listening to their discussion, Lin Feng didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But the supply issue did need solving. He checked the star chart.

"According to the course prediction, we'll pass by a small asteroid belt ahead, designated YT-77. Scans show it has abundant ice deposits and carbonaceous chondrite meteorites. Perhaps we can replenish our water there, or even... try some 'wilderness barbecue'?"

"Barbecuing asteroids?!" Wu Yu immediately sat up straight, his eyes gleaming. "That idea... sounds weird but also kinda awesome!"

The ship arrived at the YT-77 region. The engineering robot was sent out to collect ice deposits and samples of carbonaceous meteorites with relatively "safe" compositions. Little Ears even whimsically tried using the overflow heat from the ship's laser drill to "roast" a meteorite sample rich in carbon and containing trace organic matter.

The result? A pitch-black, oddly smoking, foul-smelling "roasted meteorite" emitting a mix of charred and sulfurous odors was brought back.

Everyone gathered around. No one dared to take the first bite.

In the end, a curious "Blue Fluffball" trotted over and gave it a lick, then spat it out in disgust and ran away, sneezing several times in a row.

"Alright, the 'Deep-Fried Asteroid' plan is a failure," Wu Yu announced dejectedly.

While they failed to achieve "space barbecue," they at least replenished enough ice to convert into fresh water. And the resentment over snacks transformed into motivation to continue—perhaps the next stop would hold a surprise.

Just as the "Star of Hope" was busy with the "wilderness barbecue" experiment, Sun Wen, who was monitoring rear signals, suddenly reported, "Detecting faint engine signatures. Database match... it's Li Wei's 'Mule'! It's approaching from behind. Speed... uh, very slow. Much slower than expected."

Lin Feng immediately became alert. "Maintain surveillance. Do not actively scan and expose us."

Flea looked at the sensor display showing the sluggishly moving blip and chuckled. "Is that fat guy taking his 'Mule' for a stroll in space? At that speed, by the time he crawls from 'Crossroads' to 'Void's Light,' 'Night Owl' will probably have switched careers and opened a kindergarten."

However, as time passed, they noticed that although the "Mule" was slow, its course was unusually steadfast, heading roughly in the direction marked on the star chart for "Void's Light."

"He either has absolute patience, or..." Su Wanqing analyzed, "...his ship might be carrying extremely heavy cargo or goods requiring an ultra-stable transport environment, preventing him from going fast."

"Could it be the 'goods' 'Night Owl' wanted delivered?" Wu Yu guessed. "What could be so heavy? Surely he's not shipping a whole load of bricks to build an illegal structure out there?"

The "Peregrine" maintained a safe distance, tailing this surprisingly slow cargo ship like a ghost. The tracking process was so monotonous it was sleep-inducing. Flea even started a betting pool, wagering on how many hours it would be before the "Mule" next adjusted its attitude and accelerated. The prize was the last piece of chocolate.

Chapter 112 Li Wei! Got you!

Li Wei seemed completely unaware of the tail behind him. His rickety ship continued its unhurried, chugging crawl along the interstellar route, like a stubborn old farmer driving his ox cart to market, utterly out of place amidst the stars whizzing past.

This extreme "slowness" had instead become a form of unconventional camouflage.

After several days of navigation according to the star charts, the signal of a small outpost appeared ahead.

The outpost was built on a massive, irregularly shaped asteroid. From the outside, it looked like a giant fortress cobbled together from countless scrapped ships and space junk, devoid of any aesthetic appeal, yet its external turrets glinted with dangerous light. The navigation marker identified it as "The Broken Cauldron Bar & Information Exchange."

"This place looks... quite unique," Wu Yu commented.

"These fringe outposts are often hubs for information, and there might be black market merchants," Lin Feng ordered. "The Star of Hope maintains distance on alert. The Peregrine will dock. We're going to gather information."

The docking process was challenging. The dock area was piled high with all sorts of discarded parts, leaving almost no place to stand. Inside the outpost, the air was thick and hazy, filled with a noisy mix of various species.

Lin Feng sent Flea to the bar area to inquire about rumors concerning "Void's Light" or "Night Owl." He himself approached an "information broker" who looked idle, sitting next of a pile of old servers.

This person called himself the "Junk King," specializing in selling all kinds of "archaeological" grade data junk.

"...'Void's Light'? Heh heh, heard of it, a weird place..." The Junk King rubbed his fingers together, the meaning obvious.

Lin Feng paid some energy credits.

"It's said to be a light that appears and disappears suddenly. Nobody knows what it is. Those who've seen it either went mad or struck it rich. The stories aren't reliable."

He paused, lowering his voice. "However, a few days ago, a fat guy in camouflage clothes, also came asking me about this. He bought all the useless, ancient log fragments I had about that region. Stuff from hundreds of years ago, stored on punch tape and magnetic core memory. Whether you can even read it is another question..."

Li Wei had indeed been here! And he had acquired a large amount of raw data!

Lin Feng immediately realized that Li Wei's "slowness" might not be about transporting goods, but about... "mining"! He was trying to sift through mountains of junk information to dig out the real clues about "Void's Light"!

"Do you have backups?" Lin Feng asked.

"I do, but that data is an 'information shit mountain.' It's a chaotic, error-ridden mess. Reading it is a complete waste of life..." the Junk King said, pointing at the literal "garbage mountain" behind him.

"I'll take it all," Lin Feng said without hesitation. Perhaps Li Wei's direction was the right one.

Thus, when the Peregrine left the outpost, aside from a small amount of supplies, it also carried a musty-smelling "information shit mountain" composed of various ancient storage media. For the remainder of the journey, besides tracking Li Wei, they had an additional task: panning for gold in the garbage information.

Aboard the Peregrine, Doctor Chen Wei began processing that "information shit mountain" as if she'd found a treasure trove. Just connecting the various ancient card readers, tape drives, and magnetic core memory readers kept the engineering department busy for half a day.

The data was slowly exported. It was indeed a vast, chaotic mess: centuries-old ship maintenance logs, weather records from some planet, meaningless sensor noise, even early interstellar netizen chat logs and... fragments of code resembling some sort of video game?

The filtering work was exceptionally painful. Most of the data was worthless.

Just as everyone was about to be drowned in the garbage information, Doctor Chen Wei suddenly exclaimed excitedly, "Found it! A severely damaged exploration log! From a ship called 'Pioneer 7'! The timestamp is from long before the Standard Calendar!"

The log video was blurry, full of static. Only intermittent snippets of an old man's voice, crackling with excitement, could be heard:

"...Observing... an unbelievable energy burst!... Not stellar activity!

...A light! Born from absolute void!... Beautiful and... dangerous!

...Sensors overloading!... Johnson, you idiot, don't get so close!... Record it! Record everything!

...(Harsh noise)... Wait! Inside the light... seems like there's something? A... structure?

...(Louder noise and impact sounds)... Retreat! Retreat now! Is this damned thing attacking us?!..."

The log cut off there.

Despite the fragmented information, it was enough to be shocking! As far back as several hundred years ago, a ship had witnessed "Void's Light" and seemed to have been attacked! This likely pointed to the same event as the data Li Wei had bought!

"Keep digging! See if there's more!" Lin Feng ordered.

Finally, from beneath a pile of game code, they unearthed a blurry, repeatedly re-photographed star chart image. On it, a coordinate was manually marked, with scribbled handwriting next to it:

"Void's Eye? Source of the Light? DANGER!!! — Survivor of 'Pioneer 7'??"

The coordinate location showed a high degree of overlap with their current course direction, and with the direction of Li Wei's "Mule"!

That cunning fatso Li Wei had indeed dug up treasure from the garbage heap! He was heading toward that dangerous source, carrying this critical information!

The Peregrine accelerated, no longer trailing from afar, but cautiously closing the distance. They had to figure out the true secret of "Void's Light" before Li Wei (and the "Night Owl" behind him).

The Peregrine stealthily approached Li Wei's "Mule." Unexpectedly, that dilapidated cargo ship was now silently floating in the shadow of a massive asteroid, engines dead, no lights, like a derelict.

"What's going on? Broken down? Or has it arrived?" Flea wondered.

"Scans show faint but present life signs. Engines are cold. Doesn't look like a malfunction," Su Wanqing reported.

Lin Feng had a bad feeling. "Approach carefully. Prepare for boarding and reconnaissance."

Like a shark in the dark night, the Peregrine slowly neared the Mule. Flea, with two team members, wearing magnetic boots, landed silently on its outer hull. They found an emergency interface and cleverly bypassed the airlock controls.

The ship's security system was as unreliable as Li Wei himself.

The hatch slid open. Inside was pitch dark, only the faint indicator lights on instrument panels flickering. The air carried a smell... a mix of cheap coffee and body odor.

They infiltrated carefully and soon found Li Wei in the cockpit. The fat merchant was tied up tightly, a rag stuffed in his mouth, and dumped in a corner seat, making terrified "mmph" sounds. His personal terminal had been pried open, the data chip gone.

Flea pulled the rag from his mouth.

"Help... help me!" Li Wei was scared out of his wits. "They... they took my stuff! Left me here to die!"

"Who? 'Night Owl'?" Lin Feng asked via the communicator.

"Y... yes! Two people in black clothes! Like ghosts! They were lying in wait on my ship! When I found this rendezvous point based on the data, they struck! Took all the data chips and coordinates! And said... said I was just a disposable 'courier,' mission accomplished!" Li Wei wailed, his face a picture of misery. "It's over, it's over... 'Night Owl' won't let me go..."

Just as suspected! "Night Owl" never trusted Li Wei. They just used his intelligence analysis skills to find the location, then directly plucked the fruit, kicking this middleman aside, possibly even silencing him.

"Which direction did they go?" Lin Feng pressed urgently.

Chapter 113: This Is Too Much

"Which direction did they go?" Lin Feng pressed.

"I... I don't know! They have a very small, invisible speedboat! It just vanished!"

Li Wei said despairingly. It seemed the people from "Night Owl" had already taken the precise coordinates and left ahead of them. Scarface glared at him viciously.

"Shady merchant!"

Lin Feng looked at the terrified Li Wei and frowned. Although he didn't like this fat profiteer, he couldn't just leave him here to die either.

"Take him back to the 'Peregrine' and lock him in the brig. We'll settle his account slowly later."

Now, the target of their pursuit had shifted from the slow-moving "Mule" to the invisible and extremely fast "Night Owl" speedboat. The situation had instantly become urgent.

After retrieving this unexpected "spoils of war," the "Peregrine" immediately gave chase to that invisible "Night Owl" speedboat with all its might, based on the last location Li Wei had provided.

The environment in this sector of space was beginning to become abnormally complex. Sensors detected many tiny, constantly moving gravitational anomaly points, as if the fabric of space itself was riddled with invisible vortices and traps.

"Careful with navigation! This seems to be a natural gravitational well region!"

Wanqing warned, "The 'Night Owl's' speedboat is small and more agile, we have to be extra careful!"

Suddenly, a previously calm patch of space ahead violently twisted, forcing a narrow speedboat, painted in matte black and shaped like a dagger, to become visible! It had clearly been forced to perform a violent emergency maneuver to avoid a suddenly intensifying gravitational vortex, temporarily overloading its cloaking system!

"Lock onto it!" Lin Feng shouted.

The "Peregrine's" fire control system immediately locked onto the target.

But the reaction of that "Night Owl" speedboat was astonishingly fast!

The pilot's skill was downright insane. Instead of fleeing, it used a gravitational slingshot effect, swinging around a high-speed rotating asteroid at a near-suicidal angle, then burst out from another direction. From its underbelly, it fired several special bombs not meant for attack, but for creating spatial disturbances!

The bombs exploded. There was no flash of light, but they instantly created a brief, extremely chaotic gravitational field and sensor blind spot right in front of the "Peregrine"!

The "Peregrine" rocked violently. Target lock was lost.

By the time they broke through this chaotic patch of space, that black "dagger" speedboat had long since re-entered its cloaked state, vanishing without a trace, leaving only a processed, icy taunting signal on the public channel: "Thanks for the hospitality."

Target lock lost!

That "Night Owl" speedboat had vanished like a ghost into the chaotic gravitational wells, leaving behind only a cold, mocking signal and endless mystery.

High above in orbit, Jingtianxing's "Observer" still watched everything below like a silent vulture.

The atmosphere on the bridge of the "Star of Hope" was heavy. Three choices lay before them: pursue that dangerous speedboat, continue deeper into the red giant region to search for the "Bountiful Harvest," or temporarily withdraw from this troublesome place.

"Pursuing the speedboat is too risky," Old Scar was the first to break the silence, his expression stern. "They know this environment much better than we do, and they clearly lured us out on purpose. There's likely an ambush ahead."

"But 'Night Owl' took Li Wei's data, they definitely have key information about the 'Void's Light'!"

Flea said urgently, "We can't let them get there first!"

Su Wanqing pulled up the star chart and analysis data. "Continuing deeper into the red giant region is also extremely high risk. The previous chase already consumed a huge amount of our energy, and the shields need time to cool down. Also, the 'Observer' has been watching us from above the whole time."

Dr. Chen Wei stared at the sensor readings from the area where the speedboat vanished, muttering to herself.

"Their cloaking technology... seems to utilize some kind of local space distortion, not just simple optical camouflage... The principle of this technology is somewhat similar to the 'Bountiful Harvest's' jump echo..."

Just then, Sun Wen, who had been monitoring the Jingtianxing communications channel, suddenly reported, "Received an extremely weak, highly encrypted fragment of directional communication, from the 'Observer,' seemingly sent to some distant relay point... Partially deciphered... It repeatedly mentions 'Mother Matrix' and... 'sample activity anomaly'?"

"Mother Matrix"? "Sample activity anomaly"? These two phrases sent a chill down Lin Feng's spine. He remembered the information Flea had risked using the Thought Slug to obtain, which mentioned that Jingtianxing was waiting for the "Mother Matrix's" analysis results.

"They seem... not in a hurry to deal with us," Lin Feng mused, his gaze sharp. "More like they're observing, waiting for something. What exactly is that 'Mother Matrix'? And what is the 'sample'? Is it related to 'Night Owl's' target?"

Just as he was weighing the options, Wu Yu suddenly pointed to a low-priority market message that had just been automatically filtered by the system.

"Boss, look at this... Scattered news from black market channels at 'Crossroads' station. It says someone recently offered a high price for an extremely rare crystal that can stabilize mental consciousness, called a 'Serenity Core.' Supposedly... it's to counter the erosion of some kind of 'Whisper'?"

"Whisper"? This word touched a nerve in Lin Feng again. Samir had warned about the "Symbiotic Core's" whispers, and Dr. Lena's diary also mentioned "whispers"!

All the clues seemed to be faintly pointing in the same direction—some kind of dangerous thing that could affect the mind, called a "sample" or a "core," and a mysterious "Mother Matrix." And both "Night Owl" and Jingtianxing seemed to be operating around this thing.

"We can't let them lead us by the nose." Lin Feng finally made a decision, his eyes firm.

"Whether it's 'Night Owl' or Jingtianxing, their actions indicate that the 'Void's Light,' or something related to it, is the key. Li Wei's data points there, so that's where we go!"

He pointed to the approximate location of the "Void's Light" legend on the star chart.

"Adjust course, target the suspected 'Void's Light' region. Maintain highest alert, actively avoid all known gravitational traps and energy turbulence. If the 'Observer' wants to follow, let them. We're going to get ahead of everyone and find out what's really there!"

"Yes!"

The "Star of Hope" set sail once more, no longer paying attention to the vanished speedboat or the watcher high above, but resolutely sailing toward that legendary sector of space, bizarre and perilous. All the mysteries seemed destined to find their answers there.

As they sailed into the sector of space where the "Void's Light" legend was located, the scenery here was abnormally bizarre. Space itself seemed "thinner" than anywhere else. The light from the stars grew dim and distorted, as if viewed through a layer of constantly undulating oil.

Chapter 114: What Kind of Creature's Cavity Is This?!

An inexplicable sense of oppression enveloped the spacecraft.

The sensor scans produced wildly contradictory results: on one hand, they showed this region of space as completely empty, with energy readings approaching absolute zero; on the other hand, they occasionally captured extremely brief, inexplicable spacetime ripples and energy spikes, as if something was violently active on an unseen level.

"This feeling here... is stranger than absolute void." Su Wanqing's brow was tightly furrowed as she continuously calibrated the sensors, trying to capture those fleeting anomalies.

"It's like... space itself is alive, and breathing?" Doctor Chen Wei attempted to use a metaphor to describe it, her eyes filled with a mix of a scientist's excitement and confusion.

Suddenly, the space directly ahead of the spacecraft warped violently without any warning, like a piece of paper being crumpled by an invisible hand!

A massive, pure black shadow that reflected no light whatsoever and devoured all detection waves abruptly appeared. Its edges constantly shifted and writhed, like living ink, silently enveloping towards the *Star of Hope*!

"Emergency evasive maneuvers!" Lin Feng roared!

The engines roared, pushing the spacecraft into a roll to the side, narrowly avoiding being swallowed head-on by that shadow. However, the ship's aft shields were still "grazed" by the edge of the shadow.

Shockingly, the shield's energy readings plummeted instantly! It wasn't a breach or depletion, but rather... it seemed like the energy was "eaten" by the shadow!

"What the hell is that thing?!" Wu Yu stared in horror at the shadow behind them, which had once again melted into the void as if it had never appeared.

"Unable to analyze! Unable to lock on! It... it seems to be able to devour space and energy itself!" Sun Wen's voice carried a slight tremor.

Worse still, just as they were recovering from the shock, a similar shadow appeared from another direction, silently spreading towards them as if coordinating a hunt!

"We're surrounded! These things are alive! They're treating this place as a hunting ground!" Flea screamed.

"Stay calm!" Lin Feng forced himself to remain composed. "All weapon systems, charge! But don't fire at the shadows. On my command, fire a full salvo towards the relatively stable region of space at your three o'clock! Maximum power!"

"There's nothing there!" Wrench said, puzzled.

"Execute the order!" Lin Feng's tone was resolute.

Blazing energy beams and missiles shot towards that seemingly empty patch of space. A shocking scene unfolded—the energy beams, upon hitting a certain point, did not penetrate through. Instead, they slammed into an invisible, elastic wall, violently deflecting and scattering!

Simultaneously, space warped, revealing a corner of a massive, hidden structure disguised by some kind of biological energy field! The structure looked like... a huge, unnatural nest entrance?

What was even more spine-chilling was that the void shadows that had been surrounding them seemed enraged by this sudden attack. They emitted a low-frequency hiss that human hearing couldn't detect but caused the spacecraft's structure to resonate, and they accelerated their charge!

"Just as I thought, a trap!"

A cold glint flashed in Lin Feng's eyes. "Full speed ahead, charge towards that exposed nest entrance!"

"What? Charge inside?!" Everyone was shocked.

"Exactly! These shadows are guardians, or 'watchdogs'! There must be something inside the nest that 'Night Owl' or something else doesn't want us to find! It's more dangerous outside!"

The *Star of Hope*, like a moth drawn to flame, charged headlong towards the partially revealed, bizarre and inexplicable nest entrance, with the all-devouring void shadows in pursuit. A desperate gamble had begun.

The *Star of Hope* narrowly shot into the massive nest entrance. Behind it, the void shadows violently rippled at the entrance, as if blocked by an invisible boundary. They ultimately did not pursue inside, only emitting a silent roar before vanishing into the void once more.

The interior of the nest was not the imagined rock or metal structure, but a strange, biological cavity seemingly composed of solidified darkness and energy veins. The walls shimmered with ominous, phosphorescent green light. The air was thick with the pungent smell of ozone and an indescribable, organically sweet, fishy odor.

The passageway wound and twisted, bottomless.

The spacecraft cautiously advanced deeper. Sensors here were severely jammed, only able to probe a very short distance.

"This place... it's like we're inside something's body..." Little Ears whispered fearfully.

Doctor Chen Wei, however, was exceptionally excited. "Astounding biological energy readings! This structure... is completely different from any known life form!"

Suddenly, a massive chamber appeared ahead. The sight before them made everyone who saw it gasp in shock—

Covering the inner walls of the chamber were densely packed, countless translucent, pulsating "egg sacs"! Inside each egg sac, the vague outline of a twisted, non-humanoid biological embryo could be seen. They seemed to be nourished and catalytically grown by some kind of energy!

Some egg sacs had already ruptured, with viscous fluid dripping down, their interiors now empty.

And in the center of the chamber was an even larger "primary egg" formed by converging energy veins. Its pulsating rhythm was more powerful, and inside, the faint outline of a terrifying form with multiple limbs and huge compound eyes could be glimpsed!

"What... what kind of hellish place is this?!" Wu Yu's voice trembled.

"A breeding ground... This is a breeding ground for some creature!" Doctor Chen Wei cried out. "They're cultivating some kind of... biological weapon?!"

At that moment, the cavity walls around them suddenly began to writhe violently! Several passageways opened, disgorging dozens of bizarrely shaped creatures with eerie light shimmering on their carapaces—

They resembled insects magnified a thousandfold and subjected to cruel modifications. Their compound eyes gleamed with cold, murderous intent. Sharp mouthparts dripped corrosive saliva, emitting a teeth-grating scraping sound as they lunged ferociously towards the *Star of Hope*!

"Open fire! Fire at will!" Old Scar bellowed. Defensive turrets instantly spat tongues of fire.

Energy beams striking the creatures' carapaces were actually deflected or absorbed to varying degrees! Their shells possessed astonishing energy resistance!

"Switch to physical ammunition! Armor-piercing rounds!" Lin Feng ordered decisively.

Combat erupted instantly!

The bizarre creatures surged forward like a tide. They were extremely fast, possessed shocking strength, and could even spray acid and fire energy spikes! The spacecraft's shields sizzled under the acid corrosion, and armor plates were gouged with deep scratches by their sharp claws.

"We have to find the core controlling this thing, or a way out!"

Lin Feng commanded the battle while anxiously searching. This nest itself was a living trap!

Su Wanqing stared intently at a point deep within the chamber, the only location on the scanner showing an abnormally intense energy reaction:

"There! Behind that 'primary egg'! The energy signature is the strangest. It doesn't seem like biological energy, more like... machinery?"

Could it be that "Night Owl" had not only cultivated monsters here but also set up a control center?

"Advance in that direction! Provide covering fire!"

Lin Feng gave the order. The spacecraft, while struggling to fend off the monster attacks, inched its way towards the depths of the chamber.

Every step forward was exceptionally difficult. The monsters' attacks grew increasingly frenzied. It was as if they had stumbled into a nightmarish hatchery, now confronting a man-made, twisted evolutionary catastrophe.

Chapter 115: Giant Jellyfish Lightbulb

The bridge was enveloped in a deathly silence, broken only by Wu Yu's wail, choked with tears.

"My chips! That last evasive maneuver was too violent! My last pack of 'Crunchy Munch', hidden under the console... it sacrificed itself! Scattered all into the ventilation ducts!"

Heartbroken, he tried to peer into the vent as if he could retrieve those precious fragments.

Flea kicked him in the butt with annoyance:

"Give it a rest, fatty! We just escaped from the jaws of that pitch-black, energy-devouring 'ink blot', and all you care about is your chips?!"

"That was the limited edition 'Volcanic Barbecue' flavor!" Wu Yu cried, his face a picture of misery. "My spiritual comfort is gone! This hurts my heart more than getting bitten by that shadow!"

Lin Feng ignored the bickering of the two clowns, his hands gripping the console tightly, his sharp gaze sweeping over the images fed back by the external sensors—though they were still full of interference and static snow.

"Everyone shut up! Old Scar, damage report!"

"Aft shield energy loss at 35%, armor has minor scratches, no structural damage. However, shield recharge rate has become extremely slow. The energy environment here... is very strange."

Old Scar's voice was as steady as ever, but carried a trace of gravity.

"Sensors are experiencing severe interference."

Su Wanqing operated the control panel rapidly. "Effective detection range is less than five hundred meters. Air composition is complex, but barely breathable... though it's rich in some kind of... hmm... strange spores? Recommend maintaining internal circulation."

Doctor Chen Wei, however, was so excited she almost pressed her face against the observation window:

"Wow! Look at this place! This biological structure! These energy channels! It's like we've burrowed into the womb of a gigantic... silicon-based lifeform? Or maybe the digestive cavity of some cosmic jellyfish? It's beautiful!"

The entire crew: "..."

The Doctor's aesthetic sense was always so uniquely her own.

The "Stardust" crept forward cautiously through this passage formed of solidified darkness and flickering, faintly green phosphorescent veins, its speed as slow as a snail. The surrounding "walls" seemed to be slowly undulating, emitting a low, deep hum reminiscent of the breathing of some colossal living being.

"I'm feeling a bit seasick..." Little Ears' face was pale. "This place is moving on its own..."

Suddenly, the passage ahead widened, opening into a massive chamber. The sight that met their eyes made everyone hold their breath.

Countless translucent, softly glowing blue, jellyfish-like creatures floated in the air, gently rising and falling. Their bodies were as bouncy as gelatin, their long tentacles swaying lightly, tracing arcs of flowing light, illuminating the entire chamber with a dreamlike, magnificent radiance.

"Whoa!" Flea whistled. "Now that's pretty! Much cuter than the man-eating shadow outside!"

Wu Yu also temporarily forgot the pain of his lost chips, his eyes wide. "This thing... looks kinda delicious? Crunchy? Or melt-in-your-mouth?"

Lin Feng's frown, however, deepened. "Pretty? Don't forget where we are. All weapon systems remain on standby, but absolutely do not fire first."

His caution was immediately validated.

One of the "little jellyfish" that had drifted slightly closer seemed to grow curious about the uninvited guest that was the "Stardust". It floated over, and one of its glowing tentacles lightly brushed against the ship's shield.

Zap!

A soft crackle, the shield flickered, and the energy reading instantly dropped another small notch! The "little jellyfish", as if scalded, *whooshed* its tentacle back, its body's light flashing rapidly a few times, before drifting away with an aggrieved air.

"It-it-it... it eats energy too!" Wu Yu shrieked. "Does being cute give it the right to do whatever it wants?!"

"It appears to be some kind of symbiotic organism that feeds on energy..." Su Wanqing recorded data quickly. "Seems low in aggression, but best to keep our distance."

The "Stardust" became even more careful to avoid these beautiful "energy thieves", slowly navigating through this deadly "jellyfish forest". At the end of the passage, several branching paths appeared.

"Which way?" Wrench asked. "This damn place is like a maze!"

Just then, Doctor Chen Wei pointed at one of the openings. "That way! The energy reaction is strongest over there! And... do you hear that?"

Everyone strained to listen. An extremely faint, yet very regular "thump... thump..." sound, like the beating of some enormous heart, came from deep within that opening.

"Sounds like a super-sized heart," Flea said.

"Or a fixed-frequency oscillator?" Wrench thought from an engineer's perspective.

"Could also be... some kind of cosmic-level drum!" Wu Yu always came back to food. "I wonder if the drummer is a giant chef?"

Lin Feng rolled his eyes. "Let's just treat it as a marker. Proceed in that direction, stay alert."

The deeper they went, the brighter the energy veins on the channel walls became, and the "thumping" sound grew clearer and more powerful. The concentration of spores in the air also increased, even beginning to condense on the surfaces of some instruments into tiny, faintly glowing crystals.

Finally, they sailed into an even more colossal chamber.

And the sight within this chamber was even more staggering than the previous "jellyfish forest".

At the center of the chamber, suspended in the air, was an enormous, egg-shaped object pulsing like a heart! Its entire body had the warm, moist sheen of white jade, its surface covered in intricate, faintly blue neural-network-like patterns that alternated between bright and dim with each pulse. The powerful "thumping" sound originated precisely from it!

And the light it emitted illuminated the entire chamber, also revealing the "guards" protecting it—

These were not jellyfish, but creatures each over three meters tall, composed of some kind of pitch-black, glossy chitinous carapace, resembling a hybrid of a mantis and a beetle!

They hovered motionless around the giant egg, their compound eyes flashing with cold red light, their forelimbs massive, sharp, sickle-shaped bone blades!

"Alright," Flea swallowed hard. "These ones don't look too friendly... and definitely not tasty."

"Scans show... extremely high bio-energy readings and... hostile identification signals!" Su Wanqing's voice was tense. "We're being targeted!"

Almost the instant her words fell, those pitch-black mantis guards suddenly turned their heads, their compound eyes focusing in unison on the "Stardust"! The carapace on their backs abruptly split open, revealing transparent membranous wings underneath, emitting a high-frequency, teeth-grating vibration sound!

"Prepare for combat!" Lin Feng roared. "These things don't look like they're up for a chat!"

However, just as the first mantis guard vibrated its wings, about to transform into a black lightning bolt and pounce...

Gurgle~

An ill-timed, soft gurgling sound came from near Lin Feng's feet.

Everyone looked down. The "Blue Fluffball" that Xiao Chen had been holding had woken up at some point. It struggled free, jumped onto the console, tilted its fuzzy little head, and stared curiously at the enormous, pulsing "big lightbulb" on the screen with its big, black, beady eyes, and then...

"Achoo!"

Another tiny sneeze.

A faint puff of air mixed with a few almost invisible nasal secretions sprayed onto an open backup interface on the console.

The next moment, something astonishing happened.

The pulsing rhythm of that giant white jade egg-shaped object suddenly underwent an extremely subtle change. One of the neural network patterns on its surface flickered gently.

Those originally murderous mantis guards, about to charge, jolted to a sudden halt! Their massive sickle forelimbs froze mid-air, the red light in their compound eyes flickering uncertainly, as if they had fallen into some kind of... confusion?

A faint, yet distinctly different signal was captured by the sensors, translated into fragmented, cold Universal language:

[...Identification... fluctuation... ancient protocol... verification...?]

[...Non-standard lifeform... carrying... permission imprint?...]

[...Priority conflict... guardian directive... suspended...?]

Everyone on the bridge, including the mantis guards, seemed to have been put on pause.

Wu Yu's mouth hung open. He looked at the bewildered guards on the screen, then at the "Blue Fluffball" on the console currently licking its paws and washing its face, and muttered to himself:

"Not again... Officer... Seriously?!"

Chapter 116: Mantis... Guard?

The bridge was left with only the faint sounds of the Blue Fluffballs licking their paws and the unsettling "sizzling" noises from the screen, emitted by the alternating bright and dark patterns in the compound eyes of the Mantis Guards.

"It... it... they... why aren't they moving anymore?" Wu Yu huddled behind his chair, whispering nervously. "Are they... charmed? Or... are they thinking about whether to steam us or braise us?"

"Shut up, Fatty!"

Flea lowered his voice. "Didn't you hear that broken signal just now? 'Ancient Protocol', 'Authorization Imprint'! These tin cans seem to have mistaken the furball for one of their own!"

Doctor Chen Wei's eyes were wide open, almost as if they could shoot lasers.

"Incredible! The Blue Fluffball's bio-electrical waves or... or perhaps something in its sneeze secretions contains a pheromone that this nest recognizes as 'friendly' or 'high-ranking'? This is a miracle of biological recognition!"

Su Wanqing quickly analyzed the faint signals captured by the sensors.

"The signals are still chaotic, full of questions. They seem to be re-evaluating our threat level, but the underlying 'guardian protocol' logic hasn't been revoked. The situation is unstable."

As if to confirm her words, the tallest Mantis Guard at the front slowly drifted forward one meter. Its massive scythe-like forelimbs lifted slightly, emitting a clearer, colder electronic tone:

[...Unknown Carrier... Unable to precisely match protocol...]

[...Explain... your... existence... purpose...]

[...Warning... Any threat to the 'Core'... will be... eliminated...]

Its compound eyes were fixed on the Stardust, the red light flashing in a way that made everyone's hearts race.

"It wants an explanation from us!" Flea looked at Lin Feng. "Boss, what now? Should I go out and have a little chat with them?"

Lin Feng looked at the massive, pulsating "Core" on the screen, then down at the Blue Fluffball at his feet, which was still mindlessly trying to chew on his shoelaces. His mind raced.

Fight head-on? With those energy-feeding Jellyfish outside, these obviously formidable Mantis Guards in front of them, plus this bizarre energy environment... the odds were too low.

Communicate? They didn't even share a language. How to talk?

Run away? That energy-devouring shadow was still waiting behind them.

His gaze swept over Wu Yu's plump face, and suddenly, inspiration struck.

"Wu Yu!" Lin Feng called out. "Didn't you trade a bunch of those... glowing moss with that botanist last time using fruit cans?"

"Huh? Yeah, Boss, 'Starlight Moss'. Little Ears said it would be nice to use as night lights in the farm... I only have a few boxes left, I was planning to have it as a midnight snack..." Wu Yu instinctively hugged his storage locker tighter.

"Get it out! Also, Doctor, where are those 'Super Fertility Compost Worms' you cultured before, the ones rich in energy? Bring a bucket of those too!"

"Boss! Those are my precious worms! For fertilizing the ship's garden!" Doctor Chen Wei shrieked.

"Enough talk! Hurry!" Lin Feng's tone brooked no argument. "Flea, prepare a small cargo drone! Load the stuff onto it!"

Though they didn't understand what Lin Feng was planning, everyone moved quickly. A box of moss emitting a soft starlight glow and a bucket of plump, wriggling worms were loaded onto a small drone.

"Open the hatch, lower the drone out slowly, aim it towards that big guy." Lin Feng directed.

The drone wobbled as it flew out of the Stardust. Under the cold "gaze" of countless Mantis Guards, it slowly flew towards the massive Core. When it was still some distance from the Core, the drone hovered, then... lowered the box of moss and the bucket of worms.

[...Detected... low-energy organic matter...?]

[...Behavior... cannot be parsed...]

The Mantis Guards' signals were full of confusion.

"They seem... even more baffled?" Flea scratched his head.

Lin Feng took a deep breath and spoke into the communicator in the most "friendly" tone he could muster. "Uh... hi? A small meeting gift, some local specialties, nothing much to show our respect. We're just passing through, curious, no ill intent. Look, we even have... uh... a friend of this 'big shot'." He pointed at the Blue Fluffball at his feet.

The Blue Fluffball opportunely let out another little sneeze. "Achoo!"

The drone also very "considerately" used its robotic arm to push the moss box and worm bucket a bit further forward.

An eerie silence fell over the chamber.

The Mantis Guards looked at the glowing moss, looked at the wriggling worms, looked at the Stardust. Their compound eyes flashed frantically; their processing systems seemed on the verge of overload.

Finally, the lead Mantis Guard performed an action that made everyone's jaws drop.

Slowly, somewhat hesitantly, it extended that relatively smaller, fine-manipulation appendage and carefully... dabbed a bit of the glowing moss. Then... it brought it near its massive, finely-toothed mouthparts... seemingly... to sniff it?

Next, it used its appendage to poke one of the plump worms in the bucket. The worm wriggled violently.

[...Analysis... harmless... low-value energy supplement source...]

[...Behavior pattern:... primitive... offering?... tribute?...]

Its electronic voice seemed a little less icy now.

Then, it turned towards the Stardust, slightly retracting its scythe-like forelimbs, and made a movement... like "taking a step back."

[...'Authorization Imprint' carrier and its... attachments...]

[...Permission granted... for temporary stay...]

[...Prohibited... from approaching the 'Core'... Prohibited... from any energy extraction behavior...]

The other Mantis Guards blocking the way ahead also slowly parted to create a passage. Though their compound eyes remained watchful, the murderous aura dissipated considerably.

"Holy crap?!" Flea was dumbfounded. "It worked? Boss, you're a genius! What is this? The cosmic version of 'paying tribute'?"

Wu Yu looked heartbroken at his moss and worms. "My midnight snack... just bought us a path?"

Lin Feng let out a long sigh of relief, wiping non-existent sweat from his forehead. "Who cares if it's a black cat or a white cat, as long as it can handle the guards... Let's go, move through slowly! Don't make any provocative moves!"

The Stardust, like a pardoned prisoner, cautiously, almost tiptoeing (if a spaceship had toes), slowly passed between these terrifying Mantis Guards, heading towards the exit at the other end of the chamber.

As they passed the leader guard, they could still see it curiously poking the bucket of fat worms with its appendage.

It wasn't until they had completely left that chamber and re-entered the relatively narrow passage that everyone finally let their hearts settle back into place.

"I believe it now," Wu Yu murmured. "Sometimes, a good meal really can solve a lot of problems..."

Chapter 117: Li Wei's "Deathbed" Confession

The new passage was no longer filled with biological textures like before, instead showing more and more man-made traces—

Rough welding points, exposed pipelines, and even some meaninglessly sprayed markings on the walls.

"It seems we've reached the 'renovated' area," Wrench examined those welding marks. "The craftsmanship is really rough, far worse than mine."

"It means 'Night Owl' or someone else has indeed been active here." Lin Feng's expression was grave. "Everyone, stay alert, watch out for traps."

Not far ahead, a modified small cavern appeared, resembling a temporary warehouse or outpost. The entrance was crookedly scrawled with a few words: "Warehouse Seven, No Unauthorized Entry (Especially Li Wei)."

"Looks like Fat Li isn't very popular here." Flea was amused.

The warehouse door wasn't locked, inside were piled some boxes and miscellaneous items. But the most eye-catching was a pitifully plump figure in the corner, shackled with energy handcuffs to a pipe—it was none other than Li Wei.

Seeing the "Stardust" appear at the entrance, he first trembled in fright, then as if seeing his own father, snot and tears instantly gushed out:

"Boss Lin! Boss Lin! My kin! You finally came! Save me! I knew you'd find me! Waaah..."

"Stop stop stop!" Lin Feng interrupted his wailing through the external speakers. "What happened? Who cuffed you here? Where are the 'Night Owl' people?"

Li Wei cried out with snot and tears: "It was those damned 'Night Owl' bastards! They kill the donkey after it's done grinding! They burn the bridge after crossing the river! They're utterly heartless!"

"Get to the point!" Flea impatiently knocked on the console.

"The point is... I helped them find this place's core database interface, and they robbed me of all my data chips! Then they cuffed me here to die! Said my fat body would feed the 'little darlings' here for a few days... Waaah..."

Li Wei cried pitifully,

"Boss Lin, I know I wasn't a good person before, I cheated and swindled, I sold expired compressed biscuits... But my crimes don't deserve death! You can't just watch me die!"

Lin Feng had Flea maneuver the engineering robot over, carefully cutting the energy handcuffs with a laser.

Once free, Li Wei immediately threw himself beside the ship's landing gear, hugging the cold metal leg and wailing loudly, expressing his gratitude.

"Alright alright, stop rubbing, you're about to scrape off the paint." Lin Feng said irritably. "Where did the 'Night Owl' people go? What was in the data they took?"

Li Wei wiped his tears:

"They went deeper in, said they were going to some 'control hall'... The data... the data mainly contained structural maps of this nest, energy distribution, and... and most importantly, a predictive algorithm about the occurrence patterns of 'Void's Light'! That was the treasure I dug out from hundreds of tons of data trash!"

"Predictive algorithm?" Su Wanqing keenly grasped the key point. "They can predict the appearance of 'Void's Light'?"

"Not just appearance!" Li Wei lowered his voice, speaking mysteriously. "That algorithm seems to... to some extent... guide it! Although very unstable, that's what those 'Night Owl' maniacs want to use!"

Guide a cosmic-level phenomenon? That ambition is way too huge!

Just then, an inconspicuous box in the warehouse corner suddenly emitted a "beep beep" sound, a green light flashing on top.

"What the hell is that?" Flea warily turned the cannon muzzle.

Li Wei glanced at it, his face turning even paler: "It's... it's 'Night Owl's' automatic delivery drone! They mentioned before that 'follow-up supplies' would be sent here... Damn it damn it, if they find out I'm still alive..."

The box lid popped open, inside neatly arranged rows of... military-green cans? Printed on them was a fierce skull emblem and a line of small text: "High-Energy Compressed Rations (Experimental Type)."

Wu Yu's eyes instantly lit up: "Canned goods?! New ones?!"

"Eat my ass!" Li Wei screamed. "Those are 'Night Owl' special forces' 'Iron Stomach' rations! Supposedly eating them keeps you full for three days, increases strength, but side effects are hair loss and emotional irritability! They're half-finished stimulants!"

Flea manipulated the robot to pick up a can, scanning it: "Complex composition, indeed contains high-concentration stimulants and unknown synthetic compounds... Damn, eating too much of this stuff might really turn you into a bald muscleman."

Lin Feng looked at that box of "poison cans," then at Li Wei who was scared almost to wetting his pants, and suddenly smiled: "'Night Owl' is quite courteous, leaving us a little 'gift' before leaving."

"Boss, we definitely can't eat this stuff!" Wu Yu, though tempted, valued his life.

"Who said anything about eating?" Lin Feng's smile widened. "Li Wei, do you want to atone for your crimes?"

Li Wei nodded vigorously: "Yes! Absolutely! Boss Lin, just give the order!"

"Good," Lin Feng pointed at that box of cans. "You, right now, perform an 'ecstatically receiving supplies' act for this delivery drone. Then... return this box of 'kindness' intact... back to the 'Night Owl' bosses!"

Li Wei: "????"

Flea immediately understood Lin Feng's meaning, chuckling mischievously: "Brilliant! Boss! This is called 'courtesy demands reciprocity'!"

Chapter 118 The Night Owl is Stealing Electricity!

Under the cold gaze of the Night Owl delivery drone's camera, Li Wei forced a smile that was uglier than crying, an expression of extreme "ecstasy," his voice trembling as he said:

"Tha... thank you for the warmth sent by the organization! This... this is truly delivering charcoal in snowy weather! Please... please be sure to convey my gratitude to the leadership!"

After speaking, he frantically picked up the box of Iron Stomach poison cans as if holding a bomb, carefully stuffing the box back into the drone's belly.

The drone's green light flashed a few times, seemingly confirming the delivery, then decisively closed the compartment lid and flew away with a "whoosh," quickly disappearing into the depths of the passage.

Li Wei slumped to the ground, his chubby face covered in cold sweat: "It's... it's over... Night Owl definitely knows I'm not dead yet... next time it won't be a delivery, it'll be a cleanup squad..."

"What's there to be afraid of?" Flea said dismissively, "When they discover the 'supplies' they received are the ones they just sent out, they'll probably spend some time internally investigating who has water for brains. That's enough time for us to do a lot of things."

Lin Feng nodded: "Correct. Li Wei, stop playing dead, lead the way. Night Owl is heading to the Control Hall. We need to get ahead of them, or at least know what they want to do."

With Li Wei as this "half-baked insider," the route became clear. As he walked, he pointed at the markings on the wall: "This... this way, the red arrow goes to the energy pool, the blue goes to... uh... seems like the cultivation area? Damn, their markings are really messy..."

"Energy pool?" Wrench became interested, "Running this entire nest requires enormous energy. If we can find their energy core..."

"Maybe we can 'spice it up' a little?" Flea finished with a mischievous grin.

Lin Feng thought for a moment: "The Control Hall is the target, but energy is the foundation. Li Wei, let's check the direction to the energy pool first."

After many twists and turns, they arrived at a massive, roaring chamber.

The sight here once again became unimaginable—countless thick, dazzling blue energy conduits converged from all directions into the center of the chamber, pouring into a huge, complex mechanical structure that pulsed like a beating heart! The powerful energy fluctuations caused ripples to appear on the ship's shield.

"Good heavens..." Wu Yu looked at the enormous energy core, "How many batteries is that equivalent to..."

"Not batteries," Wrench said with a fanatical gleam in his eyes, "This looks like some kind of... bio-energy furnace! It's extracting energy... probably from those void shadows outside or something else! This technology is insane!"

Just then, they saw several people in Night Owl uniforms, wearing protective masks, operating engineering robots, trying to connect several thick interfaces to a secondary node of the energy core.

"What are they doing?" Flea asked.

"Looks like... stealing electricity?" Li Wei said uncertainly, "No... that interface style... seems like they want to establish an unstable overload connection? What do they want to do? Blow this place up?"

Su Wanqing quickly analyzed: "Not detonation. They seem to be trying to... forcibly extract a massive energy pulse, directed... outward from the nest."

Lin Feng understood instantly: "It's that Predictive Algorithm! They want to guide the Void's Light and need enormous energy as 'bait' or an 'initiator'!"

They had to be stopped! But a direct attack might trigger an energy loss of control, blowing everyone to smithereens.

"Boss, look there!" Little Ears pointed to a structure above the energy core, "There are many hanging energy conduits there, they look... not very secure?"

Lin Feng followed her pointing finger and saw several relatively thin energy conduits dangling precariously above the heads of a few Night Owl team members, the interfaces seeming somewhat loose.

A bold and unscrupulous plan instantly formed in his mind.

"Flea," Lin Feng said with a smirk curling his lips, "Do we still have those... 'harmless' small electromagnetic pulse bombs? The kind we used for pranks last time, the ones that can only disrupt drones a bit."

"We do! 'Courtesy Knock Bombs,' as many as you want!" Flea immediately understood what Lin Feng wanted to do.

"Great. Calculate the angle and power, fire one for me, target is... the conduit interfaces above those Night Owl team members' heads. Remember, be 'polite,' don't actually blow the pipes apart."

"Roger that!" Flea excitedly rubbed his hands, locked onto the target, and pressed the launch button.

A small, soda-can-sized pulse bomb shot out silently, tracing a graceful arc.

Pop!

A slight burst sounded as the pulse bomb exploded at the designated location, releasing weak electromagnetic waves.

Zzzt!

The energy conduit interfaces swept by the pulse instantly erupted with a large cluster of dazzling electrical sparks! They showered down like rain on the few Night Owl team members below!

"Ah!"

"What's happening?!"

"Short circuit! Protective suit overload! Hot hot hot!"

The few Night Owl team members were electrocuted, their bodies trembling uncontrollably, hair standing on end (if they had any), smoking, their tools clattering to the ground. The engineering robots at their feet were also disrupted, spinning in place out of control.

The sudden incident and energy disturbance immediately triggered a chain reaction! The lights in the entire energy pool flashed wildly, alarms blaring! More electrical sparks burst from different interfaces!

"Retreat! Retreat now! Energy instability!"

The leading Night Owl squad leader shouted in panic, no longer caring about the mission. He led the few electrocuted, thoroughly cooked team members, scrambling and stumbling onto a nearby hover vehicle, fleeing the energy pool in haste.

The Stardust hid at the entrance, quietly watching this farce.

"Mission accomplished!" Flea slapped the control console triumphantly, "Precision strike! Physical persuasion!"

Li Wei watched, dumbfounded: "Th-that's it?"

"That's it." Lin Feng smiled, "They won't dare target this place again for a while. And after this commotion, the defense systems here will probably be more sensitive. Night Owl will have to think twice before trying to cause trouble again."

Wu Yu sighed: "Ah, what a pity, all that energy... if only we could hook up a line to charge our ship..."

"Be content, fatty," Flea put an arm around his shoulder, "It's good enough we didn't turn ourselves into roast pork. Let's go, time to see what show Night Owl wants to put on at the 'Control Hall.'"

Chapter 119 The "Musical Chairs" Game

Leaving the still crackling Energy Pool area, guided by Li Wei, the "Stardust" quickly arrived at the deepest core region of the nest—the Control Hall.

Lin Feng curled his lip,

"This guy sure remembers the way clearly when his life is on the line."

The hall was exceptionally wide, with a towering dome.

The most eye-catching feature was a huge, three-dimensional star map in the center, woven from countless shimmering threads of light, slowly rotating. One area within it was flashing with a dangerous red light—precisely the possible coordinates for the "Void's Light."

Dozens of control consoles surrounded it, their structures ancient and peculiar, but clearly showing signs of recent violent rewiring and forced activation.

And at this moment, a silent battle of contention was unfolding in the hall.

About ten "Night Owl" members were scattered before several main control consoles, attempting to crack the system and connect a black data cube they had brought. Their movements were fast, but they were obviously running into trouble; the system periodically erupted with resisting electrical sparks and error prompts.

Leading them was a tall, lean man wearing a black uniform slightly different from the other team members, with a vicious scar on his face.

He was growling into a communicator, his voice faintly audible through the ship's enhanced sensors:

"...Faster! The 'guidance algorithm' is already uploaded! We must lock the coordinates before the next 'pulse' occurs! 'Eyes' is waiting for the results!..."

"'Eyes'?" Lin Feng frowned, hearing this codename again.

Just then, the "Stardust's" intrusion broke the balance.

"Enemy attack!" a "Night Owl" member sounded the alarm.

The scar-faced man whipped his head around. Seeing the "Stardust," a flash of shock and fury crossed his eyes: "That piece of junk ship?! How did they find this place?! That useless Li Wei!" He immediately raised his hand, "Stop them! Jam their systems! Don't let them interfere with the guidance program!"

Several "Night Owl" members immediately raised oddly-shaped emitters, aiming at the "Stardust" and firing invisible energy interference waves!

The ship shields fluctuated violently, screens flickered, and some non-critical systems experienced brief malfunctions.

"Tch, knew it would be like this," Lin Feng clicked his tongue. "Wrench, can we hold?"

"The interference is strong, but it's not specifically targeted at our model. The shields can still hold, but system response will slow down!" Wrench quickly replied.

"Flea, don't fight their system jamming head-on! Make some trouble for them! Aim for those temporary cables they've run out! Take them out!"

"Got it! Whack-a-mole game begins!" Flea excitedly manipulated the ship's light close-defense cannons, precisely (as precise as possible under the jamming) sniping at those thick cables exposed outside, connecting to the black data cubes.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Electrical sparks flew everywhere! Several key cables were severed! The data stream being uploaded instantly cut off!

"Dammit! Our connection is down!" a "Night Owl" technician cried out.

"Fix it! Now!" the scar-faced man roared.

On the other side, Su Wanqing was also staring intently at the central star map and control consoles: "They're trying to embed that algorithm into the nest's control core, forcibly calculating and guiding the energy path of the 'Void's Light'! This is too dangerous. This kind of brute-force cracking will completely destroy

the nest's energy balance!"

"Can we stop it? Or... take it over?" Lin Feng asked.

"I can try to interfere with their data stream in reverse, or... seize partial control authority!" Su Wanqing's fingers flew across her console. "But it needs time! Their defenses are also strong!"

In the hall, a strange game of "musical chairs" began.

The "Night Owl" people desperately tried to reconnect the cables and complete the data upload and guidance program.

The "Stardust" continuously carried out precise "demolition" work, severing their connections, while Su Wanqing attempted to hack in.

Both sides, using energy weapons and data streams as their weapons, fought fiercely around an ancient control system.

Flea's cannon fire and Su Wanqing's electronic attacks proved effective; the "Night Owl's" progress was severely delayed. The scar-faced man was so angry the veins on his forehead bulged.

Just then, the red light area on the central star map representing the "Void's Light" suddenly and drastically increased in brightness! A low, energy-accumulating hum resonated throughout the entire hall!

"Not good!" Su Wanqing exclaimed. "External energy levels are rising sharply! The 'Void's Light' is forming! Their algorithm is partially effective, but the guidance path is extremely unstable!"

The scar-faced man, however, laughed maniacally: "Haha! It's coming! It's here! Not perfect, but it's enough! Activate the contingency plan! Initiate direct energy siphon! Suck up as much as we can!"

They seemed to abandon precise guidance, switching to a much cruder program—

Several control consoles extended huge energy collection arms, aiming at the area of the star map with the brightest red light, preparing to forcibly extract the cosmic energy about to erupt!

"Madmen! They'll blow this whole place up!" Doctor Chen Wei screamed.

At this critical juncture, unnoticed by anyone, the "Blue Fluffball" being held by Xiao Chen was once again drawn to the increasingly bright central star map. It struggled free, jumped to the ground, scurried over to beneath a control console, and aimed at an ancient-looking interface that was radiating overload heat...

"Achoo!!"

Another solid sneeze! Mixed with a bit of nasal discharge, it sprayed precisely into that dusty interface.

Zzzzap—!

All the screens in the entire Control Hall instantly flashed with countless incomprehensible ancient characters and garbled code! The system control authority that "Night Owl" had barely taken over instantly changed hands! The operation interfaces of all control consoles locked down!

[...Highest Protocol Takeover... Detecting... Biometric Key Verification...?]

[...Error... Conflict... External Forced Guidance Program... Terminated...]

[...Initiating... Emergency Protection Mode... Energy Diversion... Reversing...]

A cold system prompt sounded.

Then, under the stunned gazes of everyone present, those energy collection arms preparing to forcibly siphon the "Void's Light" energy suddenly swiveled around, aiming directly at the dumbfounded "Night Owl" members below and the black data cubes they had brought!

An irresistible, terrifying suction force instantly erupted!

"No—"! The scar-faced man only had time to let out a terrified scream before he, along with his team members and equipment, was instantly ripped from the ground. Like leaves caught in a whirlpool, they were screaming as they were sucked into the openings at the ends of the energy collection arms and disappeared!

The suction force abruptly ceased. The hall instantly fell silent. Only the "Stardust" and the mess on the floor remained.

And beneath the control console, a "Blue Fluffball" letting out a little yawn.

The entire crew: "..."

Wu Yu swallowed hard: "S-so... does that mean... we won?"

Flea stared at the now calm energy collection arm, muttering to himself: "Does this count as... the system automatically taking out the trash?"

Chapter 120 is finished! They were sucked up by the vacuum cleaner!

The Control Hall was deathly silent, with only the low hum of energy flow and the faint sound of some furry creature licking its paws.

"What... just happened?" Wu Yu blinked in confusion. "Those arrogant 'Night Owls'... they just got sucked away by a vacuum cleaner?"

Flea operated the external cameras, aiming at the energy collection arm that had just completed its "Scavenger" work, and swallowed hard. "Looks like it... people and equipment, all taken away in one package... that's some thorough after-sales service."

Li Wei plopped down on the floor, his plump face deathly pale. "It's over... it's over... Night Owl lost a squad and such important data and equipment... they'll never let me go... the universe is vast, but there's no place left for Li Wei to stand! Wuwuwu..."

"Shut up, fatty."

Lin Feng cut off his wailing, frowning as he stared at the main screen. Although the immediate crisis was resolved, the situation wasn't optimistic. The screens throughout the Control Hall were still flashing wildly with garbled code and unrecognizable ancient characters, and the system's electronic voice continued intermittently repeating, "Error... conflict..."

"Wanqing, what's the system status?"

Su Wanqing rapidly tapped the control panel, her expression grave. "Extremely bad. That... uh... 'biological key verification' seems to have triggered some kind of highest authority protocol in the nest's control core, but it's extremely unstable and has caused a severe conflict with the boot program forcibly implanted by Night Owl. The entire control system is now in a state of... logical deadlock, like... like..."

"Like an old computer that got a virus and then got hit with a hammer?" Wrench tried to make an analogy.

"Worse than that!"

Doctor Chen Wei excitedly interjected, glancing at the Blue Fluffballs. "This is a rare case of 'cognitive overload'! Two completely different system commands are fighting for control, causing the basic logic modules to crash! So fascinating! If we could record this..."

As if to confirm the Doctor's words, the entire hall suddenly shook violently! The lights flickered on and off, the energy veins on the walls pulsed erratically, and dangerous electrical arcs even shot out from some places!

"Warning... system overload... energy circuit unstable..."

"Core temperature rising... cooling system failure..."

"Estimated... irreversible meltdown in 17 standard minutes..."

The cold system alarm finally said something everyone could understand—this place was going to self-destruct!

"I knew it!" Flea slapped his thigh. "Every time we take down a big boss, there's gotta be a countdown escape sequence! Classic trope!"

"Seventeen minutes?!" Wu Yu shrieked. "What can we do in that time? It's not even enough for me to have a late-night snack to calm my nerves!"

"Don't panic!" Lin Feng took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down. "Wrench, engine status? Fastest evacuation speed?"

"Engines are fine! But the way we came is too winding, seventeen minutes isn't enough for us to fly out of the nest!" Wrench calculated quickly.

"Find a shortcut! Li Wei! Does this damn place have any... emergency passages? Or waste disposal pipes? Something like that?" Flea grabbed the limp Li Wei.

"I... I don't know! The blueprints didn't mark any!" Li Wei was almost crying.

Su Wanqing suddenly shouted, "There's a way! Although the system has crashed, some basic functions are still running! I see a direct energy transport pipeline leading outside the nest! Huge diameter, and to reduce energy loss, the interior is almost vacuum and perfectly straight!"

"You mean..." Lin Feng's eyes lit up.

"We can use it as a... universe-level high-speed slide?" Flea continued, his tone filled with disbelief and excitement.

"Exactly!" Su Wanqing nodded. "But we need to calculate the exit position and our speed correctly, otherwise..."

"Otherwise we'll be shot out like a cannonball, either crashing into an asteroid and becoming fireworks, or flying into deep space and starving to death..." Wu Yu added the worst possible outcomes.

"No time to hesitate!" Lin Feng looked at the constantly decreasing countdown on the screen and the increasingly unstable environment. "Wanqing, calculate the optimal ejection parameters and exit coordinates! Wrench, warm up the engines, prepare to accelerate at full power after exiting the pipe! Everyone, secure yourselves, hold on tight! We're about to have a wild ride!"

The "Stardust" abruptly turned around and raced toward the direction Su Wanqing indicated. On an inconspicuous wall covered with energy conduits, they found a massive pipe interface that was currently trembling slightly due to internal energy turbulence.

"This is it! The entrance gate can't open completely due to system failure, but the gap is big enough for us to squeeze through!" Su Wanqing reported.

"Squeeze through!" Lin Feng ordered.

The spacecraft tilted sideways, scraping against the edge of the gate with a teeth-grinding sound, forcing its way into the enormous pipe.

The interior of the pipe was pitch black, but they could feel powerful energy surging around them.

"Hang on tight! Engines at maximum power! Go!" Lin Feng roared.

The engines of the "Stardust" spewed out blazing exhaust, beginning to accelerate madly in this straight cosmic slide!

"Waaaaah—!" The intense g-forces pressed everyone firmly into their seats, even stretching Wu Yu's plump face.

The pipe walls flew past outside the windows at dizzying speeds.

Just as they felt they were about to be crushed by the acceleration, light appeared ahead—the exit!

But at that moment, the system's final alarm sounded: "Core meltdown... final stage... energy release..."

BOOM!!!

An unimaginable, out-of-control torrent of massive energy surged from the nest's core like a burst dam, instantly flooding into the pipe they were in, slamming hard against the "Stardust's" rear!

"Oh my god! This isn't a slide anymore! We're being launched!" Flea screamed.

The spacecraft's speed instantly skyrocketed to a terrifying level, like a stone thrown with immense force by a giant, violently bursting out of the pipe exit!

Outside the portholes, the stars stretched into long streaks of light. The massive g-forces made the ship's structure groan.

"Decelerate! Decelerate now! We're going to overshoot the planned trajectory!" Su Wanqing shouted with difficulty.

Wrench desperately pulled back the control stick, reverse thrusters working at full capacity.

After what felt like an eternity, the spacecraft barely stabilized its posture and slowly came to a stop. Everyone looked back, still shaken.

In the distance, the massive nest looked like an inflated balloon, its surface bulging with countless energy pockets before suddenly collapsing inward, finally transforming into a brief but dazzling burst of blue light that silently vanished into the void, leaving only some fine fragments and dust.

"...Done." Lin Feng let out a long, long sigh of relief, feeling his back soaked with sweat.

"So," Wu Yu asked weakly, "does this mean we... hitched a free ride and accidentally blew up the landlord's house?"

Chapter 121 Let's divide the spoils!

The relief of surviving a catastrophe permeated the entire bridge. Everyone was slumped in their seats, panting heavily.

"Thrilling... way too thrilling..."

Flea wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "Next time, can we try something a bit milder? Like, I don't know, a drinking contest with Jingtianxing or something?"

"Agreed..." Wu Yu chimed in weakly. "My poor heart almost jumped out of my throat to go join that bag of chips that died on duty..."

Li Wei had completely melted into a puddle of fat, his eyes vacant, mumbling under his breath: "Gone... all gone... the nest is gone... 'Night Owl' is gone... my backer is gone... how am I supposed to live from now on..."

Lin Feng ignored their complaints and turned his gaze to Su Wanqing. "Wanqing, during the earlier system chaos, did you manage to intercept any useful data?"

Su Wanqing nodded, a tired smile appearing on her face. "Although most of the data was lost with the system crash, I managed to download a small portion amidst the chaos. It includes preliminary scan data about the nest structure, especially those energy-based lifeforms (the Jellyfish and Mantis Guards), and also... fragments of Night Owl's 'Guidance Algorithm'."

Dr. Chen Wei immediately perked up. "Quick! Let me see! Those biological structures are incredible! And that algorithm, while insane, is absolutely genius in its approach!"

"Hold on," Lin Feng raised a hand to stop her. "Doctor, you can study the data, but it must be strictly isolated. Especially that algorithm—absolutely no practical testing is allowed, understand?"

The doctor pouted. "Yeah, yeah, I know, I know the hazardous materials handling procedures... I'll just look, no touching..." But her eyes clearly screamed "itching to get my hands on it."

Lin Feng then looked at Li Wei, who was still lost in his own world. "Li Wei."

Li Wei jolted, nearly sliding off his chair. "Yes! Boss Lin! Your orders!"

"This time... consider it... redeeming yourself through meritorious service. Your performance was... acceptable." Lin Feng stroked his chin. "Although the main credit goes to... uh... a certain 'big shot's' sneeze."

The Blue Fluffball at his feet let out a timely "gurgle."

Li Wei nodded vigorously. "Yes, yes! All thanks to the big shot! All thanks to Boss Lin giving me the chance!"

"So, now you have two choices." Lin Feng held up two fingers. "One, we can drop you off at the next civilized outpost we encounter, leave you with some basic supplies. After that, whether you live or die is up to you."

Li Wei's face instantly turned deathly pale.

"Two," Lin Feng paused. "Work with us. But we don't support idlers here, and definitely no traitors. You'll need to pass an 'entry assessment'."

"I choose two! Absolutely choose two!" Li Wei almost lunged to hug Lin Feng's leg (if he could reach). "Assessment! Whatever you want! I, Li Wei, may not be good at much, but business, gathering intel, picking up bargains... ah, no, I mean resource recovery and utilization, I'm absolutely a pro!"

"The assessment is simple," Lin Feng pointed behind him at the pile of miscellaneous "spoils of war" they'd brought from the nest—mainly some boxes they'd snatched from Night Owl's temporary warehouse that they hadn't had time to take, and a few strange, faintly glowing ores that Flea had pried off the wall with a mechanical arm while fighting the Mantis Guards earlier.

"Here are some of Night Owl's equipment, and some 'local specialties' from the nest. You have one day to sort them, assess their value, and figure out a way to use them... hmm... to trade for at least enough *normal*, *non-Poison Can* food to feed everyone on this ship for three days."

Wu Yu's eyes lit up. "Great assessment! Fatty, I'm rooting for you! My stomach is counting on you!"

Flea chuckled. "If you can't trade for it, you can just render your own fat for fuel."

Li Wei looked at the pile of random stuff, then at the "expectant" gazes of everyone, gritted his teeth, and stomped his foot. "Deal! I guarantee I'll complete the task! This is how I, Li Wei, make my living!"

He immediately dove towards the pile of supplies, pulling out a greasy magnifying glass and a small scanner he carried with him, and began inspecting them meticulously like a professional appraiser, muttering to himself: "Hmm... Night Owl standard-issue laser rifle, seventy percent new, black market price at least three hundred energy credits... This ore... strange energy signature, seems like a biological crystal, need to find a specialized collector or research institute..."

Watching him quickly slip into his professional mode, Lin Feng smiled. This guy, while cowardly and cunning, his professional skills were indeed top-notch.

"Alright," Lin Feng clapped his hands. "Everyone, the crisis is temporarily over. Wrench, conduct a full check on the ship's status, especially the rear end. Make sure that last thrust didn't cause any hidden damage. Everyone else, back to your stations. We—"

Before he could finish, Little Ears, who was in charge of communications, timidly raised her hand. "Boss... um... it seems we have visitors..."

On the main screen, a clear signal source was rapidly approaching and had sent a standard light-based communication signal.

The translated signal was simple: "Unidentified vessel ahead, please identify yourself. This is the Jingtianxing Resource Recovery and Observation Vessel 'Scavenger-7'. We have detected abnormal energy eruptions in this sector. Please cooperate with our investigation."

Everyone: "..."

Just out of the wolf's den, and now we run into vultures? These Jingtianxing guys have noses that are way too sharp!

Chapter 122: A Trash Deal with the "Vultures"

"Jingtianxing?! Why are they so persistently haunting us!"

Wu Yu wailed, "We just dealt with a nest of lunatics, and now here comes a bunch of researchers!"

"Resource Recovery and Observation Vessel..." Flea pondered the name, "Sounds like they specialize in following behind others to pick up trash?"

"To be precise, picking up 'valuable' trash."

Su Wanqing's expression was grave, "They must have detected the energy signature from the nest explosion and came to investigate the situation, while also checking if there were any 'samples' or technical debris worth recovering."

Li Wei was so scared he immediately ducked behind a crate, whispering frantically:

"Don't let them see me! 'Night Owl' and 'Jingtianxing' sometimes have some shady business dealings. If I'm recognized, I'm dead!"

Lin Feng stared at the sleek, silver-blue Jingtianxing-marked research vessel on the screen that looked like it was ready to dissect something at any moment, his mind racing.

Fight head-on? The other party was a proper research vessel. While likely not heavily armed, they had the massive Jingtianxing organization backing them. Not worth provoking.

Run? The other party had already locked onto them, and they had just finished a high-speed dash; their engines needed to cool down.

Lie? The other party weren't fools. The nest had just exploded and they appeared here immediately; suspicion would be too great.

Got it!

Lin Feng's eyes lit up. He said to everyone, "Don't panic, everyone. Watch me perform. Flea, translate what I'm about to say into the most mercenary, most trash-scavenger-like tone and send it out in universal code."

He cleared his throat, faced the communicator, and plastered on a smile mixing surprise, enthusiasm, and a hint of slyness:

"Well, well, well! It's the big shots from Jingtianxing! What an honor! We're the 'Stardust', just doing some small business, picking up space junk to scrape by. That energy burst you mentioned? Ha! Don't even bring it up! It scared us half to death just now!"

He deliberately paused, as if still shaken:

"We were just passing by when we saw that big lump ahead (referring to the nest) go off like fireworks, *boom* and it was gone! Scared us so bad we ran for it! Almost got caught in the blast! Our luck really is... sigh!"

The Jingtianxing vessel on the screen was silent for a few seconds before a calm, academic-sounding voice replied:

"'Stardust'? Unregistered vessel. Prior to the explosion, did you observe any anomalies? Or... collect any debris ejected by the blast?"

Here it comes! They really are after the "trash"!

The smile on Lin Feng's face became even more "sincere":

"Anomalies? Way too many anomalies! As for debris... hehe, you know how it is in our line of work, boss. Can't go home empty-handed when we see good stuff, right? We did manage to scoop up some bits and pieces..."

He signaled Flea to point the camera at the pile of "spoils" Li Wei was sorting, especially those peculiar, faintly glowing ores pried from the walls and some of the "Night Owl" junk equipment.

"See, just this stuff. Don't even know if it's worth anything... We were just worrying about how to handle it." Lin Feng rubbed his hands together, putting on a thoroughly mercenary "you decide what it's worth" act.

Jingtianxing fell silent again, seemingly analyzing the "junk." Soon, the voice spoke again, its tone now... carrying a hint of barely perceptible interest?

"Those glowing ores... are somewhat interesting. And that 'Night Owl' equipment... though damaged, has research value. Are you willing to sell? We can offer standard energy credits, or... equivalent nutrition paste and purified water in exchange."

Wu Yu felt like vomiting just hearing "nutrition paste," but Lin Feng stopped him with a look.

"Oh! Boss, you're too kind!" Lin Feng feigned being overwhelmed by the honor, "Sell! Of course we'll sell! It's an honor to do business with Jingtianxing! How much can you offer? We've got quite a few mouths to feed here..."

After some haggling (mostly Lin Feng's performance of crying poverty), an agreement was reached. Jingtianxing traded some food, fresh water, and a small amount of energy credits for those few ores and one piece of damaged "Night Owl" equipment.

A small transport drone flew out from the "Scavenger-7" and completed the handover with the "Stardust."

After receiving the supplies, Jingtianxing's tone seemed to soften a bit: "Transaction complete. Thank you for your cooperation. We advise you to leave this space sector promptly. The residual energy radiation is unstable."

"Right away, right away! Thanks for the heads-up, boss! We're leaving now! Leaving now!" Lin Feng nodded and bowed.

The "Scavenger-7" said no more, turning and heading towards the debris field of the exploded nest, clearly going to conduct more detailed "recovery" work.

Only when the other vessel disappeared from sensor range did everyone let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Holy crap, Boss! You're a true acting legend!" Flea was utterly impressed, "That greedy, cowardly act was spot on!"

"What act? That was genuine emotion!" Lin Feng glared at him in annoyance, then laughed, "But the effect was good. We got rid of them and got some much-needed supplies. Li Wei!"

"Consider your probation passed! From now on, you are the 'Stardust's' chief... uh... 'Resource Recovery Appraiser' and 'Foreign Trade Specialist'!"

Li Wei was instantly moved to tears: "Thank you, Boss! Thank you for the trust! I, Li Wei, will dedicate myself entirely, even unto death! I will contribute all my lifelong learning!"

Wu Yu looked at the exchanged food, fairly satisfied: "Alright, even though most of it is nutrition paste, at least there are a few real meat cans... Wait!"

He suddenly remembered something, his expression changing as he sharply looked at Li Wei: "You fat bastard! Did you just sell off my few privately stashed, best-looking glowing ores along with the rest?!"

Li Wei: "...Uh, the boss said... to show sincerity..."

Wu Yu: "I'll fight you to the death!"

The bridge descended into chaos once again.

After the chaotic interlude, the "Stardust" finally enjoyed a brief period of calm.

The engines cooled down, damage inspections were completed. Aside from their metaphorical rear ends still aching a bit, there were no serious issues.

Li Wei fully utilized his "Resource Recovery Appraiser" professional skills, properly categorizing the remaining spoils and meticulously creating a potential value assessment sheet and a list of possible buyers, preliminarily proving his worth.

Su Wanqing and Doctor Chen Wei, meanwhile, plunged headfirst into analyzing the intercepted data fragments.

"The biological structure data of the nest is extremely valuable, especially the principles of energy conversion and carapace formation..." the Doctor muttered while reading, her eyes gleaming, "It might even help us improve our ship's shields!"

Su Wanqing was more focused on the fragmented guidance algorithm: "Even as fragments, its mathematical foundation is astonishingly profound... It's not mere prediction; it's more like a... 'communication' protocol with specific cosmic energy phenomena? For 'Night Owl' to try using it to forcibly command the 'Void's Light' is sheer blasphemy!"

Lin Feng was intrigued by the word "communication": "If this isn't a weapon, but a communication tool..."

"Then its value would be immeasurable." Su Wanqing affirmed, "Moreover, at the deepest layer of the algorithm fragments, I discovered a heavily encrypted piece of information that isn't part of the algorithm itself... a coordinate."

"Coordinates?" Lin Feng leaned in.

"Yes, a very distant coordinate not recorded on any existing star charts. The encryption method... shares the same origin as the nest's core system." Su Wanqing operated the console, attempting a preliminary decryption, "It seems to point to... another similar facility? Or... the origin point of the 'Sowers'?"

Another mystery was thrown into the mix.

Just then, Little Ears, who was in charge of caring for the Blue Fluffballs, suddenly let out a surprised "Huh?"

Everyone turned to look. They saw the little furry creature was hugging a spare energy block (low power, for interface supply) next to Su Wanqing's data pad, gnawing on it with its tiny teeth, making a "crunch crunch" sound.

The previously dim energy block was visibly, at a speed discernible to the naked eye, refilling with a faint blue glow!

"It's... eating electricity?"

Wu Yu and Doctor Chen Wei were both utterly dumbfounded!

Chapter 123 Don't run away! My ball!

Doctor Chen Wei immediately rushed over, took out an instrument to scan:

"It's not eating! It's... absorbing energy? At the same time, its biological signals are strengthening! My god! It can not only trigger ancient protocols, but also directly convert energy?!"

The Blue Fluffball seemed disturbed by the doctor's exaggerated reaction, let out a dissatisfied "gurgle," put down the fully charged energy block, hopped over to Lin Feng's feet, and rubbed its fluffy head against his pant leg.

Then it raised its little paw, pointed in a certain direction in the starry sky outside the viewport, pointed at itself, and finally patted its little belly.

Everyone was stunned.

"It... what does it mean?" Flea was bewildered.

Su Wanqing looked at the direction the Blue Fluffball pointed, then compared it with the mysterious coordinate they had just deciphered, her pupils slightly contracting: "The direction it's pointing... overlaps roughly with the direction of that coordinate."

Lin Feng crouched down, looking into the Blue Fluffball's pitch-black eyes that seemed to contain the starry sea, a ridiculous yet seemingly reasonable thought popping into his head: "You... you want to go there? There... there's 'something' you can eat there?"

The Blue Fluffball seemed to understand, happily let out a "gu" sound, hopped in place once, then started licking its paw again.

Everyone: "..."

So, not only did they obtain a coordinate pointing to an unknown location, but they also obtained a... living, needs regular charging, and might provide directional guidance... universe-level GPS and key?

Li Wei cautiously approached: "Boss... this 'big shot'... how do we calculate its meal allowance? Public account or..."

Lin Feng didn't know whether to laugh or cry, rubbing the Blue Fluffball's head: "Alright, got it. After we rest and recuperate, we'll go see what delicious things are over there."

He stood up, looking toward the endless starry sea, that signature smile with a hint of roguishness and adventurous spirit reappearing on his face.

"Alright, everyone! We've finished scavenging junk, finished fighting, and even managed to get a meal! Time to leave this damn place!"

"Wrench, set the course, head to the nearest, reliable space station first! We need a good rest, replenish some real food, not nutrient paste!"

"Then..." he paused, "...we'll go see what good stuff is hidden in that place our 'big shot' is thinking about for a snack!"

The "Stardust" adjusted its direction, the engines emitting a steady roar, dragging its slightly weary but still sturdy body, sailing once more into the sea of stars.

On the bridge, the Blue Fluffball contentedly nestled on the charging block, taking a nap, while Wu Yu argued with Li Wei over what flavor of real canned goods to purchase at the next stop.

The "Stardust" ended its brief warp jump, gliding like a slightly tired but still bright-eyed steel leviathan into the port area of a small space outpost named "Snail Shell."

This place didn't have the hustle and bustle of Free Station, more like a truck stop full of life built inside a massive, abandoned spiral-shaped asteroid.

The air circulation system was filled with a mix of machine oil, food spices, and the unique scents brought by countless races.

Both sides of the passage were crammed with various small shops: repair shops, bars, inns, and stalls selling all sorts of strange goods.

"Finally, a decent place!"

Wu Yu looked at the flashing neon signs outside the viewport, sniffed the air as if he could smell the faint aroma of food, "I declare, the primary mission for this docking is—procurement! Frenzied procurement! Farewell to nutrient paste!"

Flea skillfully operated the ship's connection to the port's network: "Basic docking fee 50 energy coins per day, freshwater replenishment 10 coins per ton, waste disposal... huh, they actually don't accept waste? Bad review!"

Lin Feng smiled: "Alright, enough joking. Standard procedure, Old Scar stays with the team to guard the ship, maintain vigilance. Wrench, list the repairs needed and parts to purchase. Wu Yu, Flea, you two handle procuring daily supplies and food. Li Wei, you go with them, responsible for assessing prices and... don't let Wu Yu spend the entire budget on snacks."

Li Wei immediately puffed out his chubby chest, pulling out a datapad: "Boss, rest assured! Bargaining is my specialty! Guaranteed to get the most and best stuff for the least money!"

"Doctor, Little Ears, do you need any special research supplies or seeds?" Lin Feng asked again.

Doctor Chen Wei waved without looking up: "Get me some high-purity energy crystals, and soil and microorganism samples from different star sectors! The more the better!" Little Ears softly listed a string of plant seeds and special fertilizers.

With arrangements settled, the procurement team excitedly left the ship, blending into the outpost's noisy crowd.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing arrived at a somewhat old-looking bar and information exchange in the outpost's center—"Old Snail Shell." The lighting here was dim, the clientele diverse, perfect for gathering information.

Ordering two glasses of the local specialty, bubbling purple drinks, Lin Feng casually chatted with the bartender: "Things seem lively around here lately, any news?"

The bartender was a taciturn man with skin rough like rock. He wiped a glass, not looking up: "Lively? Which day isn't lively. 'Black Scorpion' and 'Free Vanguard' guys fought over a batch of goods in Zone D a couple days ago, almost blew through the airlock. Jingtianxing's survey ship passed by half a month ago, bought a batch of extreme-environment equipment, all mysterious."

Jingtianxing? Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged a glance. Seems their activity range is wide.

"Anything else?" Lin Feng slid over a decently sized energy coin.

The bartender collected the coin without expression, lowering his voice: "If you want weird stuff... a few days ago, a woman traveling alone, piloting a very sleek 'Meteor-class' fast ship, docked here for half a day."

Lin Feng's heart stirred: "A woman? What was she like?"

"Cold as ice." The bartender was succinct.

Chapter 124 Cold Beauty, You've Appeared!

Like a block of ice. Wearing a high-end custom combat suit, but with some torn places stained with... an unfamiliar blue liquid. She didn't communicate with anyone, just bought the highest-grade energy blocks, a set of precision repair tools, and... a large case of long-lasting compressed rations. Oh, and she also asked for the nearest jump point to the 'Kuiper Belt Edge Ruins'.

The Kuiper Belt Edge Ruins? That's an ancient battlefield site famous for being dangerous and mysterious.

"What's her name? Or any distinguishing features?" Su Wanqing pressed.

The bartender shook his head. "No name. Features... quite pretty, but her eyes could freeze a person to death. Oh, her left hand seemed to be wearing a very special wrist guard. Didn't look like a weapon, more like an... ancient artifact?"

Lin Feng's heartbeat sped up slightly. Calm, solitary, powerful, heading to a dangerous place, possibly injured, an ancient wrist guard... These characteristics instantly made him think of one person.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Three days, maybe." After saying this, the bartender paid them no more mind and went to attend to other customers.

Leaving the "Old Snail Shell," both Lin Feng and Su Wanqing felt somewhat unsettled.

"Could it be her?" Su Wanqing asked softly.

"Very likely." Lin Feng's gaze turned toward the boundless starscape outside the port. "Leng Xingyun... She's also come to this star sector, and it seems she's run into trouble."

At the same time, Wu Yu and Flea were taking Li Wei on a "shopping spree" through the station's market.

Wu Yu was like a fish in water, excitedly lingering in front of one food stall after another.

"Wow! Freshly synthesized imitation steak! Ten kilos!"

"What's this? Glowing mushrooms from the Takri planet? Buying it! Buying it! It'll look amazing in soup tonight!"

"Boss! How much for this jelly-like alien fruit? One case!"

Flea was more focused on practical tools and gadgets, occasionally "borrowing" some inconspicuous small parts to study.

Li Wei fully utilized his role as "Foreign Trade Specialist," wielding fluent cosmic common language peppered with various jargon, bargaining with stall owners with flying spittle.

"Boss! The charge cycles on these energy batteries are almost spent! You dare sell them at this price? Thirty percent off!"

"What? This synthetic starch was produced last week? Not fresh! Cheaper! Or we'll go elsewhere!"

"Aiyo, the elbow of this protective suit is worn thin! Half price! No deal and we walk!"

Relying on Li Wei's silver tongue and Wu Yu's enthusiastic "buy buy buy" attitude, they quickly purchased large quantities of quality food, fresh water, and daily necessities at reasonable prices. They even managed to trade some worthless little trinkets brought from the nest for quite a few good items.

During a break in shopping, Li Wei sidled up to Wu Yu and said quietly, "Brother Wu, while buying stuff just now, I casually asked a few stall owners for some information."

"What information?" Wu Yu was munching on a bag of deep-fried, golden, unidentified alien insect legs with a satisfying crunch.

"About that 'Kuiper Belt Edge Ruins.'"

Li Wei lowered his voice further. "I heard things haven't been peaceful over there recently. Besides the usual spatial rifts and debris fields, seems like new dangers have appeared. A few scavenger crews that went to pick over ship wreckage went in and never came out. Rumors say... 'ghost signals' have appeared inside, and some say they've seen... 'shadows' moving faster than seems possible."

"Shadows?" Wu Yu stopped chewing. "The 'Night Owl' bunch again?"

"Doesn't seem like it." Li Wei shook his head. "Night Owl's style is more direct, more violent. The 'shadows' in the rumors... are weirder, more... silent. And..."

He paused, his voice dropping even lower. "I also found out that about a month ago, a very beautiful, never-before-seen model of fast ship was ambushed by at least three unidentified armed vessels at the edge of the ruins. That fast ship was incredibly tough, fought its way out and charged deep into the ruins, but it must have been badly damaged."

Wu Yu's eyes widened. "A beautiful fast ship? Ambushed? The timing seems to match up!"

"That's what I thought too." Li Wei nodded. "Brother Wu, you think... that icy woman Boss Lin was asking about, could she be..."

The two exchanged a look, both feeling they might have stumbled onto a big lead.

When the procurement team returned to the "Stardust" with their large and small bundles of loot, Lin Feng and Su Wanqing further corroborated the bartender's information with the intelligence they brought back.

Leng Xingyun really might be in that dangerous ruin, and in a bad situation.

"Boss, what's our next move?" Flea asked. "Go check out that ruin? Sounds exciting!"

Lin Feng didn't answer immediately. He walked to the viewport and looked at the steady stream of ships outside. Leng Xingyun was strong, but alone, facing unknown dangers and potential ambushers...

He rubbed his chin and suddenly smiled. "Go, of course we go. But we can't just charge in foolishly like that."

He turned to Li Wei. "Li Wei, time to put your special skills to use again. Go to the market, collect as much recent intel as possible about that ruin, especially about those 'ghost signals' and 'shadows,' and details about the previous ambush incident, even if it's just rumors."

He then looked at Flea. "Flea, you go to the port's information black market, find a way to get the most recent, most detailed star chart and environmental scan data for that ruin, especially areas with energy anomalies and known safe routes."

Finally, he looked at Wrench and Su Wanqing. "Wrench, complete the ship's maintenance and upgrades ASAP, especially the shields and engines. Wanqing, analyze all the intel we get; we need to formulate a detailed plan."

"We're going to rescue someone," Lin Feng's eyes sparkled with that familiar light, "but we also need to make sure we don't become the ones needing rescue first. And..."

He paused, a trademark, slightly roguish smile appearing on his face. "...we might even pick up some 'good stuff' along the way?"

Everyone chuckled knowingly. Yep, that was very "Stardust."

The brief rest period at the "Snail Shell" station became busy and fulfilling.

Wrench led the engineering team, using the newly purchased parts and materials, to perform a comprehensive maintenance and targeted upgrade on the "Stardust."

The focus was strengthening the shield generator to deal with potential energy turbulence and unknown attacks within the ruins, while also optimizing engine output efficiency and response speed in preparation for possible rapid pursuit or retreat.

Inside the ship, the "Ecological Ark" chamber was thriving under Little Ears' care. The newly purchased glowing mushroom and exotic fruit seeds had been planted, providing the ship with fresh air and... potential future snacks.

Li Wei and Flea also returned with their harvests.

Through buying drinks and sharing "exclusive gossip," Li Wei extracted a large amount of fragmented information from traveling merchants and station veterans.

Putting it all together, it was confirmed: abnormal activity had indeed increased recently in the Kuiper Belt Edge Ruins. Those "ghost signals" could interfere with ship instruments.

Reports of "shadow" sightings had increased, with descriptions leaning towards high-speed, stealthy, hit-and-run tactics, not matching the style of any known faction.

As for the ambush, details were scarce, but it was certain the attackers had heavy firepower and had planned it in advance.

Using a bit of "technical means" and a small piece of peculiar ore with a faint energy signature brought from the nest, Flea traded with an information broker for a star chart data set marked with recent energy anomaly zones and danger areas. While not high precision, it was far more useful than outdated official charts.

Chapter 125 Barrage! Fire!

Su Wanqing integrated and analyzed all the intelligence, conducting multiple simulations in the simulator.

"The situation is more complex than imagined."

She reported to Lin Feng,

"The environment inside the ruins is extremely unstable. Spatial rifts, energy turbulence, and massive floating debris are all significant threats. The 'Ghost Signals' cover a wide area, severely interfering with our communications and sensors. And those 'Shadows'... if they truly exist, they likely use this environment to set up ambushes."

She pulled up the star chart, pointing to several points:

"Based on the locations of the ambush incidents and rumors of 'Shadow' activity, they likely control several key jump points and navigation nodes leading into the depths of the ruins. If we charge in directly, we'll probably run right into them."

Lin Feng stroked his chin:

"So, not only do we have to find a possibly hidden fast ship in a harsh environment, but we also have to constantly watch out for a group of extremely fast 'ghosts' hiding in the shadows?"

"Yes."

Su Wanqing nodded, "A direct confrontation is disadvantageous for us. We need a plan to lure the snake out of its hole, or... to lure the tiger away from the mountain."

"Lure the snake out of its hole..." Lin Feng pondered, his gaze sweeping across the bridge, finally landing on... Little Ears, who was using newly purchased glowing moss to build a nest for the Blue Fluffballs.

A somewhat risky, but likely effective, plan gradually took shape in his mind.

"We have the 'Stardust'. It's a big target, fast, with thick shields. It looks like a tough nut to crack, but also like a juicy piece of meat."

Lin Feng began outlining the plan, "We can approach the ruins with great fanfare, making a show of trying to force our way into the depths. If those 'Shadows' really want to control this area, there's a high probability they'll come out to intercept us."

"Won't we just become target practice then?" Wu Yu worried.

"Don't worry." Lin Feng smiled, "We're just the 'bait'. The real search force is another ship."

Everyone looked at him.

"Flea," Lin Feng commanded, "What's the status of the 'Peregrine' scout ship?"

"Ready to launch at any time!" Flea immediately understood, "Boss, you want to..."

"Exactly." Lin Feng nodded, "

The 'Stardust' acts as the visible bait, attracting the attention of the 'Shadows'. The 'Peregrine' is small, has good stealth capabilities, and will take advantage of the chaos to infiltrate the ruins from another direction. Using the star charts Li Wei obtained and the safe zones Wanqing analyzed, it will search for Leng Xingyun's signal!"

"Great idea!" Flea grew excited, "Sneaking around and fishing in troubled waters is my specialty!"

"But the 'Peregrine' has weak firepower. If it's discovered..." Su Wanqing expressed some concern.

"That's why timing and coordination are crucial."

Lin Feng's expression turned serious, "The 'Stardust' can't actually get pinned down. It needs to show signs of 'failing to break through after a prolonged assault, preparing to retreat' at just the right moment, firmly keeping the 'Shadows' focused on us, creating a sufficient time window for the 'Peregrine'."

He looked at everyone: "This is a plan requiring a high degree of tacit understanding and trust. Once it starts, there's no turning back. It could be very dangerous."

Flea grinned: "Boss, which day with you isn't dangerous? As long as it's exciting!"

Old Scar nodded steadily: "Feasible."

Wrench patted his chest: "The ship's condition is no problem!"

Wu Yu: "...Do I stay on the 'Stardust' as bait? The 'Peregrine' is too fast, I get spacesick..."

Li Wei: "I... I'll provide intelligence support!"

"Good!"

Lin Feng made the final decision,

"The plan is set! Everyone, get ready. We're going to those ruins, to meet those 'Shadows', and by the way... fish our lost friend back!"

After thorough preparation, the "Stardust" departed from the "Snail Shell" outpost, like a fierce beast that had rested and recuperated, resolutely sailing toward that dangerous space known as the "Kuiper Belt Edge Ruins".

The closer they got, the more desolate and dead the surrounding scenery became.

Huge spaceship wrecks floated silently in the void like cold tombstones, some still bearing massive tearing wounds and energy weapon burn marks.

Twisted metal, shattered armor plates, occasional drifting spacesuit fragments... silently telling the tale of the brutal war of the past.

The spatial environment also became extremely unstable. Tiny, difficult-to-detect spatial rifts were like transparent blades, ready to tear apart any intruder at any moment. Energy turbulence acted like invisible reefs, causing the ship to lurch violently from time to time.

"Sensor range reduced to 70%... interference is getting stronger." Su Wanqing reported, staring intently at the data on her screen, "Detected multiple 'Ghost Signal' sources. Cannot lock onto specific positions. It's like random recordings are being played."

"Maintain course. Reduce speed to standard cruising speed. Raise shield energy to 80%." Lin Feng ordered, "Let them know we're here."

The "Stardust" moved forward slowly through this dark, dangerous ruin like a bright beacon, not concealing its presence in the slightest.

Sure enough, not long after, the early warning radar emitted a sharp alarm!

"Multiple high-speed targets approaching! Extremely fast! Signal signatures... unclear! Cannot lock on!" Sun Wen's voice held a trace of tension.

Outside the viewports, only a few extremely faint, almost environment-blending phantoms could be seen, streaking past from different directions at astonishing speeds, appearing and disappearing like ghosts! They didn't attack immediately, but instead circled and watched around the "Stardust", as if assessing the prey's strength.

"Are these the 'Shadows'?" Flea communicated via encrypted channel from the "Peregrine", "Hiding their heads and tails, clearly no good!"

He looked at everyone: "This is a plan requiring a high degree of tacit understanding and trust. Once it starts, there's no turning back. It could be very dangerous."

Suddenly, one "Shadow" abruptly accelerated, shooting toward the "Stardust" like an arrow from a bow! At the moment of approach, it briefly revealed a blurry outline—it was a small, sharp-shaped assault boat with a matte black hull and no markings! A faint energy glow flashed at its bow!

Thump!

The "Stardust's" shields rippled violently, the energy reading dropping by a small notch!

"It fired! Some kind of low-power energy impact, like a probe!" Old Scar reported.

"Return fire! Use the point-defense cannons for warning shots! Don't hit them, just scare them!" Lin Feng ordered.

The "Stardust's" broadside point-defense cannons spewed tongues of fire. Dense energy barrages missed, forming a blockade zone in the space where the "Shadows" were weaving through.

The "Shadows" quickly scattered, moving with incredible agility, easily avoiding the barrages. They seemed provoked. More "Shadows" joined in harassing attacks on the "Stardust". Faint energy impacts struck the shields, stirring up ripples.

"They're as annoying as mosquitoes!" Wu Yu cried, hugging his head and hiding under the console.

"Good, just like this." Lin Feng, however, smiled, "Their attention is all on us now. Flea, the opportunity has arrived! 'Peregrine', launch!"

The "Peregrine" scout ship, already hidden behind a massive piece of wreckage, instantly activated its stealth mode. Like a drop of water merging into the deep sea, it silently followed the relatively safe edge route planned in advance by Su Wanqing, sneaking toward the depths of the ruins.

Step one of the "Bait Plan", successful!

Chapter 126 Dancing on the Edge of a Knife

The "Stardust" continued to draw the fire of the "Shadows," dancing on the edge of a knife.

Lin Feng calmly commanded the ship to evade and make limited counterattacks, not letting the enemy think they were an easy target, yet not revealing their true strength.

"Their tactical coordination is very precise, not like scattered rabble," Su Wanqing analyzed the combat data. "They seem more like a... well-trained private armed force or mercenaries."

"Whatever they are," Lin Feng stared at the screen, "as long as Flea can find Leng Xingyun, this trip won't have been in vain."

Just then, an exceptionally thick beam of energy, significantly more powerful than the others, suddenly shot from the main cannon of a larger black ship that had just decloaked in the distance. It slammed hard into the "Stardust's" shield!

The shield's light flickered violently, and the energy reading plummeted a noticeable chunk!

"The main player has arrived?" Lin Feng's eyes sharpened. "Looks like the 'mosquitoes' couldn't do the job, so the 'big fly' behind them can't sit still anymore."

The "Peregrine" ghosted its way through the massive wreckage and turbulent energy flows. Flea pushed his piloting skills to the limit, using the environment to its fullest to hide their presence and avoid the ubiquitous "Ghost Signals" and the occasional passing "Shadows" patrol craft.

"Damn, this hellhole is no place for humans," Flea muttered as he worked the controls. "What the hell is Miss Cold doing out here? Treasure hunting or thrill-seeking?"

Following the star charts Li Wei had procured and the route Su Wanqing had planned, the "Peregrine" cautiously ventured deeper into the core area of the ruins. The wreckage here was denser, the environment even more hostile. The sensor screen was filled with static snow, rendering them almost blind.

"Switch to optical observation and passive sonar mode," Flea ordered. "We'll have to rely on eyes and ears now."

The scout in the co-pilot's seat nervously watched the feed from the external cameras, his ears filled with the eerie sounds of twisting metal, grinding friction, and energy discharges.

Time ticked by, and the search yielded no results. The ruins were too vast. Looking for a fast ship deliberately hiding here was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

"Brother Flea, this isn't working," the scout said anxiously. "The 'Stardust' must be under heavy pressure. We don't have much time."

Flea frowned deeply. Suddenly, he remembered a detail Li Wei had dug up—Leng Xingyun had purchased a large quantity of long-lasting compressed rations and... precision repair tools.

"She's definitely injured, and her ship is damaged too. She needs a place to repair and hide..." Flea's mind raced. "She wouldn't stay out in the open, nor would she go to obvious, easily searchable wrecks... She'd find a place... easy to defend, hard to attack, with basic resources..."

His gaze swept over the star chart, landing on an area marked "Large Industrial Ship Wreckage Cluster." The structure there was complex, with huge interior spaces. There might even be residual power sources or workshops...

"Let's try our luck here!" Flea adjusted their course.

The "Peregrine" carefully navigated into this steel maze of wreckage. Just as they passed through a broken airlock hatch, the scout suddenly shouted, "Signal! A very weak encrypted signal! It's not a 'Ghost Signal,' it's a standard distress frequency! But it's encrypted!"

Flea's spirits lifted. "Can you crack it?"

"Trying... The encryption is complex... Wait, this encryption method... seems familiar?" the scout operated quickly. "It looks like... a variant of an advanced encryption the Moon Nation military used in its early days?"

Moon Nation? Isn't Boss Lin from the Moon Nation?

"Try using the old Moon Nation communication codes Boss gave us earlier as possible keys!" Flea immediately ordered.

After several attempts, the signal was suddenly cracked! An extremely weak, fragmented message was received:

"...This is... 'Phantom'... Damaged... Require... Assistance... Location... Coordinates XXX... Repeat... Not a trap..." A woman's voice, weak yet still calm and clear, accompanied by obvious electrical interference.

"Found her!" Flea excitedly slapped the console. "It's really her! Leng Xingyun! Quick! Send the coordinates and message to the 'Stardust'!"

The "Peregrine" immediately transmitted the information back via an encrypted channel.

Meanwhile, the "Stardust" was tangling with the newly appeared black warship. The enemy's firepower was fierce, its tactics cunning. The "Stardust's" shield energy was steadily declining.

Upon receiving Flea's message, a sharp gleam flashed in Lin Feng's eyes. "Well done! All hands, attention! 'Decoy' mission complete! Prepare to disengage!"

"Trying to run?" A processed, icy voice came over the public channel. "Too late! Since you're here, stay!"

The black warship's fire intensified. Simultaneously, more "Shadows" assault craft closed in, attempting to block the "Stardust's" escape route.

"Hmph, with just you lot?" Lin Feng sneered. "Wrench! Toss out that 'little toy' we picked up from the nest, the one made by 'Night Owl'!"

Wrench chuckled and pressed a button. An inconspicuous, spherical device was launched, flying ahead of the black warship before detonating!

There was no explosion. Instead, it released a powerful, wide-spectrum jamming wave targeting specific frequencies!

Instantly, all the "Shadows" ships' communication channels were flooded with piercing static noise. Their movements clearly faltered and became chaotic for a moment, their formation scattering!

"Now! Engine overload! Maximum power! Break through!" Lin Feng roared!

The "Stardust's" engines roared with overload, trailing blue flames. Like a giant beast tearing free from a net, it forcefully punched a hole through the momentary chaos of the "Shadows" fleet and raced toward the outskirts of the ruins!

"After them!" the commander of the black warship bellowed.

A fierce chase unfolded at the edge of the ruins.

Seizing this opportunity, the "Peregrine" quietly headed toward the coordinates provided by Leng Xingyun.

Behind a relatively hidden natural shelter formed by the wreckage of a massive engine, they finally saw a ship. Even covered in scars, its sleek, elegant lines were unmistakable—a "Meteor-class" fast ship, the "Phantom."

Its viewports were dim, its hull showed several obvious breaches, yet it remained vigilant. A secondary turret swiveled slightly, aiming at the approaching "Peregrine."

Flea opened the public channel, speaking in the friendliest tone he could muster. "Hey! Miss Cold, don't shoot! We're friends! Boss Lin Feng sent us to find you! Fellow Moon Nation countryman, remember?"

Silence filled the channel for a few seconds. That cool, clear voice sounded again, carrying a trace of barely noticeable surprise and... exhaustion?

"...Lin Feng? That... junk collector?"

Flea: "..."

Chapter 127 "Shadow" Boarding

The "Peregrine" cautiously completed docking with the battered "Phantom." The moment the airlock door opened, a faint mix of energy burn smell and the scent of blood wafted through.

Flea was the first to jump over. Just as he was about to strike what he thought was a cool welcoming pose, he saw a strangely shaped dagger gleaming with cold light almost touching the tip of his nose.

The one holding the dagger was Leng Xingyun.

She was leaning against the bulkhead, her face frighteningly pale, yet her gaze remained sharp as a blade, like a wounded but unyielding black panther.

Her once neat combat suit was damaged in multiple places, with simple bandages on her left shoulder and thigh that were still slowly seeping blood. Even so, the icy aura of "stay away" surrounding her was still powerful.

"Whoa whoa whoa! Beauty! Blades have no eyes! We're on the same side!"

Flea quickly raised both hands, forcing an awkward smile. "We were sent by Lin Feng! The real deal!"

Leng Xingyun's gaze swept over Flea, then looked at the crew members curiously peeking from inside the "Peregrine" behind him. Only after confirming there was no threat did she slowly lower the dagger, but her vigilance didn't lessen in the slightest. Her voice was weak but icy:

"Where's Lin Feng? Where's his broken ship?"

"Boss is outside drawing fire for you! We need to get out of here, fast!"

Flea hurriedly explained the situation. "Can your ship still move? Do you need a tow?"

Leng Xingyun glanced at her "Phantom," shook her head, her tone carrying a trace of barely noticeable heartache:

"Propulsion system damage exceeds 60%. Short-range jump capability is lost. Can only barely maintain low-speed navigation. Energy is almost depleted too."

"Alright then, you come back to the 'Stardust' with us first! We'll do a quick seal on your ship for now. We'll have Boss Wrench bring the engineering team to fix it later!"

Without waiting for her to argue, Flea signaled the medic behind him to step forward and support Leng Xingyun.

Leng Xingyun seemed to want to refuse, but her body swayed slightly. Clearly, she was at the end of her rope and could only let the medic support her as she boarded the "Peregrine."

She took one last look back at the silent "Phantom," a flicker of complexity in her eyes.

The "Peregrine" quickly detached and headed towards the rendezvous point agreed upon with the "Stardust."

On the other side, relying on its excellent performance and the jamming devices Wrench had pre-deployed, the "Stardust" successfully shook off the pursuit of the "Shadows" fleet, lost its tail, and rendezvoused with the "Peregrine" in a relatively safe debris field.

When Leng Xingyun, supported by Flea, stepped onto the deck of the "Stardust," what greeted her was a... slightly bizarre "welcome ceremony."

Led by Wu Yu, a few guys set off some party poppers. Colored paper shreds sprayed all over Leng Xingyun and Flea's faces.

"Welcome! A warm welcome! Congratulations, Miss Leng, on your escape from danger!" Wu Yu laughed like a Maitreya Buddha.

Old Scar stood expressionlessly with a few security team members on either side, maintaining order, or perhaps just watching the spectacle.

Little Ears curiously poked her head out, still holding a bunch of freshly picked interstellar lavender that emitted a fresh fragrance.

Li Wei hid behind the crowd and quietly asked Wu Yu, "Brother Wu, who is this beauty? Her aura is so strong, she looks so... high-class... Can you ask her what brand of skincare products she uses..."

Leng Xingyun was stunned by this sudden "enthusiasm." Even her pale face showed a hint of bewilderment.

She was used to operating alone and cold-blooded combat. This kind of noisy, chaotic scene made her extremely uncomfortable.

Lin Feng walked out from behind the crowd. Looking at Leng Xingyun with her face covered in confetti and a stiff expression, he couldn't help but laugh:

"Well, if it isn't our bounty hunter lady? Haven't seen you in years, looking so rough? Seems going solo isn't easy either."

Seeing Lin Feng, a bit of sharpness returned to Leng Xingyun's eyes. She snorted coldly, shook off Flea's supporting hand, and tried to stand straight on her own, but the movement tugged at her wounds, causing her to frown slightly in pain:

"Cut the crap... Lin Feng. Your welcome ceremonies are still so... unbearably tacky."

"It's the thought that counts." Lin Feng shrugged and waved at a medical robot.

"Take our honored guest to the medbay for a thorough checkup. Oh, and get her some food while you're at it. Looks like she's so hungry she can barely stand—and not nutrient paste, of course."

The medical robot emitted a soft guiding light. Leng Xingyun hesitated for a moment but ultimately followed it towards the medbay. Her back was still straight, but her steps were clearly unsteady.

Flea sidled up to Lin Feng and whispered, "Boss, that ice queen lives up to her reputation. Back on the 'Phantom,' she almost gave my nose a new hole."

Lin Feng watched the direction the short-haired beauty had left and smiled. "That's just how she is. Puts pride before comfort. But, to force her into this state, the other party must be no small fry."

Lin Feng gave a hard look at the girl's cool-toned pale skin and sharp, delicate nose, then turned and went off with everyone else to get busy.

In the medbay, Leng Xingyun lay on the examination bed, letting various instruments scan her body. Her face was still pale, but slightly better than when she first boarded the ship.

Doctor Chen Wei looked at the data screen and clicked her tongue in amazement:

"Multiple soft tissue contusions, minor bone fractures, energy burns, excessive blood loss, and signs of mild poisoning... Tsk tsk, quite seriously injured. But your physical fitness is truly impressive. Recovery rate is much faster than an ordinary person's. This poisoning... seems to be some kind of biological toxin?"

Leng Xingyun, eyes closed, responded flatly, "The sting of an alien jellyfish... accidentally got touched."

"Oh? What kind of jellyfish? What's the toxin composition? Do you still have a sample?" The doctor's scientific curiosity was instantly piqued.

Leng Xingyun opened her almond-shaped eyes wide: "..."

She chose silence.

Chapter 128 "Technology" Worker? A Lucky Romance!

Lin Feng leaned against the doorway, tossing an apple in his hand. "I say, Miss Leng, was this trip of yours about treasure hunting or volunteering as a punching bag for alien creatures? You came back in such a sorry state."

Leng Xingyun opened her eyes and gave him a cold glance. "None of your business. This time... thanks. I'll pay for the repair and medical fees."

"Talking about money hurts feelings." Lin Feng tossed the apple to her. "Talk. Who ambushed you? What's the background of those 'Shadows'? Why are they targeting you?"

Leng Xingyun caught the apple but didn't eat it, just held it in her hand. "Don't know their exact origins. Well-equipped, well-trained, ruthless and efficient tactical style. Not like ordinary pirates or mercenaries. They ambushed me for this." She raised her left hand, revealing the ancient-looking, blue crystal-inlaid bracer on her wrist.

"This thing?" Lin Feng leaned in for a closer look. "Looks pretty valuable, but not enough to send a whole fleet after, right?"

"It's not just an ornament." Leng Xingyun stroked the bracer, her expression complex. "It's a key, or rather... part of a map. Points to a... legendary place."

"Another legendary place..." Lin Feng rubbed his forehead. "Can't you mysterious types ever come up with something new?"

Just then, Flea and a few security team members who had finished their rotation passed by the medbay door, arms slung over each other's shoulders, making a racket.

"...That 'Blue Vortex' bar earlier was great! Drinks packed a punch! Just that Takri dancer, the fluorescent powder on her nearly blinded me!" That was Flea's voice.

"I still prefer 'The Veteran's Home', quiet, beer on tap, and you can brag and play cards!" Anvil said listlessly.

"Why isn't A-Qiang saying anything? That girl with the mechanical prosthetic who gave you her comm code earlier was nice! Even if her arm was cold, her smile was pretty warm!" someone teased.

A-Qiang's muffled voice came through. "...Don't talk nonsense. I just helped her fix her datapad interface..."

Their voices gradually faded away.

Inside the medbay, Leng Xingyun's brow furrowed almost imperceptibly, seemingly unaccustomed to such noise.

Lin Feng smiled. "Don't mind them. The brothers just went through a tough fight, they need to unwind. That's how this ship is. Loud, yes, but lively."

He stood up. "Get some good rest. We'll talk about that bracer and the 'Shadows' after you've recovered a bit more. As for payment..." He paused, a sly grin spreading across his face. "I see your 'Phantom' won't be fixed anytime soon. How about temporarily joining up, acting as our high-level enforcer... uh, I mean, security consultant, to work off the debt?"

Leng Xingyun glared at him. Before she could retort, Lin Feng had already waved with a laugh and left the medbay.

Outside, Flea and the others hadn't gone far and were indeed still gathered around A-Qiang, egging him on.

"Not bad, A-Qiang! Quietly making connections? Spill it, what model was that girl's interface?"

A-Qiang's face flushed bright red. "It was... just a standard Type-7 interface! I happened to have my multi-tool on me! Really, I just fixed it!"

Lin Feng walked over, scolding with a smile. "Alright, alright, stop bullying the honest one. Had enough fun? Get back to your posts! Wrench still needs hands to tow Miss Leng's 'Phantom' back for repairs."

"Got it, Boss!" Flea replied cheerfully, leading the group as they scattered.

Lin Feng shook his head and headed for the bridge. Rescuing Leng Xingyun was just the first step. The mysterious "Shadows" and the secret behind the bracer would likely bring bigger trouble. But for now, letting the crew relax a bit wasn't a bad thing.

The "Stardust" lurked at the edge of the ruins for two more days. On one hand, to ensure there were no pursuers; on the other, to let Wrench lead a team in carefully towing the damaged "Phantom" back, docking it in a larger repair bay for initial assessment.

With the medbay's help and her own powerful constitution, Leng Xingyun's injuries were mostly healed. She could move freely now. But she spent most of her time in her temporary quarters or the repair bay, silently watching Wrench and the others work on the "Phantom," rarely interacting with others, maintaining that same sense of distance.

Li Wei, meanwhile, fully embraced his new duties. Using the connections he'd made earlier at the "Snail Shell" outpost and a bit of energy currency to grease the wheels, he actually managed to gather some follow-up intel about the "Shadows" and those ruins.

"Boss," he found Lin Feng, speaking mysteriously, "Got a lead! Those 'Shadows'... behind them is likely a secret organization called the 'Shadow Association'!"

"Shadow Association?" Lin Feng raised an eyebrow. "Never heard of it. What do they do?"

"Incredibly secretive!" Li Wei lowered his voice. "Rumors say they specialize in collecting and researching various relics and technologies from ancient civilizations. Their methods are ruthless, stopping at nothing to achieve their goals! They're said to have some murky connections with high-level figures in several major factions. But they rarely act directly. This ambush on Miss Leng shows that bracer must be extremely important!"

Lin Feng stroked his chin. "An organization specializing in ancient relics... no wonder they're so interested in Leng Xingyun's bracer. Anything else?"

"There is!" Li Wei continued. "People at the 'Snail Shell' outpost said not long after we left, several large ships flying 'Mining Company' flags—but looking nothing like mining ships—went to the ruins. They seemed to be salvaging the wreckage of ships destroyed during our fight with the 'Shadows.' I suspect... it was the 'Shadow Association' cleaning up the battlefield, destroying evidence!"

This news made Lin Feng's expression turn serious. The enemy's swift, organized response confirmed they were indeed a troublesome opponent.

"Well done, Li Wei." Lin Feng patted his shoulder. "This intel is valuable. Keep an eye on their movements."

Praised, Li Wei's chubby face broke into a wide grin, and he scurried off happily.

On another front, the story of A-Qiang's "romantic luck" became an enduring topic of conversation among the crew.

After that day, the girl with the mechanical prosthetic actually sent a follow-up greeting message to the "Stardust" via the outpost's relay signal. She specifically thanked A-Qiang for fixing her datapad and asked if the ship had left the ruins safely.

Little Ears, who handled communications, was the first to share the news with everyone.

Thus, whenever A-Qiang appeared, he faced relentless teasing.

Flea: "Instructor A-Qiang, did you perform interface maintenance today?"

Wu Yu: "Brother Qiang, need your bros to teach you a few datapad... uh, deep communication techniques?"

Even Old Scar rarely cracked a slight smile, patting A-Qiang's shoulder. "Not bad, young man."

A-Qiang turned beet red from the teasing. But every time a message came, he would sneak around near the comms room. When caught by Little Ears, he'd pretend to be checking the lines.

Finally, Lin Feng had seen enough and called A-Qiang aside. "If you like her, reply to the message openly, chat a bit. We drift in space year-round; it's not easy to meet someone you can talk to. As long as it doesn't affect work and you don't get scammed, I have no objections."

A-Qiang hemmed and hawed for a long time before finally blurting out, "...Boss, the parts she uses... the models are pretty old. Next time we pass a supply station, I want to... buy some new spare parts... maybe give them to her..."

Lin Feng laughed. "Alright, approved. Deducted from your next mission bonus."

A-Qiang: "...Oh."

Though the process was awkward, A-Qiang seemed to have genuinely sparked the beginnings of a cross-stellar, technology-hobby-based "online romance."

This added a touch of steel-infused warmth to the adventure and crisis-filled life in space.

Leng Xingyun's injuries were basically healed. Her "Phantom," through the day-and-night efforts of Wrench's team, also completed repairs to the main structure and replacement of the thrusters. While it still needed time to fully regain combat capability, it could at least travel alongside the "Stardust" now.

One day, Lin Feng called a core member meeting in the conference room. Leng Xingyun was also invited to attend.

This was her first time formally participating in an internal meeting of the "Stardust." She still wore her repaired combat suit, sitting coolly in a corner like an observer.

Chapter 129 Cold Nebula Meeting!

Lin Feng first presented the currently gathered intelligence regarding the "Shadow Association" and the "Shadows," then looked at Leng Xingyun.

"Miss Leng, can you tell us now? About that bracer, and why they're hunting you?"

Everyone's gaze focused on Leng Xingyun.

She remained silent for a moment, seemingly weighing her options, before finally speaking, her voice cool and concise. "This bracer is a family heirloom passed down through my lineage. Legend says it contains a fragment of a star chart pointing to the origin site of a lost civilization—the 'Watchers'."

"The Watchers?!" Everyone was startled. They had heard that name from the ancient warnings before—the advanced observer civilization that viewed technological civilizations as a threat!

"Just one of the legends," Leng Xingyun added. "More importantly, family records mention that deep within that origin site, there might be clues or weapons to counter the 'Void Erosion'."

"Void Erosion..." Lin Feng recalled the ultimate threat mentioned in the outline. "So, the Shadow Association wants it to either..."

"Either to claim it for themselves, or to prevent anyone else from obtaining it," Leng Xingyun said coldly. "They clearly believe the legend is true."

"Then what are you looking for it for?" Flea asked curiously.

Leng Xingyun glanced at him, her eyes sharp. "That's my business."

The meeting atmosphere stiffened momentarily.

Wu Yu quickly tried to smooth things over. "Ah, whatever the reason, we're all in the same boat now! Those 'Shadows' definitely won't just let this go!"

"Exactly," Su Wanqing nodded. "We need to formulate a plan for the next step. Do we continue hiding, or take some initiative?"

Lin Feng rapped his knuckles on the table. "Hiding isn't a solution. Since we're already targeted, we might as well be proactive. Miss Leng, based on the star chart fragment you have, where does it point to next?"

Leng Xingyun hesitated briefly, then still projected an encrypted piece of star chart information onto the table. It showed a dangerous region located in a distant star sector, known as the "Wandering Nebula."

"The Wandering Nebula..." Wrench frowned. "That place is notoriously labyrinthine, with intense electromagnetic storms and gravity anomaly zones. Easy to get in, hard to get out."

"But also a good place to hide secrets," Lin Feng's eyes flashed with interest. "Besides, I recall intelligence from the Snail Shell outpost mentioned that the extreme-environment-resistant equipment Jingtianxing procured earlier was likely intended for a similar type of location."

The threads of clues seemed to be intertwining again.

"We need a more detailed star chart of the Wandering Nebula's interior and safe navigation channels, even if they're just rumors," Lin Feng looked at Li Wei and Flea.

Li Wei immediately nodded. "I'll go inquire! Intelligence on such dangerous places is scarce, but there are always some money-over-life folks who know something!"

Flea also rubbed his hands eagerly. "Black market star charts and such, leave it to me!"

Finally, Lin Feng looked at Leng Xingyun. "Miss Leng, your ship isn't fully repaired yet. Acting alone is too dangerous. Since our objectives align for now, how about temporary cooperation? We provide protection and resources, you share the star chart and information about the Watchers. After we find the place, we each take what we need. How about it?"

Leng Xingyun looked at Lin Feng, then at the others in the conference room—noisy and bickering, but their eyes all held a kind of reliable resilience. She had struggled alone for too long and knew well how difficult the road ahead was.

"...Fine," she finally nodded, though her tone remained icy. "But don't expect me to babysit you."

Lin Feng smiled. "Deal! Welcome aboard temporarily, Consultant Leng."

Thus, Leng Xingyun, in an awkward manner, temporarily integrated into the Stardust's crew. Their next target pointed directly toward that mysterious and dangerous "Wandering Nebula."

With the objective set, the entire Stardust bustled with activity once more, preparing for the journey to the Wandering Nebula.

Wrench's team conducted a final comprehensive inspection and maintenance of both spacecraft, especially installing additional energy stabilizers and shielding layers to counter the intense electromagnetic storms likely encountered within the nebula.

Wu Yu and Li Wei, armed with a long procurement list, visited the Snail Shell outpost again, stockpiling large quantities of long-shelf-life food, high-grade energy blocks, and special equipment for extreme environments.

Su Wanqing and Doctor Chen Wei buried themselves in researching all available data on the Wandering Nebula. Though most of it was vague and contradictory, they still tried to analyze some patterns and potential dangers from it.

Flea and Old Scar reinforced security patrols, guarding against possible retaliation from the Shadow Association.

Leng Xingyun spent most of her time still in the repair bay, assisting Wrench with tuning her Phantom. Occasionally, she would have brief but efficient exchanges with Su Wanqing regarding some details of the star chart.

She still spoke very little, but that ice-cold, keep-your-distance aura seemed to have melted just a tiny bit—at the very least, she no longer refused offered food and water.

Amidst all this busyness, only one little creature seemed somewhat unusual—the Blue Fluffball.

It became somewhat restless, no longer content to stay peacefully in its glowing moss nest.

Instead, it often ran to the viewport, tapping the glass with its little paws, making soft, anxious-sounding "coo-coo" noises toward the dark starscape outside. This reaction was especially pronounced when the ship adjusted its orientation, roughly aligning toward the direction of the Wandering Nebula.

"What's up with the boss?" Wu Yu wondered, trying to pet it, only to be impatiently swatted away by the Blue Fluffball's tail.

"It seems... it doesn't like that direction?" Little Ears said worriedly.

Doctor Chen Wei took out a scanner. "Bio-electrical waves show anxiety and... longing? Complex emotions. What is it sensing?"

Lin Feng picked up the restless Blue Fluffball, stroking its soft fur, and looked toward the direction of that seemingly calm yet actually perilous nebula.

"Do you also think there's something tasty over there? Or is it... something over there that scares you?"

Chapter 130: The Cosmic Color Palette!

The Blue Fluffball rubbed its wet nose against Lin Feng's palm, continuing to gaze at the starry sky, cooing softly.

"Alright," Lin Feng smiled, "whatever is over there, we have to go check it out. Who knows, we might actually find something good to add to your meals."

With all preparations complete, the "Stardust" and the "Phantom," now mostly restored to operational capability, slowly departed from the ruin-filled space that had given them a brief respite but also brought new troubles.

The two ships flew one after the other, maintaining a defensive formation, and began a new jump towards the direction of the "Wandering Nebula."

Outside the viewport, the stars stretched into long lines once more. Everyone knew the journey ahead would be even more perilous. They would not only have to face harsh natural conditions but also remain constantly vigilant against the mysterious "Shadow Association" and the potential secrets of the "Watchers."

On the bridge, the Blue Fluffball finally quieted down, snuggled in Lin Feng's arms and fell asleep, but its tiny claws still tightly gripped the corner of his clothes.

Lin Feng looked at the sleeping Blue Fluffball, then at the nebula on the screen that was getting closer and closer, resembling a vast, colorful fog. His gaze was profound.

"Let's go, brothers, and... Consultant Leng," he said softly,

"Let's go see what kind of monsters and demons are hiding in that nebula, or perhaps... a cosmic-level feast."

After several short-range jumps, the "Stardust" and the "Phantom" arrived at the periphery of the "Wandering Nebula."

The sight before them was breathtaking.

It wasn't the pitch-black expanse one might imagine, but rather like a giant overturned color palette. Dazzlingly colorful interstellar dust and gases stretched for light-years, weaving into an endless, slowly rotating veil of colored mist. Pink, purple, blue, and green gas bands drifted like gossamer.

Countless newly born, blindingly bright blue young stars dotted the scene, along with some faintly visible star clusters shrouded in dust.

"Whoa..." Wu Yu pressed against the viewport, his mouth agape, "This place... looks like a cosmic-level candy factory exploded!"

"It's beautiful, alright," Wrench said, looking at the wildly fluctuating data on the sensors, his brow furrowed,

"But it's also deadly. Intense electromagnetic radiation, chaotic gravity fields, and high-speed dust particles... Shield energy consumption is 300% higher than in normal space!"

A communication from the "Phantom" came through, Leng Xingyun's cool voice sounding: "According to my star chart fragments, the entrance is behind that huge blue vortex ahead. But the energy turbulence there is the strongest."

Sure enough, at the edge of the nebula, a massive vortex composed of blue gas was slowly rotating. Powerful energy fluctuations emanated from its center, like a giant maw ready to devour anything that came near.

"Stardust takes the lead, 'Phantom' follows closely behind, maintain minimum safe distance. Power down all non-essential systems to minimum, prioritize energy for shields and engines," Lin Feng ordered. "We'll squeeze our way in slowly."

Like small fish swimming against the current, the two ships cautiously approached the blue vortex. The moment they touched its edge, the ships began to pitch violently, as if they had entered a raging sea. Dense colored dust particles slammed into the shields, creating ripples of light and crackling sounds.

"Shield energy continuously dropping! 85%... 80%..." Sun Wen reported nervously.

"Stabilize engine output! Don't let the turbulence throw us off course!" Lin Feng gripped the control stick tightly.

Suddenly, an invisible, distorted gravity anomaly zone appeared ahead like a tripwire! The "Stardust" lurched violently, the hull emitting a teeth-grating metallic groan!

"Left engine overload! Balance compromised!" Wrench shouted!

The "Phantom" was in worse shape. It wasn't fully repaired to begin with, and under this sudden gravitational pull, it instantly lost control, spinning towards the depths of the vortex!

"Leng Xingyun!" Lin Feng exclaimed.

At this critical moment, an auxiliary thruster port on the side of the "Stardust," originally used for deploying probes, suddenly opened. A grappling hook device was fired out with force—it was Flea! He had anticipated this situation and prepared in advance!

The hook accurately caught onto an external mounting point on the "Phantom"!

"Wrench! Maximum reverse thrust! Pull her back!" Lin Feng roared!

The "Stardust's" engines roared, wrestling with the chaotic gravity field, forcefully pulling the nearly swept-away "Phantom" back bit by bit, stabilizing its posture.

There was silence on the comms for a few seconds before Leng Xingyun's slightly breathless voice came through: "...Thanks."

"No problem!" Flea's smug voice chimed in, "For a fee! Remember to put it on my tab, Consultant Leng!"

Leng Xingyun: "..."

After a difficult struggle, the two ships finally made it through the most dangerous edge region of the vortex, entering the interior of the nebula.

The scene inside was even more bizarre and kaleidoscopic. Visibility was extremely low, the colored fog was so thick it seemed impenetrable, and the sensors were practically blind, relying only on the most basic optical observation and sonar.

"This damned place... it's like a giant, colorful maze," Wu Yu murmured, looking at the dense fog outside the window.

"According to the star chart fragments, we need to head towards the largest gravitational source emitting pulse signals inside," Leng Xingyun provided guidance again. "But the specific path... we'll have to figure it out ourselves."

"Then we'll feel our way through slowly," Lin Feng sighed. "All hands, maintain highest alert. In here, the chance of hitting something is much higher than being shot by an enemy."

Just as they were navigating with difficulty through a cloud of purple dust, Little Ears suddenly shouted: "There's a signal! A very faint... music signal?"

Everyone was stunned. Music in this godforsaken place?

Sure enough, the sensors picked up a fragmented, distorted, waltz-like melody, as if from an old record player, drifting through the colored mist, appearing incredibly eerie.

"What's going on?" Flea felt a chill down his spine. "Are cosmic ghosts throwing a dance party?"

That bizarre, intermittent waltz music lingered in the colored mist like a specter, sending a cold shiver down everyone's back.

"Trace the signal source!" Lin Feng ordered, simultaneously gripping the weapon control stick tighter.

"The signal source is erratic... seems to be moving... not fast..." Sun Wen tried hard to lock on, but the interference was too strong.

Leng Xingyun from the "Phantom" suddenly spoke up: "It might be 'Nebula Jellyfish'."

"Jellyfish? More jellyfish?" Wu Yu remembered the energy-sucking creatures from the nest. "They're here too?"

"Different," Leng Xingyun explained. "They are unique lifeforms of the 'Wandering Nebula'. Their shells can absorb and reflect energy waves of specific frequencies. Occasionally, they play back old signals they've absorbed, including some... distress signals from abandoned ship black boxes or crew entertainment records."

"So... what we're hearing is a bunch of jellyfish playing 'record players'?" Flea found this explanation even more horrifying.

"You could put it that way. They are usually harmless, but best avoided. Their group activities can sometimes trigger localized energy turbulence," Leng Xingyun added.

Sure enough, as the ships slowly advanced, some huge, translucent, jellyfish-like creatures appeared faintly in the mist ahead. Their shells shimmered with iridescent colors, their long tentacles trailing behind them. That eerie music was indeed emanating from within them. There were so many, they almost formed a barrier.

"Can't go around them, the area is too vast," Su Wanqing said, looking at the scan map (though most of it was static). "Forcing our way through might disturb them."

Chapter 131 Long Live Interstellar Rock and Roll!

"Try this." Lin Feng thought for a moment. "Wanqing, analyze the main frequency of that music, then have our external speakers play a piece of... hmm... completely different style music. See if we can interfere with them, or make them move aside on their own."

"Play what?" Su Wanqing asked.

Lin Feng grinned. "Something passionate! Play that song 'Long Live Interstellar Rock!' at maximum volume!"

Instantly, intense, rhythmically powerful electronic rock music blasted through the ship's external speakers, exploding into this quiet, eerie, colorful space!

The effect was immediate!

Those previously leisurely "Nebula Jellyfish" shrank their massive bodies violently as if stepped on their tails, the waltz music they emitted instantly distorting into a mess of noise! They seemed to utterly detest this noisy music, beginning to panic and clumsily move their bodies, scattering towards both sides!

A narrow passageway was cleared!

"Haha! It works!" Flea was delighted. "These jellyfish have pretty classical taste!"

The two spacecraft quickly seized this opportunity, speeding through the passage cleared by the jellyfish swarm. Only after completely leaving the eerie waltz and the lingering echoes of rock music behind did everyone let out a sigh of relief.

"Lady Leng, you're quite knowledgeable," Lin Feng said to Leng Xingyun over comms. "You even know what kind of music the jellyfish in this nebula like?"

Leng Xingyun responded coolly, "Some family records mentioned it. In this nebula, knowledge is more important than weapons."

The subsequent voyage remained full of challenges. They encountered suddenly appearing ion storms and had to take shelter inside a massive, hollowed-out ancient asteroid fragment;

They carefully navigated around a colorful dust cloud that continuously emitted lethal radiation;

They even saw the wreckage of an exploration ship from some unknown era, half-crystallized, silently testifying to the dangers here.

During the process, Leng Xingyun occasionally provided some key information hints, like the precursors to certain energy turbulence or the habits of certain dangerous cosmic lifeforms. Her knowledge indeed helped the team avert danger multiple times.

But she still maintained her distance, silently piloting the "Phantom" behind them most of the time, like a silent guide rather than a team member.

A few days later, they gradually penetrated deeper into the nebula's heartland. According to the guidance from Leng Xingyun's star charts, that powerful pulse signal source was getting closer and closer.

However, just as they passed through a relatively thin green gas band, the sensors suddenly emitted a sharp alarm—not an environmental hazard, but a weapons lock!

From behind several massive, seemingly torn-apart starship wreckage fragments ahead, three pirate ships suddenly swung into view! They were painted with ferocious skull insignias and modified into bizarre shapes!

Their gun ports were firmly locked onto the "Stardust" and "Phantom" that had just emerged!

A brutally crude voice exploded over the public channel:

"This mountain is my road! This tree is my plant! If you wish to pass from here! Leave your money for the fare! You fat sheep up ahead! Stop your ships immediately, hand over all valuables and women! Or we'll blast you to dust!"

Everyone: "..."

Flea picked at his ear. "Did I hear that right? Are there still pirates with such outdated business lines these days?"

Wu Yu: "Have they been hiding in this nebula too long, cut off from the world?"

Lin Feng looked at the other side's ships, which appeared rundown but seemed to have considerable firepower, then glanced at the complex surrounding environment, and sighed:

"Really... can't go anywhere without running into these clueless types."

Facing this bunch of pirates who seemed to have escaped from a museum, the "Stardust" and "Phantom" slowly came to a stop.

Over the public channel, that crude voice was still shouting: "Hurry up! What's the holdup! Hand over the energy credits, rare ores, and pretty girls! This lord's patience is limited!"

Fighting back laughter, Flea responded over the comms, deliberately putting on a scared tone: "G... good sirs! Don't fire! We're just passing merchant ships, we don't have anything valuable! Just some nutrient paste and used parts..."

"Bullshit!" the pirate leader cursed. "I see your ships are decent sized! You must have goods! Cut the crap! One more word and we'll blast your engines first!"

Lin Feng gave Su Wanqing a meaningful look. Su Wanqing immediately began silently scanning the structure and energy cores of the enemy ships.

"Alright, alright... we'll hand them over, we'll hand them over..." Flea continued acting. "But good sir, this place is so remote, what can you even rob out here?"

"Hmph!" The pirate leader seemed quite proud. "That's what you don't get! This 'Wandering Nebula' is a treasure trove! Often there are overconfident explorers who run in here to die! We lie in wait here, specifically picking off greenhorns like you! Don't try to get chummy! Hurry up and open your cargo bays!"

By now, Su Wanqing had completed preliminary scans and whispered, "Three ships, highly modified but technologically outdated. Shield generator locations are old-fashioned, energy core protection is weak. Main cannons charge slowly, but they have many point-defense weapons."

Lin Feng understood the situation. He took over the comms, his tone becoming calm. "Friend, let's negotiate. We really don't have much loot, how about we each go our own way? A fight benefits no one. If it attracts other things in the nebula, like those 'singing jellyfish' or 'Shadows' or something, that wouldn't be fun."

He deliberately mentioned "Shadows," wanting to test their reaction.

The pirate side fell silent for a moment, seeming to react to the word "Shadows," but then the leader became even more aggressive: "Stop trying to scare us! What Shadows or no Shadows! I've been working here for over a decade, who have I ever been afraid of?! Last warning! Don't open the bays, or we fire!"

"Fine." Lin Feng sighed, seeming very helpless. "Then... we'll play by your rules. Wu Yu, prepare to open the cargo bay door... just a crack is enough."

Wu Yu was momentarily stunned, then seeing the look in Lin Feng's eyes, he immediately understood. "O... okay, Boss..."

A small cargo bay door at the stern of the "Stardust" slowly opened a crack.

Seeing this, the pirate ships excitedly moved closer, seemingly wanting to see what was inside.

Now!

"Fire!" Lin Feng sharply ordered!

The "Stardust" and the already-prepared "Phantom" instantly erupted! Their targets were not the enemy's main cannons, but the shield generator and engine areas marked by Su Wanqing!

Precise energy beams and several high-velocity armor-piercing rounds screamed out!

The pirate ships never expected these "fat sheep" to dare resist, and with such cunning, vicious attacks! Their outdated shields were torn apart like paper, and their engine sections erupted in massive sparks!

"Damn it! They're tough nuts! Fire! Give them..." The pirate leader's roar was drowned out by explosions.

A brief, one-sided battle began.

The pirate ships had heavy firepower, but their technology was outdated, and their coordination was poor. Against the "Stardust's" formidable shields and the "Phantom's" agile, precise shooting, they had no chance to fight back.

A few minutes later, one pirate ship's engines were completely destroyed, losing power. Another had its shields overloaded, its bridge smoking, forced to surrender. The last one, seeing the situation turn bad, tried to turn and run, but was disabled by a precise pinpoint shot from the "Phantom" that severed its thrusters, leaving it paralyzed on the spot.

Flea, along with a few security team members in protective suits, boarded the surrendered pirate ship. Soon, he escorted the dejected pirate leader (a burly-faced, sloppily dressed human) back to the "Stardust" via the docking passage.

The pirate leader, upon seeing Lin Feng, immediately knelt down. "Big brother! Great lord! Spare our lives! We were blind, didn't recognize Mount Tai! We offended you! We were wrong! Take the ships and everything! Just spare our lives!"

Lin Feng sat in his chair, looking down at him. "Now can we have a proper talk? In this nebula, you just do this kind of banditry?"

The pirate leader said with a tearful face, "It's... not entirely that... sometimes we also do odd jobs for the big shots... handle some 'dirty work'..."

Chapter 132 Pirate Robbery? I'll rob you first!

"Big shot? What kind of big shot?" Lin Feng keenly seized the key phrase.

"Just... just... some mysterious fellows, very generous with payments but also have many demands... Sometimes they have us keep watch on the outskirts of the nebula, or... take care of people who shouldn't be coming in..." The pirate leader's eyes darted around nervously.

"Is it called the 'Shadow Association'?" Lin Feng suddenly asked.

The pirate leader shuddered violently, his face instantly turning deathly pale. "You... how do you know?! No, no... I don't know any association..."

His reaction said everything.

Lin Feng and Su Wanqing exchanged a glance. It seemed the "Shadow Association" was indeed active here.

Seeing the pirate leader scared out of his wits, Lin Feng knew the time had come to squeeze out valuable information.

He had Flea take the man to a separate cabin, handed him a cup of water (synthesized water, of course), and said in a "kindly" tone, "Don't be nervous, we're just curious. Tell us everything you know about the 'Shadow Association'... or rather, those mysterious people who hired you. If you talk well, you might even get a ride out of this hellhole with us."

The pirate leader held the cup, his hands still trembling. He hesitated for a moment before his will to survive ultimately won out. "I'll talk... I'll talk... Actually, we don't know much. They never show themselves, always contact us through encrypted communications. They pay promptly too, always in hard currency energy credits."

"What did they have you do?" Lin Feng asked.

"Mainly... surveillance," the pirate leader recalled. "They had us guard near several possible entrances to the nebula, record the model, features, and time of any ships entering, especially... scientific research vessels or exploration ships that looked like they were searching for something. Then report back to them."

"What else?"

"And... occasionally they'd have us... 'clean up' some small targets they specified. Usually solo adventurers or small treasure-hunting teams." The pirate leader's voice dropped. "We only handled the fighting. Sometimes they'd send those... black, impossibly fast 'shadow' ships to finish up and inspect..."

Flea chimed in from the side, "The kind that ambushed Miss Leng?"

The pirate leader looked blank. "Miss Leng? I don't know... But we've encountered it once or twice, their 'shadows' handling the aftermath. The methods were... terrifyingly clean and efficient."

Lin Feng pondered for a moment before asking again, "Do they have any bases inside the nebula? Or have they ever had you deliver anything inside?"

The pirate leader shook his head. "No. They never let us go deep into the nebula, said it was too dangerous. We only operated at the edges at most. But..." He paused, as if remembering something. "Once, I overheard a word during their communication... something like... 'observation outpost'? It seemed to be deep in the nebula, but they didn't elaborate."

Observation outpost? That was likely one of their targets.

After asking for more details and confirming the man truly didn't know more, Lin Feng had Flea take him away and lock him up with the other pirates for temporary custody.

"It seems the 'Shadow Association's' control here is tighter than we imagined," Su Wanqing analyzed. "They use these local pirates as peripheral eyes and hired muscle."

"And that 'observation outpost'..." Lin Feng looked toward the depths of the nebula. "Is probably the destination indicated by Leng Xingyun's star chart, and a place the 'Shadow Association' values."

Leng Xingyun's voice came through the internal comm (she was clearly listening in). "If the 'Shadow Association' has already established an outpost, it means they've likely grasped part of the secret, or are attempting to take control. We must move faster."

Just then, Little Ears, who was responsible for monitoring the environment, suddenly issued a warning. "Detecting multiple high-speed signals approaching! Extreme velocity! Signal signature... very similar to the 'shadow' ships from the ruins!"

Everyone's hearts tightened! Speak of the devil?

"They found us this quickly?" Flea immediately rushed to the control console.

"They're not targeting us," Su Wanqing said, watching the sensors. "Their targets... are those pirate ships we disabled!"

Outside the viewport, several familiar, blurry black phantoms appeared like ghosts, mercilessly firing precise energy beams at the three pirate ships that had lost power!

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The three pirate ships didn't even have time to send any signals before transforming into three massive fireballs amidst violent explosions, fragments scattering everywhere!

Cleaning house! Ruthlessly efficient!

After completing their destruction mission, those "shadow" ships didn't hesitate for a second, instantly turning and vanishing into the colorful nebula mist like ink drops dissolving into seawater, arriving quickly and leaving just as fast.

The entire process took less than a minute.

The bridge fell silent. The other side's ruthlessness and efficiency were chilling.

The pirate leader locked in the brig saw this through the monitor and fainted on the spot.

"Damn..." Flea cursed. "Those bastards are real hyenas, coming to silence witnesses as soon as they catch the scent."

Lin Feng's expression was grave. "They definitely spotted us too. The reason they didn't attack us is either because they think we're not easy to deal with, or... they have bigger plans and don't want to alert us."

He stood up and looked toward the direction the pulse signal was coming from. "Regardless, we have no way back now. Increase speed, head straight for that 'observation outpost'! We must figure out what's really there before the 'Shadow Association' can react!"

The "Stardust" and the "Phantom" set off again, heading toward the deepest part of the nebula. The surrounding colors grew increasingly intense, the energy environment more hostile, as if the entire nebula was resisting the intrusion of outsiders.

And this time, they knew that lurking in the darkness weren't just natural dangers, but more cunning, more brutal enemies watching and waiting.

Chapter 133: Terrifying Suction!

The Choice Between the Energy Vortex and the "Phantom"

The deeper they ventured into the "Wandering Nebula," the more the environmental conditions deteriorated exponentially.

The colorful dust clouds were as thick as liquid, reducing visibility to almost zero. The ship could only inch forward, relying on the most basic sonar and inertial navigation to feel its way. Intense electromagnetic storms raged almost without pause, savagely battering the shields. Energy readings continued to drop, forcing Wrench to take turns shutting down non-critical systems to conserve power.

Even more terrifying were the elusive energy vortices and gravity wells. They lurked behind the dazzling mist like cosmic quicksand; once caught, it almost certainly meant destruction.

The "Stardust," relying on its rugged hull and Wrench's masterful piloting skills, was barely holding on. But the "Phantom" following behind was struggling more and more. Already damaged and unrepaired, in these extreme conditions, its hull groaned in agony from time to time, its shield flickering erratically as if on the verge of sputtering out.

"My engine output is unstable... shield generator overheating alarm..." Leng Xingyun's voice came through the heavy interference, still calm, but a thread of tension was audible.

"Stay close! Follow my wake! Avoid that red turbulence zone to port!" Lin Feng stared intently at the scanner (though it was mostly static snow), continuously issuing commands.

Suddenly, an unprecedented, massive energy vortex appeared ahead! It was woven from countless streams of energy in myriad colors, blooming within the nebula like a flower of death, emanating a terrifying suction force!

The "Stardust" banked sharply, skimming perilously close to the vortex's edge, its hull shuddering violently!

But the "Phantom" following close behind wasn't so lucky. Forced to evade another sudden burst of energy turbulence, its maneuver was a fraction too slow, and it was instantly caught by the vortex's edge gravity!

The "Phantom" lurched downward, uncontrollably pulled toward the vortex's heart!

"Leng Xingyun! Maximum thrust! Break free!" Lin Feng roared!

"I'm trying! Not enough power!" Leng Xingyun's voice held a rare trace of urgency. The Phantom's engines spewed blinding blue light, but it couldn't overcome the immense gravitational pull, still sliding inch by inch toward the abyss of destruction.

The "Stardust" attempted to fire a tractor beam, but the powerful energy interference made it impossible to lock on!

"No good! If we get any closer, we'll be pulled in too!" Wrench cried out urgently.

Watching the "Phantom" about to be completely swallowed, Leng Xingyun made her decision.

"Lin Feng!" Her voice suddenly became abnormally calm. "My ship is done for. You proceed. I've transmitted the target coordinates to you."

"What kind of bullshit are you talking!" Lin Feng cursed. "Hold on! I'll figure out a way to pull you out!"

"No time." Leng Xingyun cut him off. "Remember our deal. Find the 'Observation Outpost.' What's inside... is very important to me."

The next moment, instead of continuing to struggle, the "Phantom" suddenly swung its bow around. It concentrated all remaining engine power to a specific angle aimed toward the vortex's center, and then... actively detonated a fuel tank for an auxiliary thruster located at the ship's stern!

BOOM!

The explosion's shockwave gave the "Phantom" a brief, reverse thrust, launching it like a projectile. It was violently ejected from the vortex's gravitational edge, hurling sideways toward a relatively stable patch of space!

But simultaneously, the explosion severely damaged its aft structure, leaving it completely powerless. It drifted like a piece of scrap metal, electrical sparks dancing across multiple sections of its hull.

"Leng Xingyun!" Lin Feng gasped in shock.

"I'm fine... not dead yet, for now." Leng Xingyun's voice came through, laced with panting and electrical static. "My escape pod is still functional... I'll find a place to crash-land... Wait for you to come back... or I'll find my own way out."

Her meaning was clear: she had abandoned the "Phantom," choosing to eject and seek a sliver of survival in this dangerous nebula, rather than be a burden to the "Stardust."

"Damn it!" Lin Feng slammed a fist on the console. He knew this was the most rational choice at the moment, but it felt incredibly frustrating.

"Boss Lin, what do we do now?" Flea asked. "Go look for her?"

Lin Feng looked at the scanner, at the direction where the "Phantom" had last disappeared, then at the target coordinates Leng Xingyun had sent—coordinates that were now tantalizingly close. His face darkened as he thought for a few seconds.

"No." He finally gritted his teeth. "Proceed. Find that 'Observation Outpost' at maximum speed! This is the chance she risked her life to create for us. We can't waste it!"

He paused, then added, "Deploy that 'signal-boosting spore' Little Ears just cultivated! Hopefully it can last a while longer in this hellhole, leave her a marker."

"Understood!"

The "Stardust" hesitated no longer. Engines at full power, it charged toward the final objective, pushing against the immense environmental pressure.

And in the colorful mist behind them, an escape pod flickered with faint signal lights, like a speck of dust in a storm, searching for a landing point. Leng Xingyun's solo survival challenge had begun.

Chapter 134: A "Tree" Composed of a Star!

After escaping the energy vortex, the "Stardust" struggled forward along the coordinates Leng Xingyun had finally provided, heading deeper into the heart of the nebula.

The concentration of energy around them was astonishingly high, the colorful mist almost condensing into a liquid state. The ship sailed as if through thick syrup, each inch of progress exceptionally strenuous.

"Shield energy below 40%! Structural stress approaching critical limits!"

Wrench's voice carried an unprecedeted tension. "Boss, if we go any further, the ship might not hold!"

Lin Feng stared at the increasingly close, star-like dazzling pulse signal source on the sensors and gritted his teeth. "Shut down all non-essential systems! Reduce life support to minimum standards! Divert all energy to shields and engines! We must see what's there!"

The interior lights of the ship dimmed, leaving only the necessary consoles illuminated.

Everyone held their breath, feeling the unsettling vibrations and groans transmitted through the hull.

Finally, they broke through the final layer of dense, blindingly white energy curtain!

The sight before them robbed everyone on the bridge of speech.

There was no anticipated planet, space station, or massive structure. At the core of the nebula was a relatively calm, enormous spherical void. Suspended at the center of this void was a... "tree" that defied description.

It was not composed of matter, but woven from countless flowing, shimmering streams of data and pure energy that glowed with billions of lights!

Its "roots" plunged deep into the surrounding energy mist, constantly drawing energy from the nebula.

The "trunk" was immensely thick, flowing with incomprehensibly complex runes and star charts.

The "canopy" was lush with branches and leaves, each "leaf" being a miniature model of a nebula or galaxy, slowly cycling through birth and destruction!

The light emitted by this "Data Tree" illuminated the entire spherical space and also lit up a silver-gray, intricately structured hexagonal space station floating beneath it—that must be the "Observation Outpost"!

"My heavens..."

Doctor Chen Wei stared at the screen, mesmerized. "This... is this a living model of the universe? Or an... information singularity? It's so beautiful... so unbelievable!"

"Detecting extremely strong information radiation... cannot parse... but it doesn't seem actively hostile," Su Wanqing quickly analyzed.

However, their arrival had clearly triggered something. Several "branches" of the Data Tree swayed gently, projecting a few soft beams of light that scanned over the "Stardust." Simultaneously, several lights lit up on the surface of the silver-gray space station, multiple entry/exit ports opened, and several... sleek, highly technological-looking frigates painted with the "Shadow Association" emblem flew out!

"There are guards after all!" Flea shouted. "Prepare for combat!"

"Not so fast!" Lin Feng stopped him. "They're not firing immediately... seems like they're... verifying identity?"

Indeed, the opposing fleet merely fanned out, blocking the path to the space station and the Data Tree, taking no further action. A cold, processed communication signal patched through.

"Unauthorized visitors. This is a Shadow Association highest-level restricted zone. Please state your identity and purpose immediately, or you will be considered hostile."

Lin Feng's mind raced. A frontal assault was definitely out of the question; the enemy's strength was unknown, and that "tree" looked formidable. Lying? They weren't pirates; they wouldn't be easily fooled.

He glanced at the coordinate information Leng Xingyun had last sent and suddenly had a flash of inspiration. Speaking into the comm with the calmest tone he could muster, he said, "We are the 'Stardust.' Commissioned by the holder of the 'key' to come and conduct 'observation.'"

He deliberately kept it vague, mentioning the "key" to hint at the wristguard and the "observation" function of the outpost.

There was a moment of silence on the other end, as if they were verifying something. Then the cold voice spoke again. "Key' holder? Verification code."

Lin Feng's heart sank. He didn't have a verification code! Just as he was preparing to take a risky gamble or attempt a forced breakout—

Suddenly, the massive Data Tree reacted again! An even thicker beam of light projected down, not targeting the ship, but coalescing in the void into a line of clear, pulsating ancient script!

The content of the script was precisely part of the complex patterns on Leng Xingyun's wristguard!

The Shadow Association fleet also seemed stunned. That cold voice carried a trace of disbelief. "...Highest authority verification... passed?! How is that possible..."

Seizing the opportunity, Lin Feng immediately said, "It seems the verification passed. May we proceed?"

The other side fell silent again, as if internal disagreement had arisen. Finally, the voice spoke. "...Authority confirmed. Permission granted for one vessel to dock at the outpost's external dock. Entry limited to three personnel. Do not approach the core area of the 'Root Tree.' Any suspicious activity will be met with lethal

force."

A narrow gap was cleared in the path to the space station.

"We succeeded?!" Wu Yu said, disbelieving.

"Don't celebrate too soon."

Lin Feng's expression was grave. "They're only temporarily fooled, and the restrictions are severe. Flea, you're coming down with me. Wanqing, you stay on the ship for support, ready to flee at any moment."

The "Stardust" slowly approached the silver-gray space station, like a small fish swimming toward a giant beast's maw.

And the enormous Data Tree continued to silently flow with the mysteries of the universe.

The "Stardust" cautiously docked at the designated external dock of the "Observation Outpost." The dock area was cold and empty, devoid of any human presence aside from a few automated guide robots.

Lin Feng disembarked with Flea and Su Wanqing (who insisted on accompanying them, responsible for technical analysis). The three wore lightweight but fully functional protective suits, vigilantly observing their surroundings.

A heavy alloy door slid open silently, revealing a brightly lit but equally silent corridor inside. The air smelled of disinfectant and ozone.

"Stay close, keep comms open," Lin Feng said in a low voice, taking the lead.

The corridor was lined with various sealed chambers. Through observation windows, they could see precise instruments and dormant drones inside. The entire outpost felt like a massive, automated beehive, lacking any "human" presence.

Following the guidance signs, they arrived at a circular hall. At the center of the hall was a massive holographic projection—a miniature model of the external Data Tree, with countless points of light flowing among its branches and leaves.

A blurred, light-constructed humanoid projection appeared in the center of the hall and emitted the familiar cold voice. "Welcome to Observation Outpost Seven. According to your authority, you may access part of the non-core database for limited observation. Please abide by the regulations. Do not attempt to interface with any physical ports."

It seemed they were determined not to show themselves, using only an AI for reception.

"We want to understand this 'tree,'" Lin Feng got straight to the point.

"The Root Tree is a regional node of the 'Watchers' network, responsible for collecting, organizing, and uploading data on the material, energy, and information evolution of this star sector," the AI projection explained without emotion. "It is not a physical entity, but a projection of higher-dimensional information into our physical universe."

"Upload to whom? The 'Watchers'? Where are they?" Flea couldn't help but ask.

"Insufficient authority. Cannot answer."

"Then what is the 'Shadow Association' doing here? Studying it? Or trying to control it?" Lin Feng pressed.

"The Shadow Association is a temporary cooperative partner of this outpost, responsible for basic maintenance and security. Their specific research objectives cannot be disclosed due to insufficient authority."

The AI's responses were watertight, clearly bound by strict restrictions.

Su Wanqing was more concerned with technical questions. "These data streams... how is cross-dimensional stable projection achieved? What is the energy source?"

"Involves core Watchers technology. Insufficient authority. Cannot answer."

Almost every key question received the same reply. They were allowed to "observe" but denied any substantive information.

Suddenly, Su Wanqing subtly tugged his sleeve and pointed at her data pad. On the pad, a tiny, encrypted message from Leng Xingyun popped up.

[Outpost lower levels, energy core control room. Backup interface X-7. Attempt physical connection. Beware of guards.]

Leng Xingyun! She was alive! And she seemed familiar with this place! How did she get the message through?

Lin Feng's heart jolted, but his expression remained unchanged. He gave Flea and Su Wanqing a meaningful look, then said to the AI projection, "The view here is spectacular. We'd like to observe a while longer."

"Proceed. Time remaining: 29 standard minutes." The AI projection finished speaking and vanished.

The three pretended to linger before the holographic projection, watching intently, but their minds were racing. How could they infiltrate the lower-level control room without alerting the AI and the guards?

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