

The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a futuristic city. The buildings are angular and layered, creating a sense of depth and complexity. The color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with some highlights in a muted orange or yellow. In the lower-left foreground, a character is seen from behind, wearing a dark suit with a prominent red glowing light on their back. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and high-tech.

by Lazy Cliché

Superstars of Tomorrow



QIDIAN
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SUPERSTARS OF TOMORROW

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Chapter 101

Ambassador, an Even More Natural Image

After finding out Curly Hair was not from Muzhou, many people began to voice their thoughts.

"Such a good dog that was born for sheep herding. It is a pity it is from a foreign continent. Are there such great pastures in other continents? Are dogs loved as much in other continents compared to Muzhou?! Therefore, this sort of dog should be taken care of by the people of Muzhou!"

"Someone else's dog? Buy it! It is merely 50 million dollars. To many farm owners of large farms, this is just an insignificant amount."

But very quickly, they realized Curly Hair's owner was also very rich.

"Tsk, Fang Zhao's dog? This sucks; I heard that little fellow is loaded? He was the one that meddled with Su Hou's farm."

"Someone asked already. He is not selling."

"I just heard from a friend who does music. One of Fang Zhao's compositions went for a fee of 10 million, and that was some time back. After his global lecture tour, his fees will be even higher. What now?"

"What's an artist like him doing keeping a dog?"

The people who had originally intended to purchase the dog were dejected. What they were most unhappy about was that the owner refused to sell and had no lack of cash!

"Let's wait a bit more. There is reasoning behind not selling now. After the finals, who knows how high his value will soar. When the time comes, let's discuss terms with that little fellow. Who knows, it might work."

"But after the finals, the price will not be what we normal people can afford. You large farm owners go ahead and compete. Us medium-sized farms will temporarily back

off."

"But returning to the main topic, don't we have other methods to depress its value? Wager on another dog—who knows which dog might outshine this little Curly Hair at that time, and its value will not rise much."

"Makes sense. However, in the Eastern region, which dog can beat Curly Hair? Gold Colt?"

"Gold Colt won't do; its sheep-herding performance is still lacking. We can't find any suitable in the Eastern region. Let's see if there are any in the Western region we can wager on. Otherwise, the throne of most valuable dog in the finals might be stolen by a foreign dog!"

Those farm owners discussed in private how to suppress Curly Hair. However, the ignorant audiences online really liked this dog. There were no rules that prohibited foreign dogs from joining any farm's team. This was because the Muzhou people had always believed only dogs from their homeland could herd sheep and that foreign dogs were all idiots. In this sort of competition that tested their IQ, other dogs would not keep up.

Until now, Curly Hair was the most well-liked dog among Muzhou audiences. Especially the scene of its horizontal leap where it flew. In the days that followed the competition, it was still trending on the internet. That scene fully explained what was meant by "I scare even myself when I go wild."

Therefore, on Muzhou's internet, many people liked to use "flying dog" to describe Curly Hair. They felt that the name Curly Hair was not formal enough and did not illustrate this lead dog's special characteristics. Thus, a lot of the time, they called him "Flying Dog." The best case scenario for the people of Muzhou was if someone could buy him, but even if this was not possible, everyone was eagerly anticipating Curly Hair's performance in the finals.

Over at Muzhou's side, this topic was stirred up, and even people of Yanzhou were contacted to see if they could provide a little more information. And the Yanzhou media was like a cat that had caught the scent of a fishy smell and reacted quickly.

"What? The most valuable dog of Muzhou's sheep-herding Eastern finals is a dog from our Yanzhou? A value of 50 million?! Are dogs that expensive? Oh, right, it's Muzhou.

The people of Muzhou are a bunch of dog crazy fanatics."

Whatever the situation, it was time to put it on the news!

Therefore, very quickly, many people in Yanzhou caught on to what was happening.

Qi'an City district, the black street where Fang Zhao used to stay.

Yu Qing was going through his normal routine, having lunch and a cup of tea, watching the news while reclining on his chair beside the door, and being bathed by the warm sunlight.

"Muzhou sheep-herding competition? What is so strange about... 50 million? Muzhou people are really crazy. Tsk tsk, a \$50 million dog... Ack! Cough cough... cough cough cough..."

Yu Qing had choked and coughed violently till his entire body curled up. The cup had been tossed aside. With great difficulty, he slowly got up and heard Ai Wan rushing over from his drug store.

"Old Yue! Old Yue! We have a big situation!"

"What?"

"Have you seen today's news?"

"Are you talking about Fang Zhao's little Curly Hair?"

"Yes!" Ai Wan shuddered as he extended the five fingers on his hand. Shaken, he stammered, "Fif-fifty million! That stray that wandered into our black street for who knows how long and nearly died, that little Curly Hair has a value of 50 million! And this is only temporary. I heard that after Muzhou's whatever competition is over it will rise even more. Old Yue, 50 million dollars! Poor old me opened a drug store and doubled as a doctor. Yesterday at night, I was still treating people and only made a small 10,000, and that excited me till I couldn't sleep. But compared to this dog... I suddenly feel like owning a dog. Where in our street can I find myself a stray? I shall go and pick one up; maybe I won't need to open my store anymore!"

With thick bags under his eyes, Ai Wan shook his head vigorously, as if imagining something wonderful, and mumbled something to himself.

Yue Qing went into his shop and got an iced beverage for him. "Drink some."

Ai Wan guzzled two mouthfuls down and shivered from the ice.

"Awake now?" Yue Qing asked.

"Awake." Ai Wan dragged a chair over and sat beside Yue Qing. Sighing, he said, "Some people have luck that we can only dream about. Furthermore, Fang Zhao, that little fellow, is really capable. How long has it been? And he is so prosperous now. Fifty million and that little fellow probably does not think much of it? Sigh, back when I shaved the fur of that little dog and it spoiled my shaver. Giving a shave to a dog worth 50 million, and I shaved it all off. I could brag about this for a year! If only I had kept the dog fur from back then. Who knows, I might even have been able to sell it for quite a decent sum!" Ai Wan raised his head to look at the afternoon sun shining down on the black street and was blinded momentarily. Raising his hand to shield his eyes, he said, "That little fellow and us have different paths. He is still so young and can go much further in the future. After 10 years, who knows, we might still be staying here in this black street."

Yue Qing rarely heard Ai Wan that rueful. It seemed like the 50 million value of little Curly Hair had upset him. However, why did he not continue talking?

"Old Yue."

"Mmhm, I'm listening."

Ai Wan pointed at the sky. "Drone."

Yue Qing looked up. Indeed there was a drone from high up descending. An express delivery model. Whose house upstairs was expecting an express delivery?

"That's not right. Why do I feel that it is going to descend all the way to the bottom?" Ai Wan used his hands to block out the sun and watched the falling drone.

Yue Qing also felt the same way. At this spot, right at the bottom, was his shop.

"Old Yue, did you buy something? Or perhaps it was your wife?"

"Nope, my stock came in a few days back. Also, if I had purchased something, I would not use this sort of delivery method." Yue Qing watched it descend. This drone model

had a faster speed and was steady when it transported. It was just that its freight fee was many times more than a normal drone.

"Yue Qing, express delivery." An electronic voice blurted out from the drone.

"It really is mine!"

After verifying the identity, the drone set down a case that was two meters wide and one meter tall.

When they saw the name of the sender, Yue Qing and Ai Wan made eye contact, and together, they shifted the case in and closed the door of the shop. Ai Wan urged Yue Qing to open it.

"Faster, faster, faster. Let's see what Fang Zhao has sent over!"

Yue Qing opened it and realized there were a few packages of vacuum-sealed meat products and some grains wrapped up. There were also some processed food stuffs manufactured in Muzhou. Even if it was processed food, they were made from natural crops. When sold out of Muzhou, these did not come cheap either.

Inside was a message from Fang Zhao, saying that he was in Muzhou now and had conveniently sent Yue Qing and Ai Wan some Muzhou specialty products.

"Hahaha, that little fellow has not forgotten about us! Old Yue, Fang Zhao said a portion here belongs to me. Temporarily keep them at your store. I have no storage facilities at my place. That's all for now. I'm heading back to attend to my store, I will be back later to have barbecued meat!"

Yue Qing laughed and shook his head as he watched the jubilant Ai Wan run out. They were just like this, without any big ambitions. Although they would grumble, they were easily satisfied.

Fang Zhao had not sent these to only Yue Qing and Ai Wan, who had helped him in the past. He'd also sent some to the people in the company, Second Uncle Fang's family in Yanzhou, and also to his great-grandparents.

Great-grandfather Fang happily went out to show off again. They were not lacking any of these. It was just that Fang Zhao's heartfelt intentions made them happy. Moreover, they had been paying attention to information online, and knowing that Fang Zhao

was doing well made them glad.

Previously, when Fang Zhao had gone with Xue Jing for the global lecture tour, Great-grandfather Fang had flaunted to all the others at the retirement center, "My great-grandson Fang Zhao will be a great artist in the future!"

In the past, Great-grandfather Fang had hoped his descendants would all enter the military and develop, repeatedly urging them to proactively serve, and how it would be best if they would head to more arduous places to train. After all, hardship increased stature! Now, he was a little worried. Those that were sent to far off planets to mine for resources were too tough, and the people of the same batch might be impulsive or violent. All the more so for his great-grandson who could not raise a hand to defend himself. That little fellow was a man of art; if he really went to such a place for his military service, would he be able to survive?!

Thus, on the night where they received the delivery, the old couple went without sleep the entire night and discussed the best place to arrange to send their little great-grandson to serve in the military.

If Fang Zhao knew what these two elders were thinking, he would have told them: you two are overthinking things.

...

Muzhou's Eastern and Western region's normal competitions had all concluded. Before the finals, there would be a one-month period to give each farm a chance to recover and train.

Shanmu Farm.

Curly Hair and the other dogs were in the field hunting field mice. Wu Yi let someone watch over them. After the competition, they were more relaxed, and he did not restrict the dogs playing. There was a veterinarian team on standby, so nothing should happen.

Today, a slightly special person had come to the farm.

The person was an older male cousin of Su Hou's. He was around twenty years old, and after graduating from university, he had used his cash on hand to start a company, naming it "Four Elephants Foodstuff Company." Su Feng's own farm had a mountain

to one side and a river on the other, and there were four rocks that were the shape of an elephant, hence the name. As for why Su Feng had come, it was to discuss business, not with Su Hou but with Fang Zhao.

Compared to the owner of Shanmu Farm, Wu Yi, Su Feng looked more like a businessman.

"Ambassador?" Fang Zhao looked at Su Feng. "Dog food?"

Su Feng wanted Curly Hair to endorse his company's new range of superior-quality dog food. In Muzhou, the market for this was quite big. People of Muzhou were willing to spend money on dogs. The fee Su Feng offered was not low either. He gave Fang Zhao a first draft of the contract, and if Fang Zhao did not agree, it could be modified.

Fang Zhao took a look. There were no issues with the contract. "I need to first take a look at your products before coming to a decision."

"That goes without saying." Su Feng took out several cans that had already been prepared and even handed over two sets of appraising notes. One was from the supervising department, and the other was from the Academy of Agricultural Sciences, where Su Hou's own brother had had a private assessment.

"I know you have your own considerations to make and I believe that a number of companies will have approached you. However, I hope you will take the time to consider our company," Su Feng said. "Actually, I have one other matter, which also concerns an ambassadorial role and is our company's main issue."

"Also for Curly Hair?"

"No," Su Feng smiled and said, "I'm looking for Polar Light."

Su Feng had come up with a plan for Polar Light. He had spent the past two years gradually pushing his company's brand out of Muzhou. The company's main business was not dog food. Dog food was just one of the many developments that the company had, and it was only focused within Muzhou. The company's main emphasis was to sell its agricultural products to other continents. However, competition was tough, and even though he was from the Su family, there was still a limit to what he could do. Su Feng kept trying to find a way, and during this sheep-herding competition, he'd taken notice of Fang Zhao, a composer from Yanzhou, and he hoped to garner the help of one of Yanzhou's three big entertainment companies, Silver Wing Media's virtual projects

department.

"Virtual idol Polar Light's image is a tree, just right! Even more fitting for our concept of 'natural'."

Chapter 102

The Person Behind

After the end of days, development had been the first priority. With the technological levels back then, development of the industry needed unavoidable sacrifices of certain things, such as the environment. Other than Muzhou, the other eleven continents all experienced a severe stifling period, so much so that the people then wondered whether they had made the right choice and if the world would just go to ruin. Should they halt the development at hand and create spaceships to visit other planets in search of a new place to survive?

After all this had boiled over, new energy sources had already surpassed the original sources. Construction was faster and technology invalidated a lot of toxic emissions. The twelve continents in the New Era had really stabilized. But aside from Muzhou, the other continents did not have much suitable land for growing crops, so a lot of the materials for producing food stuff were cultivated without soil and other different methods.

After 500 years passed, Muzhou's status as one of the four special continents continued to exist peacefully. This was also a rule set by everybody, not to interfere with Muzhou's development. Even if there were people who wanted to transform Muzhou and the people there did not oppose, the other continents would not allow it.

There were people that once said, Muzhou was the last clean soil. Hence, in this world, when it came to food, Muzhou had a special place. Families with good conditions would choose to get their food from Muzhou and were more inclined toward the so-called "natural" foodstuffs.

Generally speaking, Muzhou's well-known companies did not need an ambassador to boost their popularity. Among the public, their influence was very hard to displace. As Su Feng's Four Elephants company was a very young brand, when given the choice of a product of a similar type and price between two companies, people would definitely choose the more familiar brand. Su Feng had sought out celebrities in other continents to endorse his products, and there had been results. They just were not as good as he had expected. Many other companies also looked for celebrities to endorse their

products as well.

Su Feng had decided to try it out at Yanzhou, but this time, instead of finding a real-life celebrity, he chose to find a virtual idol whose image was close to "natural," Polar Light. And it just so happened that Polar Light was popular at the moment.

"Polar Light?" Hearing Su Feng, Fang Zhao understood what he meant. "It is indeed a good opinion, however..."

Fang Zhao looked Su Feng in the eye and said seriously, "The endorsement fees for Polar Light won't be cheap."

Su Feng laughed as if he had just heard a joke. "Don't worry, even though our company just started out, when it comes funding, paying for an endorsement ambassador is not a problem."

Su Feng thought to himself that Fang Zhao did not understand the market for endorsements. Polar Light was indeed on the uprise in Yanzhou and was quite popular, but he still could not really compare with those really big name superstars whose endorsement fees could be considered to be sky high. Polar Light's would only cost a few millions.

As he was about to explain to Fang Zhao, Fang Zhao received a notification on his communications device.

"Sorry, I need a moment." Fang Zhao walked out of the room to answer the call.

Su Feng indicated he understood and sat in the room, thinking about whether or not he should explain to Fang Zhao about the market for endorsements.

Outside, Fang Zhao had received a voice call from Duan Qianji.

"Fang Zhao, are you still in Muzhou?" Duan Qianji's tone sounded like she was in a good mood. Something good must have happened.

"I still have some matters over here," Fang Zhao replied.

"If the matters are not important, leave it first and return to the company for a bit to sign a contract with Fiery Bird. They have selected Polar Light to be the spokesperson for 'Battle of the Century'!" Duan Qianji could not help laughing as she spoke. After

waiting for so long, they'd finally gotten the result they wanted.

"Apparently it seems like you are not surprised?" Duan Qianji's acute senses could guess as much. Although there was no video projection, she could sense that Fang Zhao did not have much of a reaction. This was one of the reasons many employees in Silver Wing feared Duan Qianji; even without using her eyes, she could tell what one was up to and whether they were lying.

"Early in the morning, Hua Li had sent me a message that just said 'congratulations.' Looking at the timing, I guessed that it probably had to do with the endorsement deal," Fang Zhao replied.

As Hua Li was the head of Fiery Bird's sound effects department, he would have received the news earlier. Duan Qianji understood this and did not ask any more, instead urging once more, "So you need to hurry back. As the person in charge of the virtual projects department, the contract has to be signed personally by you."

"Wait a bit, I still have a matter here." Fang Zhao then told her the situation regarding Su Feng and Polar Light's endorsement.

"Got it. Go and pack your stuff and prepare to leave. I will arrange for someone to discuss terms with Su Feng."

Curly Hair's endorsement deal could be decided by Fang Zhao, as Curly Hair was his personal property. However, for Polar Light's deal, it had to go through Silver Wing's personnel, as Polar Light was a company asset.

Su Feng had never expected to be able to discuss with Duan Qianji directly. At first, he was calmly discussing, but once Duan Qianji informed him of the price, Su Feng nearly dropped his communications device.

Su Feng was shocked by the figure. "One hundred million? And only for one year? Boss Duan, since when did Yanzhou's endorsement fee get raised that much?"

Many A-list celebrities' fees for this sort of endorsement deal could be signed for less than 50 million for two years, and there were many choices. At present, Mi Yu, who was termed as Yanzhou's number one virtual idol, had an endorsement fee of about 150 million, but that was for two years. Andy Leo, who had a similar reputation, garnered a fee of 120 million for two years as well. To think that Silver Wing's virtual idol—who'd only risen to prominence less than a year ago and was not as popular as

Mi Yu and Andy Leo—would demand a fear of 100 million for one year?! Did they think that Muzhou people had no brains?!

Duan Qianji took no offense to Su Feng's tone and just told him the matter of Fiery Bird coming to the decision of having Polar Light endorse "Battle of the Century."

Su Feng was fuming. He obviously knew what this meant. Stifling back his words for a bit, he then said, "Even if he was chosen by Fiery Bird, your price is too high!"

...

Su Hou had gone out for a run, and when he returned, he saw his cousin standing there, his face distorting nonstop as if he was discussing something of great importance.

When Su Feng looked up and saw that Su Hou had returned, he took a deep breath, got up, and left.

The next day, Four Elephants and Silver Wing's Polar Light came to an official decision for cooperation.

Su Feng had not only taken into account Polar Light's appearance and his influence in Yanzhou, he'd also taken into consideration Fang Zhao, who was the person standing behind Polar Light. Su Feng believed that, as long as Fang Zhao was there, Polar Light would only continue to rise.

When he thought about what he understood from Fang Zhao's information, all Su Feng could think about was how frightening Fang Zhao was. In just a little more than a year, he had risen from being an obscure intern to a reputable hotshot in the music circles. He had completed a global lecture tour, supported Silver Wing's entire virtual projects department, and even attracted the colossal Fiery Bird's attention. He had even made his dog's value soar to 50 million.

Could this be a flash in the pan?

Su Feng was not one to concede or listen to what others said. Instead, he believed that, in the near future, this young person would become even hotter. Although he could not guess how, that was what his intuition told him.

Su Feng knew he was taking a risk. If the market proved that he was wrong, he would

be ridiculed by those in the industry. This he did not mind, but what he cared about was the few Su elders living on Qingtai Mountain. He had wanted to earn more benefits and resources from the elders after producing results and showing them. However, if he failed, he did not even need to think about it.

As Su Feng and the person Duan Qianji had sent were discussing the concrete details of the contract, Fang Zhao had already boarded the flying transport headed back to Yanzhou. Curly Hair stayed behind in Muzhou once more, continuing to train with the other shepherd dogs as they prepared for the finals.

...

Once more returning to Yanzhou, the moment Fang Zhao stepped into the department, all eyes were on him.

"Boss! You're back!" After Zu Wen and the others had finished shouting, they looked behind Fang Zhao then beside his leg, finding nothing. "Curly Hair did not come back?"

"He is staying in Muzhou to train. He still has to train for the finals," Fang Zhao said.

Zu Wen and the others gathered around Fang Zhao and asked him about the happenings over in Muzhou and inquired as to Fang Zhao's thoughts on having a dog with a \$50 million value that would continue to rise.

When they had seen the news, the entire virtual projects department had been full of shrieks and had scared Du Ang, who, when he'd to visit the 50th floor, had thought an accident had happened.

Back then, before he left, Fang Zhao had said that he was heading out to expand his professional services, but who knew that it would really happen. The department members had already received news of the endorsement collaboration with Muzhou's side. As for the concrete details, it would be arranged before they were informed.

As they thought about Polar Light's endorsement fee, and then Curly Hair's value, Zu Wen and the others could not help but think that this department was becoming rich and powerful.

"Tsk, boss when you were abroad, you could still stir up the news." Zu Wen shook his head and sighed ruefully. "Muzhou is really a crazy place. Oh, right, can we go over and watch Curly Hair's final live?"

"We shall see the situation when the time comes. If there are no assignments at the company, we can organize a trip to Muzhou," Fang Zhao replied.

"On company expenses?" Zu Wen asked.

"If the company does not approve, I will sponsor it myself."

Fang Zhao's answer drew cheers from everyone in the department.

"But for now, we have to prepare for the signing ceremony with Fiery Bird."

"Yes!"

The next day, Fang Zhao brought a few key members of the virtual projects team over to Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch. There, a signing ceremony would be held.

Many people had not expected that, in the end, Fiery Bird would pick Polar Light, who had only appeared less than a year ago, as Yanzhou's spokesperson. Even though Polar Light had only come in third place in the online popularity poll, it had not affected Fiery Bird's final decision.

Photos and videos of the signing ceremony were spread quickly. Fiery Bird's choice of Polar Light as the spokesperson of "Battle of the Century" spread widely across Yanzhou's gaming circles.

Five days later, Fiery Bird had a public post on its website. It was a picture of twelve warriors. On it were the virtual idols that were the twelve representatives of the respective twelve continents. Polar Light was the only non-human virtual idol, and his image on that picture was from his "100-Year Period of Destruction" music video, where his branches were muscled and he took on a human-like form for battle.

"On October 1, 'Battle of the Century' will be officially released."

Chapter 103

The Only Non-Human

For any virtual idol, receiving Fiery Bird's endorsement deal was like winning the lottery, with the prize being a rising popularity.

Fiery Bird were not lacking customers. Finding a spokesperson was equivalent to finding a cooperative partner in Yanzhou. Promotion was a cooperative effort by Silver Wing and Fiery Bird. Once Fiery Bird's massive campaign started, it would be everywhere.

Throwing money!

Ruthlessly throwing money!

In Qi'an City's center, on many high rise buildings, screens in public squares, huge entertainment centers, and public transportation, "Battle of the Century" advertisements could be seen.

It was still some way off from October. However, for a company that only produced a game every ten years, many people felt that their advertisements had started late.

Although what attracted the interests of gaming fans was the publicly released short film, all the people that normally did not follow the film and entertainment industry more or less remembered the virtual idol Polar Light.

The frenzy was in full swing the whole of May. Ten years after ten years. The money that gaming fans had saved up for a long time was used to make preorders of the latest models of gaming hardware to upgrade their rigs. Those that were richer would just get themselves a brand new gaming setup and were only waiting for Oct 1 for the game's release.

In a highrise apartment complex in Qi'an city, Big Dipper, a gaming team well-known within Qi'an City were very busy.

"Captain, we are running out of water, meat too. Everything is running out!"

"Got it, I will get someone to go get more. Just eat whatever there is or order some takeout."

"Hey, Captain. Let's change brands this time. Buy Four Elephants this time."

"All the stuff from Muzhou is the same; was the previous brand no good? An old brand is always reassuring."

"But I heard from my younger cousin, they tried Four Elephants today and it was not bad. Furthermore, it's endorsed by Polar Light."

"Endorsed by Polar Light? Let me see... All right, let's try this brand."

...

At a public square, a teenager stood in front of a vending machine, thirsty from playing. As he scanned through all the different types of mineral water inside and decided on a brand he'd drunk once before, he caught sight of a "Battle of the Century" advertisement on a billboard in the distance.

The teenager looked at the image then looked at the printed tree man on a certain bottle and made his choice.

...

Although online shopping was very efficient and popular nowadays, in large cities, there would still be shopping centers. These sorts of ancient shopping centers still existed to provide those sentimentalists with a place to feel nostalgia and antiquity.

Gaming sections were always packed recently. Youngsters could always be seen coming and going. At the same time, Four Elephant's products were all the rage too. Endorsing a game and endorsing foodstuff, Polar Light was the only one doing it!

In schools, many secondary school students were more inclined to pick the Four Elephant drinks that had Polar Light on them. Other products might be too expensive for their allowance to afford, but drinks were still fine.

...

In Muzhou, Su Feng listened to a report from his subordinate regarding the sales

volume of every continent in the last seven days.

Huangzhou, slowdown in sales.

Leizhou, sales remain largely unchanged.

Lazhou, sales remain largely unchanged.

Yanzhou, 500% increase in sales volume...

Hearing this, Su Feng was so surprised he nearly fell out of his chair.

"The result is that obvious?!" Su Fang got someone to hand over the detailed information, and he proceed to carefully investigate it, checking whether there was any manipulation or if the market had really started to incline toward them.

After he had done so, Su Feng had only one thought. That 100 million was well spent! This gamble really paid out!

Su Feng felt himself shaking from excitement when he spoke. "Is there enough stock over at Yanzhou?"

"As there was a surplus previously, there aren't many places that are lacking. We have already hastened our deliveries over there."

"Boss, Huangzhou's side has suddenly increased their order," another person abruptly said.

"What? Why did this happen?"

Su Feng had not gotten a new spokesperson for Huangzhou. His farm's products were wrapped in the same packaging that had Polar Light's image. He did not have much hope that many people in Huangzhou would recognize Polar Light. All he wanted was to imply the products were natural. As Fiery Bird was based in Huangzhou and their company had used Polar Light for advertising, there would be some effects, but it would not be that effective.

Now that Huangzhou had requested to increase their order, Su Feng was puzzled. He contacted his people in Huangzhou to get to the bottom of the matter.

It turned out that, in Huangzhou, the boss of a large shopping center was a gaming enthusiast and had pasted 12 advertisements on the exterior of the building. Every advertisement was of a product. Normally, such an advertisement would require that the brands pay additional fees, and sometimes, if there were others competing for the spot, the prices would be high. This time, the gaming enthusiast boss had willfully placed twelve advertisements on the exterior, each one being endorsed by a celebrity. There was endorsed foodstuff, endorsed clothing, endorsed kitchen equipment, and others including exercise equipment. And these twelve celebrities endorsing these twelve products were none other than the virtual idols in Fiery Bird's promotional image!

And what was different from the hot-blooded styles of the promotional image of "Battle of the Century" were the styles of these advertisements. Some of them were elegant, some charming, some witty, and Polar Light had a fresh and clean style.

Compared with the promotional image of "Battle of the Century," many people thought it was rather meaningful. Compared to their intense looks, the boss of the shopping center took delight in it.

Occasionally there would be utterances of "Woah, isn't this the tree man endorsing 'Battle of the Century'?" heard from the people visiting the shopping center.

Among the twelve virtual idols, the tree was the one that left the deepest impression for gamers.

Four Elephants left an impression among customers who visited the shopping center. Even if they had not known of this brand before, since the others were all big brands that could be trusted, Four Elephants would not be any shoddy brand either, and it was from Muzhou.

As for Polar Light being the only nonhuman spokesperson endorsing "Battle of the Century," in addition to Yanzhou and Huangzhou, the other continents gradually showed signs of its influence.

At the same time, many people also inquired with Fiery Bird's relevant department on why they had chosen Polar Light to be Yanzhou's representative when it was not even a human virtual idol and had so few works and insufficient popularity. Fiery Bird's reply was just this: "He is worth it."

At Fiery Bird's headquarters, the engineers in the technical department were yawning. They had continuously worked overtime for quite a number of days in a row.

"People outside are discussing why we chose Polar Light as Yanzhou's game representative."

"Who we choose is none of their g*ddamn business!"

Why choose Polar Light?

Probably, it was because they had poured so many deep sentiments into producing "Battle of the Century." When they saw the "100-Year Period of Destruction" music video, they'd felt that the world in which this tree existed was the same world they had created in the game and that it was no longer a game but reality.

Therefore, during the discussions for the spokespersons, there were disputes for the other continents, but when it came to Yanzhou, it was an almost unanimous vote in favor of Polar Light. From their point of view, he was the most suitable candidate and most worthy of the chance.

"Who is the head of the Polar Light team? I thought someone mentioned it before."

"Fang Zhao, he is a composer. '100-Year Period of Destruction' was created by him. Previously, the sound effects head Hua Li mentioned they had used Fang Zhao's composition. However, for the fee, he was given two choices: cash or a gaming console. Fang Zhao chose the console."

"Woah, that fellow has good taste. There are only a hundred sets that'll be released in the entire world. However, for someone that dabbles in the arts, he probably will not get used to it and will probably resell it. What a pity."

"Yeah, a pity. However, whatever his choice, once it is sent out, we don't have to bother about their decision. Speaking of which, I rather like that little fellow's works. Oh, right, the opening scene's background music was composed by that fellow."

"The one we listened to that time? Where you get goosebumps just listening to it?"

"Yep."

"Ha! That was really impressive. What was the title of that background music?"

"Hua Li said that the piece is called 'Immortal'."

Chapter 104

You Have Too Few Expressions

Fang Zhao did not know that he was being talked about by the few engineers of Fiery Bird. At that moment, he was standing in the 50th floor office, gazing out the window.

In the distance, an image of Polar Light appeared every five minutes in the middle of a bunch of skyscrapers. Recently, Polar Light's figure was everywhere in Yanzhou. Billboards, holographic projections above buildings, posters, etc. Other than Silver Wing and Fiery Bird's cooperative marketing campaign, there was Su Feng's Four Elephants's advertisements as well. It seemed that Polar Light's popularity had exploded spectacularly overnight.

At one of the press conferences for the movie that Silver Wing had invested in, which starred Polar Light, when the media were inquiring about Polar Light's endorsements, an announcer "accidentally" revealed that Polar Light's Four Elephants's endorsement fee was 100 million for a year. Toward this, many people's first reaction was disbelief.

Sensationalization!

Definitely sensationalization!

If the fee was from Fiery Bird, it would still have been believable, but that another company, especially one that was not considered famous, would actually pay out such a high fee? How could anyone be convinced? Merely considering endorsement fees, that would make Polar Light the number one virtual idol in Yanzhou. Even if he did not have sufficient works or enough detailed information, his fans also could not compare to the other two popular virtual idols. But who let Polar Light have such good luck? Who had let the people behind Polar Light be so capable? When the word got out, it was a topic that was discussed furiously.

Four Elephants had really spent so much just for Polar Light to endorse them? Dumb*ss?

Four Elephants's Yanzhou-in-charge immediately shot back: "Sorry to be a bother, but I am that dumb*ss you were speaking about."

There were also many people that admired the way Four Elephants had grabbed the chance at the opportune moment. Freeloading on the hype over "Battle of the Century" was surely pleasant. And counting the number of eyes across the world that would be on "Battle of the Century" despite it being some ways off, people were starting to understand.

Because of Silver Wing's and Fiery Bird's joint promotional campaign, now, anybody from Yanzhou who went online or headed out would get to see Polar Light's image. This was also the reason for Four Elephants's steep increase in sales volume. Also, Four Elephants had also gone from being "a certain Muzhou brand" to a "well-known brand."

Fang Zhao did not understand much about the market and sales, but just from everyday sights and sounds, he could understand that sort of change.

Recently, the members of the virtual projects department walked more proudly. When they went out, they would receive looks of envy or congratulatory words.

"One hundred million for an endorsement deal, 10 of these would be a billion! Twenty of these would be 2 billion!"

Zu Wen counted and counted but felt himself getting even more confused. "Are we... Are we going to be rich?" They would not get that much, but overtime fees and bonuses would increase, right?

"We have been rich for some time already." Song Miao rolled her eyes. "Haven't you checked your bank account?"

"Nope." Zu Wen changed his position on the department's couch and checked the funds in his account.

"Ssss!" After the violent sucking in of air, Zu Wen held his head with his two hands as if he could not believe what he was seeing.

"I, I, I... This, this..."

Their wages were considered quite high within the company already. There was still the overtime pay and, more importantly, the bonuses. Seeing the zeros at the back, Zu Wen once again felt that his decision back then to be lazy and stay at the virtual projects departments was the right choice!

"This, this, this... This is all thanks to boss's great leadership!" There could be no expense spared when it came to bootlicking! Without Fang Zhao's approval, how would they be able to get so much overtime pay and such great bonuses? If it were somebody else, one who liked to deduct staff wages, as their superior, they would not receive such good treatment.

To this, the other members in the department nodded their heads in agreement.

Ever since Fang Zhao had come to Silver Wing's virtual projects department, it had only been on the uprise. Whatever would happen in the future, nobody knew yet. However, they all knew that, as long as they followed Fang Zhao, their prospects would be boundless. Just a trip to Muzhou for a bit and he'd pulled a 100 million endorsement deal? Even the dog could become so valuable.

Speaking of Muzhou...

"Boss, when can we go to Muzhou to watch the finals?" Zu Wen asked. This was his second time mentioning it since Fang Zhao had returned.

The other department members looked at Fang Zhao with anticipation,

When the marketing was its peak, they had all worked overtime to clear the tasks assigned. Now that the workload was not that heavy, the workload could be shared by other departments and they could afford to relax a little.

"I will speak to the boss. Today, some new tasks have been assigned, You guys can settle the matters at hand first." Fang Zhao tidied up some of his things. "After work, I leave it up to you guys to arrange."

"Got it!"

Although that was the reply they gave, no one left. Working hours and after work had little difference to them. Now all they wanted was to clear all the work so that they could enjoy without any worries.

After leaving the company, Fang Zhao paid a visit to Xue Jing at his residence. Xue Jing was already back in Yanzhou for a rest. Previously, as Fang Zhao'd had matters at Muzhou and Xue Jing still had a number of meetings to attend, they had parted rather hurriedly. This time, when he came back, Fang Zhao still ought to thank this old man. After all, it was Xue Jing that had given him such a chance and spared no effort to help

him.

As Fang Zhao's driver-cum-bodyguard, Zuo Yu naturally accompanied him.

Xue Jing was very happy to see Fang Zhao. "I was just talking about you and now you are here. Have you eaten dinner?"

"I ate already."

"Youngsters have great appetites. Come, accompany this old man for some food." Xue Jing called him over.

Fang Zhao was astonished when he realized that Xue Jing had another guest. It was the Fiery Bird sound effects department head Hua Li, who had previously contacted him.

"Xue Jing can also be considered my teacher, and we have always kept in touch. Today, I visited Yanzhou to meet a few old friends and, at the same time, visit Old Xue. Never did I expect to run into you," Hua Li said.

Xue Jing was very happy today and was especially talkative, probably from drinking some wine. His assistant had stopped Xue Jing from drinking too much, but this amount was enough to raise his spirits.

"...I never expected that, at my age, to accept the heavy task of writing a textbook that no one wanted to touch would instigate a new wave of studying frenzy. I heard that many academies have added related courses to their curriculum. Yesterday, I also received a message from a few of my former students saying that their chance had come again..."

Xue Jing spoke enthusiastically and Fang Zhao and Hua Li listened from the side, occasionally nodding in agreement. However, as Xue Jing was rather old, even if was especially spirited, after talking for some time, he got quickly tired and fell asleep.

Fang Zhao and Hua Li helped the assistant shift Xue Jing into his room and then helped tidy up the house before leaving. As Hua Li had come from Huangzhou and did not drive his own flying transport or bring anyone along, Fang Zhao got Zuo Yu to drive the car and send Hua Li to the hotel he was residing at.

When they were close to the hotel, Hua Li asked, "Are you busy? How about a drink?"

Guessing that Hua Li probably had other matters to discuss that were not convenient in Xue Jing's presence, Fang Zhao agreed.

Hua Li chose a restaurant close by the hotel where he knew the owner.

Zuo Yu took the initiative and found a chair outside to sit in. He did not go inside to listen.

"Back at Old Xue's place, there was something I did not say." Hua Li looked serious. "Fang Zhao, have you thought about your own future?"

Hua Li's sudden question surprised Fang Zhao a little. "What do you mean by that?"

"Do you intend to keep staying at Silver Wing? To speak the truth, back at Old Xue's place, that old man told me he wishes that you could focus all your efforts on music and not have to manage the trivial matters of Silver Wing's virtual projects department. However..." Hua Li's tone changed. "I, on the other hand, hope that you get yourself in more stuff and experience more. That way you would have inspiration and create even better works."

Fang Zhao twirled the cup in his hands but did not say anything, waiting for what was to follow.

Hua Li swept his gaze across Fang Zhao. This young fellow was still the same as before. He could not see if his words had received any reaction from him. Hua Li paused for a bit before continuing. "If you feel your limitations are too high, when you have idle time, you can visit Huangzhou Music Academy. The advance courses there are better than at Qi'an Academy of Music. There is a lot that can be learned there, and many symphonic enthusiasts all over the world are there. You can overcome any weakness and get to know others. It would be beneficial for your future, too."

Advanced studies?

From Fang Zhao's memory, he knew that Huangzhou Music Academy did have an advanced course for the global music association. Many great masters in the music world had previously gone there for advanced studies. That was a gold-plated process and he would get to know many people from the industry and widen his network. The people who could go there were top talents from all around the world.

"Given your current works, plus Ming Cang and Old Xue's combined

recommendations, you can surely get into the youth advance course," Hua Li told him.

"Have you been there too?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Yes, I have. The company recommended me. I am not the creator type—my strength lies in my hearing capabilities. I was recruited into Fiery Bird early on and arranged to attend advanced studies. After returning, I took less than two years to become a deputy department head, and after that, I got promoted to where I am now." Hua Li had not composed in a long time. "During my advanced studies, I was in the same batch as Ming Cang, but because of the situation with his son, he put his career on hold for more than 10 years.

"Of course, this is only a suggestion I am giving you as an industry senior. If you don't wish to, there is no problem. Even if you want to change professions later on, that is fine too. I know a lot of people from the music industry who switched over to film and television because it is easier to become popular in film and there's more money there.

"The memory of the internet can be very long—long enough that it will remember us when we die—or it can be very short. A person popular throughout the world can find himself tucked away at the back of people's memories in the next moment. Especially so for you creator types who work behind the scenes are more forgettable. I had a classmate who followed the path his company set out for him. He single-mindedly devoted himself to composing, and after making a name for himself, left the company and went solo. Later on, as he was not satisfied with his fame but found his body conditioning to be good, he switched over to the film industry and became a film star. Surprisingly, he did very well, acting and singing, but not everyone can take the same path he did. His talent for acting was not inferior to his composing skills." As he spoke, Hua Li looked at Fang Zhao and shook his head. "But you won't do. You and me are similar. You don't look too bad, but you just don't have enough of that X factor."

Fang Zhao: "..."

"Besides, you are not suitable for the film industry. Looking at how you are normally; you are too cold and your mood rarely changes. Your expressions are not intense enough. If you were to compete with others in the industry, you would be crushed. In terms of acting talent, you might not even be able to beat me."

Fang Zhao: "..."

Hua Li laughed and continued, "Actually, I said so much because somebody asked me to help pass a message." As Hua Li said that, he took out a stack of about ten name cards and spread them out in a circle in front of Fang Zhao. "Helping a few friends and classmates bring these over. They say that, if you ever feel like leaving Silver Wing or Yanzhou, you can consider them. All these are their own companies or private studios, which are rather reputable. Music, especially for movies and large-scale game productions. With more money, there will be more freedom too."

Thus, today, the reason why Hua Li had sought out Fang Zhao alone was to help others lay down their cards.

Before leaving, on his part as an industry senior, Hua Li told Fang Zhao seriously, "You might not know this, but in Huangzhou, there are a number of 10-plus-year-olds who are also preparing for their own global lecture tours. They were born into influential families of musicians and have been attending the best music schools. Their talent is astonishing, and they have achieved a number of industry awards. Those old folks up there seem to think highly of them. There is a seven-year-old fellow in Yanzhou who is conducting an orchestra. Just yesterday, they had a public performance.

"In the New Era, the paths in the music industry are not that many. Competition is tough, and every year, many talents appear. Although all these companies might be treating you well because of Polar Light and many others are scrambling to rope you in, if a day comes when your inspiration dries up and your works are no longer breathtaking or you find yourself in a situation where your talent is restricted, you will be surpassed by the younger generations and will no longer be treated the same way. They are many cases of young talents who have miserable ends.

"From my point of view, I really hope that you will do more things that interest you. The world is huge. Experience it more, enjoy some fresh adventures. Although I no longer compose, I do know a little. This thing called inspiration often pays a visit when one's spirits are lively. Do not be restricted by music and do not loathe it." After finishing his talk, Hua Li looked at Fang Zhao, noticed him seriously thinking about something, and asked, "So, do you have anything you want to ask?"

"When will the gaming console be delivered?"

Hua Li: "...". Talking to this sort of junior made his heart weary. Did this fellow not worry at all that those little kids would surpass him?

Chapter 105

Strictest Lockdown Day

"This year's ninth generation 'Challenger' and tenth generation 'Rhapsody' will be released simultaneously. However, the 10th generation is a limited edition. There are only 100 sets in the entire world, and yours is one of them. When the time comes when you no longer use it, you can sell it. Wait for the price to rise before selling. The 10th generation 'Rhapsody' is slightly special. Your type might not get used to it. Keeping it could be a waste."

Hua Li left after leaving this message. He still seemed a little gloomy, probably because he had never expected Fang Zhao to be different from the other younger generations in the industry.

Fang Zhao was grateful for everything Hua Li had said, and he knew Hua Li's intentions.

Hua Li had spoken so much to tell him that, firstly, he should not get too caught up with all the false reputation. Now, most of the fame lay with Polar Light, which was the result of Silver Wing and Fiery Bird's collaboration that made Polar Light's popularity explode. Thus, the main reason was not Fang Zhao, and Hua Li wanted Fang Zhao to remain calm and not let it all get to his head. Secondly, when considering his future path, he could not forget his true intentions.

However, Hua Li was thinking too much. Fang Zhao was very much clear headed. After all, he was not really only in his twenties. His mental age was much older than both Hua Li and Ming Cang.

Leaving the restaurant, Fang Zhao paused for a moment and looked in a certain direction.

"Boss, there seems to be somebody watching this area, but not that close." Zuo Yu had discovered this earlier, but the other person was some distance away and Zuo Yu had to stay here, since Fang Zhao's safety was his number one priority.

"Doesn't matter; it's not important. Let's head back."

"Yes."

However, as for Fang Zhao actually realizing he was being photographed and even finding the direction of the perpetrator, how was he able to sense it? Unless public figures had outstanding intuition and acute senses? Zuo Yu had heard from a few friends who'd become bodyguards after leaving the military that some big celebrities were just like this. When they could sense the direction they were being photographed from, they would pretend not to know and would display their best poses.

At night, a few articles appeared online.

"Polar Light project producer Fang Zhao on a date with a mysterious person."

"Mysterious person's identity found: shocking!"

Recently, virtual idol Polar Light had a strong presence, and when the public paid attention to this virtual idol, they would also have an interest in the team behind it. Therefore, when people saw the words "Polar Light project producer," they became curious. This was the lead character of the project. It could even be said that Polar Light had been created by him. Thus, people naturally paid attention.

The group of people that did not sleep and stayed up all night rushed in with a raging passion to check out all the gossip but, after seeing the details, could only cough blood from anger.

"Your father was still wondering which female he would be dating, but instead I realized I got tricked when I went in!"

But very quickly, others started to discuss why Fang Zhao would be having a meal with Fiery Bird's Hua Li? Could it be that Fiery Bird wanted to poach Fang Zhao?

Recently, there had been a lot of rumors that some music studios and entertainment companies had shown an interest in Fang Zhao and wanted to poach him, but there had been no concrete developments. But now, having suddenly gotten a photograph of Fang Zhao together with a Fiery Bird staffer and remembering Hua Li's raving evaluations of Fang Zhao, this was surely an attempt to entice him over!

Soon, a number of "Fang Zhao on the verge of defecting" news articles started to circulate.

The next day, when Duan Qianji saw the news on "Fang Zhao on the verge of defecting," her face turned green and she was so angry she nearly broke her communications device.

"Riiip!"

Duan Qianji's assistant consoled her. "Boss, all these small media groups love to make blind guesses out of these sorts of things and attract the attention of the public. Do not mind them."

Duan Qianji did not utter a single word.

Although Fang Zhao was contracted to Silver Wing for quite a number of years, if Fang Zhao really wanted to break the contract, it was not like he could not pay the compensation fee. And if Fiery Bird really wanted to poach Fang Zhao, that little amount of compensation fee was nothing for them.

Duan Qianji could not be blamed for doubting. Now that Silver Wing finally had a virtual idol that was successful, all the more it could not afford to have a setback. Right now, Fang Zhao was the pillar that was holding up the entire virtual projects department. If the pillar was removed, Duan Qianji believed that the virtual projects department would return back to its old form. Even if she recruited a few professional great masters, she had no confidence that they could create a second Polar Light. The conditions had been right at that time to create a Polar Light that was ever present in the whole of Yanzhou. Who knew if they would have the same luck and capabilities the next time?

Furthermore, the workers in the virtual projects department only submitted to Fang Zhao. If Fang Zhao left, they would leave too. The moment Fang Zhao was poached, the other key members of the team would probably be poached too, as if the heart of the virtual projects department had been dug out. The staff were secondary; the main issue was Fang Zhao. Unless a replacement of a sufficient standard could be found to replace Fang Zhao, Duan Qianji could not see herself letting him go.

Other companies did not cause her much worry, but Fiery Bird? This was a company that many would try anything to get into. Fang Zhao would surely have that sort of thinking. Furthermore, after joining Fiery Bird, as long as one was not lazy and one had the ability, one would not have to worry for the rest of one's life.

Furthermore, Fang Zhao indeed frequently communicated with the people of Fiery Bird. Could it be that their suspicions were correct and Fang Zhao did have thoughts about defecting?

Duan Qianji felt like she could easily see through youngsters of that age, but Fang Zhao was a special exception. Up till now, she could not understand the type of person he was.

Duan Qianji had a solemn expression on her face as she drummed her fingers on the table.

At this moment, her secretary received a message. With a hesitant expression, she said, "Boss, Fang Zhao asked if you are in. He has some matters to discuss."

Duan Qianji's fingers trembled. She remained silent for two seconds before saying, "Let him in."

As Fang Zhao walked in, he realized the atmosphere in Duan Qianji's office was abnormal. Not just Duan Qianji, even her assistants and secretary were examining him, as if they were guessing what was up.

Upon seeing Fang Zhao, a faint smile appeared on her face and she warmly asked, "What is it again?"

"Application to have a vacation abroad."

"Another trip?! How long have you been back for? Recently, your department does not have that many assignments. Mostly everything is handled by the Public Relations and Marketing teams. If you really are unable to concentrate on your work, you can do so at home. If you lack the inspiration, going out for a bit is not out of the question." Duan Qianji could be considered to be talking slowly already.

"I am not applying for a personal vacation. I am applying for the entire department."

"...Vacation for how long? What are you all going to do?"

"A week. I have checked the arrangements with the other departments already. Our department has no pressing tasks. I would like to bring them over to Muzhou to watch the sheep-herding competition."

The lump in her throat seemingly dissipated. Checking on the most recent arrangements, she said, "Let me check first before getting back to you."

"Sure, I will send you a detailed electronic application in a bit."

Duan Qianji nodded her head and watched Fang Zhao. Trying to spot if there would be any changes in his expression, she asked. "Yesterday, you met with Fiery Bird's sound effects department head Hua Li? A lot of people are suggesting that you are going to get poached by them." She did not beat around the bush.

"Last night, when I went to meet Old Xue, Hua Li was there, and after that, he asked me out for a few drinks." Fang Zhao knew what Duan Qianji was worrying about. "Don't worry, as long as I am under contract to Silver Wing, I won't leave."

Having received Fang Zhao's resolute reply, Duan Qianji let out a thorough sigh of relief in her heart. When she received the application from Fang Zhao, she delightedly approved it and even asked Fang Zhao whether he needed an additional flying transport. Just as Duan Qianji had said before, for her prized talent, she was willing to give him what he wanted.

One flying transport was more than enough. The department's core members were not that many. They could fit in one transport, so Fang Zhao did not request the additional transport.

In the afternoon, before knocking off, Fang Zhao arranged a meeting with the members of the department. He inquired about the progress on their work and whether the assigned tasks had been completed. After confirming that everything was done, he told them the matter about heading to Muzhou for the competition.

The members of the virtual projects department went crazy. After Fang Zhao had left, it was rare for the entire department to leave the office. Without even playing their games, they all returned home to pack their luggage.

The technicians within the company had a group chat. Recently, Zu Wen and the others had been in the limelight. Who knew that the virtual projects department would have a reversal in fortunes. Back then, many would have rather died than be transferred there. Now, even if they wanted to enter, it was impossible, and that all had happened within a year.

Zu Wen sent a message in the technician's group chat. "Our department's boss is going

to bring us to fly. Goodbye, everyone, don't miss me too much! Here I come, Muzhou's blue sky and huge fields!"

The originally quiet and peaceful group chat exploded to life.

"Scram! Your father is still working overtime!"

"How cheap! Your father is still working overtime, and my overtime is not even a third of what you guys in the virtual projects department get!"

"Not seeing you off! Zu Wen, are you all going to Muzhou to watch the sheep-herding competition?!"

"I am not going to scold you, Zu Wen, as long as you bring back some specialty goodies from Muzhou~"

"Zu Wen, your department had better take care of that 'Golden Dog.' Don't let it be stolen! I haven't seen it for myself yet, so make sure you bring it back safely so I can go over and touch it."

The news of Curly Hair's 50 million value had already been spread across most departments, so many Silver Wing employees had coined Curly Hair "Golden Dog." Although its hair was not gold in color, that nickname was to show its value.

Zu Wen teased the rest of the group a little and felt more spirited. Having grown up, he had only ever been to Muzhou once, during a trip organized by his secondary school. However, back then, there had been too many restrictions, and he'd never been able to see a sheep-herding competition. All he'd done was breathe a little of the Muzhou air before having to return.

After another two days, the core members of the virtual projects department gathered and headed for Muzhou.

...

Muzhou's sheep-herding finals was a grand occasion that occurred once a year and would attract many people from other continents to come over and watch.

Fang Zhao first brought the entire department over to Shanmu Farm. Then, on the day of the competition, together with Wu Yi and Su Hou, they arrived at the competition

venue situated at Qingcheng City.

The parking area was still a distance away from the competition grounds. By the time they arrived, they realized many others had already arrived before them and half the flying transports packed there had foreign serial numbers.

"Today, there are many foreigners. Stay vigilant," Wu Yi said.

As there were a lot more people today, the place was much more confusing. Security had also been raised by several levels.

As they left the parking area. Fang Zhao noticed a number of police officers with similarly attired police dogs on a leash guarding the entrance of the parking grounds. These people were probably meticulously selected, and their hawk-like eyes scanned every person that came to the parking grounds, searching for anything suspicious. The police dogs that were beside them had their tongues out and were panting from the heat. They did not look like much, but their pair of dog eyes were observing the surroundings, and their ears were erect to catch any sounds that were not easily heard by the human ear.

"This time every year is when Qingcheng's sheep-herding competition grounds have the most stringent security checks," Wu Yi explained to Fang Zhao in case it made him tense seeing this sort of situation for the first time. "Actually, not just the competition grounds, the entire Muzhou has stricter security checks. Therefore, we have termed the day of the finals as the 'Strictest Lockdown Day.' If you notice the police officers or dogs have found something suspicious, make sure to avoid them immediately to prevent yourself from getting hurt."

Wu Yi had just finished when Fang Zhao said, "I have the feeling that we are being watched."

"Cough, how is that poss—" Wu Yi's sentence ended with a grunt, because he realized that a police officer was watching them. The police dog beside him had already retracted its tongue and was staring in their direction. As someone who owned a dog, Wu Yi was very clear what the dog's manner was displaying. That was a look of suspicion and alarm, and in the next moment, it would bark.

"Woof woof woof woof woof!"

Chapter 106

Possession of Dangerous Materials

Originally, many people leaving the parking area who saw Fang Zhao and his group wanted to go over to say hello. Those who knew them wanted to have a little small talk, and those who did not know who they were wanted to satisfy their curiosity. There were also a bunch of paparazzi from the media lying in wait, fighting for the chance to get the first bit of news from Dongshan Farm.

But once the police dog started barking, the people that were walking over immediately stopped, glanced at Fang Zhao's party, and then glanced at the barking police dog before turning and walking away, as if avoiding a plague. The other people that were walking behind Fang Zhao's party also backtracked toward the parking area.

The previously crowded exit cleared up in just a short while. Now, all around Fang Zhao's party were empty spaces. However, these people did not go very far but were keeping a distance and observing. People would always be curious. They were trying to see what exactly was going on. Could it be that someone was carrying a bomb? Or something else? Especially those youths who were visiting Muzhou for the first time; they were even more tense and excited.

As if the media had smelled blood, they all became alert and closely watched the situation unfold.

"Woof woof woof!"

The barking police dog was straining against the leash. If not for the police officer holding onto it tightly, the dog would have rushed over. As the police officer held his dog in line, he was saying something, probably using his miniature communications device to explain the situation over here.

And at the moment that police dog had started barking, over ten police officers had rushed over. At the back, a team of special forces were also heading over.

"What's... What's going on?" This was Zu Wen's first time encountering such a situation, and he was frightened by the sudden activity. He was just a normal citizen

on his first trip to Muzhou to watch a sheep-herding competition, but now he was scared sh*tless and was at a loss.

Just now, they had still been thinking that the security checks were strict and the place was securely guarded and they could be at ease as their safety was guaranteed, but who knew that the situation would turn out like this?!

Pang Pusong gulped nervously. "I... I have no idea..." In the past, his most challenging period was going for interviews, and he had not even felt nervous doing so. Now, though, he was so afraid he could not even speak properly.

Fang Zhao did not understand either. After his few experiences at the cemeteries and being watched, he had learned how to act so as to not arouse the attention of these people and their watchful gazes. The background music in his head was still lively. His manner was different from the way he had been at the cemeteries and should not have resulted in these people being alarmed.

Although Zuo Yu who was beside Fang Zhao looked calm, he was a little skeptical deep down. Could it be that the gun I have hidden has been found? That shouldn't be the case.

Not just Fang Zhao and the rest, Wu Yi and Su Hou were dumbstruck too. Having taken part in numerous competitions, they had experienced many security checks. Even though this time around was more stringent, nothing like this should have happened.

"What... What is happening?" As the oldest here, Wu Yi trembled as he spoke.

The police officer that walked over examined all of them with a hawk-like gaze, making Wu Yi shiver once more.

"Everyone has to go through another round of security checks. Please cooperate," the police officer said coldly.

As he finished, he did not wait for anyone to reply. Waving his hand, he brought the people handling the security screening equipment. The special forces team also moved closer.

After the second round of checks, nothing was found. Their identities were also examined once more. They had gone through a first round of security checks when they had exited to ensure they were not carrying prohibited firearms and ammunition

or other dangerous materials. Further checks found nothing of the sort.

The person in charge of screening looked through Zuo Yu's identity and examined him quite a bit. Zuo Yu returned a smile.

"Captain, everything is normal," one of the screeners reported to the police officer with the dog.

The police officer looked at the person in charge of screening and saw him nodding his head, meaning that no anomalies had been found.

That police officer frowned. The leash was being strained in his hands. His dog, as well as two other police dogs that had come over, were extremely fidgety, their line of sight continuously sweeping the group, as if searching for something. Struck by a thought, the police dog circled once around Fang Zhao's group.

"Woof woof woof woof!" The police dog began barking once again, this time more ferocious than the last.

The other dogs that had come later starting barking as well.

Seeing the ferocious barking of the police dogs, Zu Wen's gaze went to the leashes attached to them, he was really worried that the leashes would break.

The police officer's body suddenly shook, his penetrating glare chilling as he pointed to the car beside them and told the group, "Open it!"

"You want to inspect the car?!" Wu Yi could not help it and rushed forward to obstruct them. "Inside are just our competing shepherd dogs and the veterinary team!"

After alighting from the flying transport at the competition venue, a specially prepared car would be sent over. This car was not for everyone. It was only for the competing participants. This was to prevent the competing shepherd dogs from being harassed by the spectators that had arrived early and to prevent them from being subject to underhanded means of sabotage. Therefore, the organizers would send a special car to fetch the teams of competing shepherd dogs. Besides the dogs, the veterinary team was inside to look after them. The car was soundproof so as to protect the dogs from being affected when inside. Even if it was very noisy outside, nothing could be heard. However, the people inside could see the situation outside through the car's windows, but as Wu Yi had not approved, they did not get off.

"They were just examined a while back and there are people from the organizing committee inside taking care of things. There are absolutely no dangerous materials inside!"

Wu Yi did not want to let the police inspect them. The few dogs had adjusted to their peak condition. If they were scared by the police officers and their dogs, it could potentially affect their competition. Police dogs and shepherd dogs were like well-trained soldiers and normal athletes, respectively; how would they be the same?! He had waited so long, as his luck overflowed and they reached the finals, how could he be willing to let a situation like this happen at such a crucial moment?

Staring right back at the police officers pressurizing gaze, Wu Yi refused to back down.

Seeing the police officers about to take action, Fang Zhao said, "There is no need to examine." Then he told Wu Yi, "Go and bring Curly Hair out. Remember to leash him."

"Ah? Fang Zhao, Curly Hair is the core of our team!" Wu Yi was unwilling. What happened if he got scared after coming out? He might not be able to run during the competition.

"Don't worry, it'll be all right. Go and bring him out, make sure to leash him," Fang Zhao stressed.

"Oh." Wu Yi grudgingly walked to the car and prepared to open the door. But under of the watchful gaze of more than ten pairs of security personnel eyes and the grave atmosphere and pressure, Wu Yi's legs turned soft and he stumbled. If not for Su Hou, who saw what was happening and supported him, Wu Yi would have fallen.

"It's okay, Wu Yi, just stand and wait with the rest. I will go," Fang Zhao said as he opened the car door and went in, quickly closing it.

The car door was at the tail end and there were two doors, one inner and the other outer. There was a little space between the two doors. When only the outer door was open, those in the interior of the car could still hear nothing.

After a while, the outer door opened, and this time, when a tiny crack appeared, the three police dogs went into a frenzied barking, straining against their leashes and trying to rush over. One officer could not hold them down and they needed an additional two to three men to keep the dogs in check.

Wu Yi saw a few of the special forces touching their guns, probably making sure they were standing by and ready to fire at any time. Farm owners had gun permits as well but rarely used them, and the guns these people were using were different. Of course, what was important was still their imposing manner. Seeing them this way, Wu Yi was very worried that the special forces would fire in their direction should the police officers give the signal.

The atmosphere now was particularly tense. Zu Wen felt that if this was a scene in a movie, the next moment was when a shoot-out would happen. But what did they have over here that was making the police so guarded?

Zu Wen and the others racked their brains trying to guess and were so nervous they forgot to breathe.

The outer door opened wider and wider. Over ten guns were pointed there as they watched Fang Zhao heading out with a leash in one hand. At Fang Zhao's feet was the curly-haired dog, decked out in Dongshan Farm's competition attire.

However, the tense atmosphere did not cease. As Fang Zhao lead the dog down from the car, the special forces team were all ready to fire. They did not care if you were a competing person or a dog, as long as the lives of people were threatened or the safety of the competition venue was compromised, you would be shot dead. That had always been the rule.

Fang Zhao lead the dog forward a few steps. One hand held the leash and his other hand was held up, showing that he did not have any weapons. Fang Zhao left the dog's car and walked about ten meters. The three police dogs followed as well, their incessant barking still continuing. Their throats produced some deep snarls as well.

Everyone there could see now that what the three police dogs found threatening was not in the car but rather in Fang Zhao's direction. Where he stood, there was only one person and a competition dog that could not be considered big. That curly-haired dog seemed to be rather gutsy, as it bared its teeth and started barking as it faced off with the three police dogs.

"Woof woof! Woof woof!"

"Woof woof woof! Woof!"

"Woof! Woof! Woof! Woof!"

In a low voice, Zu Wen asked Wu Yi, who had the most experience, "Are they communicating in dog language? How come there is even punctuation between their barks?"

Wu Yi looked at Zu Wen as if he were an idiot. "Every dog has their own way of barking." He then fell silent and contemplated for a bit. "From my experience, I believe they are having a quarrel."

"Even a blind man can see that! If they were not leashed, they would be fighting already. Curly Hair wants to take on three at once? Not bad, eh, totally not weak at all!" Zu Wen had already forgotten about being scared. He found the sight before him too comical. On one side, Fang Zhao was holding on to Curly Hair, while on the other side, there were seven to eight policemen struggling to hold their three police dogs down.

Just observing a little and it was easy to see that the three police dogs were not focused on any other people or the car. What they saw as a threat was the dog Fang Zhao had on a leash, Curly Hair.

The people in charge of security checks brought their equipment over and scanned Curly Hair from head to toe.

After that, other than the barks of the four dogs, everyone else fell into a weird silence, including the special forces team that was standing by.

In the distance, other dogs heard the commotion and starting barking too. Some were police dogs, but others were competition dogs that had arrived earlier.

This odd situation continued for close to two minutes. The special forces team could not take it any longer. It turned out to be that sort of thing between dogs. That was quite awkward!

Fang Zhao pointed at the three police dogs barking at Curly Hair and asked the police officers standing behind those dogs, "So does this count as being in possession of dangerous materials?"

"Cough... Probably not... I guess?" The police officer glanced at the rigid looking captain, awaiting further instructions.

"Doesn't count." The captain forced out a smile and apologized to Fang Zhao's group. "Sorry for the misunderstanding."

As he finished, he signaled the team with his hand, indicating for them to stand down.

Chapter 107

Star-Studded Gathering

Zu Wen and others breathed a heavy sigh of relief after the air was cleared. They were genuinely worried that they had been dragged into a life-threatening conspiracy at their first live sheep-herding contest.

"I was scared shitless just now. Did you notice how the armed officers over there almost opened fire? How scary!" Wan Yue looped her arm around Zeng Huang's, still recovering from the tense standoff.

Zu Wen said, "Believe it or not, I actually felt no fear. I even wanted to laugh."

Song Miao was deeply skeptical. "I don't believe you. You were ghastly pale and your legs were shaking."

"Anyway, all's good as long as nothing bad happened. I really don't understand how those folks got in their heads that we were carrying dangerous items. All we have is a small curly-haired dog." Wu Yi was very upset. The policemen were this close to entering their transport with guns, which would have terrified his beloved competition dogs. If Curly Hair had been spooked, they could've kissed today's contest goodbye.

Fang Zhao had returned Curly Hair to their dog transport, but the group still drew many curious gazes when they left the parking lot for the competition venue.

"I'm still confused, though, as to why the police dogs zeroed in on Curly Hair." Zu Wen was puzzled. "Also, none of those sophisticated detectors sounded any alarms. Why did all the officers swing into action when the police dogs barked? Are police dogs more reliable than detectors in Muzhou?"

Wu Yi shook his head. "All the police dogs deployed here have undergone the most rigorous training. The ones that show up here are the select elite. Actually, there are ways to beat the detectors and smuggle in dangerous items, but the dogs can identify dangerous individuals based on their superb instincts. You've heard of cemetery guards, right? The folks assigned to guard martyrs' cemeteries? They all have very

strong instincts. The police dogs here are similar. As for why they singled out Curly Hair, I have no idea. Maybe it's because Curly Hair has a keen fighting spirit?"

"Hahahaha!" Zu Wen couldn't contain his laughter.

Wu Yi and Su Hou turned their heads and glared at him. They didn't find anything funny about Wu Yi's hypothesis. "His fighting spirit is strong. He hasn't lost in a fight since he arrived in Muzhou."

But shepherd dogs and police dogs were different. If it were one of the shepherd dogs that had caused such a stir, so be it. And why were the police dogs so alarmed even when the shepherd dogs were confined to their transport? It was as if they had sensed some form of extreme danger.

A light bulb flashed in Wu Yi's head when his train of thought reached this point. He was no longer worried—he was excited instead. "Champions always stand out!" He felt even better about their chances in the grand finals.

Zu Wen: "...” He really wanted to burst out laughing.

The police officers guarding the exit to the parking lot were confused too after Fang Zhao and company left, although they didn't blame or discipline the three police dogs.

"That's the dog from Muzhou who's here to stir things up?" one officer asked a colleague.

"That's him."

"Now I realize why the sheep dash like they're running for their lives when they're herded by Dongshan Farm's dogs."

"Yeah, I think I get it too."

The man who was addressed as Captain watched Fang Zhao and company make their way to the stadium. "Be careful if you run into that dog again. If you're caught unawares, you'll get ripped to shreds," he said.

There were some dogs you simply couldn't judge by appearance. They were also exceptionally gifted. Despite their small size, they were endowed with the DNA that allowed them to survive the apocalypse. Any dog that endured the end of days

shouldn't be underestimated. Among service dogs, few were small in size, but every one of them was extremely competent. The officers had come across many special breeds of military dogs in their line of work, so they would never underestimate a seemingly innocent puppy.

"That curly-haired dog is probably descended from a service dog, right?"

"He's definitely military dog material. Pity he's being used as a shepherd dog." Military dogs and shepherd dogs were subject to different kinds of training. Neither would be able to adapt to the other's line of work after being trained.

"It's a shame such a good dog has been trained as a shepherd dog, notwithstanding the fact that he's being raised by a foreigner," one officer lamented.

After a brief silence, someone asked, "Have you placed your bets yet?"

The others raised their heads, eyes burning. Police officers in Muzhou weren't banned from betting. They just couldn't watch the contest, having to guard it instead.

"Who are you going to bet on?"

"What a stupid question. It's a no-brainer." Of course they would put their money on the dog they considered most dangerous.

Curious bystanders who had gathered near the parking lot were held back by grounds staff, so they couldn't figure out what was going on. All they heard was barking. They thought something big had gone down, but things quieted down after a while, as if nothing had ever happened.

One staffer told the folks still lingering, "Stop peeking. It's just a misunderstanding."

"Hey, you're blocking the way!" an obnoxious voice complained.

The staffers turned their heads. The person who spoke was a young man emerging from the parking lot. He wore green shades that resembled a fly's eyes. The lower part of his face wore an expression of unabashed cockiness. For a young kid like him to roll with assistants and bodyguards, he had to be a rich kid, but there were tons of people like that milling around today. That didn't strike anyone as unusual. What drew

attention was the fat dog he was leading on a leash.

It was big enough to swallow two dogs of the same height.

The young man basked in the attention his beloved dog was receiving. He cocked his chin and said, "So what do you think? Well fed, huh? This dog is descended from the most valuable dog of last year's championship team. It shares the bloodline of a champion dog!"

The Muzhou locals who had gathered around the dog twitched their faces. What the f*ck are you so cocky about? Do you know anything about raising a dog? You've wasted such precious genes. Travesty, a total travesty.

The Muzhou natives were heartbroken. That was why they rarely sold the offspring of quality shepherd dogs to foreigners—so they wouldn't fall into the hands of self-indulgent owners like him. Even the best dogs would be sabotaged.

Such a well-endowed dog had been turned into a pig. What could it accomplish?

It looked like it was just good for cuddles.

The young man responded to the angry glares with a broader smile. He thought folks were jealous about how much he pampered his dog, so he went on his way. "Come on, my little angel. I'm going to pick you the perfect companion this year. How about this year's MVD?"

When the cocky young man left with a group of bodyguards, one of the bystanders asked, "Who was that obnoxious kid? He actually had the gumption to consider poaching our MVD."

"I have no idea. Anyone? Any foreigners here?"

"He's not from Tongzhou."

"Not from Jinzhou."

"There aren't idiots like that from Jizhou."

A journalist from Leizhou pursed his lips, retreated, and then sent a message to his colleagues: "Big Master Zaro just started a feud."

As for Fang Zhao and company, they split up once they arrived at the stadium. Wu Yi took the team for precompetition medical tests while Fang Zhao led Zu Wen and the others to the viewing gallery.

The team arrived early because, after arriving at the venue, the dogs had to undergo several rounds of testing, which required everything from blood to fur samples. Both biological and physical screening was conducted. To prevent cheating, no stone was left unturned.

Naturally, Wu Yi and Su Hou had to be present for the tests. Especially Su Hou, who was banned from doping. That was why they arrived early, so they could rest after the testing and appear and compete in tip-top shape.

After Fang Zhao and company entered the viewing gallery, they looked for the balconies. The balconies were open air and would be sealed only when the contest began.

"Wow! So this is the legendary VIP viewing gallery!" Zu Wen carefully examined all the trappings and scrutinized the audiovisual equipment with his professional judgment. His conclusion: "This place is f*cking loaded."

"This isn't the VIP viewing gallery. This is the viewing gallery for competing teams. The VIP viewing gallery is over there." Fang Zhao pointed from the balcony.

"F*ck, I think I see a major celebrity. I think it's that really famous star from Huangzhou," Rodney exclaimed.

"Where? Where?"

"Woah! Good thing I brought my binoculars. Wait... there are other celebrities standing next to the Huangzhou one. I think they're from Lazhou or Jinzhou. Wait, there are so many! I see a few more now. They're all standing on the balconies of the VIP viewing gallery."

"The grand finals of Muzhou's sheep-herding contest draw a sizable batch of celebrities every year, as well as prominent figures from different fields, but they don't necessarily show up on the balconies," Song Miao said calmly as she craned her neck, binoculars in hand.

The viewing gallery for competing teams had the best view. From here, you could see most of the balconies jutting out from the VIP viewing gallery.

"Wow!" Pang Pusong shouted from another balcony.

"What is it? What is it? Did you spot another big star?" Zu Wen rushed over from his balcony.

Pang Pusong pointed to his right. Deep inhalations followed.

The balcony Zu Wen had staked out had a view of the interior of the stadium, while the one Pang Pusong had picked faced outward.

It had been nearly an hour since they'd landed. Traffic was picking up. From the balcony, they had a clear view of the parking lot. Scores of flying transports and flying cars were hovering above it. Police aircrafts were scattered nearby. Air traffic lights blinked nonstop, keeping flying transports in queue and directing them to designated parking spots.

Zu Wen felt goosebumps. "Such a spectacle. If you didn't know better, you might think war was imminent." He was nervous and emotional. The blood coursing through his veins felt like it was heating up.

The faces of VIPs kept showing up on the big screen in the viewing gallery, such as a world-renowned actor, an infamous rich kid, and his contemporaries from various continents. There were also political figures from other continents invited by the Muzhou government. And so on. The press corps was having a field day. They didn't have to worry about filling their pages.

"This is why today is known as 'Lockdown Day'." Zu Wen felt the trip was totally worth it. The security fiasco was nothing.

"Who knew so many people were interested in a sheep-herding contest," Pang Pusong said.

Song Miao, who was standing next to him, snickered. "You think they're actually interested in a sheep-herding competition? They're not here to watch the contest. They're here to show their status and further their personal interests."

That rang true, especially for all the celebrities present, big shots or not. They were

here to get exposure, and Muzhou journalists wouldn't let them down. Who would not milk this golden occasion to draw global attention, to let the whole world know that the grand finals of Muzhou's sheep-herding contest were taking place today?

"Ah, I almost forgot the contest is being televised live globally." Zu Wen smacked himself on the head, tidied up in front of a mirror, then struck what he thought was the slickest pose on the balcony that overlooked the stadium.

Chapter 108

Really, What Sort of Dog Is This?

The core of Muzhou's entertainment industry was the sheep-herding competition. There were not many actors, and there were even fewer singers. However, the people of Muzhou were rich. Every time there was an opening ceremony of a large-scale competition, they would invite world-renowned superstars to perform and liven up the atmosphere so as to increase the reputation of Muzhou's sheep-herding competitions throughout the world. These stars had fans, and the fans would watch the live broadcasts and would naturally learn of Muzhou's yearly grand competition.

The normal rounds of sheep-herding competitions would not be broadcast to other continents, but the finals were different. Every year, many popular online broadcasting companies would collaborate with Muzhou's side to stream the competition. The entertainment circles of each continent did not prevent it, as it was a win-win situation for everyone.

And all the people that caught the broadcast would see the image from how the organizers chose to film it.

The main focus would surely be on prominent figures such as celebrities and the descendants of those aristocratic families. After the recording went through one round, it would then feature the viewing halls of each participating team. When the introduction came to Dongshan Farm's viewing hall, staff in Silver Wing's internal departments that were secretly watching the broadcast all started to curse at the same moment.

"F*ck! It's Zu Wen, that slut!"

"That position is very good, heh. They can probably see many stars, right?"

"So envious!"

"Envy +1"

"Regret not joining the virtual projects department back when it was still easy to get

in!"

Even though the footage lasted only two seconds, they all saw the pretentious Zu Wen posing up on the viewing platform. Other than Zu Wen, there were other members of the virtual projects department, but the others were not as conspicuous as Zu Wen. Some of the others could not be seen clearly, but the Silver Wing people, especially those from the technician group, knew that the entire virtual projects department was there at the best viewing hall, with the best positions, being broadcast to the world. And this was all a part of their department vacation. It simply made the other members jealous!

Seeing the virtual projects department riding waves in Muzhou, whereas they themselves were working overtime everyday, this sort of taste... Why did so many people rant about wanting to beat up Zu Wen? This question was not that hard to understand.

Su Hou's group had not finished the inspection yet when Su Feng came over, bearing many gifts for Fang Zhao and the gang.

Four Elephants had made huge profits in Yanzhou. Although their advertisements came out at the opportune moment, the sales volume's rapid growth was a fact. When Su Feng had found out that Fang Zhou would be bringing his department members over to watch the competition, he got his workers to specially wrap gifts as a form of thanks and to improve relations. After all, everyone would be continuing to collaborate in the future, so it was better to get closer.

Getting to watch the competition for free and now receiving benefits, although Zu Wen and the rest did not really care about the cost of these items, the treatment made them really happy.

Su Feng spoke to Fang Zhao regarding Four Elephant's marketing campaign and its achievements in Yanzhou. A moment later, Su Hou and Wu Yi brought the veterinarian team and the shepherd dogs over.

"Faster, faster, faster! Let's take a group photo with all the participating contestants!" Zu Wen went over and took quite a few photographs and videos. These were for showing off when he got back.

Curly Hair was wagging his tail nonstop and seemed very happy. The other dogs were

the same without any hint of prematch jitters. On the other hand, the pressure on Su Hou as the instructor was crushing.

"I heard that many are coming over to watch the competition live, although they were afraid to affect your condition and hence did not come here. After you have finished, you will probably get to see a number of familiar faces," Su Feng said.

"I know." Su Hou had been informed about all this earlier, and that was the reason he was feeling even more nervous. This feeling he was having was similar to when he'd first stood on position for his first competition, a mixture of anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. Su Hou knew this was not right, and after chatting a little with Su Feng, he retired to the resting room to recharge.

Su Hou had formed the habit of watching the Eastern region's publicity film a few times and listening to the BGM. It helped boost his fighting spirit. He was still young and still had a long way to go. There was no way he could compete with all the other experienced competitors, so he could only use this method to adjust his state of mind.

Wu Yi was used to this and did not ask anything. Instead, he went over to Fang Zhao's side and handed over the Curly Hair's test reports. This was what Fang Zhao had asked for previously. Including the normal rounds of competition and the Eastern region finals, Fang Zhao had stockpiled all of them.

Wu Yi did not think much about the matter. Curly Hair belonged to Fang Zhao. As an owner, keeping copies of test reports was normal.

Today as well, Fang Zhao kept a copy of the test report. Similar to his previous test reports during the normal rounds of competition, other than Curly Hair having higher concentrations of certain metals in his body, everything else was normal. The concentration of those metals in his body was also at an acceptable level. Otherwise, he would have been barred from competing. This sort of situation was not that uncommon when it came to dogs with wild-dog ancestry in them.

Wu Yi stopped talking after a while. He had gotten jittery too. The viewing hall was a distance away from the outside, but the pressure and nervousness one felt there was different from the normal rounds of competition, and it was enough to make even the experienced Wu Yi unable to keep calm.

The finals were not limited to just one day. They took place over a period of a few

competition days, and each time, the rounds would be different. Every team would get points for each round, and at the end, the team that accumulated the most points would be the champions.

Today's first round was not much different from the normal rounds of competition, but the obstacles in the pasture were slightly different. For this round, the sheep could still disperse after being gathered when they encountered the imitation hills or ditches. The difficulty compared to the normal rounds was much higher. However, this first round was still the easiest in the finals, and each of the following rounds would get progressively harder. Thus, every team wanted to score high points for the first round, as it would give them some guarantee.

For the finals, Muzhou officials wanted to attract a global audience, so the prematch introductions of the farms were made much simpler. After the brief introduction was the opening ceremony and performances. This was the segment that viewers from other continents were anticipating the most.

However, the Muzhou masses only saw this as noise and excitement. They were more interested in the competition that followed.

After an hour of the opening ceremony and warm-up, it was time to draw lots for the appearing order of the teams.

The person in charge of drawing for the team was still Su Hou. This time, among the eight teams, Dongshan would be the third team to appear.

As this pastures were bigger, the times would increase as well. The teams that were taking part in the competition were all highly capable. As long as the shepherd dogs did not make serious mistakes on an unfamiliar ground, just by following their instructor's commands, they should be able to complete it.

The two teams in front did not make any serious mistakes, and their minor errors were very quickly corrected. This made Zu Wen and the rest tense as they followed the competition. Seeing the first two teams' performances, they had a totally new outlook toward the IQ of shepherd dogs. These dogs were way more intelligent than they had expected. Due to the performance of the two teams, they were a little worried for their own.

The two teams had times around the five and a half minute mark. One was 5 minutes

28 seconds and the other was 5 minutes 33 seconds. Both of these teams were from the Western region and this result was quite decent.

Next up was Su Hou's team. Su Hou and the shepherd dogs had gone down earlier to prepare.

"So nervous. I never had any interest in sheep herding competitions before, but now my heart feels like it is going to fly out of my chest!" Rodney exclaimed.

"Watching live and catching the broadcast are totally different. Of course, what's most important is that the competition has your dogs and you have wagered on them. Being nervous is normal, everyone feels the same way," Su Feng told them.

He had felt like this back when he was ten years old. That time, his aunt's family dog was competing. He had wagered all of his allowance on them. Although, eventually, they had not won, he still remembered clearly the nervous anticipation he had felt then. As a Muzhou citizen, seeing all these foreigners being captivated, one could not help but feel proud.

Ta—Ta—Ta—

The sound of the timer machine counted down. With a "Boom," the flock of sheep entered the pasture, as did the shepherd dogs. There were a few loose sheep that were originally scattered within the pasture. Their job was to gather up these loose sheep together with the flock and drive them toward the goal.

"Come on, my babies! Pay attention and follow closely. Don't run in the wrong positions!"

"Very good, follow the commands! Good form, Curly Hair! Oh, my little cuties!"

In a moment, all sorts of "babies," "little cuties," "darlings," and other corny terms came out. Zu Wen and the others, who would normally not be caught doing this, joined in the madness alongside Wu Yi.

Seeing Fang Zhao still sitting on his chair, staring at the screen as if he was solving a problem, Zu Wen shouted over, "Hey, Boss, stop being so serious! Come over and show your support!"

"They can't hear your shouting over at the field."

"What's important are the feelings. You understand feelings, right? The one participating is Curly Hair, our department's Golden Dog. His value will rise even more after winning!" Zu Wen was no longer looking at Fang Zhao; his eyes were on the screen, following the dogs who were rounding up the sheep.

"This is the first time I clearly realized how intelligent Curly Hair really is," Rodney said ruefully.

Shepherd dogs were very intelligent. This they could tell from watching past videos and seeing the previous two teams' performances. However, Curly Hair's performance let them know that this dog was even smarter than others. More importantly, it had a knack for sheep herding.

Fang Zhao stared fixedly at the screen. Every ounce of his concentration was focused on the little curly-haired dog that appeared on screen.

Intelligent?

Of course.

Moreover, it was not even normal intelligence. Curly Hair's IQ seemed less and less like that of a normal dog.

Fang Zhao knew all along that Curly Hair had a very impressive learning capability. When he had first picked it up, if it only had the perceptiveness of a stray, its intelligence then would not have been so surprising. It probably knew that staying by Fang Zhao's side would be safer and there would be no need to worry about food and water, so it had stayed and followed Fang Zhao every day. After Fang Zhao had brought it to the office, it had unknowingly learned a lot. It knew how to use its own personal urinal, learned how to listen to instructions, and understood more and more words. Although Fang Zhao had taught him a few things, it had picked up even more from its daily life. What it saw and heard, it absorbed even more quickly.

When Curly Hair had started sheep herding, it had started off as a complete newbie too. However, very quickly, it'd learned to make use of its imposing manner and mastered many tactics.

Really, what sort of dog was this?

Was it like this at the start, or had it started to change later on?

If it had such a strong learning capability and attacking strength at the start, how could it have gotten itself into such a bad state in the black street and nearly starved to death? Yue Qing and Ai Wen, who had lived in the black street for decades, had said that this stray had lived in the black street for a few years already.

If he had only started to change after that, when did it started?

Fang Zhao thoroughly tried to recall back to the time when he'd just woken up in this body. As for this dog, inside its body, could something else have woken up inside?

Without a doubt, this was indeed a dog. But could this dog's body be hiding something inside?

From a normal stray in the black street to a "dangerous material" discovered by the police dogs while in the car. It was still changing, its learning capabilities and strength still increasing. So much so that... it had started learning how to conceal its own strength.

How much more would it change in the future?

Fang Zhao pondered as he watch the little figure running on the screen.

Chapter 109

Not for Sale

In the pasture, the shepherd dogs were in the midst of the flock and starting to drive it forward. Similar to the Eastern region finals, the flock of sheep were gradually picking up speed. Even if they had taken slightly longer than the previous two teams to gather up the flock so far, given the speed of the flock, they would definitely make up ground.

Wu Yi and the others in the viewing hall got more and more excited. Zu Wen and the others were red in the face from all the shouting.

The intersection ahead was narrow and there was an obstacle in the middle. To cross it, they had to let the flock become thin, or split them up to go around it.

Su Hou requested to issue commands and made gestures to Curly Hair and Bingo, instructing them to lead the dogs on both sides to split up and go around the obstacle.

Fang Zhao was watching the screen intently. On the screen, as Curly Hair was running, it barked a few times. It was issuing commands!

The lead dog barking out commands to other shepherd dogs was not uncommon, so no one found it surprising. However, Fang Zhao, who had been watching Curly Hair closely, had realized that, before Su Hou had even gestured with his hands, Curly Hair had already started to increase his speed. This meant to say that Curly Hair's understanding of the course had been even quicker than Su Hou's! If Su Hou had not requested to issue commands, what would Curly Hair have instructed the other dogs to do? Fang Zhao could not guess.

The shape of the flock as it encountered the obstacle split into two, forming a "Y" then becoming a "Λ" and after the obstacle had been passed, the flock congregated back together. During the entire process, the running speed of the flock did not change much. Although the flock on Bingo's side was slightly slower in gathering up, generally, the entire process was very smooth.

Everyone in the viewing hall had their eyes on the timer at the top right hand corner,

and they were going crazy.

The only calm person in the hall was Fang Zhao, who was still analyzing Curly Hair.

Curly Hair had learned how to lead the other dogs on the field to coordinate and herd the sheep. He had already adapted to become a leader on the field for the competition. Other than strength, he had brains.

The harder the challenges, the quicker it grew.

His outward experience did not change much, yet inside, every day, he was evolving rapidly. Perhaps very soon, his IQ would be similar to that of an average adult?

Fang Zhao did not know whether bringing Curly Hair was the right decision, but from what he saw now, Curly Hair did not show any signs of menace.

...

As the competition went on inside, the police guarding the parking area were no longer as busy as they had been before, but they still had to continue watching the area to stop any accidents from happening.

The arena had already been closed off and sealed. The sounds from the audience were isolated. They could only hear the sounds of the commentators coming over from the arena. Occasionally, in between the pauses in the commentating, they could hear some barking come from the pasture.

During the previous two rounds, everything had been normal, but after Dongshan's run had started, something started to feel wrong.

Low growls were coming from a police dog. This time there was no barking, firstly because the distance was rather far, so the threat they felt was not as intense, and secondly because they had instructions not to bark too loudly when the competition was underway so as to not affect the competing dogs.

This was not just limited to one dog. All around the arena, the scattered dogs were all exhibiting the same sort of behavior.

The police dogs bared their teeth, their eyes showing an ominous glint as they kept growling nonstop.

"Captain, what do we do?" someone asked.

The police captain had already received multiple reports from all his men scattered around the arena. After getting the concrete details, he found out they were all the same. This behavior only started when Dongshan Farm's turn was up. There had been no complications during the previous two teams' turns.

Taking a while to think, the police captain then instructed his men through the communications device. "If the police dogs are only facing the arena and growling, do not do anything. Wait till Dongshan Farm has completed their run before giving me another situation report."

The competition was underway. The men standing guard here were unable to see the live broadcast, but from the bits and pieces of the commentator's words, they could tell that Dongshan Farm's round was ending soon and they had successfully crossed obstacles one after the other, and their results seemed to be looking good.

"They are in!"

"They are all in the pen! Every single one! Four minutes and 49 seconds!" The commentator howled, "Four minutes and 49 seconds! It's better than the previous year, as well as the year before that! It is the best time in the last five years! Just shy of the record by five seconds!"

Outside, the police officers made eye contact with each other. There was delight in their eyes as they flashed each other victory signs.

They had all wagered on Dongshan being first. This was an outstanding result. Barring any accidents, first place should be assured.

The police captain watched his leashed dog. It's growling and snarling slowly ceased. The fierce and violent demeanor vanished as well. Reports were coming in from all the other police officers that things were back to normal.

"Alright, everything is normal. Don't get distracted, continue to watch the surroundings," the police captain said through the comms.

Just five seconds short of breaking the record in the first round of the finals. What a pity. However for Fang Zhao and the others in the viewing hall, this was more than enough to be happy about. This result was sufficient to beat the majority of other

teams in the first round!

There were still five more teams after them, but the atmosphere in the viewing hall had become more relaxed. When Su Hou and the seven shepherd dogs returned, Wu Yi knelt down and kissed each dog.

After the vets had inspected their bodies, they were fed and given water as well as massages to alleviate fatigue. The way the seven dogs were treated was better than humans.

Fang Zhao's gaze turned toward Curly Hair. Curly Hair had just finished drinking and was lying there enjoying the massage. When he caught Fang Zhao's gaze, he wagged his tail vigorously, as if taking credit for the hard work.

Laughing, Fang Zhao gave him a thumbs up and looked elsewhere. He had some doubt in his heart. Did Curly Hair's changes have anything to do with him being reborn? After the competition ended, he would need to find some time to head back to the black street and ask around.

"There are five more teams to go. Let's watch!" Wu Yi regained his composure and sat down to observe the remaining teams.

After every team had completed their runs, Wu Yi heaved a huge sigh of relief, as the times of those teams were slower than their own. Shoubei Farm of the Eastern region also posted a decent time—5 minutes 13 seconds—and were in the top four.

Among the five teams that went after them, the best time belonged to a farm from the Western region. They had gone under five minutes as well, but their time of 4 minutes 58 seconds was nine seconds slower.

Teams that could qualify for the finals were all outstanding. The results of the first round were all very close, but without a doubt, Dongshan Farm's results were really an eye-opener.

Once all eight teams had competed, the sealed arena was opened once again as sounds and laughter came drifting out. The previously quiet competition grounds were full of noise. They were still discussing the competition. There was delight and sorrow. Some people were laughing happily while others stormed out full of rage. These people had spent money on the wagers. Some people were returning with a few times their wager, whereas others could only look on as their money became another's.

When the competition ended, Wu Yi and Su Hou brought the dogs through the official passageway for their post-match inspection. After that, they still needed to allocate the car for the dogs and to attend an interview. The dogs would be looked after by specialists from the organizing side. Su Hou and Wu Yi had additionally hired people to protect them as well, so there was no need to worry about their safety.

Fang Zhao led Zu Wen and the others through another passage as they exited the arena.

While exiting the arena, Fang Zhao's mind was still pondering Curly Hair when he heard someone shout his name.

"The person in front, Fang... Fang... What was it... Oh yeah, Fang Zhao! Hey, Fang Zhao!"

Fang Zhao turned around, looking for the source. The others also turned back curiously. When Su Feng had a clear look at the person who came running over, his eyelids could not stop twitching.

"Zaro Renault?" Fang Zhao watched as the sloppy-looking youngster came running over. Thinking about Great General Renault's temper, he wondered, if Renault were still alive and he saw this descendant's conduct, he probably would raise a hand in anger, right?

Zaro's assistant followed closely, holding a cup in each hand. One was filled with wine, the other with a cold drink. Another bodyguard held a fan and faced it toward Zaro.

After Zaro ran over, he took off his spectacles and tilted his head. His assistant rushed over and handed over the cold drink. After letting Zaro suck a few mouthfuls through a straw, he kept it and stood aside.

Smacking his lips, Zaro examined Fang Zhao. "The one who created Polar Light was you, right? Forget it, let's talk about the other stuff next time." As he spoke, he tilted his head right and left and looked around, but he could not find the dog he was looking for.

"Where is your dog?" Zaro asked with a hint of arrogance.

Zu Wen and the others started to take precautions. What was this stupid idiot trying to do with their dog?!

"Went another way for an inspection," Fang Zhao replied.

"When can he come out?" Zaro asked.

"No idea."

"Never mind, I heard the curly-haired dog belongs to you?"

"That's right."

"Are you selling? Just name a price!"

"Not for sale."

Chapter 110

What Happened That Day

Hearing Fang Zhao decline without even considering made Zaro very discontented. Many years ago, when he'd come to Muzhou to buy a puppy, the people of Muzhou had done the same, using all sorts of excuses to avoid selling him a puppy. In the end, it was through throwing his money at them that they finally accepted. The puppy that he bought was the one he held on a leash beside him, named "Little Angel," and was a descendant of the most valuable dog all those years back.

Zaro wished to pick an MVD to keep his beloved pet dog company. After the first round of the competition, he had set his eyes on Curly Hair. Unfortunately, Curly Hair's breed was not a native shepherd dog of Muzhou, so Zaro had decided to purchase this dog and be done with it. Fang Zhao was not from Muzhou, so he probably would not be that attached to the competition dogs. But now Fang Zhao had declined—could it be that his offer had been too little?

Zaro examined Fang Zhao once more and said, "I know that Curly Hair still has the potential to rise in value. How about this; let me reserve it. When the Muzhou whatever finals are over, I will pay you double its reported value."

As Zaro finished talking, the face of his assistant beside him was twitching. He had been personally picked for the job by Zaro's manager. Starting this job recently, he had promised Zaro's manager that he would watch Zaro at all times and not let him throw his money around purchasing things that he had no need for. That dog was worth 50 million. After the finals, even if it did not reach 100 million, it would still be close. But what was behind doubling the price? If Zaro really spent that amount, the manager would surely fire him when they got back to Leizhou.

At this moment, the new assistant was full of regret. Why had he not stopped Zaro's foolish actions?!

Luckily for him, Fang Zhao promptly replied, "I said I'm not selling."

Zaro's face flashed with anger. "Are you a fool..."

Observing Zaro about to create a commotion, the assistant went to his ear and whispered something. The anger on Zaro's face rapidly vanished and he approvingly said, "Makes sense!"

"Okay, I don't want your dog. When your dog has puppies... Right, your curly-haired dog is a male, it can't give birth. Whenever it has puppies with a female dog, I would like to reserve one. Just name your price then! You should know who I am, right? Just send someone to Leizhou and tell me, or if you can't find me, just mention my name."

Fang Zhao remained silent and Zaro took it as agreement. He was about to say something when his assistant reminded him, "Young Master, time is almost up, we have to rush over."

"Oh right, still have to go fishing!" Zaro looked at the time and got anxious. He had arranged for a fishing competition with others and it would start on time. He turned his head to Fang Zhao and shouted, "Remember, tell me if there are puppies. Daddy has money!"

Watching Zaro hurriedly leave with his assistant and bodyguard, Zu Wen asked Fang Zhao, "Does he have a screw loose?"

"Don't bother with him," Fang Zhao said. This little fellow was lacking a proper upbringing. If Old Renault was still alive, Zaro would have been slapped a long time ago.

Su Hou still needed to go through a series of interviews and participate in some activities by the organizers for publicity. There would be other Su family members there, and Fang Zhao was not worried that anything might happen. Su Feng had told him that the heads had already made their stand, so no one would dare touch Su Hou.

Since they had finished the first round of competition, Zu Wen and the others had time for sightseeing. They were not going to follow Wu Yi and Su Hou all the way. Hence, after leaving the competition grounds, they went with Fang Zhao to take a look at Dongshan Farm, which their boss had invested in.

"It's soooo big! Does all this land belong to Dongshan Farm?"

Being used to the cramped city life, for Pang Pusang, Zeng Huang and the others, their first time in Muzhou was nothing short of amazing.

The newly refurbished Dongshan Farm was very different from when Su Hou had first bought it. Now the farm was full of life. The few lazy dogs had also been trained and were running around the farm. The fields were now full of crops. Although the pastures will still relatively empty, the grass had already grown quite a bit.

Getting to see the scenic landscape, Zu Wen and the others felt refreshed.

Su Feng invited the virtual projects department for a visit to Four Elephants farm when he saw them really enjoying this sort of environment.

Four Elephants Farm had good business all along and was different from the originally empty Dongshan Farm. Four Elephants farm had a vibrant bustle to it. The environment was a combination of primitive and advanced technology. On the farm, there were many modern machines that aided the processes. Some helped with planting, some tending to livestock, some forecasting the weather, and some monitoring the soil. There were many workers, and there were even fish ponds.

Su Feng arranged for his men to show Zu Wen and gang around the farm to explore and enjoy. One week passed by quickly and the vacation time that Fang Zhao had applied for from Duan Qianji came to an end. He could use his status as a composer to stay out in Muzhou and "seek inspiration," but the others could not.

The day Zu Wen and the others left Muzhou was also the second round of the sheep-herding finals. Fang Zhao let Zuo Yu send them back. He would stay in Muzhou for another day.

When it was time for them to board the the flying transport, Zu Wen and the few others kept looking back longingly, feeling as if they had not had their fill of fun yet.

"Stop looking, there will be more chances in the future," Fang Zhao said.

"Thats right!" Zu Wen's brain started to calculate. As long as they could clear all their assignments, perhaps they could go for yet another vacation within the next two months, possibly coming back to watch another round of the competition. However, it would not be as long as this round. Anyway, as long as Fang Zhao was here, all they needed to do was follow him, and everything would be well.

After coming around, Zu Wen's reluctant feelings had somewhat dissipated. They loaded up the gifts Su Feng had given onto the flying transport and left.

Fang Zhao walked into the viewing hall and spectated round two of the finals.

The second round's opening ceremony was not as extravagant as the first, as the level of interest from foreigners was not high as the opening round. But for the masses of Muzhou, it was still an important day. Almost every family would have someone watching the live broadcast.

Compared to the first round, round two was more challenging. The flock of sheep were split up into ten smaller flocks and scattered. The shepherd dogs had to first gather up all of the sheep and then drive them to the goal.

Throughout the entire round, Fang Zhao only paid attention to Curly Hair's performance. He watched as Curly Hair followed Su Hou's instructions as he led the other shepherd dogs to gather up the loosely scattered sheep and form up the flock. Whenever another dog ran to the wrong position, he would bark to remind them to return to the correct position.

As before, Dongshan Farm finished in first place during the second round of competition. This time, though, the second- and third-place teams finished three and five seconds behind, respectively. It could be said that, among the top three finishers, there was not much of a gap in skills after all. And as time went by, the gaps would continue to get closer. This was because, besides Curly Hair, the other dogs on Dongshan's team were not as strong as the dogs on other teams. Therefore, despite winning the first two rounds, no one was certain that Dongshan Farm would be the eventual champions.

After the conclusion of the second round, Fang Zhao left Muzhou and headed back to Yanzhou. Curly Hair continued to stay at Shanmu Farm for training.

For a dog, Muzhou was indeed better than Yanzhou. Dogs could run as much as they wanted to on the vast grasslands there.

Fang Zhao did not let Zuo Yu come pick him up. When he returned to Yanzhou, he did not head to the office, nor did he go home. Instead, he paid the black street a visit.

Yue Qing was lying at his counter dozing off. When he heard the buzzer implying that someone had entered, he jolted awake immediately.

"Fang Zhao?! Why are you here?!" Yue Qing hurriedly pulled Fang Zhao over to the table, and from his innermost cupboard, he took out wine that he had kept hidden for

a long time.

Fang Zhao was empty handed. "Brought the team over to Muzhou for a vacation and bought quite a few things that'll be sent to you. You will probably receive it in the afternoon." Taking a look at the time, he continued, "Within two hours."

"Hey, it's fine if you just come. What's the need to buy so much stuff?" Yue Qing felt embarrassed. He had not helped Fang Zhao that much, and the stuff that Fang Zhao sent over was not cheap.

Fang Zhao laughed and took a look at the front of Yue Qing's shop. It seemed even wider than when he had left the black street.

"I brought over your old unit to store goods and I connected all the floors. The shop below also looks more spacious, and it's no longer as cramped as before," Yue Qing said.

"That's good," Fang Zhao said. "Getting the unit next door as well?"

"Hehe, you saw through me." Yue Qing did not hide that fact, as he believed that telling Fang Zhao would not disrupt his property plans.

"The shop next door has been closed for a long time. The shop owner owes a lot of money and is being chased by debt collectors. Recently, he secretly came back and decided to sell the shop to pay off his debts. I have already discussed with him, and if all goes well, it will be finalized within the next month."

"Congratulations."

"I should be the one doing the congratulating. You are famous now." Yue Qing poured Fang Zhao a glass of wine. "Congratulations."

"It's unwarranted fame. It'll probably cool in a bit." Fang Zhao clinked his glass against Yue Qing's and the two proceeded to drain the alcohol.

"Coming back at this time, is there something you need?" Yue Qing asked as he filled up Fang Zhao's glass once more.

"Yes, a little." Back when Fang Zhao had just woken up in this body, he had asked a few people on the black street, but those people had not noticed anything strange on that

afternoon. This time, Fang Zhao decided to thoroughly search for answers.

"The night when I first picked up Curly Hair and brought him home, did anything unusual happen?" Fang Zhao asked.

Yue Qing looked at Fang Zhao suspiciously then asked in a low voice, "Is someone trying to harm you?" Yue Qing could not think of any other reasons. He knew that Fang Zhao's childhood friend had done stuff in secret that hurt him and thought that Fang Zhao was tracing the matter.

"I just wish to clarify some stuff."

Yue Qing was certain that it was as he had suspected and did not ask for the reason. He recalled back and then shook his head. "Nothing really unusual happened that night. All I saw was you buying medicine and going back to your apartment, and I thought you were going to commit suicide and have Curly Hair accompany you. These types of suicide are rather popular in the black streets. Some youths in my shop at the time even made bets on that. My impression is rather deep on that matter, but other than that, there was nothing abnormal. I don't think there were any strangers either."

Fang Zhao mused and then asked, "Were there any blackouts or any communications malfunctioning?"

"Nope, everything was good. Did such malfunctions happen in your apartment that day?" Yue Qing paused as he thought. "Wait a minute, let me check."

Yue Qing went to his surveillance records. "Here is a copy of the surveillance footage of those two days. Take a look for yourself and see if you can find anything wrong."

Chapter 111

Coincidence?

"Thanks. Are there any other houses around here that have surveillance footage? I don't need those inside, just the outside footage will do."

"I do know a few, but to get their footage, you will probably have to spend some money." Yue Qing was very clear on the characters of people around these parts, especially a certain few that would not agree to help unless they benefited. Even if the surveillance footage had no value to them, they still would not give it out for free.

"This is no problem at all. It will be great as long as I can get it."

"Sure, since you are not short of cash. Don't come with me; if those people find out you are the one asking for it, the amount they ask for will surely skyrocket."

Yue Qing temporarily closed his shop, since he did not have much business in the daytime anyway. He let Fang Zhao rest in the shop as he went to look for a few familiar faces in the neighborhood for their surveillance footage. None of them were willing to give it up, but with a reasonable price, there was no issue at all.

An hour later, Yue Qing handed over seven copies of surveillance footage from last May over to Fang Zhao.

"There were a few that used cloud storage rather than local storage. As they did not pay for it, the records are only up to 6 months ago and they no longer have last year's footage. One copy is 500. 3500 will do, there is no need to pay me any extra." These prices had still gone through Yue Qing's bargaining. These people were just too much. Outdated footage that had nothing to do with them, yet they still asked for such a high price.

Fang Zhao had just transferred the money over to Yue Qing when Yue Qing received a call from from an old acquaintance from the black street.

"Hey, Old Yue, I heard you are looking for last year's recordings? Why didn't you find me? I have quite a number of copies here!"

The person who contacted Yue Qing was a teenager. Recently, he had been doing decently in the black street and had a lot of information. He received news from the people that Yue Qing had looked for and knew about this, so he hurriedly contacted Yue Qing at the same time and enticed Yue Qing with low prices and a number of copies.

Yue Qing glanced at Fang Zhao and saw him nodding his head, so he replied, "How many copies do you have? I want to inspect the goods first."

"You don't trust me? Could my goods be fake?!"

"It's unlikely to be fake; you don't have the guts. But all the recordings you have might not necessarily be of my vicinity."

"...It's not considered too far, so how about this: I shall send it to you to view first. As you go through them, you can pay me, all right? I believe in Old Yue's character, haha."

Very quickly, the teenager sent Yue Qing a few copies of videos. They were all footage of the whole of last May. When Yue Qing was collecting the footage, he had gotten the entirety of May. Therefore, when the other party collected this footage from others, he'd taken the entirety of May as well.

"Pfft, of the eight copies, only three are in my vicinity. The other five, three of them are 100 meters away from my shop, and the other two are of another street," Yue Qing told the other guy.

"That's why I told you to pay as you watched!" The teenager did not even feel sorry. After all, he had already sent the videos over. If he could earn a little extra, then why not. "The neighboring street isn't considered that far away, I don't know what you are looking for. Did you lose something? Maybe these few can give you some clues? Boss Yue, you have already received them. At most, I will accept a little less for the footage that is further away. That's okay, right?"

Yue Qing glanced at Fang Zhao, obtained his approval, and thus said, "The three nearby ones are the same as everyone else, 500 for a copy. The other three from the same street will be 100 each. I will give you 50 for the two copies combined from the neighboring street."

The other party went silent for two seconds, probably calculating the amount. "So little? Give me 2000 to make it a round figure."

Yue Qing looked at Fang Zhao once again. He knew that Fang Zhao did not care about these miniscule amounts. However, he could not let that brat think that he was easy to fool. He scolded and swore for a bit before agreeing.

The teenager was happy to receive the money. Not even the least bit bothered by Yue Qing's tirade, he happily ended the call.

Yue Qing took all the videos he got and marked them in case Fang Zhao was not familiar with the positions the footage had been taken from. After all, Fang Zhao had not lived here for long and he'd seldom come out.

Having gotten the videos, and after the express deliveries from Muzhou arrived, Fang Zhao called over Ai Wan, who was having a nap in his drug store, and the three of them had a meal together. Ai Wan also gave a copy of the surveillance footage from his store to Fang Zhao.

After leaving the black street, Fang Zhao went back to his own apartment. He had bought fifteen copies of footage and received two free copies from Yue Qing and Ai Wan. Fang Zhao loaded all the videos onto one screen and adjusted till it was the night before his rebirth. Following that, he simultaneously fast-forwarded them all.

Every recording was very clear, and the sounds were distinct. However, Fang Zhao chose to mute them, instead staring at the screen, observing any possible changes.

Fang Zhao paid extra attention to the footage of Yue Qing's shop and the other ten copies that were close by. Fang Zhao saw a dejected silhouette walking over. Just from the video, he could see the despair and lifelessness exuding from his body.

That was the night before Fang Zhao was reborn. The scene was after the original owner of the body had bought medicine from Ai Wan's drug store. Indeed there had been a number of people advising him against it, including Ai Wan and Yue Qing and a few other old people. However the body's original owner did not seem to be listening, his eyeballs not even moving, as if he was a wooden puppet. He only saw the curly-haired dog caked from head to toe in mud and dirt. He stopped there for a while and lifted up the curly-haired dog and brought it home. Once he entered the building, he was out of view. Luckily, there was a copy taken from the opposite block, which showed the shops below as well as the windows of the apartments on top.

Fang Zhao watched as the lights in the window above Yue Qing's shop were

extinguished. After that, nothing unusual happened. At night, the black street was lively; many people came and went. Other than the few teenagers who made a wager inside Yue Qing's shop, it seemed that no one else paid attention to a man that did not have much presence.

Fang Zhao continued waiting, watching the images from the surveillance footage.

From 1 a.m. to 2 a.m..... 3 a.m..... 4 a.m.....

The bustle of the black street at night gradually died down. There were less people on the street and some of the shops closed.

Close to 7 a.m., the screen flashed.

The flash was fast, lasting just a second, but this appeared in all 17 copies of the surveillance footage!

After that, until daybreak, and until he was reborn and opened the windows to look outside, nothing else unusual happened.

Was it an electrical malfunction? Or was it something else?

Fang Zhao rewinded all the copies back to around seven, and this time, he paid close attention to the time. At 6:55:32 a.m., the images on the screen flashed.

The flash was strongest in the footage from Yue Qing's shop. In that one second, nothing could be seen in the image, it was as if the system had malfunctioned for that second. As for the footage furthest away, although there was still a flash, and it was still possible to see a little. It seemed that the further away the footage was, the less obvious the situation was.

In the images from further away, from another block, and from the other street, it was little more than a flicker in the footage.

Comparing this, Fang Zhao started to ponder.

Fang Zhao searched for that day's morning news broadcast and for anyone who livestreamed near the black street. Those even a little outside the black street did not seem to have experienced the flash.

This circumstances only appeared in the black street. The closer the place was to his, the more obvious that point.

Fang Zhao enlarged the video and focused on the copy that could see his apartment window. Luckily the distance was not that far, and Fang Zhao could still see a little. He set the it to slow motion and watched attentively.

At 6:55:32 a.m., the screen lit up. At the same time, in the distorted image of the video, Fang Zhao saw a bright flash in the apartment through the window.

The quietest period in the black street was 7 a.m. The people who worked in the day had not gotten up yet, and those that worked the night shift had just gone to bed. Not a single person was in the black street, and nobody would have understood the not-so-obvious anomaly that had just occurred. Even if someone had the surveillance footage and saw the flash, they would have probably thought it was an electrical malfunction or someone playing with a flashlight.

Fang Zhao played the video in slow motion 10 more times before lying back in his chair, trying to make sense of it all.

It was evident that the anomaly in the surveillance footage had something to do with what had happened inside the apartment. What was that flash? Did it have something to do with his rebirth?

And Curly Hair, who was also in the room—had something happened to his body too?

Extending his hand and clenching his fist, Fang Zhao felt power coursing through every cell in his body.

At the start, when he'd been training in the company, he had realized that this body seemed to contain even more strength. He had originally thought that it was just the body, but now he had doubts.

Having experienced the end of days, man's physicality had increased. However, due to technological advancements, on many occasions, labor and physical strength were no longer needed. Other than a few professions that required physical strength, most people no longer relied on their physical bodies, so there was a phenomenon of physical degeneration.

The advancements in technology, alongside breakthroughs and genetic technology,

resulted in many diseases that were hidden in genes being removed when a person was still an infant. The lifespans of humans kept increasing, and the number of life-threatening illnesses decreased. Exercise and physical training also become a pastime. The tempo of city life made less people bother about their physical strength. As long as one could use their brains to solve problems, they did not need muscles.

Fang Zhao knew that in this body, other than the core being replaced by his own, the body had also been strengthened. As for Curly Hair, Fang Zhao did not know what had happened within his body, but the dog had definitely become stronger too. On the pastures, he would run much more than the other dogs, but he wouldn't seem tired at all.

Oh, right. Now, Curly Hair had learnt to conceal his strength. He would now act like the other dogs, lying on the ground, panting with his tongue out, as if he was all tired out from running.

Although it seemed like a lot of clues, in actual fact, there were very little. Fang Zhao still could not find the source that had caused his change. Was it his mysterious rebirth that had caused the anomaly, or had that anomaly caused his rebirth? Had Curly Hair been dragged into this, or had he been the source?

Fang Zhao drummed his fingers on his forehead. Since he could not determine the source he, would set it aside temporarily. When he had more clues, then he would decide. After all, these changes had all been beneficial, both for him and Curly Hair.

Chapter 112

We Are in the Same Boat

Luckily, so many things happened every day in the black street that even if anyone realized this phenomenon, they would not think about rebirth and would probably guess that someone was up to something.

Fang Zhao stored all the videos securely and then took out all of Curly Hair's pre-match and post-match inspection reports.

The post-match reports were not a good reference, as they'd had a rest-period after the competition. Fang Zhao was unable to see what changes went on in Curly Hair's body during the period of high activity and whether they were different from other dogs, but he could tell a little; Curly Hair was very healthy. When the other dogs ate random things, they would have stomachaches or other problems, but Curly Hair was totally fine.

Wu Yi had laughed and told Fang Zhao that, when Curly Hair had learned how to herd sheep in Muzhou, his constitution had improved and he had become much more robust. Despite his smaller size, when the dogs were all running, it was very obvious that this dog was different.

"He is a natural-born sheep-herding champion!" Wu Yi had said after the Eastern region finals.

But now, Fang Zhao was certain that, other than sheep herding, if Curly Hair were to learn anything else, he would master it quickly. His physical capabilities had already surpassed other dogs. Whether Curly Hair would continue to get stronger, Fang Zhao could not be sure.

As for the anomalies that had happened simultaneously for the both of them, Fang Zhao had curbed his abilities well and had not been discovered by others.

In the period that followed, most of the time, Fang Zhao was busy in the company. As the head of a department, he had many things to attend to. Fang Zhao had mentioned to Duan Qianji before, he could not go on like this forever. Back then, he had accepted

the virtual projects department as there was nobody in charge and the entire matter had been forced into his hands. Now that the department had risen up, there were many people more professional than Fang Zhao to handle matters better. Therefore, there was no need for Fang Zhao to continue doing this. After he was reborn, all he wanted was to enjoy life in the New Era as he liked, not to be buried under all sorts of forms, reports, and contracts.

But Duan Qianji was worried that if Fang Zhao no longer took charge of the virtual idol department, the department would return to its original form and therefore did not agree. However, as September drew closer, Fang Zhao decided not to drag it any further.

He went to find Duan Qianji once more, this time with a resolute attitude.

This gave Duan Qianji a headache. The previous failures after failures had made her afraid. It had been so hard for Silver Wing's virtual projects department to finally succeed, and she wished for Fang Zhao to continue remaining there. However, Fang Zhao's specialty was indeed composing, not to handle all sorts of contracts, files, and the communications within a department.

Fang Zhao's reasons for transferring also left Duan Qianji very helpless: "Require heading abroad from time to time to collect materials. During September, Fiery Bird will send the gaming console over, and September is for adapting to the console. In October, he would start to play the new game. Schedule will still be fully packed."

This was the first time Duan Qianji had someone confidently declaring "playing games" as a reason for a transfer request. If it was any other person saying "I don't want to do this anymore, I want to play games," she would have sent the person packing right away.

But of all people, this had to be Fang Zhao, who had the power to fight for his freedom to compose songs at his own pace. After signing a contract with the company, Fang Zhao had indeed produced a few high-quality compositions. His deeds were all there and the company had certainly benefited. This Duan Qianji could not refute. As for gaming, tactfully put, it was just a request for leisure time or longer vacations. These were all perfectly reasonable requests given Fang Zhao's profession.

Threaten him with wages?

This would be of no use against Fang Zhao. Right now, he simply did not need money. Although Duan Qianji had not been to Muzhou, she had heard from Zuo Yu that Fang Zhao had won considerably from betting on sheep-herding competitions. Even if Zuo Yu had not said the amount, Duan Qianji could tell from his expression that, even if Fang Zhao did not work and played games for a few years, he could still enjoy an extravagant life.

"How troublesome!" Duan Qianji felt her head hurting even more.

"How about this. You will temporary be assigned as manager of the department. I will arrange for an assistant manager to handle the daily affairs in the department and you can just compose peacefully," Duan Qianji said. She had not yet thought of what position to assign Fang Zhao, but she certainly was not letting Fang Zhao leave the virtual projects department!

Fang Zhao considered for a bit. "I guess that would do."

The person assigned to be temporary assistant manager of the virtual idol department was Duan Qianji's secretary, Zhu Zhen. Zhu Zhen had always been in charge of communicating with Fang Zhao, so she somewhat had a decent understanding of the situation in the department. Now, the important matters of the virtual projects department went through Duan Qianji and the foundations had been set by Fang Zhao. Therefore, Zhu Zhen only needed to execute the instructions given and did not have too much pressure.

Regarding a new temporary leader, Zu Wen and the others did not feel much of a change. The department's boss was still Fang Zhao and they could still be at ease as before. If they really did get treated unfairly, they could still grab onto Fang Zhao. They just took this situation as if Polar Light had gained one more manager.

Once the department's tasks had all been assigned, other than a few big or important matters, Fang Zhao would no longer be bothered by trivial matters.

Fang Zhao had gone back to Muzhou to watch Curly Hair's daily training and the remaining rounds of competition.

As they got to the later rounds of the competition, the challenges became more demanding for the shepherd dogs. But for Dongshan Farm, other than Curly Hair, the other dogs were lacking, and there was a disparity between them and other teams'

dogs. Hence, after the two consecutive first place finishes, Dongshan Farm only finished second in round three and third in round four.

Solely relying on Curly Hair? Whether the future Curly Hair would have that sort of capability, Fang Zhao did not know, but at the moment, there was still no way for Curly Hair to completely dominate the whole competition. He needed the coordination of the other dogs. If they did not coordinate well and could not keep up to the tempo, the teams behind could make a comeback.

On the score table, after the fourth round, Dongshan Farm's points were still the highest and they still held first place, but Wu Yi and Su Hou began to worry. The later rounds of competition were even more complicated, and their confidence had started to waver.

Luckily, in the fifth round of competition, due to an exceptional performance by Curly Hair, Dongshan Farm managed to narrowly edge into a first-place finish. It was as if one dog had spurred on the team. His speed was even quicker and had helped the other dogs share some of their burdens. The performance was very dazzling, and even people who knew just a little about sheep-herding competitions could see that the nucleus and driving force behind this team was still that little curly-haired dog. And during the fifth round of competition, Curly Hair's value had risen to 75 million.

In the rounds that followed, they did not achieve first in every round but always remained within the top three. The total accumulated points continued to lead over 2nd and 3rd.

The days of the ten rounds of competition were not fixed. Generally, there would be a round every five to seven days. In the event of bad weather, the round would be brought forward or postponed. Muzhou advocated being natural, and forecasting weather was a test to them, to adapt to natural weather and make changes.

After the last of the ten rounds of competition ended, it was already August. Dongshan still occupied first place on the score table. Although there were times when another team had the same number of points as Dongshan, and there were times when they were nearly overtaken, Dongshan Farm had managed to persevere till the end.

That day, the focus of the entirety of Muzhou was on Curly Hair, the lead dog of the champion team. Fully deserving of the most valuable dog title, his value was published on the sheep-herding competition's homepage—a new record of one hundred million!

This year, a dog that was foreign to Muzhou that looked like a pet had achieved the MVD of the finals!

In Muzhou there emerged people who vowed to buy the curly-haired dog. Even if the price now had made many people back off, the number of rich and powerful willing to pay that amount was still plentiful.

Other than the aristocrats of Muzhou, In Leizhou, Zaro's agent was shaking. Pointing at Zaro who was talking on the phone, he clenched his teeth and instructed the others. "Watch him closely! Don't let him buy that dog!"

The news of a non-native dog of Muzhou having a value of 100 million spread to all continents, especially Yanzhou. Silver Wing were trending, because under their control, when people talked about the dog, it was always "Yanzhou Silver Wing's virtual projects department manager's dog." The label, "Yanzhou Silver Wing" was used as a search term by many internet users across the world.

Wu Yi was over the moon. Su Hou, as the farm owner, was bombarded with all sorts of interviews. As for Curly Hair, after the competition ended, he received a medal followed by an official interview before being brought back to Yanzhou by Fang Zhao.

Even though it was mentioned a lot in Yanzhou's news, the Yanzhou masses purely saw it as entertainment and were not as crazy over it as the Muzhou masses.

Having just arrived in Yanzhou, Fang Zhao received a call from Duan Qianji.

"Back yet?" Duan Qianji asked.

"Back."

"Did you bring Curly Hair back? Do you need me to send a few more people over?" Duan Qianji asked again.

"No need, he is back home."

"That's good." She let out a sigh of relief. She was really worried that the dog-crazy fanatics of Muzhou would have forced Curly Hair to stay behind.

"Today, a number of directors personally came looking for me, asking to let your dog that is worth one hundred million to appear in films. All of them are rather famous

directors, the quality production would be higher and is worth considering. Other than that, there are also advertising companies..."

Duan Qianji had never expected that her own company would produce a dog worth one hundred million! Many celebrities had strived but never reached these heights, yet this dog that had been brought over to Muzhou by Fang Zhao half a year ago had achieved these heights.

"The information has all been sent to you. Take a look yourself; the dog is yours and it's considered your personal property. The deciding rights all belong to you," Duan Qianji said. With regards to Curly Hair's situation, the company could not decide, but if Fang Zhao was willing, everyone could work together.

"I will consider it," Fang Zhao replied.

He actually hoped that the matter would cool off as fast as possible, but completely rejecting advertisements and hiding Curly Hair would not do. This would just heighten people's curiosity and make them suspect all sorts of reasons. He would accept the films and advertisement, but not too many.

After Duan Qianji ended the call, Fang Zhao received a message from Zu Wen.

"Boss, when will you be bringing Curly Hair back to the office? We all have renovated a grand residence for him!"

Under that, there were messages from the others in the department, implying he should look after Curly Hair well and not let him be stolen—one hundred million!

Fang Zhao switched off the communications device, sent Zuo Yu out on an errand, and closed all the doors and windows.

"Come here," Fang Zhao said to Curly Hair, who was running about the house.

Having been away for so long. Curly Hair was still very excited, as if he were patrolling his territory, and ran a few rounds. Hearing Fang Zhao call him, he hurried over and crouched down. However, Fang Zhao's gaze unsettled Curly Hair, so he wagged his tail to curry favor.

"You don't have to act in front of me. I know you can understand. Perhaps in the past, you only understood a little, but now..." Fang Zhao placed his hand in front of Curly

Hair, watching the dog as he continued, "I believe you can understand everything."

The crouching Curly Hair became even more restless, as if he had done something wrong. He drooped his head and wagged its tail less, looking up gingerly at Fang Zhao.

"You are probably aware that you are different from other dogs. No matter what changes happened in your body, for our own safety, in the future, do not make yourself stand out when we are outside. Of course, don't act too stupid. Keeping at the current level will do. We are in the same boat, understand?"

"Woof!"

Chapter 113

Tools from the Old Era

Fang Zhao observed Curly Hair for some time to make sure he understood the lecture before taking him back to the office.

It was true what Zu Wen had said—the label had set up a new hangout for Curly Hair. As soon as he stepped onto the 50th floor, Fang Zhao saw several pictures on the wall. Some were taken by Zu Wen and company during their recent trip to the Muzhou grand finals; others were official pictures from the prize presentation ceremony. The walls had originally been dominated by posters of Polar Light, but now Polar Light and Curly Hair each accounted for half the area. As Zu Wen put it, both of these characters were products of the virtual projects department, even if Curly Hair was Fang Zhao's personal pet. Fang Zhao was the head of the department, so Curly Hair was part of the department too.

Curly Hair's new digs took up an entire room. It was custom-made, complete with a turf carpet.

"Curly Hair is here? Oh, my little munchkin!" Zu Wen smiled so hard when he saw Curly Hair by Fang Zhao's feet he was wincing. A cheesy term like "munchkin" carried over from the competition to the office.

There were reasons why they allocated and renovated an entire room for a dog. First, Curly Hair's market value had gone through the roof and he was now world-famous. Second, everyone had bet on Dongshan Farm winning and Curly Hair taking MVD honors when they were in Muzhou. They had raked it in big time. Folks who had wagered smaller amounts were now regretting their decision. Zu Wen was one of the major punters, earning at least 2 million. That's also why he was so excited to see Curly Hair that he called him "little munchkin."

"Boss, I hear the label wants to cast Curly Hair in a movie?" Zu Wen asked.

"That's why I'm here."

After dropping off Curly Hair on the 50th floor, Fang Zhao headed to the penthouse

suite to see Duan Qianji.

He had read through the details on the offers that Duan Qianji had sent over. He'd picked a few commercials and a hit online TV series. It was a guest-star role for one episode, not heavy lifting. He'd also agreed to a few public interest announcements, which were also recommended by the label.

The public interest ad was about stray dogs. The main purpose was to urge people to take the responsibility of buying a pet seriously. Sure, you would be free if you tossed your pet after a few days, but not every abandoned dog ended up in a centralized pound. Stray dogs were common in the suburbs and beyond. Not only were they a potential means of disease transmission, but they occasionally attacked humans too.

Many people knew that Curly Hair had been a stray dog before being adopted by Fang Zhao, but few had expected this stray dog would end up an MVD with a market value of more than 100 million dollars. It made sense for the label to consider it for public interest ads. The ad was financed by Silver Wing. A few stars would appear in it and Fang Zhao had a cameo, but the centerpiece was Curly Hair.

After deciding on the offers, as the owner, Fang Zhao tagged along on the shoots.

Likely as a result of Fang Zhao's reminders, Curly Hair appeared more normal on his shoots. He was still smart, but "normal" smart. There were lots of smart dogs in the world. Muzhou was home to many shepherd dogs with high IQ, so the production crews on the shoots didn't think Curly Hair stood out.

The ads were quite straightforward, be they the commercial shot by a regular Silver Wing partner or the public interest ad shot by Silver Wing itself. Shooting went smoothly. Given technological advancements in the New Era, both shoots were completed back-to-back in a day.

The online TV series took longer, with the shoot lasting a few days. "City Hunter" was a detective thriller. Quite a few major stars were involved. Ads featuring Curly Hair were rolled out once his role had been confirmed. Some folks joked, "Even the dogs used in 'City Hunter' are big shots."

While Fang Zhao was tagging along on the shoot, he noticed that quite a few folks were following news about "Battle of the Century." Fiery Bird had released a new ad, which was more revealing.

During a break, some folks projected the ad so everyone could see.

The ad featured a dilapidated city resembling a wasteland. Several helicopters were charging forward.

As they watched the scene, someone shouted, "I know what that is! That's what was known in the Old Era as a tractor!"

Fang Zhao waited for one of the others in the audience to correct the speaker, but after a few seconds, all he got was silence. He turned his head and realized that everyone else wore an expression that suggested "mystery solved."

After letting out an imaginary sigh, Fang Zhao said, "It's called a helicopter. This one's for freight."

"Helicopter? I could have sworn it was called a tractor!" The speaker was skeptical, but a quick search yielded the correct information on Fiery Bird's official website. The words "mid-sized double-propellor freight helicopter" were highlighted.

"Oh, it's really called a helicopter. I remembered wrong, haha." The speaker laughed in Fang Zhao's direction. "Brother, you're good at history. Are you a gamer? They're quite meticulous when it comes to historical details, no?"

Before Fang Zhao could answer, the speaker's attention was drawn by something else in the video and he started a discussion with the person next to him.

Fang Zhao was sitting far from the speaker, so he could see the projection clearly too. The images were realistic, as if transporting him back to his previous life.

Even though footage from the Old Era existed, Fiery Bird splurged on a 100-person team of consultants to recreate those times perfectly. The team comprised world-famous researchers on the Period of Destruction. There were historians, scholars who studied the history of science, biomedical experts, weapons experts, and so on. The point was to recreate the era comprehensively and realistically.

Apart from the promotional video, Fiery Bird also launched an online feature that introduced daily items from the Old Era, from food to daily necessities to modes of transportation. If you had a gaming console, you could start practicing using the items.

There was a big distinction between the two eras when it came to guns and forms of

transportation. It helped to familiarize oneself with them ahead of time.

After Curly Hair shot his scenes, Fang Zhao returned to the office. He was caught up on all his outstanding tasks. The shoots for the ads and the TV series had been completed. There wasn't anything else left.

It was noon when he arrived in the virtual projects department. His staff had gathered for lunch. When Fang Zhao walked in, they were discussing items from the Old Era.

He had already heard his share of complaints from members of the production crews for Curly Hair's shoots.

"How come automatic transmission isn't the same as automatic driving? Why is the steering wheel round? Why are the gas pedal and the brake pedal so close to each other? Why was it so hard to drive in the Old Era? I need to switch to a luxury car that places the gas pedal on the steering wheel."

"What the hell is a bicycle? Why doesn't it run on its own when you get on it? Why is it so hard to maintain your balance? Wait, there are also electric scooters, motorbikes, and experiential vehicles. Forget it, I'll pass on the bike."

"What the hell can you do with so few bullets in a clip?"

People in the New Era were used to easily operated and smart technology. Relics from the Old Era struck them as clumsy and a hassle. They even wondered why these things existed in the first place.

Zu Wen and company were also discussing the practice tools launched by Fiery Bird. Obviously, they were still getting used to them.

"Boss, we were discussing Fiery Bird consoles in our tech discussion group yesterday again. I steeled myself this year and ordered a cabin-style console from Fiery Bird. It's an upgrade from the ninth-generation console. They say the cabin-style console is more realistic than the helmet-style one, but word has it they're coming out with a new design for their 10th-generation console, but they haven't announced any details. Boss, the one you're getting is a 10th generation, right?"

"Yes."

"So it's the 10th-generation console 'Rhapsody'?' The one announced on the official

website? The one coming out along with the ninth-generation upgrade?"

"Yup."

"Is it being delivered to the office?"

"To my house."

Zu Wen and company were instantly disappointed when they heard Fang Zhao's response. They were thinking that, if the console were delivered to the office, they could pose for pictures with it.

In fact, Fang Zhao had originally planned on having the console delivered to the office, but after rethinking it, he'd had Fiery Bird send it to his house. He could play freely at home, but being too reckless at the office would cause a bad influence. Even though Fang Zhao was given free rein, others were working. He didn't want to sow the seeds of jealousy or prevent other departments from going about their business.

After noticing that his body had mutated, Fang Zhao had also set up a gym at his home. That would free up the company gym for others. He could also exercise more freely at home and keep his secret under wraps.

"Boss, do you know how to drive a regular car? Or ride a bike? Or use a gun?" Zu Wen was firing on all cylinders. "Tools from the Old Era are too difficult to use. I've already summoned the level of determination I had for my college entrance exams."

"I do," Fang Zhao responded.

"You've figured it out already? But I did too, hahaha. Among our group, only Wan Yue is still learning," Zu Wen said with a laugh.

Wan Yue wore a massive frown. She found the tools a handful. "We'll be fine as long as you guys know how to use them. We're going to play together anyway, right?"

"No worries. You have me," Zeng Huang said.

"Right. Right. If you can't figure out the tools, we'll help out," Zu Wen said with a nod.

Fang Zhao restrained himself from raining on the parade. He hadn't played the game yet, but he was skeptical as to how accurately it could recreate the Old Era.

Chapter 114

Your Express Delivery Is Arriving

Electronic competition had become among the top sporting events, and with advancements in technology, the internet was omnipresent and electronic competition had permeated into everyone's lives. This new form of electronic competition had overtaken many older sports, and throughout the world, it was known as the most widely accepted sporting entertainment program.

For entertainment, other than film, music, and livestreams, there was one other major player, and that was gaming. Its place in the New Era was much higher than that of football, basketball, or other sports.

Electronic competition also had no lack of stars. The main team members of the five e-sports clubs of Yanzhou had influence comparable to the A-listers of Silver Wing, and every time they participated in large-scale competitions, these main team members would take the stage at the same time, so the influence they had was naturally even bigger.

Song Miao lamented, "The drama series that I was watching is going to have a break after today. I have to wait till February or March next year to catch the next episode."

"No choice, if it continues on like this, it will die out," Zu Wen said.

"Battle of the Century," which was about to be released, had captured most of the attention and popularity. Movies and online television had seen a decline since the start of the year. During July and August, there had been a sharp drop in viewership. If it continued on till September, many investors would be disappointed with the results. Hence, other than a few highly popular drama series, many other programs went into a rest period, giving way to "Battle of the Century."

"Yesterday in the chat group, I heard those from the film department mentioning that the gamer-actors, those dual profession celebrities, have been recalled by their clubs. Probably to prepare for the publicity that's to come," Rodney added in.

"Gamer-actors, dual profession celebrities?" Fang Zhao totally did not understand this.

"It means that they are actors and, at the same time, they are professional gamers too," Zu Wen explained.

Some gaming stars some would enter into showbiz as they played. For some, they would sign contracts after their prime and hold both professions. And there were some that were discovered when they were still schooling. After signing on with a company, the company would arrange for them to enter professional gaming competitions.

"All of them can be considered a form of investment by the company and have been lying in wait for the past couple of years just for this time. However, I feel that, even if the company manages to recall all these people back, it will not have much of an impact. Just recalling what happened ten years ago... Oh, right, Boss, ten years ago, you were still in secondary school, right? You probably didn't pay much attention to this," Zu Wen said.

Fang Zhao understood what Zu Wen said by "not much of an impact" on the second day.

The previous day, there had still been a number of movie and film stars appearing on the headlines of each major entertainment media's news, but today, all the trending news by the big media firms was dominated by news related to e-sports clubs.

With this widespread news coverage, movies and music both took a backseat.

The big e-sports clubs had all started preparations a year ago. They had declined invitations to all sorts of competitions, and even when they did participate, they only sent out their second-string or third-string players. They had handpicked gamers from all sort of genres and had focused on "Battle of the Century," training intensely for it. Some clubs were even rumored to have engaged a military school for a few months of military training. All the clubs had been in confined training, all for today, where they would remove the secrecy surrounding them.

When Fang Zhao was watching the entertainment news, he realized that of all the trending stars that appeared, 90 percent were from Yanzhou's big five e-sports clubs. A certain gaming superstar riding an automated car could also start trending.

And this was just the start.

Aug 26, Qi'an City's People's Stadium, the largest stadium in Yanzhou. One of

Yanzhou's big five, Big Dipper e-Sports Club held a pre-battle pledging ceremony. A million fans went in person, and those unable to enter just stood directly outside the stadium.

Aug 27, At Qi'an's business center's highest building complex, at the "Jungle of Light" public square, Transcendental e-Sports Club held a pre-battle pledging ceremony, and vast crowds were present.

Aug 29, 2S e-Sports Club rented out Yanzhou's largest garden on a lake to hold its pre-battle pledging ceremony. The live broadcast nearly jammed from viewership.

Aug 30, BOOM e-Sports Club held their pre-battle pledging ceremony on the summit of Yanzhou's highest mountain. Photographers nearly froze.

Aug 31, HWR e-Sports Club held their pre-battle pledging ceremony on a virtual stage. Team captain Jess said, "We have the lowest profile," then proceeded to display a video of the team driving cars and motorbikes from the Old Era, causing fans to scream nonstop. A digital fan fainted from excitement and was sent to the hospital.

Although the game was to be officially released in October, during the entirety of September, the teams would all undergo adaptive training. To the business minded e-sports clubs, the battle had already started early.

September 1, 8 a.m., Fiery Bird released an official announcement. The "Battle of the Century" age restriction would be altered. From the original 16 years and above, it was raised to 18 and above. A clear-cut rule: People below 18 were prohibited from playing.

An hour after the announcement was released, several hundred seventeen year olds staged a sit-in outside the entrance of Fiery Bird's office, pressing Fiery Bird to lower the age restriction from 18 to 17. After that, their parents were called.

Fiery Bird's official spokesperson explained that protesting at the entrance would do no good. The limit had been set by the Electronic Competition Union in conjunction with other relevant departments for the good of everyone's physical and mental well-being.

Because of the internet, kids in the New Era matured faster. Smarter kids knew a lot. However, this did not mean that their mentalities were mature. One's outlook on the world, life, and values could be seriously influenced by small matters. Previously, Fiery

Bird had set the age restriction as 16, but now, after some prudent consideration, they had determined it necessary to be raised. The game was too dangerous for minors.

Fang Zhao received a call from Su Hou early in the morning.

As he had not reached the age restriction, Su Hou could not play "Battle of the Century." Thus, he had called Fang Zhao to relieve some of his misery, and his motive was to borrow Curly Hair from Fang Zhao.

Su Hou had bought a few decent shepherd dogs and had hired a professional to specially train them. However, the results were not so good, so he wished to loan Curly Hair for a bit. Who knows, maybe with Curly Hair to spur them on, those dogs would learn faster. The same had happened back at Shanmu Farm.

Fang Zhao did not agree right away; he needed to consider first.

After ending the call with Su Hou, Fang Zhao called Curly Hair over.

"Do you want to head to a Muzhou farm to play? Su Hou called and wants to borrow you."

"Woof!" Curly Hair's tail wagging was extra jubilant, seeming like he was very excited.

He preferred carefree running on real grasslands. The house was a little too small; he had gotten used to running in fields. After returning to Qi'an, he had felt that there was too little space.

"Remember what I told you before. Make sure you guard the farm properly when you are over there."

"Woof!"

"I'll get Su Hou to come fetch you."

"Woof!"

Curly Hair frisked about happily in the house.

When Fang Zhao told Su Hou the news, Su Hou was very happy. He had been waiting for these words. "I will leave Muzhou and pick him up right away."

Ding!

Suddenly, there was a new notification.

Fang Zhao gave Su Hou his address and said a little more before ending the call and checking the notification.

"Your express delivery is arriving. Please be ready to receive it."

Chapter 115

Astonishing Adaptability

Fang Zhao's unit was on the top floor of the building. When he'd bought over the apartment, half of the top floor had been a garden. Since buying it over from Xue Jing, Fang Zhao had not made many changes, only expanding the parking space slightly.

After receiving the notification, Fang Zhao stepped outside. He did not have to wait long before he saw a black dot approaching from the distance. The black dot increased its speed. It was a transport drone. When it arrived at on top of the parking space, it slowly descended.

A black metal case was lowered onto the space.

Fang Zhao verified receiving the goods and the express delivery drone left.

The case was encrypted. When Fang Zhao scanned in the details of his identity, the case automatically opened.

Inside the metal case was another transparent case made from some unknown material. Within it was a humanoid-shaped machine that looked like a robot.

Fang Zhao was puzzled—when had he ordered a robot?

But after reading the description on the transparent case, Fang Zhao understood. This was not a robot; it was the 10th generation game console that Fiery Bird's headquarters had sent over. The machine was mainly white in color with black veins running across it and the red Fiery Bird insignia.

So this is their new gaming console? The thought had never crossed his mind.

At this moment, Fang Zhao's bracelet notified him of an incoming call. It was from an unknown number.

Fang Zhao considered for a bit before answering the call.

"Hello, is this Mr. Fang Zhao?" a somewhat boorish voice asked.

"Yes. That's me."

"Hi, I am Zachary, an engineer from Fiery Bird's Yanzhou department, in charge of installation of the machine and servicing. We have received notification that you have accepted the console. May I ask if you have time today? If you are free, we can be at your place in 20 minutes to help you install the console and to guide you on its usage. If you are busy, we can reschedule for another time."

"I don't have anything else going on. I will be at home."

"All right, we will have to trouble you to wait for another 20 minutes. My assistants and I will leave for your place right away.

Since there were engineers coming over to install the console, Fang Zhao temporary left the case lying there.

"Boss, what is this? A robot for the chores?" Zuo Yu had come over to deliver a set of files that required Fang Zhao to sign. As there was a case in the parking space, Zuo Yu'd had to park the car at the public garage below before coming up. When he saw the case there, he became suspicious. What had Fang Zhao bought a robot for? Chores? On closer inspection of the robot, he saw the insignia on its chest and doubted even more. Since when did Fiery Bird create robots for housework?

"It's not for housework; it's Fiery Bird's 10th generation game console," Fang Zhao told him.

"That fabled 10th generation? Game console?!" Zuo Yu was still full of doubt. "This is a game console?"

Only after reading the description on the clear case did Zuo Yu believe that Fang Zhao was not pulling his leg.

"It really is. The fabled 10th generation looks like this? What were the designers thinking?"

Although his words about Fiery Bird's designers seemed full of disdain, Zuo Yu was still very curious and kept circling the case. Knowing that the engineers were about to arrive, he was not in a rush to leave. He had planned to return immediately to the

company after getting Fang Zhao to sign the files, but these files were not especially urgent—as long as they were returned by today, it would be fine. He wanted to stay longer and take a look. If it had been a helmet or a cabin-style gaming console, Zuo Yu would not have been that curious or interested, even if it was a new model from Fiery Bird. However, this gaming console's shape aroused the curiosity in him.

"It's probably an exoskeleton type. I never thought I would live to see the day there would be an exoskeleton-type design of a game console. It's a pity the appearance doesn't look impressive enough." As Zuo Yu examined it, he clicked his tongue in wonder and could not help but open the case and touch it.

Fang Zhao understood what Zuo Yu meant by "exoskeleton." The hard shell on the surface of the body protecting the soft interior of prawns, crabs, and bugs was known as an exoskeletons. Humans also had related projects as a means to protect the relatively weak and fragile human body.

Actually utilizing machinery as an exoskeleton had been used during the end of days. During that period, there were scientists that had started an exoskeleton project, but the technology had not advanced enough and Fang Zhao hadn't gotten to wear an exoskeleton combat suit in his past life.

In the New Era, during the period when mankind had started exploring other planets, these technologies had advanced rapidly, but the majority of their use was in the military and for medical treatment. The general public's deepest impression of exoskeletons were their use as armor by the outer space corps. Its use in entertainment was not much, due to the high manufacturing costs, and there were no companies willing to try. No one would have expected that Fiery Bird's 10th generation would choose to use an exoskeleton type!

It seemed like, when Fiery Bird had announced that the 10th generation would have revolutionary changes, they'd meant that they had started on an exoskeleton project and it had become reality.

"It's a pity that it is just a game console. How great would it be if it were a real power exoskeleton." There was a hint of envy in Zuo Yu's eyes.

"Have you worn that sort of power suit?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Nope, I enlisted in the military very early. My studies were all completed in military

school. When I was assigned my posting, I was sent to the anti-terrorism unit and could not get out." Zuo Yu was full of regret.

"Could not get out" meant that he could not leave the planet. This had been a regret of Zuo Yu's. He had originally wanted to continue making a living in the military and one day finally get out, but because of a few mistakes, he had been discharged from the military.

However, Fiery Bird's 10th generation console made him anticipate again. "Fiery Bird's goal is probably to let more people get a kick, those 'power exoskeletons' sold online are made from a different material, and the technology and feeling cannot compare to the real ones. Since Fiery Bird has made the 10th generation as an exoskeleton, given their reputation... The feeling after wearing it might not be same as the real ones, but it should be close.

As Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu were talking, a flying car came.

There was no space to park the car, so a middle-aged person in working attire hopped off. He showed Fang Zhao his working ID and said, "Hi, I am the engineer that spoke to you just now, Zachary."

Zachary looked like a worker from a Muzhou farm. He was tanned, full of vigor, and his rough hands were full of calluses.

After the self introductions, Zachary pressed somewhere on the transparent case and four wheels appeared. Zachary pushed the case aside and let his helper land the car.

"Mr. Fang, where do you want the machine to be placed?" Zachary asked.

"This room." Fang Zhao opened a room he had prepared beforehand. There was nothing else inside the room.

Zachary pushed the case into the room and he and his helper got down to work. While assembling the machine, he explained to Fang Zhao the superiority the 10th generation machine had over the 9th generation one.

"This is the power exoskeleton model, or mobile clothing. It is very convenient and doesn't burden you when being worn. For example, if you are tired, you can just eat drink or sleep in the suit. Other than bathing, you can basically wear this for everything. This also fulfills the desires towards the outer space corps that some

gamers have. If you can adapt to this, even if you wear the outer space corps power suit in future, you will not find much of a difference. Of course, this exoskeleton does not have the same functions as the power suits of the outer space corps. After all, the power suits of the outer space corps are weapons, and this is just a game console, it can only imitate that sort of feeling. Other than that, it will let you have a more realistic experience of gaming."

As Zachary was explaining, Zuo Yu was eager to give it a try. "Boss, later, after you have tried it, could I try it out too?"

Fang Zhao nodded. "Sure."

After the installations and inspection were completed, Zachary instructed Fang Zhao on how to put it on. Actually, it was not really complicated, as it was all automated as long as he confirmed his identity and usage rights.

Fang Zhao could feel himself wearing an outer shell, but he did not feel it stifling or restrictive. Waving his hands, swinging his shoulders, walking, jumping, all these actions felt very unhindered. What Zachary had said about wearing it to eat, drink, and sleep was all true.

"Okay, now we can enter the adapting phase. I recommend lying down. If you remain standing, once you enter the game for a long period of time, your nerves and muscles will not feel exhausted, as the suit bears the strain, but once you leave the game, you will experience the side effects. Sitting is fine too, but I still recommend lying down," Zachary instructed.

Fang Zhao did not proceed to find a bed, instead just lying down on the floor. Following Zachary's instructions, he entered the adapting phase.

It was as if his soul had been removed from his body. Fang Zhao felt himself standing at an unfamiliar place. He could no longer feel the original feeling of lying on the floor.

In front of him was a basketball, and his surroundings were transformed into a basketball court. The ground below him was a wooden floor board, and the clothes he was wearing were basketball attire and shoes.

"Mr. Fang, you have now entered the adapting sequence. You can freely exercise. We will monitor your degree of adaptation." Zachary's voice seemed to be just beside his ear.

Fang Zhao did not waste any time. He walked over and picked up the basketball. He could clearly feel the lines of the basketball in his hands.

Indeed... very real!

Fang Zhao started trying to bounce the ball.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The sound of the basketball smashing against the ground, combined with the sound of the basketball whizzing through the air, stimulated his excited senses.

Fang Zhao bounced the ball and moved forward. His bouncing became faster and faster as he got more proficient with the dribbling movement.

...

In the room, Zachary watched the charts displayed by the measurement apparatus and then looked at the comprehensive numbers at the side. On it was displayed a "60." The maximum value was 100. Normally there would be no issues upon reaching 60.

Glancing at these numbers, a relaxed smile appeared on Zachary's face. "Not too bad, hitting 60 means that you can use it often, your adaptability is good. With another month of adapting, you might even hit 70..."

Zachary had not finished speaking when he lost his voice. He stared blankly at the screen displaying the adaptability value. Originally stabilizing at 60, it had begun to move again.

61... 64... 68... 72...

What had he just said?

With another month of adapting?

In less than 30mins, the adapting value had jumped from 60 to 75!

"Tsk, this adaptability is indeed strong!" Zachary's assistant exclaimed in astonishment.

The value stabilized at "75."

Zachary laughed and shook his head. "Never expected that Mr. Fang's adaptability to the new machine would reach 75. I'm afraid some people in the company are going to be disappointed. If Mr. Fang hadn't adapted to the machine well, the moment he put it up for sale, quite a number of people in the company would have bought it immediately, but now it seems like these people won't even get a chance."

"Master!" Zachary's helper, Boken, shouted out.

"What?" Zachary asked. He was sending messages and thus did not look up.

"The value changed again."

Zachary was displeased. "Nonsense, the value is always changing constantly. It is fine as long as it modulates around a certain range. Have you forgotten all that I taught you?"

"No, take a look!"

Zachary lifted his head up to look at the value of the screen, and his eyes slowly widened.

The value that had originally stabilized around the 75 mark had begun to rise upward again.

78, 79, 80, 81...

Although it was not rising that quickly, it was indeed increasing. This could not be explained rationally anymore.

"This... this... this adaptability is way too strong, right?!" Thinking of something, Zachary turned his head and asked Zuo Yu. "Is your boss really an artist? Does he meddle with anything else?"

Zuo Yu was equally baffled. "He really is only a composer."

Chapter 116

Your Boss... Is Still Your Boss

For adapting training, other than basketball, Fang Zhao played football and badminton, rode a bicycle, drove a car, practiced archery, and many other events. The realism he felt got more and more intense, as if he was really standing in an empty room and playing with all this equipment, not inside a game.

When Fang Zhao exited from the adaptive training mode, he was sweating profusely. As he separated from the game console, only then did he realize the casual attire he was wearing was entirely soaked and his entire body felt as if he had really done all those sports.

How mysterious.

Fang Zhao looked at the taut muscles on his arm before using the sleeves of this shirt to wipe sweat off his face. He turned to face Zachary and Boken who were standing there in a daze.

"Are there any problems?" Fang Zhao asked.

"No... No problems." Zachary glanced at the display showing a bright red "91" then looked at Fang Zhao who was still standing there and asked, "Do you feel anything abnormal? For example, headaches or no sense of balance?"

Fang Zhao walked a few steps, then jumped on the spot. "Everything seems to be fine. Only... at the moment when I was leaving the training mode, I felt a little dizzy, but I was all right after a few seconds."

Zachary checked all the results displayed on the screen that showed readings of his bodily functions. All these had been taken when Fang Zhao was in the training mode. These readings showed that Fang Zhao was not lying and he was perfectly fine.

"When using the 10th generation for the first time, separating from the console for the first time will indeed cause a little dizziness. In the future, after using it a few times, it will not occur anymore." Taking a look at the final figures, Zachary lamented. "Mr. Fang,

how was the experience of using it?"

"Very good," Fang Zhao replied. "It's very easy to get addicted."

A proud smile appeared on Zachary's face. "To be able to let players become addicted is our greatest accomplishment. Seems like Mr. Fang also knows how to find joy in games." It seemed like this gaming console would not be sold after all.

"Boss, can I try it?" Zuo Yu asked in eager anticipation.

Fang Zhao looked toward Zachary. "Can he use it?"

Zachary nodded his head. "This machine's owner is you, Mr. Fang. As long as you authorize it, he will be able to use it."

Zachary taught Fang Zhao how to set up the authorized users.

"All done. This gentleman can enter and try it out," Zachary said.

Once Zuo Yu entered the training mode, Fang Zhao saw that the last screen in front of Zachary displayed a "76." Zachary then explained to Fang Zhao the meaning of that number.

"This gentleman is also adapting very well." Zachary watched the numbers jumping up, turned his head, to Fang Zhao and asked, "He is your bodyguard, right?"

"Yes." Fang Zhao saw the misgiving in Zachary's eyes, so he asked, "Are there any problems?"

Zachary thought about what to say before shaking his head. "Nothing." He just thought that this bodyguard's adaptability would probably not be higher than this young man who said he was a composer. Although the value rose up, this was probably because Zuo Yu had used a lot of similar machinery. Just now, when Fang Zhao had been using the machine, Zachary had talked to Zuo Yu and knew that Zuo Yu was an old hand.

Zachary's eyes were on the charts and numbers on the screen, and Fang Zhao was watching the machine lying on the floor in wonder.

Just now, he had been the one wearing the gaming suit and lying there. Being totally immersed in the adaptive training mode, he had not known what the situation outside

was like. Now he knew that, when he had been vigorously exercising in the adaptive training mode, outside of the mode, his body had seemed sedated, only slight trembles being seen.

The machine that covered the surface of the body was full of sensors. These sensors would gather all sorts of data and would transmit it to a processor. Finally, it would appear as charts and numbers in front of Zachary.

The adaptability value that was at 76 rose to 87 before coming to a complete stop.

Zuo Yu separated from the machine with a satisfied grin and was soaking wet. "Indeed, the experience compared to all the older game consoles is way more intense. It is worthy of being called the 10th generation. Most likely, compared to the real power suits, there won't be much difference... 87?!"

The grin on Zuo Yu's face turned into shock when he saw the value. "I only got 87?" He still remembered that Fang Zhao had achieved a value of 91 a short while back.

Zachary grudgingly said, "Exceeding 85 is considered first rate; this is already very high."

"My boss got a 91 just now!" Zuo Yu felt that his own ability had been looked down upon.

"Your boss has an impressive adaptability," Zachary said.

"I was from the special forces!"

"Your boss... is still your boss." Zachary could only think of this reason.

Confirming that usage would not be hindered and having gotten an adaptability of 90+. Zachary was not the least bit worried that Fang Zhao would encounter any problems. He sent a copy of a detailed guide to Fang Zhao and left a means of contact. "If there are any issues with the machine, just call this number. Even if I am not free, my colleagues will rush over and help you service it."

As they had other tasks, Zachary did not stay for too long. After exhorting a few important points to Fang Zhao, he left along with his assistant. The casing that had originally been used to store the 10th generation machine was also taken away by them.

After showering and changing into a set of clean and dry clothes, Fang Zhao called out to Zuo Yu, who was still sitting there bewildered. They would be heading back to the company together. Although he was now a manager that did not need to handle matters personally, he still had to return occasionally to keep an eye on things.

The game console had already been delivered and installed. In the next few days, he would probably spend a lot of time playing. Today, he wanted to head down to the company and ask if there were any more documents that required his signature or approval.

After a round in the virtual projects department, Fang Zhao held on to a set of documents that Zhu Zhen had handed him and took the elevator to the film department to check on some of the programs that Polar Light and the film departments were collaborating on.

Entering the elevator, Fang Zhao noticed five others inside: an older manager and four youngsters who seemed like university students—three guys and a girl. Most likely, the parking garage above was full, so they needed to come up from the lower garages.

The manager recognized Fang Zhao and laughed as he exchange greetings. "Manager Fang, heading to the top floor to give your report?"

"Nope, I'm heading to the film department. You brought newcomers again?" Fang Zhao remembered him bringing another group of youngsters a while back.

"Yeah, these four are here to receive priority development," the manager said, not hiding anything.

Fang Zhao understood. These were probably part of the company's reserve strategy. With the entertainment market being dominated by gaming, the company would transfer over these dual profession gamer-actors and give them prioritized development.

The five of them were also headed for the film department. When the elevator doors opened, that older manager did not step out first, instead making an "after you" gesture to Fang Zhao. Originally, two of the youngsters had lifted their legs to step out, but seeing their manager do that, they retracted their step.

After Fang Zhao was some distance away from the elevator, a few of the youngsters then asked their new manager, "Who is that?"

"The number one in the virtual projects department. You guys are new here, so you wouldn't be familiar," the manager told them.

"Also a manager?" A youngster wearing a baseball cap pointed in the direction he'd left. Finding it hard to imagine, he continued, "That guy is a department manager? He looks to be around the same age as me. Is he famous?"

"Yes, he is the manager of the virtual projects department. A while back, Fiery Bird's sound effects department head even mentioned him. Back then, you guys were having sealed training and did not pay attention to entertainment news. That man is really impressive. The virtual projects department rose up under his watch, and he is the new star of music composition circles. He is so great he can even discuss terms with Director Duan. Back then, everyone shunned the virtual projects departments, but now they're finding ways to try and squeeze themselves into the the department. The benefits are great, wages are high, and the prospects are plentiful."

"Sounds really impressive, but we do not have much of a relationship with him. He is not part of the gaming circle," a short-haired girl playing with a gaming device in her hands said indifferently.

"That's true, but in the future, if you meet him around the company, do take notice," the manager exhorted.

"Got it~." The four youngsters agreed but did not really think much of the matter. Music and composition seemed too far away for them, and they would not be joining the virtual projects department. No matter how impressive the other person was, it did not really affect them much. At most, just giving way to him in the company would do.

When Fang Zhao found the film department's manager He Hao, he was watching a live broadcast of an interview.

He Hao knew that Fang Zhao did not know much about the gaming circles and thus explained, "2S e-Sports Club's ace Ke Zimo's popularity is on the uprise." Thinking of something. He Hao laughed. "This brat even slighted your department today."

He Hao told Fang Zhao about this morning's news. At that time, Fang Zhao had been at home for the installation of the game console, and had not paid attention to the news."

"This brat was not satisfied with Fiery Bird's choice of a virtual idol to be the spokesperson. He felt that they were the most professional and wrote a few letters to Fiery Bird's headquarters requesting a change in spokesperson. He felt that endorsement of a game should be done by the most professional and outstanding people. Seems like Fiery Bird's side gave him some slack, so Ke Zimo seemed particularly happy today. He thinks that the virtual projects department have gotten all they can for the last time and won't be so lucky in the future."

These few reputable e-sports clubs were no longer having sealed training. The reason for sealed training was to keep their training methods and tactics secret. Sealed training was for the teams to get used to the game and come up with methods to tackle things they did not understand. When they started their practice, the image would not have been beautiful, and if videos were released, they might even lost fans. Now, though, after becoming proficient through lots of training, videos released now would be able to stir up lots of fans.

In the New Era, there were too many e-sports clubs. As they were still mainly business driven, they need to guarantee their own strength and capture the hearts of fans.

Especially at this juncture that only happened once every ten years. From a business point of view, these e-sports clubs no longer needed to maintain their cold and indifferent attitudes. From time to time, they would release a few videos or accept interviews.

For example, videos of Big Dipper e-Sports Club's captain taking his team out to drive cars from the Old Era, or videos of BOOM's team riding motorcycles around the city as training.

And this time, 2S e-Sports Club and BOOM e-Sports Club had organized a practice match, and the event was motorbike racing. They had already spoken with Fiery Bird's branch, and when the time came, Fiery Bird would released a map on the public web for them to compete on.

And Ke Zimo was the main talking point of this practice match.

In the interview, Ke Zimo seemed very flamboyant. "It's just a common Old Era vehicle, more difficult to operate than modern vehicles, but I have had no trouble learning, and have mastered it rather easily. Actually, my house has a bike that is a replica of an Old Era model, which I have been riding for the last few years. I haven't encountered much

difficulty in games."

The host of the program asked, "Why did you choose BOOM e-Sports Club as your opponents for the practice match? This is your first practice match after the pledging ceremony, right?"

Ke Zimo waved it off with his hands. "It can't be helped. Only BOOM e-Sports Club has professional racing gamers. The others are too weak." There was an added emphasis on his last three words.

There was no need to say what sort of reaction the other three clubs had when they saw the news. They were all termed as Yanzhou's five strongest, yet this brat actually publicly belittled them during an interview.

"You all also know that my other profession was a racer, and I won many youth racing championships. However, after I switched to electronic competition, I haven't taken part in these sort of competitions anymore, and I also didn't take part in this year's championships. Still, I feel that, on this level, I don't have any worthy adversaries. Even though I have not taken part in these championships, I have not stopped training for games. The vehicles during the Old Era were much harder to maneuver, but I am the best driver in my team." As he spoke, Ke Mozi lamented, "I really wish I could pit myself against the generation from before the apocalypse."

"If you had the chance to compete against the older generations from before the apocalypse, who do you think would win?" the host asked while laughing.

"Me, of course!" Ke Zimo flashed a victory sign toward the camera. The smile on his face was not the joking sort but a rather haughty one. He really felt this way.

"That little fellow is really full of himself," Fang Zhao suddenly said.

He Hao nodded his head in agreement when he heard Fang Zhao. "That little fellow is a little crazy, but he does have a frightening talent. He came from a line of racers and he has a dual profession. He really has the ability to back up his words, though. But mentioning the older generation before the apocalypse is a little lacking in manners. Obviously he knows that it is impossible for these older generations to still be living, so who can prove that he is better than them? Only his words?"

Fang Zhao laughed but did not say more.

The interview continued on. Ke Zimo did not feel like he had said anything wrong. He still continued emphasizing, "Actually, I feel that everyone should just face up to history. The older generations during the Period of Destruction have all been overglorified. All those mentioned in textbooks are too perfect and exaggerated. Just one look and you can tell they are all fake. Of all the videos that have survived from those periods, none of them have been able to prove the situations written in those textbooks. I am a professional racer, that's why I know best. Some of those things that are mentioned are really impossible. For example, the celebrated leader from the Period of Destruction Fang Zhao could ride a motorbike and shoot accurately. Even when he his bike was knocked down, he could still flip a few times, free fall 20 meters, and still land properly and continue riding. Isn't this all nonsense? Did they think it was a sideshow? It's simply an insult to my IQ!"

Fang Zhao: "... little brat!

The host of the broadcast gave a forced smile. Many viewers watching the broadcast online also approved of what he'd said and left comments requesting that portion be removed from history books.

As the interview was ending, Ke Zimo faced the screen. "The model we are using for the competition is a motorcycle that Fiery Bird specially designed. The level of difficulty is really high. For all the newbies, I have a word of advice: don't bite off more than you can chew. Newbies should not court disaster and try it. When the time comes, just watching us will do."

Fang Zhao exhaled sharply.

Chapter 117

Black T-Rex

He Hao did not pay much attention to Fang Zhao's reaction. He knew that many of these people who shared the same name as martyrs were more respectful and worshipped them more; they did not like hearing others badmouth their namesake. Thus, being unhappy with Ke Zimo's words was normal.

"Those are the sort of people they are; don't lower yourself to that level," He Hao consoled.

"Yeah." Fang Zhao smiled a little, but what he was thinking about... he could not mention to He Hao.

Fang Zhao returned home from the office and checked the news. On the entertainment side, almost every entertainment media was reporting about the upcoming practice match between 2S and BOOM e-Sports Club. This was an exhibition match before the official release, and it captured the attention of other players.

Previously, Fiery Bird had released a small map for players to adapt to. Players who entered this map could watch from a bystanders point of view. They could experience the city and view the lifestyle of people from that period and various items that they used. And now Fiery Bird had released a portion of the map similar to the previous one, but the characters inside had all been removed. This map had been specially released for 2S and BOOM e-Sports Club's practice match. After this practice match was over, it would be opened to all players.

In short, 2S and BOOM, two of the strongest clubs, had collaborated with Fiery Bird's Yanzhou division to organize this practice match that benefited all parties.

The news also mentioned the racing motorbike that Fiery Bird had designed, "T-Rex." It was rumored that, in the game, T-Rex would be considered an "uncommon item." Every continent had a set limit of 200 units, and all twelve continents combined would not have more than 2400 units. Although it might seem like a lot, but compared to other items, this was considered scarce. Otherwise they would not have been considered uncommon. When the time came, obtaining one would depend on the

person's capabilities, but before that, Fiery Bird would be borrowing 2S and BOOM gaming club's practice match to advertise their T-Rex and excite players.

The practice match was set at 10 a.m. on September 3. Su Hou had come over on the 2nd to borrow the dog and satisfy his craving knowing that Fang Zhao had a 10th generation Fiery Bird game console. Unfortunately, he was still young and had limited access to a lot of games, so he could only watch with envy. Every day, he could only watch videos or highlight clips of games.

When Su Hou left with Curly Hair, Fang Zhao logged onto Fiery Bird's public platform and entered the training mode. Here there were a few choices of heavy-duty motorbikes, but not the T-Rex model that was seen on the news. These motorbikes were surely less powerful, but for training purposes, they were more than enough.

Fang Zhao had not ridden heavy-duty motorbikes in a long time. Normal motorbikes were easy to obtain, but this was his first time using one since he'd been reborn. In the latter stages of his past life, due to the decline of his body functions due to injuries and illnesses, the research team had come up with a new model of vehicles, but Fang Zhao had rarely used them. Waking up in the New Era, these vehicles from the past had already been phased out and could no longer be accessed. Fang Zhao expected himself to be quite unaccustomed to it, but hearing the roar of the engine, a familiar feeling entered his mind and his senses started tingling. It seemed as if his memory had already coordinated with his body to the most suitable level.

Four hours later, Fang Zhao separated from the console, returning back to reality. His stimulated mind gradually became tranquil. Fang Zhao took a drink and walked to the window, admiring the beautiful glow of the city.

He had entered the game in the afternoon; now it was already dark outside, but the city center would never become quiet just because the sun had set. The winds on the top floor were strong and cold. Fang Zhao finished his glass of water, shut the window, and smiled as observed the excited entertainment news.

September 3, 8 a.m.

Lots of people had already opened up Fiery Bird's Yanzhou division's live broadcast in anticipation. Although it was just a practice match, viewership was high. 2S and BOOM e-Sport Club's fans were fervently stirring up the atmosphere, and some people were even betting on the outcome of the match. Fang Zhao noticed that there were slightly

more people supporting a 2S win; they probably placed faith in Ke Zimo's many racing trophies.

Fang Zhao realized that, in the virtual projects department's group chat, Zu Wen and the others had still been discussing who would win at 11 p.m. last night. It seemed like they would surely be catching the live broadcast.

As Fang Zhao ate his breakfast, he briefly browsed through the news before he would enter the game and familiarize himself even more.

Today's entertainment headlines were mostly dominated by 2S and BOOM e-Sport Club's practice match. The other three teams of Yanzhou's big five were not going to miss this opportunity to evaluate their rival's skills and ability either. Even if it was only a single practice match, they could still gauge their rivals skill level by observing their proficiency with the equipment. A person who was able to use all sorts of equipment had the ability to survive in a world of chaos. This sentence applied in the real world, and it applied in games as well.

At Big Dipper e-Sport Club headquarters, the main team was all present. This was their internal viewing area, and it was easy for them to hold discussions here, as there were no other people from other gaming events.

"Who do you think will win?"

"Probably 2S. Although that Ke Zimo fellow needs to be taught a lesson, we can't deny that he has skills and is very talented. If not for the fact that he was underage ten years ago, we would probably have crossed swords with him. To become well known in the gaming circles so early, he should be worthy of the high salary 2S are paying him."

"I really hope BOOM wins. If that Ke Zimo brat really wins, he won't even need to wait till tomorrow to start belittling us again."

"It's just riding a bike and he is acting all high and mighty. Even if he can ride well, it doesn't mean that he will have the last laugh. None of the great generals of the founding era were race car drivers."

"...Seems like there was one who was a truck driver, the one from Jizhou."

"Wasn't the Jizhou one a discharged soldier before he became a truck driver?"

"He is still a driver and can be considered as having a driving background, I guess."

"Speaking of that, the Ke Zimo brat even doubted the martyr Fang Zhao. Luckily, at this time, people are more tolerant of this discussion, and the martyr Fang Zhao does not have any direct descendants. I reckon that if he had any surviving descendants, the brat would have been invited over for tea immediately after the interview."

"If he really had the guts, why did he not talk about Great General Wu Yan, who was even more overexaggerated in history textbooks? He knew that the martyr Fang Zhao did not have any descendants that would come looking for him. He might be arrogant, but he is not stupid. He knows which parties he cannot afford to offend."

Team captain Yi Yuan sighed. "What a pity."

Yi Yuan thought back to the words Ke Zimo had said during the interview. Many people online even joked that Fang Zhao's coffin would not be able to rest underground. Yi Yuan's history was decent, and he deeply worshipped the Yanzhou leaders who had left a deep mark. There was only that unfortunate one who did not have the luck to survive one more year. How would the Wu family have developed then? It was a pity, given the great circumstances that the Wu family descendants had, that they had not been able to grab hold of the chance and instead had internal strife after the founding era. Even if they were now slowly recovering their influence, Yanzhou had no way of hiding the truth. Many Yanzhou governors did not have the Wu family name. This was something that people from other continents would always use to poke fun at Yanzhou, but most of Yanzhou's masses did not mind.

Yi Yuan could only sigh. If he were good enough at racing, he would surely have participated in that practice match, but in reality, he was not good enough, and participating at this juncture would only make himself a laughing stock. It was better for him to honestly analyse the other party's capabilities.

At 9.30 a.m., the live broadcast started, showing the two teams that had already logged in, fans from both sides, and other players that had qualified for the practice match.

That's right, other than the two gaming clubs, 2S and BOOM, Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch had also released 100 spots. These spots were first released to high-level VIP guests, and the remaining spots were then released one by one to other players.

Yanzhou's five big gaming clubs all had high-level VIP invites, but this time, the other

three teams were not taking part. Taking part despite not being good enough was asking for a beating.

In the broadcast, the backdrop was the map that Fiery Bird had released earlier. The starting point was a village outside the city. At that moment, it was already bustling with excitement.

There were a number of black heavy-duty motorbikes on site. Like violent beasts, they were seemingly full of restrained power. Half of the coarse back tire was exposed, and it was like a tyrannosaurus rex that was prepared to start on its hunt. To the people of the New Era, it seemed to harness a primitive and intense power beneath its exterior.

Electronic dance music was playing in the background as the tones of the commentators got more and more animated. They knew how to drum up the interest of fans and players alike. At the side, some VIP players were controlling their throttles and revving their engines. The roaring of the engine and hysterical shrieks from the fans created a noisy atmosphere.

The fans were seemingly in a frenzy, but there was still order. After all, they had also been selected with utmost care.

Due the map being specially designed for the practice match, the road at the start was especially wide. Right at the front were the teams from 2S and BOOM. However, it was not their entire main force. Each club had sent five members to be their representatives. They were clad in their e-sports club's uniform. Behind them were the other players who had decided to take part and had managed to obtain a spot and the usage of T-Rex. The players were in all sorts of their own attire. Some had on their insignias while others were armed to the teeth with all sorts of in-game equipment.

The dynamic electronic dance music came to an abrupt end and the entire site was silent, but it was soon filled by hysterical shrieks and shouts. This signified that the race was about to start.

With a loud explosive sound, the front ten raced off the blocks. The seemingly large and cumbersome heavy-duty motorbikes finally set off without any restraint. The rumbling of the engines unleashed a brutal energy. With a heavy discharge of smoke and large power outputs, the machines were telling people that, although the exterior might seem cumbersome, it was a two-wheeled racing monster!

Behind the ten, the other players followed behind in succession, but their competitive spirits were not as intense. They were just following behind to get a kick. Due to some of them not having enough practice or being too excited to properly control the bikes, they crashed their bikes not long after starting and immediately disconnected. This meant to say that, if this was reality, they would have already lost their lives.

For every crash, the players nearby were all affected and crashed out together. Although those players did not immediately disconnect, the impact of the crash was too brutal and both man and machine suffered damage. In the game, the pain induced was lowered and hence did not have such an intense feeling. Those few people no longer had any desire to continue following and so voluntarily disconnected and went to watch the live broadcast.

This practice match had a spectator view from all angles. Therefore, those watching the live broadcast could watch from the front, sides, and even top down. The cameras for the broadcast were mainly following the ten people at the front.

The people at the starting line were prepared to go offline to watch the broadcast when they saw a figure suddenly appearing. He was riding a T-Rex, and they immediately knew that he was one of the hundred players that had managed to obtain a spot for the race.

"Hey brother, you are late. They already set off. I'm afraid you have no way of catching up, but just follow behind and enjoy yourself," someone at the starting line said.

The figure riding the black motorbike nodded his head and set off.

The earsplitting roar of the engines echoed all around.

"Who is that?" another player at the starting line asked.

"Looking at his attire, he is neither from 2S or BOOM. I don't see any emblem either, so I have no idea."

"Who cares about him. He's definitely a player who came to join in on the fun. Hurry and disconnect to watch the live broadcast; there is nothing for us to watch here."

"Right right right! The live broadcast is more important. Who cares about the others."

Chapter 118

Who Is That Lunatic

Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch, live broadcast studio.

"The practice match started?"

"Just started. Other than the ten people from 2S and BOOM, of the other 100 players that obtained a spot, 99 are already online... Eh, the last one just came online! Just now he wasn't even on."

"Don't mind it. After all, these people are just here to have a bit of fun. Just take it as giving VIP guests the benefit of having an up-close interaction with the clubs. When they come online or how they want to play is all up to them. All you people need to do is follow the action between those few people from 2S and BOOM closely."

"Understood, of the 110 people, eight of them have disconnected one minute in. All from the back."

"In a bit, the gap between the front and back will increase. Pay attention to where the cameras are pointing at."

"Got it... two more have disconnected. Only a hundred left. No idea how many will remain after five minutes."

"There will be more crashes once we enter the city. Got to let them suffer a little and not let them think this is a walk in the park."

"Eh?" Someone at the side was staring at the screen, flabbergasted. "That one at the back, so fast!"

"Which?" The few others stretched their necks over to take a look.

"This dot. It was in last place, but now it's already in the middle of the pack." The person in front of the screen pointed out a little dot. The map had been minimized and all participants appeared as bright dots on this screen.

"It's easier to crash when you are going too fast," someone else said. Everyone knew what he meant: the faster one went, the narrower the field of vision and the harder the vehicle became to maneuver. Racing along a straight path without anybody was fine, but when it came to speeding along turns and bends, it was easy to lose control.

"Another one at the front crashed, 99 left. I shall see when this fellow crashes and disconnects."

The start of the race course was flat and smooth ground, and the road was a straight path with not many turns. After a while, the number of bends would gradually increase, and the number of mishaps would increase alongside it.

Just as Fiery Bird's staff had predicted, 5 minutes later, from the 99 players, there was a sudden drop to 67. Those at the back were getting further and further away. They also probably felt no reason to continue racing and had voluntarily disconnected. As this continued, the number of players dropped to 51.

A few entertainment workshops saw this as a chance to increase their popularity too. Fiery Bird's public broadcast prohibited others from taking videos, so they could only take screenshots. Every time there was a crash, they would excitedly snap away and post it up, letting everyone know what the crashes looked like and adding commentary, making the crashes even more interesting.

When speeding along bends, even a professional race driver was faced with the dangers of crashing at any time. The screenshots kept getting uploaded, and they were taken from all angles. Included were the players who'd crashed out of the server, other players that had been affected by the crash, and which players had withdrawn due to injuries.

Even for those that wore professional racing gear or were armed to the teeth with all sorts of in-game equipment, once they were riding at high speeds, the crashes were too brutal and they would disconnect immediately.

To them, this was merely a game and the accidents were virtual; they took it as all fun and games.

Although this was just a source of laughter for the people watching the live broadcast, for people who had been professional drivers, when riding the bike, they already did not differentiate between game and reality. These people treated it seriously even

though it was just a game.

At the front, 2S e-Sports Club's Ke Zimo and BOOM e-Sports Club's Olaf had gradually pulled ahead of the others.

2S and BOOM e-Sports Club's had a total of ten people participating, and they had pulled away from the other players after starting. Furthermore, as they were the focal point of this competition and were coined the "front ten," the cameras focused mainly on them. The rest of the players were filmed by a different camera, but as the race went on, of the front ten, the distance between the two professional race drivers, Ke Zimo and Olaf, and the other eight kept increasing. The cameras following the front ten were split once more, with a portion following Ke Zimo and Olaf's head-to-head race while the remaining members of the front ten had one other camera following them.

Ke Zimo was a braggart, but as a professional e-sports athlete and professional race driver, he adjusted rather well to this race.

At that moment, the race had been underway for 20 minutes.

One of the participants from 2S e-Sports Club who was last among the front ten had not heard any sounds from behind him for some time. He thought to himself, See, amateurs are just amateurs. You just can't compete with us professional gamers. Even if we are not professional racers, as e-sports athletes, there is still a gulf between us and amateur players, and we will crush you! Since the start, not a single one of you outsiders could do anything!

When they'd first gotten their hands on the bikes, they had still ridden carefully, but later on, as they got more familiar with the technique, they had been able to push themselves even more and truly harness the power of the machines as their intense competitive spirit showed. They were enjoying themselves and showing off at the same time, attracting even more fans.

But still, the one languishing at 10th spot was not contented. Ahead of him at 9th spot was a BOOM member. He had to overtake that BOOM member! In two more turns, they would be entering the city. The difficulty would increase then, so it would be best to pass before the city.

Eh?!

Why was there noise from behind?

And it sounded like it was getting closer?

Someone had caught up?!

Doubting someone could actually catch up, he grew distracted. Getting flustered, he made an error and went off a bend and smashed into a hillside.

The 9th place BOOM member heard the sound of the crash behind him and felt pleased.

"Haha, crashed!"

Regarding a member of the opposition camp who had been following him tightly and finally crashed, in his heart he was secretly delighted. Until now, the front ten only had one crash, what a disgrace! Later on, they could gloat over 2S!

But very quickly, the 9th place gamer's delight disappeared as he heard the sound of an approaching engine behind him.

How could it be?! Didn't he crash into a hill?! Even if he did not disconnect upon crashing, but even continuing to race, there's no way he could catch up that fast!

But if it was not the other party, who could it be?

Thinking of a possibility, the gamer in 9th place was unable to contain his curiosity and turned his head behind to take a peek. Just one peek and it was too late for regret.

From time to time, rocks would appear on the highway, they were rather large, and as long as one was alert, they were simple enough to avoid. Turning back for a look, he realized that the person behind was in default system attire and wasn't the adversary that had been following him tightly. He was surprised, and that rider was gaining on him at high speed. His heart panicked, and in those few moments of carelessness, when he faced the front once more, he realized that there was a rock in his path. He tried evading, but the bike brushed against the rock and skidded forward as the rider was thrown off.

Tumbling on the ground, the corner of his eyes caught sight of the onrushing bike. At its speed, even if the person could evade the rock, he could only continue speeding

forward into his path.

Screech——

Tires revolving against the ground created an earsplitting screeching as the engine produced a roar that sounded strained. The sounds were more than enough to make anyone nearby disorientated.

The 9th place racer was still hurtling forward; his field of vision was all over the place. All he could see was a black shape brush past him. As if a spectre had ghosted past him, in a flash it was gone. All that was left was the rippling wind created by him.

The sound of friction produced by the tires disappeared, and the roaring of the engine gradually grew farther away. He struggled to get up and look at the surrounding ground. Beside him were only strange tire marks and the smell of burnt rubber.

Even though it was only a game, he could feel cold sweat dripping down his back. He felt as if he had just survived a narrow miss by the foot of a colossal monster and had somehow lived to tell the tale. His heart was beating rapidly as he stood there in a daze, his mind still not recovering from that scene. When he sobered up, he looked down the highway; the other person's figure could still be seen!

As for the people operating the camera for the live broadcast following this area, they forgot their original motive in that moment; their eyes had been captured by that thrilling scene.

Those online watching this feed were also stunned.

"The f*ck, who was the lunatic who just went past?"

"No... no idea, that that scene was just too thrilling. Just a little more and it would have hit... It did not hit just now, right?"

"Evading like this is possible? The bike did not flip over!"

"Did anyone see clearly how he dodged it? When I try to recall what happened, my head is blank. Professional screen capturers? Did you all manage to snap anything?!"

"Perhaps an e-sports club's main member went into battle without their attire?"

"Probably not. If it was from another gaming club, with his skill, there would be a lot of fanfare and he would definitely be wearing his uniform. What that guy was wearing was just the default system attire.

"Could it be a professional race driver who decided to play around?"

"Perhaps."

"That can't be right. At yesterday's public announcement, other than 2S's Ke Zimo and BOOM's Olaf, there were no other professional race drivers taking part."

"Then who was the person who passed by just now? Someone who came over specially to sweep the competition?"

"Hahaha, two out of the front ten crashed after being spooked! Looking at the situation, who is going to get the last laugh is anybody's guess. Now that there is one more mystery person, who knows how many more he can overtake."

Those watching the second camera's feed hurriedly called their good friends to stop watching the main camera feed of the duel between Ke Zimo and Olaf. There was a monster rushing from the back!

Chapter 119

What's His Background?

The practice match was supposed to be a showdown between the top players from 2S and BOOM, but lo and behold, a mysterious player had showed up out of the blue. The audience was ecstatic. Chatter popped up on different online discussion groups.

"Judging from the way he drifted during his turns, he must be a professional racer."

"Looks like Fiery Bird might not have been completely forthcoming on the entry list."

"That might not be the case. It might be a really skilled amateur. Doesn't the saying go: 'The masters hide among the masses'?"

There was all sorts of speculation online—and the folks at the Yanzhou branch of Fiery Bird were also at a loss.

They had a crystal-clear picture of the race. They had been tracking the mystery player since he'd surged forward, but they hadn't expected him to sideline two professional gamers as soon as he caught up with the top 10.

"We screened the premium VIP customers who won entry passes. There was no one with professional racing credentials. If there was, we wouldn't have missed him or her," said a Fiery Bird staffer stationed in the live broadcast hall.

"Then it must be an amateur professional." A so-called "amateur professional" was a highly-skilled amateur who was as competent as a professional racer or gamer but not properly credentialed.

"Is it possible it's a bench player from one of the clubs? Not all of their reserve players are credentialed."

"That's a possibility. In any case, let's keep watching closely. This is an unexpected surprise."

For Fiery Bird, the outcome of the practice match wasn't that important. What they

cared about most were the viewership figures and whether they could use the appearance of the mystery player to advertise their spin-off brands. The company's technicians would also use the opportunity to test the game. The unexpected development happened to meet everyone's needs, much to their delight.

Meanwhile, the virtual projects department at Silver Wing was also abuzz with excitement. Zu Wen and company were tuned into the game but had missed the latest development. They had been focused on the duel between Ke Zimo and Olaf among the front runners. They switched views when they read about the mystery player in a discussion group. They switched just in time to catch the mystery player who caught up with the top 10 pass two more bikers.

"I wonder if Boss saw this. Let me give him a heads up. He better not miss an exciting development like this."

Zu Wen dialed Fang Zhao's bracelet, but no one answered. He kept getting a busy tone.

"Maybe Boss is busy. Forget it, I'll leave him a message."

The number of viewers tuning in to the second camera grew significantly because of the mystery player who'd broken into the top 10, even dwarfing the viewership of the first camera, which was focused on Ke Zimo and Olaf.

"He's No. 7 now! Looks like he can still pass a few more racers."

"Remember the screen capture! Don't freeze this time."

The folks at Entertainment Workshop and other journalists monitoring the match started zooming in on the mystery player.

The loud rumbling of the mystery player's high-frequency motor kept viewers stimulated. The two marquee racers dueling on behalf of their two clubs also noticed the unfamiliar shadow catching up. They didn't know how to lose him. He kept on creeping closer and closer. After entering the city, the roads were clear of pedestrians and other vehicles, but they were narrower than in the suburbs and varied in width.

To make way for the practice match, many elements had been removed from this particular layout. Even though the road was dotted with the occasional parked vehicle,

which made it slightly crowded, there were no other speeding cars or pedestrians. The players kept zipping along. All a bystander could see was a flurry of shadows dash by.

After another turn, the mystery player advanced to fifth place.

"He's so calm. He's barely made any mistakes," Yi Yun, captain of Big Dipper Club's first team, said while glued to the monitor.

"This one's a force to be reckoned with. The two players ahead may not be able to stop him," one of his teammates said.

Yi Yun thought of something and let out a knowing laugh. "We'll see. Let's see which two players are ahead of him."

"Judging from the lettering on their uniforms, in third place should be Ewski, the vice captain of BOOM e-Sports Club, and in fourth is Jabbar from 2S. Hey, those two sly bastards are setting up an ambush. Was this planned? So they could stave off surprises like this?"

"Looks like that's the case. This practice match was never a duel between two teams, but rather a performance by the two professional racers Ke Zimo and Olaf. The others are there to cheer them on and to prevent accidents. And now we have a situation."

While 2S and BOOM feuded fiercely in public—they were trash talking ahead of the practice match—if a third party threatened them, they would present a united front. The same rule applied to all of Yanzhou's top five e-sports clubs. Regardless of which of the Big Five were competing, if someone other than the Big Five showed up, then they would join hands and deal with the outsider first.

At this point, Big Dipper's team leader cut in. He was completely serious. "Stay on Jabbar and Ewski. The two of them are about to make their move."

The big screen showed the mystery player approaching, on the verge of taking fourth place, but he slowed down suddenly and veered off-path. At the same time, Jabbar seemed to make a mistake and flipped. If the mystery rider had stayed where he had been, he would have smashed right into Jabbar or his bike, even if he made a last-minute correction, but the mystery man looked like he had anticipated the move and avoided the obstacle.

Watching the scene unfold, Jess, the captain of HWR e-Sports Club, winced.

"A real pro! Great anticipation. No wonder Jabbar couldn't stop him. Jabbar will be able to say he did his job when he gets offline. He did his best."

Jean, the vice captain of HWR e-Sports Club, nodded in agreement. "We've lost another player. Let's see if Ewski can take him down. If not, it's going to be a race between the top three."

Just as Jean finished his sentence, the screen showed Ewski appearing to lose his concentration during a turn and crashing, ramming into a lamppost by the road. The crash sent the lamp post tumbling. A car was parked on the other side of the road. The top of the lamp post landed on the car, which created a low trapezoid-shaped barricade on the less-than-wide road.

Even though the lamppost didn't collapse onto the road entirely, the resulting barricade was enough to halt any forthcoming vehicles.

"What a dirty move by Ewski. Who knows how many times he practiced that ahead of time?"

"That's the kind of boldness a vice captain should display. He was much more decisive than Jabbar, crashing himself out of the game. Looks like he should accomplish his mission and stop the threat. Wait... he's not going to stop?"

The screen showed the silhouette charging forward.

The gap between the fallen lamp post and the ground wasn't big enough to fit a person or a car. A car would definitely hit the lamp post. The mystery person would have to stop and figure out a way through or take a detour or different route. Either way would mean a delay. In a high-speed race like this, a delay of one second would translate into a bigger cushion for the two professional racers in the lead.

"He's gonna hit the lamp post if it doesn't stop now."

"He's going to crash. F*ck!" Jess, the captain of HWR Club, who was glued to the screen, blurted out an expletive.

The silhouette on the screen flew off his motorbike, which turned sideways as he approached the lamp post. The motorbike threaded the gap beneath the lamp post, the sound of screeching tires creating a piercing noise that suggested burning.

Just when everyone thought the motorbike was about to collapse, it bolted upright again after clearing the gap between the road and the lamp post. The engine of the erect vehicle roared as it pressed forward.

"How is that possible? How did he do that?"

"If the motorbike had a little less clearance, he would have been knocked out of the race. But he... actually cleared the gap?"

"How did it not collapse at that angle?"

"I feel like he gave gravity the finger."

"No, I feel like I've been given the finger. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"This was not a lucky coincidence."

Viewers watching the live webcast were equally blown away. What they considered impossible happened before their own eyes. The game was a simulation of reality, which meant the player could manage the same move in real life.

Ewski, who was forced offline when his avatar died after knocking down the lamp post, scrambled out of the gaming cabin.

"Did I shut him down?" he blurted at his teammates.

His teammates wore a weird expression on their faces and stayed silent. When the sound of the mystery rider's engine from the live broadcast drew Ewski's attention, he knew he had failed.

Ewski went pale, as if something horrible had happened.

"What's the lowdown on that fellow?" Ewski asked his teammates.

"We asked around. He's not from the Big Five. We don't know anything about his background. All we know is that he's scary. He may pose a major threat to us."

"A professional racer? No, if it were a professional racer, he'd be credentialed. Fiery Bird wouldn't miss that piece of information."

"Too bad the guy has remained anonymous. All his personal information is blocked. We tried asking Fiery Bird, but they won't look up his profile just because we're curious."

Staffers watching the live broadcast at the Yanzhou branch of Fiery Bird were also curious about the identity of the mystery player, but the player's premium VIP status made them think twice. Even if he were a regular customer, unmasking his profile would be a violation of professional ethics. Fiery Bird had strict internal protocols in place.

"If we can't look up his profile, then let's check when he registered," one staffer suggested.

Out of respect for client privacy, they couldn't dig deeper just because they were company staff, especially if the client had chosen to hide his profile, but they could look up his date of registration.

"He registered from his console on Sept. 1. He only has one account, no others. It's his first time playing one of our games. A newcomer? Or someone who just met the age requirement?"

All Fiery Bird games could be accessed through a single user ID. Even though "Battle of the Century" had released a few practice platforms this year, Fiery Bird counted many other titles among its library. Folks who met the age requirement would definitely practice with other games before the official release of "Battle of the Century."

"Not necessarily. Maybe it's the first time he's playing one of our games and he registered with us for the first time on Sept. 1."

A premium VIP customer who'd registered on Sept. 1 and could deliver blows to two of the Big Five.

"Who on earth is this guy?"

The player might not have been physically healthy—he could have been disabled or infirm. As long as you had a nimble mind and superior hand motor skills, the world was your oyster if you had a gaming console. One of Fiery Bird's former CEOs once said, "Gaming is a window into a person's soul."

The mystery man was a shadowy monster lurking in the dark, preparing to bare its sharp claws.

"I have a hunch something is about to go down."

Chapter 120

Overtaking

"We are left with three."

"Never expected that we would have a three-way fight to the finish for a normal practice match."

The other e-Sports clubs were all watching the final struggles of this match. A few members that were training were called over by their captains to come watch.

Participating in this practice match were the 10 members from 2S and BOOM and another 100 who'd received entry passes—a total of 110. Now, there were three left. The others had already crashed out or were left far behind and had no mood to continue racing, instead going offline to watch. Especially for those among the front ten that had not crashed but been overtaken, catching up was too difficult, so they figured they might as well disconnect earlier and watch the battle in front. Therefore it ended up with only three players left online.

Ke Zimo and Olaf had set the pace in the race. The distance between them did not widen. At times, Ke Zimo was in the lead, and sometimes Olaf managed to successfully overtake him. However, the times Ke Zimo was ahead were more numerous, and he was now in a good spot to consolidate his lead.

Olaf felt a little anxious, but not to the point that it affected his rationality. He was older than Ke Zimo and had more race experience. Perhaps he didn't have as much talent as Ke Zimo, but he was hardworking and more steady. He gritted his teeth and pressed on, maintaining the 20–50 meter distance between them.

At the front, Ke Zimo felt rather proud of himself, but not to the point where he would forget himself. He knew that he could not afford to be distracted and had to continue maintaining his dominance all the way to the end. According to the map before him, he would be able to leave the city in approximately ten minutes. After exiting the city, the end point would be near.

At this moment, Olaf's heart started beating violently. He could sense someone

catching up.

They were on a Y-shaped bridge. Ke Zimo and Olaf were on one road, and on the other road, a figure appeared.

At the junction where the two roads intersected, like a flash of lightning, the figure emerged between Ke Zimo and Olaf!

The main camera following Ke Zimo and Olaf and the secondary camera following the mystery figure coincided!

To think he actually caught up! This was the thought of all the viewers watching the broadcast.

Olaf was shaken by the sudden overtaking and nearly lost his balance.

Looking forward, the figure was wearing the default black racing attire, and Ke Zimo could not see anything special. Who the hell was this?

Not just Olaf, the still-leading Ke Zimo's heart starting pounding from the shock.

There is still a third person?!

Other than him and Olaf, there was actually a third professional race driver that had taken part in this practice match?!

Not possible. Fiery Bird had publicly announced that there were no other professional race drivers taking part. Then who could the person behind have been? If it wasn't a professional driver, could it have been someone from another e-sports team that had come to wreak havoc?

As a professional race driver, Ke Zimo did not make the same mistakes his teammates had made by turning back. Even if he could hear the roaring behind him and his heart was full of curiosity, he still kept his eyes on the road before him. Race drivers only had a forward; they had no backward! All he had to do was keep looking forward! No matter who was catching up to him, no matter where the party was from, he could only continue maintaining his superiority till the end!

However, the person that had abruptly appeared made Ke Zimo feel a little pressure. Although Olaf's strength was comparable to his own, as an old adversary, they had

competed against each other many times and understood each other's patterns, but this fellow that had suddenly appeared was different. Ke Zimo was totally unable to determine his origin or motives.

Due to the sudden appearance of that bike, Ke Zimo increased his speed again. The opponent had been able to chase all the way till this point. If he continued at that speed, Ke Zimo would surely be overtaken. In order to maintain his lead, Ke Zimo had no choice but to continue increasing his speed as well. Even though, by increasing the speed, the maneuverability of his bike would drop and he would be more prone to accidents, Ke Zimo still chose to do this!

Because of this appearance by a third party, not only Ke Zimo increased his speed. Olaf, who was still busy chasing, stepped up his speed as well. Having already been left in the dust by the third party, if he was left further behind, he would be losing face.

The three shapes on the road sped along, chasing the one ahead tightly. The two professional race drivers and the one suspected professional driver made this race even more intense. At every bend, they seemed to float through at a slanted angle, giving viewers the impression that they were going to skid off the track at any moment.

Even those watching the broadcast began to feel anxious and excited.

"With that sort of vehicle in front of me, I would even have trouble lifting it up. Yet those three can operate it in such a manner. Even if it is only in a game, it is very hard to come by."

"Just like an artistic performance, impressive! Every time they head into a bend, I always feel that they are going to crash out, slanting so much and not falling over. If it was me, I would have crashed long ago."

"Those people, probably... mastered exceptional driving skills, like the folklore of car and man as one? It's as if they have achieved a boundary that normal people can never hope to surpass." Some fans revered as they kept their eyes fixated on the screens.

However, compared to the viewing masses, as people from the entertainment circles watched, more problems arose.

Big Dipper's captain Yi Yuan said, "Don't you guys feel that... that mystery rider seems to be playing around with them?"

Yi Yuan's sentence made the others momentarily silent. They did feel it a little, but their hearts were not willing to admit it. Who would operate the bike in such a manner just to play around? Isn't he afraid? With one lapse of concentration, his showboating could fail and he would crash.

But they had seen the mystery rider steadily overtaking bike after bike throughout the race, but after catching up, he had seemed to slow down and not overtake. Even though Ke Zimo had already increased his speed, they still had the feeling that the mystery rider could still overtake him. Now, though, it seemed as if he'd decided to follow Ke Zimo and Olaf and play around with them.

"Anytime now," Big Dipper's captain said. "The city's exit is coming up. This race is coming to an end. Now that he has caught up... surely he doesn't intend to remain in second place?"

Ke Zimo was feeling very vexed. He realized that he could not shake off the person behind him! Even Olaf had not been so troublesome!

Not just the viewers watching, even Ke Zimo had a slight feeling that he was going to be overtaken, and that made him even more anxious. Even if he lost to Olaf, he would not feel this way, but losing to someone whose origin was unknown, that was not going to be pleasant.

He did not bother to guess where this opponent had come from, but Ke Zimo's intuition told him that this opponent's aim was probably himself!

As if a penetrating pair of eyes were fixed on him from inside the darkness, ready to pounce at any moment. Ke Zimo felt sweat dripping down his back. He kept telling himself, stay calm, stay calm!

But as time passed, Ke Zimo was unable to calm down. Rarely was there anyone able to press him this hard. The only one able to exert similar pressure was his own racing instructor, but even the pressure his instructor exerted was incomparable to this situation.

As they got closer and closer to the city exit, the feeling of unease in Ke Zimo's heart became even more intense, until his sharp sense of hearing heard the change in the sound of screeching tires and the roar of the engine.

The opponent wanted to overtake!

Ke Zimo instinctively shifted his vehicle to the side to obstruct, sealing off the opponent's path for overtaking. He was not willing to give up the pole position and so chose to block off the person behind.

But in the next moment, Ke Zimo knew that things were going to take a turn for the worse.

The opponent had done a feint, and at the moment Ke Zimo shifted to the side, that person rushed past him from the other side.

In past races, Ke Zimo had used this method numerous times to overtake others, but he had never expected that today, at this race, he would be the one falling for it.

At that moment, time slowed down for Ke Zimo. He could only stare blankly as a black motorbike with no designs or insignias went past him.

No insignias whatsoever?!

Who the hell was he?!

The lead he had protected all the way... had actually been lost... just like that?!

At this sort of speed, one had to be absolutely focused at all times. Until now, Ke Zimo had done very well, but now, after being overtaken by that figure, Ke Zimo was feeling disheartened and beaten. So much so that he felt a sense of hatred.

Creak—Crash!

Ke Zimo smashed into a fence at the roadside. He was flung off his bike and tumbled across the road, but as a race driver, his reflexes were better than others, and he knew how to protect himself in the event of an accident. Even though it had been a brutal crash, he was still able to prevent himself from disconnecting straight from the crash.

Behind, Olaf had also made an emergency brake, as after Ke Zimo had been flung from his bike, he had landed in Olaf's path. Olaf knew that this was not intentional and it was only an accident, but regardless, with one crashing and the other braking, both of them had no way of catching up.

But contrary to what Olaf had expected, the bike right at the front did something. It's rear tire lifted off from the ground as the front tire stayed stuck to the ground and

continued rolling forward, as though it was doing a handstand. Hanging in the air, it did a 180 degree turn as it rotated to face Ke Zimo and Olaf.

At the moment where the rear tire fell to the ground, it was as if a galloping colossal beast had come to a halt. The screeching of the tires and roar of the engines had stopped. This motorcycle coined "T-Rex" had finally ceased its engines, but the smell of burning rubber still remained.

The opponent just sat silently on his bike in the distance, watching them. The default helmet he wore blocked out his image, and there were no designs or insignia on his attire or bike to determine his identity. But the way that the opponent had toyed with them, this person was not to be taken lightly.

Olaf, who was still seated on his bike, and Ke Zimo, who had not disconnected after crashing but could not get up right away, were feeling nervous. Olaf had a feeling that he ought to lower his head slightly.

At this moment when Olaf and Ke Zimo thought that this mysterious rider was going to mock them or show a few rude hand signs, the mystery rider chose to disconnect straight away.

Chapter 121

Bullying Kids

"He actually went offline!"

"Then why did this master take part in the first place?"

"Aren't racers supposed to give it their all until the finish line? How come he went offline before he crossed the finish line?"

Folks watching the live broadcast were a bit disappointed. They were thinking the three leaders would get into a discussion or, better yet, start trash talking. That would have made for more exciting viewing. Even an extra word would do.

"But that 180-degree turn at the end was so cool! This guy is truly a master. Who knows who he is? I'm offering 100 dollars for the answer. Please repost."

"One thousand for the answer. Anyone who knows what this dude is all about, contact me in private. I'm going to become his disciple."

"So no one is curious what the folks at 2S and BOOM are thinking?"

Regardless of what the folks tuning into the online discussion were thinking, the members of 2S and BOOM weren't in good moods. Anyone in the same position wouldn't feel great. The two clubs were hoping to build their exposure with a practice match before the official launch of the game, maybe act cool and interact with fans a bit, but lo and behold, someone had crashed their party.

Ke Zimo couldn't keep competing. All he could do was go offline. Meanwhile, it was impossible for Olaf, who was blocked, to continue as well, so he went offline soon as well.

After the end of the broadcast, journalists filed in a frenzy, as if they were high on crack. The fact that someone had crashed 2S and BOOM's party was big entertainment

news. Someone had messed with Yanzhou's Big Five of gaming. This was bound to draw a lot of attention.

Some speculated the mystery rider was an amateur professional racer, while others said he was a professional gamer. Some wondered if he was someone who couldn't become a racer because of a physical disability and thus lived vicariously through racing games.

Several well-known racing teams in Yanzhou even took out ads offering top dollar to the mystery man who'd passed Ke Zimo and Olaf. Physical disability wasn't an issue. The mystery rider could join as a driving coach. His salary would be negotiable.

Folks in the racing industry kept probing each other to no avail. There was also all sorts of speculation in e-sports circles, which also led nowhere. The mystery rider wouldn't be identified unless Flery Bird decided to unmask him publicly.

Meanwhile, Ke Zimo was being grilled by his teammates.

"That fellow is definitely a professional. Either a professional driver, a professional gamer, or both," Ke Zimo said, wearing a sullen expression.

Anyone could tell that Ke Zimo was in a terrible mood. This was a direct slap in the face, not to mention on a live broadcast before an audience of tens of millions. Such a major face-losing event was a deadly blow to Ke Zimo, who had been confident he would win the race.

"I feel like he was targeting me," Ke Zimo said.

"Did you piss someone off?" Jabbar regretted the question as soon as it came out of his mouth. They all knew what kind of personality Ke Zimo had. There were plenty of people who took issue with Ke Zimo. Emboldened by his quick wit and gaming skills, this kid was way too obnoxious for his own good. He had sowed plenty of hatred. This time, he'd probably pissed off some big shot.

"If they had something against Ke Zimo, they could've just spoken out. There was no need to be so ruthless," another teammate mumbled.

Other teammates kept their mouths shut. They knew that words alone wouldn't ground Ke Zimo. Only concrete action was enough to deliver a rude awakening.

Regardless of what the club thought of the incident in private, they had to defend Ke Zimo in public. They were a team. Captain Xie He noticed that Ke Zimo was in bad emotional shape, so he signaled to the others to stop the line of questioning and then looked toward his deputy, Abu, who had just joined the group. "Have we figured out anything about his background yet?"

Abu shook his head. "Fiery Bird said he's a premium VIP customer who masked his profile. Out of respect for client privacy, they can't tell us anything."

Bang!

Ke Zimo slammed his fist on the table in front of him. His eyes were bloodshot and he was panting. He was absolutely furious.

"It's OK. Next time I see him, I'll definitely be able to identify him," Ke Zimo said while grinding his teeth.

Xie He glared at him. "Ke Zimo, you're losing it."

"My apologies." Ke Zimo was on his best behavior in front of the captain. As obnoxious as he was, he didn't dare throw a tantrum in front of the captain and his deputy.

"This is a good thing for you," Xie He said. "Don't think that you're invincible just because you perform well in training. There are so many masters out there. This was a single-event contest for warm-up and publicity purposes. It has no impact on the official contest when the game is launched. Just treat this as a lesson. OK, let's meet in the conference room for a post-mortem."

The players who'd crashed in the race because they'd been distracted started getting jitters. They knew they would be singled out in the meeting.

All the leading e-sports clubs held meetings to analyze the practice race, and folks in the racing community seized the opportunity to gain exposure, offering expert advice on how to negotiate turns skillfully. Stuntmen kept repeating the seemingly impossible moves made by the mystery driver.

Stunt drivers could pull it off, although it was more difficult using vehicles from the Old Era. The captain of a stunt driving team posted footage showing off the moves of him and his teammates on Fiery Bird's practice platform. Even though they weren't riding the T-Rex model featured in the practice race, their footage still drew plenty of

viewers.

Hands off handle bars, backward flips, stationary spinning off the backwheel, drifting—all these tricks were replicated, as was the mystery rider's now-famous move of sliding his motorbike through the gap between the fallen lamp post and the ground. Viewers got a great fix.

The captain of the stunt driving team, at the end of the video, said, "What you're seeing is edited footage. More often than not, these stunts took 10 or even 100 attempts to complete. Take this stunt, for example, and this one." He pointed at two screen caps. Threading the gap under the lamppost and the front-wheel slide plus 180-degree spin had both taken many attempts to stage successfully. "Completing those moves on that motorbike at that speed is no small feat. You've gotta be a professional stunt driver. To be perfectly frank, for professional drivers like us, we either focus on our stunts and technique or we strive for speed in competitive racing. People who can balance both aren't unheard of, but someone who can push the envelope on both fronts has got to be a gamer. No one is that crazy in real life. Otherwise they would have ended up in the hospital already. Repeated injuries take a severe toll on your body. So my take is that the mystery rider is a master gamer."

As a professional stunt driver, the captain had great credibility. Other professional stunt drivers and race drivers soon posted messages seconding his opinion. In no time, journalists had picked up on the consensus of the racing and stunt driving community—mystery man was a master gamer who excelled at racing games.

Only in a computer game could you walk away unscathed regardless of how many times you fell. No bones would be broken. Your life wouldn't be on the line.

But it was still unknown exactly which master gamer the mystery man was. This became one of the biggest puzzles ahead of the release of "Battle of the Century."

After the practice race, Fiery Bird released a highlight reel. Viewers who had picked the wrong camera view during the live broadcast and missed out could finally see how mystery man had clawed his way to the leading pack.

Watching the live broadcast was one thing. Taking in the highlights was a different story.

During the live broadcast, viewers were most concerned with ranking, crashes, and

overtaking, but watching the edited highlights, admiring the shadows zipping by against an Old Era backdrop transported them back to that period in history, filling them with an excitement bred by the mixing of Old Era culture and the passion of race driving.

Race tracks, old forms of transportation from the Old Era—today's viewers couldn't fathom life in the Old Era, but watching the race helped them relate. Back then, there were people who shared our passion.

The Period of Destruction lasted 100 years, and it had been 500 years since the founding of the New Era. Some 600 years had gone by.

Had there also been a group of youngsters riding Old Era motorbikes, zipping down the same urban track 600 years ago?

No one stayed young forever, but there were always young people milling around.

After logging out of the game, Fang Zhao sat by a window to enjoy the breeze so he could calm down.

He saw the missed call on his bracelet and dialed back.

"Hey, Boss! Did you see the match between 2S and BOOM?" Zu Wen sounded excited. He was probably fresh from a discussion about the race.

"I did," Fang Zhao responded. Competing in the race counts, right?

"Hehehe, it felt really good seeing 2S and BOOM stumble. But we don't know who the mystery man who took down Ke Zimo and Olaf is. He must be pleased with himself right now, no?"

"What pleasure is there in bullying a few kids?" Fang Zhao said. He just wanted to teach them a lesson. He didn't feel cocky. Ke Zimo had a big mouth and needed a spanking. That's all that had been. Fang Zhao had already held back on account of Ke Zimo's young age. If he'd really wanted to go all out, he could've made Ke Zimo feel 10 times or even 100 times the pain.

"Bullying kids? That is to say the mystery man is a seasoned racing game player.

Anyway, it felt good to watch Ke Zimo crash. Didn't he just mouth off in an interview two days ago? Now he has to eat his words. Right, I almost forgot to tell you. We just got word that Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch has invited us to a press conference. I asked around. They're having a few press conferences before the official launch to launch new ads and related merchandise. In any case, we'll definitely be receiving gifts."

"When is it?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Two p.m. the day after tomorrow, dinner included."

"Who else will be attending besides us?"

"We are attending as members of the Polar Light project team. Apart from us, there will be folks from e-sports clubs and the media. Oh, 2S and BOOM will be attending."

"Got it. I'll be in the office in the morning that day and head over with you guys in the afternoon."

Chapter 122

Who Do You Think You Are

Fiery Bird's press conference was the focus of the entire Yanzhou entertainment industry. All the invited media were large firms. Smaller and medium firms that were not qualified enough to be invited could only wait outside. Even if they could not be first to publish news from inside, news from the sidelines was good enough.

Unfortunately, they could only photograph the shapes of a few flying cars.

Fiery Bird's Yanzhou Branch was located in Qi'an's city center, a short distance away from Silver Wing Tower. But as a mark of respect for Fiery Bird, and to display their own status, the company had specially arranged for a longer and more luxurious flying car that had an image of Polar Light and the Silver Wing logo. On the day of the press conference, after Fang Zhao reached the office, he set off together with the other members of the department in the car the company had specially provided.

"So many people!"

Surveillance cameras were installed on the outside of the car. Those in the interior could see the images being recorded of the situation outside.

Outside Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch, other than the media that were unable to enter, there were also fans. Those fans wore clothing that had the emblems and insignias of the e-sports clubs they supported, and some had certain team members' aliases printed on them. For example, letterings and numbers, or some used their full name. Ke Zimo might have suffered a defeat in yesterday's practice match, but that had not affected his popularity.

Every time they saw a car from an e-sports club approach, the fans below screamed and shouted maniacally. When Fang Zhao and the others arrived, the people from Transcendental e-Sports Club arrived as well. Down below, howls and shrieks were coming from the Transcendental fans. When they saw a car window open and a head pop out and waved toward them, the shrieks became even more intense.

And regardless of which e-sports club they were fans of, they were all Fiery Bird fans.

Fiery Bird was really the biggest winner.

Fang Zhao caught sight of the constantly changing images on Fiery Bird's Yanzhou Branch building. There were images of Polar Light as well as group photos of the other e-sports clubs and a few promotional videos.

Fang Zhao brought his members and entered the building. The staff there told them the press conference would be held upstairs but that it had not yet started, so they could freely wander about.

A number of people were walking about in the first floor hall. The interior was a dazzling combination of science and games. There were holographic projections as well as material exhibitions. The 1st to 10th generation game consoles were all on display, as were their past games and the motorbike that had been all the rage these two days, T-Rex.

This time around, Fiery Bird had indeed been the biggest winner. They had garnered a lot of attention, viewership had been great, and their peripherals had been publicized.

The previous day's practice match had let everyone see the debut of the T-Rex, and now Fiery Bird had even made a physical model. For this press conference, a physical model of the T-Rex would serve as good publicity.

The models of T-Rex were divided into two categories, the type used in 2S and BOOM's practice match, the racing version, and the entry level model, the street version. The two versions would be available for purchase at the same time.

The racing version used in the practice match was slightly different from the street version. The bottom was entirely sealed up, and its lights and reflectors had been removed. The tires were different, and its exhaust pipes, handlebars, and gearbox had all been modified.

This had been carefully made by Fiery Bird. The racing version had been specially made with the purpose of yesterday's practice match in mind and had been made using references to Old Era technology and then modified.

Looking at these models, yesterday's race had not just been to publicize the game but also to publicize the peripherals as well. The map released for the practice match did not have many interfering factors, such as people or objects, as they had all been

removed all for the purpose of speed and spectating. That was why, other than a few obstacles on the roads, there had been no other loose items, pedestrians, or cars.

But outside of these sorts of professional race settings—on normal roads, for example—or when the game was officially released, the one used by players would be the entry-level street version.

The racing version and street version might have seemed alike but, upon closer inspection, the differences were rather obvious. The racing version was like a wild beast full of killing intent ready to pounce at any moment. As for the street version, it had a more personalized touch to it.

What about gamers who were too young to enter "Battle of the Century"? They were even too young to enter the training platform.

No worries, there was the model.

Fiery Bird never ever gave up on young gaming enthusiasts.

This models came in scales of 1:18, 1:12, 1:4, and all sorts of standards, and they cost between 1,000-20,000, according to the size or where they could be deployed. Made from an alloy, they could be controlled through a person's terminal. The biggest difference with those in the game were probably their power size. These models did not use petrol but ran on rechargeable electricity.

With even more convenient and clean energy sources, why use methods from the Old Era.

Fang Zhao let his department members roam freely. He would head to the exhibition platform and see what other peripherals Fiery Bird had made in the past.

Ahead was a quarrel between members of e-sports clubs. It was not really a quarrel of sorts, just a butting of heads and exchanging of words, poking fun at the other party's pain.

"Wait till the official game is released; it won't be that simple then. Don't tell me you think that you can ride like that once it is officially released? Everything you see on TV is special effects, and in games, they are all imitating reality. When the time comes, there will be lots of obstacles on the ground. If anyone can do those impossible moves we saw from the practice match in the game once it is officially released, I won't

hesitate to call him daddy!"

Fang Zhao's footsteps faltered slightly, and he looked over in that direction.

The insignia's on the people gathered there showed that they were members from 2S and Big Dipper e-Sports Clubs. Ke Zimo was also there, but he was not looking too good, probably from something a Big Dipper club member had said. And the words that had just been said were from a 2S member.

Seeing Fang Zhao glancing at them, Ke Zimo, who was holding in his pent-up frustrations, vented it out on Fang Zhao. "What are you looking at?!"

The others also looked toward the direction of Fang Zhao.

"Mr. Fang." Big Dipper's captain Yi Yuan recognized Fang Zhao, introducing him to the others. "Silver Wing's Polar Light project producer, composer, and a new star in the entertainment circles."

"I know him. We even bought quite a lot of products that Polar Light endorses. You know the one from Muzhou?"

"Four Elephants."

"Yes, yes, yes. That brand really is not bad. We are still using it now."

"Mr. Fang, where is your one-hundred-million-dollar curly-haired dog?" a member of Big Dipper asked.

The whole team had talked about this Fang Zhao person before, so they knew a little about him.

Hearing the words from the Big Dipper members, 2S side also pieced things together.

"Oh! That dog worth one-hundred-million belongs to him?!" exclaimed 2S's vice captain, Abu.

However, as Fang Zhao was not part of the e-sports circles, their everyday knowledge of news outside of e-sports was limited.

Big Dipper's captain Yi Yuan thought of something. Looking at Ke Zimo he laughed.

"Mr. Fang shares the same name as Yanzhou's leader during the Period of Destruction. Martyr Fang Zhao was my idol, so I have a deeper impression of Mr. Fang."

The matter with Ke Zimo talking about the Period of Destruction leader Fang Zhao and using his deeds as an example was known by everyone.

Fang Zhao looked at Ke Zimo over on the 2S side. "Not seeing does not mean it doesn't exist. What you can't do doesn't mean that nobody else can. Even if you doubt, when it comes to the martyrs, there should at least be some form of respect. Do take note in future."

Ke Zimo sneered. "Who do you think you are?! Having the same name as a martyr and you really think you are a leader?" After all, the only people here were them, and there was no media around. Fang Zhao was also from a different circle, so Ke Zimo did not care much about him.

"Ke Zimo!" Captain Xie He reprimanded him. Turning to Fang Zhao, he flashed an apologetic smile. "Of course we have utmost respect for the martyrs." They could not afford being burdened with the accusation of not respecting martyrs. But they only respected the martyrs, as for other people... they did not have the right!

"I heard that Fiery Bird might cancel Polar Light's endorsement deal in the near future. I hope when that time comes we still have the chance to meet you here, Mr. Fang." Xie He smiled politely.

"No problem, I just have to swipe my card." Fang Zhao fished out a golden VIP card. It had been sent over together with the invitation yesterday. Generally, unless Fiery Bird actively recalled the card, it would always remain valid. The cardholder could enter the Yanzhou Branch building anytime. Even if he no longer had his status as a producer, Fang Zhao could still enter this building.

Xie He's face became rigid, but he quickly recovered. He then probed, "Mr. Fang also plays Fiery Bird games?"

"Yes, although I haven't played them for long."

All the members from 2S and Big Dipper present simultaneously had slight grins. In their hearts, one word appeared—newbie.

Hadn't played for long; if not a newbie, what could he be?

"May I know what sort of console Mr. Fang is using?" Xie He asked.

"10th generation 'Rhapsody'," Fang Zhao replied.

Ke Zimo: "... I, your father, only use a 9th generation version!

No one bothered hiding their looks of envy and jealousy.

"You actually use a 10th generation?!"

"Can you handle it?"

All the 2S and Big Dipper members felt heartache. Because there was a limit on the 10th generation, in all these e-sports clubs, generally only the team captain would use a 10th generation. All the other members would use 9th generation consoles.

What a waste! Too wasteful!

To actually let such an amateur use a 10th generation!

"This is no wonder, then. All users of the 10th generation are given the golden VIP card by Fiery Bird," Xie He said. However his main point was not this. "Has Mr. Fang thought of selling the 10th generation? Actually, Mr. Fang, you just started on games; there is no need to use the 10th generation. For the new game 'Battle of the Century,' the sixth generation and above can be used. After all, using the 10th generation will cause a great deal of discomfort if you can't use it well."

The Big Dipper members also looked toward Fang Zhao. If Fang Zhao had the intention of selling, they would all fight for it. As professional e-sports athletes, they would always be inclined to using the newest equipment.

"Not for sale. I seem to use it rather well," Fang Zhao told them.

"Price can be negotiated."

"I'm not lacking money."

Remembering that the other person had a dog worth one hundred million, Xie He really had no way of using money to change Fang Zhao's opinion. As for Fang Zhao saying that he "seemed to use it rather well," that Xie he did not believe.

Looking at the time, Fang Zhao did not continue on. He went to round up the rest of his team, as the press conference was starting soon.

After Fang Zhao left, Ke Zimo had a sinister smile on his face. "What do you guys think, if we kill him in game till he doesn't dare to log on, will he stop playing?"

The others there looked pensive.

It seemed like... it made a little sense.

Chapter 123

Bring It On

Fang Zhao could not hear what Ke Zimo was saying, but he could at least guess as much. Having survived so many years during the end of days, Fang Zhao could at least guess what Ke Zimo was thinking from his few words and expressions. Back when he'd mentioned about the 10th generation console, the look on Ke Zimo's face had let him know that little brat had been planning something.

Fang Zhao did not mind the manner Ke Zimo had used when talking—he just took it as Ke Zimo being young and ignorant—but if Ke Zimo decided to continue being ignorant during the game, he would not mind personally teaching this kid how to respect his elders.

Once Zu Wen and the others gathered, they headed up and prepared to enter the venue.

"Mr. Fang! Please wait!"

Just as he was about to enter the conference hall, Fang Zhao turned his head over. It was Zachary—the engineer who had helped him install his game console—and another unknown person. This person seemed slightly younger than Zachary and seemed more warm. However, he had the aura of a leader. Taking a look at the his chest area where the insignia was at, Fang Zhao could see his rank and position. He belonged to Fiery Bird Yanzhou Branch's senior management.

"This is our Yanzhou branch's head engineer, Xavier. He wanted to talk to Mr. Fang about a matter," Zachary introduced.

Seeing the members of the Polar Light project team behind Fang Zhao, Zachary got someone to lead them into the hall and then invited Fang Zhao to a small lounge next door.

"Mr. Fang should probably find it easy to use the 10th generation console," Xavier said.

"It's not bad. Don't beat around the bush." Fang Zhao was sure the two had not brought

him over just to inquire about how the console was.

Xavier laughed and asked, "Yesterday at the practice match... that person was you?"

Fang Zhao looked up at Xavier and Zachary. "Didn't you already investigate?"

"Cough, just a guess." Facing Fang Zhao's gaze, Zachary swallowed the excuse that he had prepared early and helplessly said, "We investigated, but we don't divulge our customers' private information. It will be kept top secret and nobody will say anything."

Xavier also gave his guarantee. "Confidentiality is something we at Fiery Bird have always been doing well. The five big e-sports clubs have all asked us whether we know the person in this matter, and not a single word has been leaked. Mr. Fang, you should probably know that the 10th generation has data transmission over to us here; it is written on the contract."

Fang Zhao nodded his head. This he knew. During the installation of the console, Zachary had also told him, and he had agreed. As the 10th generation console was a new model, it was a project that Fiery Bird saw great importance in. There was a limited number of 10th generations in the market, so to make improvements to it, they needed the data from these machines. This data was divided into many different parts, and every part had a specific list. One of these was the adaptability value with the machine. Back when Zachary had helped Fang Zhao install the machine, he had explained it. Not just Fang Zhao, all other users of the 10th generation in Yanzhou also had the same data transmissions. Of course, this was all handled by the user, but in the event of something abnormal happening, before the user even realized anything, at the Yanzhou branch, they would receive warnings and come up with countermeasures.

"On the day of the practice match, when Fang Zhao used the 10th generation, the adaptability value exceeded 95, finally stopping at 96." Xavier glanced at Fang Zhao from head to toe. "In the whole of Yanzhou, the only person who has crossed 95 as of now is Mr. Fang."

This data had given Zachary a shock when he'd seen it. He did not know whether there was an error with the data or he had really achieved such an adaptability value, so he followed the data and checked on Fang Zhao's log-in situation and found that Fang Zhao's log-in and log-off times were at the same time as the mystery person from the

practice match.

A new user that signed up on Sept 1 and had a premium VIP status immediately on registering, and with the data concurring, there was only Fang Zhao. Realizing this, Zachary spoke with his immediate superior, Xavier. Xavier authorized an ID check, and the result was as they had expected.

Zachary felt that this was simply unimaginable. In Yanzhou, there were only eight players who used the 10th generation console. Of the eight, five were from the five big e-sports clubs. Five players who were at least at the level of team captain. The five captains were indeed outstanding, achieving over 90 during their first usage. However, until now, they had stayed within the 91–95 range. But during the practice match, Fang Zhao'd had an adaptability value that rose all the way to 96.

This was also the reason they had to check Fang Zhao's ID. Fang Zhao nodded his head, signifying that he understood.

"Thank you for your kind understanding. We will keep it confidential and they won't know." Zachary knew very well that if news about the matter got out, he would only be harming Fang Zhao. Those e-sports clubs always banded together. Yesterday, Fang Zhao had stepped on 2S and BOOM. If 2S and BOOM wanted revenge, when the game was officially released, Fang Zhao might possibly find himself surrounded by those crafty e-sports clubs and end up on the receiving end of some unsavory methods. They might even do something in the shadows. Which of the Big Five in e-sports did not have some methods?

"It doesn't matter if they know," Fang Zhao replied.

Xavier and Zachary laughed when they heard this. They just treated it as angry words from Fang Zhao, as he was still young.

Fang Zhao had not said it in a fit of anger. The reason why he'd chosen to hide his ID back then was not because he had been afraid of being surrounded but that if he had revealed himself, there would have been some trouble. The people finding him would not be little, from companies to media to e-sports clubs and more. With that, he might not even have had time to play his games. Before the game was officially released, he did not want to be disturbed and spoil his mood for games.

"Actually, for inviting Mr. Fang over, there is one more matter. After the practice match,

Mr. Fang had submitted a user feedback form, which we have received and forwarded to headquarters. Half an hour ago, headquarters just got back to me, and we hope that Mr. Fang can join our 'Battle of the Century' game advisory team and participate in evaluating the game."

Zachary was impressed. The feedback and opinion form that Fang Zhao had submitted could actually make headquarters take notice and invite him to the advisory team and evaluation panel; this showed how much value his feedback had. Many areas mentioned in the form had gone unnoticed by the advisory team.

Inside Fang Zhao's feedback and opinions, he had attached cited material. Some information was more obscure, which not many people had seen. There were even a few hand-copied excerpts taken from resources during the Period of Destruction that had been preserved in the memorial hall. This was not a feedback form full of nitpicking. It had really hit the nail on the head.

Headquarters thought this little fellow was a talent, and he knew a lot about history during the Period of Destruction. After verifying what Fang Zhao had cited, he had been invited to the advisory team. In the "Battle of the Century" project's advisory team, he was the only person younger than 30.

...

Press Conference hall.

The invited e-sports clubs and media had all arrived. Fiery Bird's other cooperative partners had also arrived one after the other. Among these partners, other than Silver Wing's Polar Light project team, there was also a reputable toy factory that had helped manufacture the T-Rex models.

On the left of 2S e-Sports Club was HWR e-Sports Club, while on the right was BOOM e-Sports Club. Members from all three clubs were engaged in a disagreement.

HWR taunted that 2S and BOOM had humiliated themselves at yesterday's practice match. 2S and BOOM criticized HWR, saying they did not even have anyone qualified for such a race.

HWR's deputy captain Jean sat cross-legged, not looking over at 2S. She casually mouthed off, "That's right, at least we admit we are not good enough for that race. You guys gave your all and boasted. Where did that get you? Didn't you get stomped?"

Disgraceful! Speaking of that, the postures when you guys crashed were so cool. Our team saved screenshots of your crashes. Just a pity that you all were wearing helmets that hid your expressions. If we could have seen your expressions, they would probably have been like this..." Retracting her legs, Jean's look changed. Her pair of eyes widened with a shocked expression, inciting hooting laughter from her team members.

The Big Dipper and Transcendental members joined in the excitement, seeing that it was not serious. 2S and BOOM's ridiculing of HWR also targeted the other two clubs now.

As they bickered, the lighting changed. The e-sports club members did not bother continuing their quarrels. People that were originally slouching sat up. Members of the media that were discussing stuff put away all their other stuff and prepared to grab the news.

The important guests were always last to arrive. Previously, the first two rows in the conference hall were empty. Now that the press conference was about to begin, these people came in.

Entering were some of Fiery Bird's Yanzhou Branch's important personnel, senior management, chief engineers, and advisory team. These people had seats set up for them at the front.

However, among the personnel walking in, there was a figure that was rather unimaginable.

Ke Zimo pointed at Fang Zhao, who had emerged with the group of people. "Why is that fellow sitting in the first row?"

The others also took notice.

Among the people who had entered late was Fang Zhao.

But as the press conference had started, they could not discuss it loudly; they could only talk about it over messages.

"How is that fellow able to sit at the front? Could it be that he has other backing?"

"Probably not. I remember, back then, when this fellow became famous, someone

mentioned his background. He was just a normal graduate. I didn't hear about any considerable parties backing him."

"Let's observe a little while more. If that fellow goes on stage to talk, we will know what's up."

"Him? How can he even go on stage to present at this sort of press conference?"

"He is the person in charge of the Polar Light project team. Don't forget that Polar Light is still endorsing the game."

"That is why they should just dispose of the rule of virtual idols endorsing it. It's just tasteless!"

No matter what those who attended the press conference were thinking in private, the press conference went according to the scheduled arrangement: the new trailer of the game, explaining the background, announcing the release of peripherals, etc.

The captains of the five big e-sports clubs also represented their clubs and went up to say a few words.

Amongst the Big Five, the last to go on stage was 2S's captain, Xie He. During his speech, he mentioned that some media were rather mindful of the previous day's practice match. "We might not be experts in the single-event competition, and there were a number of issues that arose after that matter, but we are very grateful to the mystery rider. He showed us a few of our weaknesses early on. However, when the game is officially released, we will remain the kings of Yanzhou!"

Members of the other four—Big Dipper, Transcendental, BOOM, and HWR—all simultaneously said, "B*llshit!"

When Xie He returned to his seat, the Big Five started to declare war, arguing over who were the real kings of Yanzhou.

"Hey, that fellow is really going on stage!" a member from 2S exclaimed.

The others also looked over to the front.

A while back, when the host had introduced Fang Zhao, he'd said that Fang Zhao was "One of the eight users of the 10th generation machine in Yanzhou, composer of one

of the background music pieces in the game, a member of the advisory team and evaluation panel, and head of the Polar Light project team that Fiery Bird was collaborating with."

"Also a member of the advisory team and evaluation panel? Didn't that fellow compose music? Why is he involved with this?"

"Now that it's like this, should we still do it?" Ke Zimo frowned.

On stage, Fang Zhao touched on a few points regarding the Old Era. Before leaving the stage, he said, "There are some people that are probably thinking about attacking me in-game till I become afraid of logging in. To such people, I have these words for them."

Fang Zhao looked up and scanned the hall. Although it seemed like a casual glance, it made the people over at the 2S area feel uneasy. How did that guy know they wanted to target him? Could he read minds?

"Bring it on," Fang Zhao said flatly. "As long as you all don't regret it."

Chapter 124

Boss, Don't Be Scared; We'll Cover You

"Whoa! This fella is real crazy!"

"Not even a professional e-sports athlete and yet he is so insane?"

"I thought that Ke Zimo from 2S was crazy enough. I never expected that there was someone even crazier."

Fang Zhao's words made a number of e-sports athletes present twitch their lips.

A middle-aged member of the media sighed. "That's just how youngsters are. I understand."

Outside the conference hall.

Zuo Yu was chatting with his old comrades.

When Zuo Yu had accompanied the Polar Light project team over to the Fiery Bird Yanzhou Branch's building, he'd run into an old comrade who was working as security here. After a while at the press conference, he had come out. After all, inside, Fang Zhao was with Fiery Bird staff. Safety was not compromised, so he did not need to follow. Thus, he had come out to catch up with his old comrade and reminisce and talk about their work experience in Qi'an City.

"Work here gets very busy. The game is about to be released and there are many crazy fans. A lack of concentration and someone will sneak in. Not to mention all the items on display, if any machine gets spoiled, I will feel heartache!"

As Zuo Yu's old comrade spoke, his hands went to his chest. He was remembering the incident that had happened a while back, when a fervent fan had broken in to steal a 10th generation console. The fan had been caught but had damaged a few displays, and the damages were worth several million. This sort of money was not a lot to Fiery Bird, but they would feel heartache! Although the fan had paid a compensation fee, all those displayed items that were considered works of art were destroyed, and they

could not help but feel sorry. They were also Fiery Bird fans and treated every item that Fiery Bird produced as a treasure. Especially the limited editions from 40 to 50 years ago that were on display. These were all commemorative items and had special significance. Ruining one was the same as losing one.

"Especially during the period close to the press conference, other than Fiery Bird fans, there are also fans from the other e-sports clubs. We have to watch them and increase security. Luckily, Fiery bird pays out rather readily. What about you? Following a composer around, don't you feel bored?" Zuo Yu's comrade asked.

"It's okay. My boss also pays out readily, and it's not boring. This year I still got to visit Muzhou to watch the sheep-herding competition, the benefits and salary are good too." Zuo Yu replied.

"That's true, your boss does not lack money. I heard he even has a dog worth \$100 million. Doesn't your boss have any unusual hobbies? I heard that people with such high levels of artistic sense are weird."

"You know, those that dabble with the arts are..." Zuo Yu paused, pointed at his own head, "different from most people. You have no idea what goes on in their heads. Nowadays, he spends most of his time at home and I'm not needed. However, my wages are never short."

Zuo Yu's old comrade sighed. "Then you have it easy, getting your salary without staying beside and protecting him, unlike us who are always tired."

"I am his personal bodyguard; of course I needed an opportunity to show off and protect the boss well. When he is protected well, only then I can take the money. When the boss is happy, he pays out even more. On account of the money, I would even protect him in-game," Zuo Yu said.

"You still get to play games and get bonuses, how great. Who knows, if your boss is happy when he plays, he might even give you a pay raise. I'm really envious, we still have to do shift work. You found a really good job. If you retire or get sacked, recommend me."

"Hey, are you trying to steal my job?"

The two laughed. Suddenly, the conference hall door opened, and the bustling noise wafted out.

Zuo Yu saw the message that Fang Zhao had sent to his communications device. "Alright, till next time. The press conference has ended, I need to send them back."

"My break is ending soon, so I have to get back to my post. Let's talk more when we have time."

This time, Fang Zhao was together with Zu Wen and the others and had left through an exit at the back of the conference hall. He had left a message for Zuo Yu, asking him to drive the car over and wait for them.

Because when Fang Zhao had went up on stage, a few media groups had wanted to interview him but were not successful. In the blink of an eye, he was gone and had brought the entire Polar Light project team and disappeared. Since they could not stop Fang Zhao, they did not waste time and turned around to interview others.

Xavier and Zachary let the interview be handled by the spokesperson and returned to the office.

Xavier still felt that Fang Zhao had chosen the wrong profession. "What a pity. If he had honed his skills as a professional e-sports athlete from a young age, all of the big five would now be fighting for him. Why did he study composing?"

"Such great talent. It is indeed a pity," Zachary agreed.

They had just understood from headquarters that, of the 100 10th generation machines that had been released to the public, only Fang Zhao had exceeded the value of 95. Even in all the other continents, the highest value stayed at 95. Perhaps the adaptability value might rise as the console was used more, but as of now, only Fang Zhao had achieved an adaptability value of 96, which was the highest.

That was why Xavier felt rueful. A young seedling with the potential to be an e-sports athlete had actually chosen composing!

Fang Zhao did not know the Fiery Bird staffers' assessments of him. He got Zuo Yu to head directly to his place, because Zu Wen and the others wanted to see the 10th generation up close and, at the same time, hold a department meal at his place.

Fang Zhao's words at the press conference were also circulated by the media, giving rise to resentment from a number of players.

"This amateur actually dares to talk nonsense in front of the Big Five?"

"Isn't he afraid of getting thrashed? Does he feel like the time he can hold on to the 10th generation is too long?"

"Who knows, maybe there really are people who would use these sorts of methods to make him sell the 10th generation."

"There is an old saying, 'The ordinary people are innocent, but a person's cherished possessions will get him into trouble.' If he is willing to sell the 10th gen, not only will he be more relaxed, he would also earn a large sum. But if he is not willing to sell, even if the Big Five don't bring themselves so low as to attack him, other people will also kill him till he doesn't dare log on. If he doesn't log on and doesn't play games, would he let the console rot away at home? When the time comes, he will surely sell it, perhaps at an even lower price."

"Now the whole world is hyping up the 10th generation console. Currently, its price has been hyped up to \$60 million, and yesterday, someone predicted it will rise up to \$80 million in the next 10 days."

"When the game is officially released, it might even cross the 100 million mark. Tsk, is the 10th gen really that great?"

"You don't understand, this is called style. Many people wish to purchase it. Yesterday, there were people mentioning that, of all the models that Fiery Bird has produced, this is the first exoskeleton-type. It is worth keeping it; in a few decades, the price might increase a few times over. In any case, there is no way you lose by keeping it."

"Anyone has the means? Sell your house or take a loan and get one!"

It was not possible to conceal him being the owner of a 10th gen console. That's why, from the start, Fang Zhao never intended to hide that fact. Recently, more and more people wished to purchase the 10th gen from him. Of Yanzhou's eight 10th gens, five belonged to the Big Five, and it was impossible for them to let go of it. The other two owners were influential bigwigs in Yanzhou. As such, if anyone wished to buy it, it would only be through Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao had recently installed a blocker on his communications device, and that brought a little peace and quiet.

Luckily, users online had very short attention spans. In September, there were many more practice matches between the five big e-sports clubs, which stole the headlines. This time, Fang Zhao did not interfere. Just like people had mentioned, gaming was the main strength of the entertainment industry. The gaming circles that had been restrained for 10 years almost took up all the hot news topics daily. Even if it was not everything, they still accounted for half of the top 10 hottest news and crushed all other film, TV, and music celebrities.

Silver Wing had also launched their reserve dual profession gamers. Although they could not compete with the Big Five, competing with a few old rivals was fine too.

Very quickly, October 1 arrived. It was a weekend, and there were many people.

Fiery Bird's official release time was October 1 at exactly 12 p.m. in Huangzhou. Huangzhou's time zone was ahead of Yanzhou by six hours, so at the time of the official release, it was 6 a.m. in Yanzhou.

At 5 in the morning, the virtual project team's group chat started to buzz with excitement. Zu Wen and the few others had probably been too excited to catch any sleep the night before, but they were still very energetic.

Zu Wen, Rodney, and the technical staff were a bunch of sly and experienced gamers. Ten years ago, they had not met the age requirements and had not had the chance, but now, they could finally take part in this global feast.

"Everyone is rather early," Fang Zhao said in the chat.

"Oh! Morning boss!"

"Boss, were you so excited you couldn't get any sleep?" Rodney asked.

"I slept for seven hours," Fang Zhao replied.

"Boss, when you enter the game, be careful. There might be people trying to ambush you," the department's technical staffer Fu Yingtian said.

They knew that, after Fang Zhao had gradually built up the virtual projects department, only then had he spent more time playing games. Previously, he had only played a few shooting games, and this was the first time he would be playing this sort of large-scale game by Fiery Bird. When first coming into contact with this, it might be

more difficult to control and might cause some apprehension. Furthermore, in the morning, there were people who had talked about attacking Fang Zhao, so they were worried that Fang Zhao's mood might be affected.

"Don't be afraid, Boss."

"Yeah, Boss, don't be scared; we'll cover you!"

"If they want to kill you, they would need to do it over my dead body!" Zu Wen exclaimed. In this sort of situation, of course he had to pledge his allegiance.

"I am here as well," Zuo Yu said. When it came to giving a favorable impression, there was no way he could be left behind. Pay raise!

"I'm not afraid," Fang Zhao replied.

"Boss, then what are your thoughts now?" Zu Wen asked.

"I thought of a tune."

All members of the virtual projects department: "..."

"Boss's brain is blasting BGM once again."

Chapter 125

Immortal! Let's Drink, Old Friends

To enter the game, one first had to set up an avatar and game ID. When Fang Zhao had registered a Fiery Bird account after receiving the 10th gen, he had thought of a lot of IDs, but all were in use by others. The username "Fang Zhao" had also been taken, probably by a player who shared the same name.

At last, Fang Zhao entered "AliveAfter500Years". The system showed that this username was unused, and so he confirmed it. In his past life, Fang Zhao had wished to continue living on. He still remembered the regret of not completing all 100 steps but instead stopping at the 99th. He just had not expected that, when he opened his eyes, he would have jumped 500 years into the future. The vacant 500 years that he'd skipped could only be understood through images. Although he still had regrets, at least he got to see the developments after 500 years. If all his old friends knew this, they would surely have struggled to survive 500 more years. If any of them were really still alive, Fang Zhao could still meet them. Unfortunately, this was only an impossible dream of his.

As for his avatar, Fang Zhao chose his current image and made a few modifications. Fang Zhao could not remember what his body had looked like in his past life. He just based it on his vague memory and made some changes. Then he added two scars to his face. This was now similar to his image during the later part of his past life. His height and weight should be similar to his current body, so no changes were made to that.

When Zu Wen and the others saw the added scars on Fang Zhao's avatar in game, they laughed. "We know that Boss worships the martyr, even imitating his two scars."

Fang Zhao also joined in the laughter but did not explain.

Zu Wen and the others' in-game avatars were not entirely similar to themselves. In real life, Pang Pusong was shorter and more plump, but his avatar was tall and imposing like a bodybuilder. Zu Wen's avatar was 80% similar to himself. Only, he had added on a flamboyant and explosive hairstyle and two weird curving whiskers on his face. The others were mostly like Zu Wen, using their base avatars and adding a few

minor changes.

The members of the virtual projects department formed a team and entered together. Other players did the same; the members of e-sports clubs also formed teams and entered together.

After they successfully entered, everything before their eyes changed. A mild scene of the Old Era emerged.

Crisp piano notes fluctuated to the opening scene as it changed. Before their eyes were a few materials that resembled what had been introduced in films, so many people did not feel any wonder and just anticipated the scene quickly passing. They had a pressing need to enter the game and flex their muscles.

"I heard the opening sequence is two minutes long?" someone said.

"That's too long, why can't we skip it?"

"Let's just wait, it is only two minutes."

The members in the team chatted with one another.

Very quickly, the sound of the piano faded and became hazy. A drawn-out note surged, slow and stifling. Along with it, the low sound of a string instrument rang out, making people's nerves fray. It was as if some inharmonious noises descended from a distant place, similar to people yelling and also to the sound of activity produced by other objects.

The field of view started to shake violently, as if a huge creature was rampaging below the surface. The ground below made slight movements that rapidly became violent. Deep fissures appeared as a large portion of land in the distance sank in. A flyover with many cars on it fractured as large buildings collapsed. The bustling city turned to ruin in the blink of an eye. In the distance, coastal cities were swallowed by tsunamis, and huge ships capsized. Meteors rained down as volcanoes erupted and dust filled the entire sky.

The vibrato of a string instrument being strummed seemed like the cold shivers a person got. The rumbling of drumbeats was like the large boulders crashing into the earth or a hidden sledgehammer, pounding away at people's hearts. The blaze of explosions emerged all around as the ground opened up. It seemed like a scene

straight from hell; the entire world was finished!

A whimpering trumpet call carried a hint of darkness, and an emotional and gloomy string score played, showing the unceasing despair of a city that had fallen. The lifelike images coupled with the tense music battered the senses and produced a stifling atmosphere.

A segment of remixed electronic sound effects brushed across the ear, as if someone was running hastily beside, rousing the sensitive nerves of players.

The group of players that were originally talking had unknowingly ceased their conversations.

Faint piano notes slowly entered, as if it was an old man recalling all his fading memories. The combination of sounds and images showed the tragic world after it had been battered by that devastating power.

The field of vision started to broaden, cities shrunk, and tall buildings vanished. Displayed in front of all players' eyes was a reduced map of the world. The ground seemed withered and full of fissures. Below these fissures were flowing lava and blazes that threatened to burn everything down.

Its changes told everyone that, as of that moment, the Old Era ceased and the Period of Destruction began.

Still, the heavy string score continued; a few clear notes of the piano permeated in. The music also started reflecting two types of forces battling, one being the devastation of the disaster and the other a sort of unyielding tenacity in the face of such adversity. The tempo continuously increased as the pounding drumbeats and the music of both piano and string became more forceful. These two themes interwove as though locked in battle.

Small glowing dots like stars gradually appeared on the shrunken map. Every moment, new dots appeared, and some dots were extinguished. Some dots were bigger than others. In any case, the glowing dots were increasing on the map.

Every glowing dot represented a group fighting for survival. That was mankind's hope.

The acoustics augmented the entire image, and an oboe and a french horn alternated, like souls standing up from the ruins. The rumbling of percussion signified the

graveness after the horrors, like the hell during that period. The process of refugees experiencing mortal danger and uniting together shook one to the core!

A momentary silence occurred, and afterward, brass, string and electronic music simultaneously rang out, seemingly from the ends of the Earth. The harmony was extremely aesthetic, with a steady rhythm. It hinted at something magnificent.

At the same time, on the world map, starting from the two poles, in the manner of a sweeping tide, the scorching earth and wastelands subsided.

Players watching this understood. This was the period of change in history. Starting from the two poles toward the equator, mankind set out to reclaim their world.

Just as everyone thought that it had ended, from the remote boundaries, a faint harmony reverberated. A string medley split into a number of different parts. Other than the obvious high-pitch melody, the middle part, which was harder to discern, combined with the reverberating high-pitch sounds and became impossible to differentiate. The tones that were as different as heaven and Earth had seemingly closed the large gap between them.

It was like being struck by an ice-cold lightning bolt that spread throughout one's core, and one could not help but shiver.

The ground below moved once again, but it was not the violent shaking of disaster. This time, things were emerging from the ground!

Twelve ash-colored stone objects rose from the ground. When only the tips were visible, players who were familiar already knew what they were.

Huangzhou's Cemetery for Martyrs's monument!

Yanzhou's Cemetery for Martyrs's monument!

Jizhou...

Tongzhou...

Azhou...

Jinzhou...

Lazhou...

Leizhou...

Mazhou...

Xizhou...

Muzhou...

Rongzhou...

Twelve monuments!

The twelve largest monuments from the world's twelve cemeteries for martyrs rose steeply!

The murals and sculptures on them depicted a hail of bullets whistling past, crossing of swords, and slaughter, recreating the period of bloodshed that had lasted a century. The lingering fog was like a white blaze, as if they were the souls of the dead. With the epic backdrop of music, their determination never stopped burning.

This was not the hot-blooded fighting but the origins of the heroics during those times!

The music faded and the images stop changing. In the field of vision were only the twelve towering gravestones and the smaller gravestones behind them that were as plentiful as a sky full of stars.

All the players that entered the game had originally had their minds sets on explosions, guns, and killing, but at this moment, it was as if they had been doused with cold water as they all calmed down.

Facing the twelve solemn monuments and the numerous graves behind them, it was as if one had taken an icy-cold cup of alcohol—cold to the touch, but it warmed the body.

This was the message that Fiery Bird wanted to pass to all the first time players. It did not project just one form, but a whole entity! It was a period of history, a group of people.

In the 100-year Period of Destruction, the death toll was in billions. Great sacrifices were traded for the start of the New Era. The war that lasted a century, the degree of tragedy and bitterness was not something that people living in the New Era 500 years into the future could experience.

A lot of people were under the impression that the opening sequence for "Battle of the Century" would be a segment to stir up the surging passion of the gamers or a frightful scene reeking of blood. But in reality, the message Fiery Bird wanted to give its players was this: There were many sacrifices during the end of days, many outstanding and capable people died in battle. These gravestones served as a warning. So many capable people could not even survive. Can you?

The most powerful way to convince them was to let them experience it for themselves.

Survival was an attitude. Now, all the players standing there, have they prepared themselves to enter hell?

Someone recovered. Sighing deeply, he said, "I felt as if the opening sequence left me dumbstruck. Anyway, who called me just now?"

"Nobody, I didn't hear anyone. In any case, it wasn't me," his team member said.

Other members also voiced out in succession.

"I didn't call you either."

"Was it your imagination?"

"I... I think I also... also heard someone calling me..." a timid voice said.

"When?" someone asked.

"At the time when the gravestones were rising up."

"You?" The question was directed at the last person to voice out.

"...Me too."

A chorus of air exhaling could be heard. "Sssssss."

"Recalling back, when the gravestones were rising, it did feel like there were human voices from behind," a member of the team hesitantly said.

"Now that you mentioned it, I think I felt the same way just now."

"Seen a ghost?"

"D*mnit! Stop talking about this, I'm starting to get goosebumps!"

A bolder member poked fun at the others. "HAHA, do you have that little guts? Are you guys afraid?"

"I'm not scared, it just... just feels strange. There are some shivers, yet there is some excitement. I don't know how to describe this feeling."

Actually, similar dialogues happened in many teams.

Some teams had members who were music students that had studied symphonic structures before. They had joined their friends and entered the game. One reason was to kill time, and the other reason was to listen to this year's Fiery Bird's game's background music for the opening sequence. Yesterday, his classmates that studied music were already discussing which great master had composed the background music for the opening sequence. Teachers had also mentioned before that the opening tune from Fiery Bird's previous game ten years ago had been taken and used as an examination topic. Who knew whether it would happen for this year's opening sequence's background music. Thus, they were listening to it even more seriously.

Music was a component of a game's soul. Only those companies that did not take manufacturing seriously would skimp on this. Companies that were completely devoted to manufacturing games, such as Fiery Bird, would be willing to put a lot of effort in the music.

Many composers were anxious to prove themselves but, in the end, had been refused to be seen by Fiery Bird. Those that were invited were reputable people within the circle, and the piece that was finally chosen would have to beat at least ten other pieces by famed masters. The background music of the opening sequence was of utmost importance. These music students would naturally not let it slip by. Because of the simultaneous release worldwide, time zones were different. In some places it was in the wee hours, so some had set alarms to get up in the middle of the night to log on. Others had simply stayed up because they had to experience it for themselves

immediately.

Those in the industry had reflexively begun to analyze it after hearing it. Many people who had studied music knew that, when depicting disasters in movies or documentaries, music was used to achieve a larger and more shocking impact, often using incompatible harmonies and combinations that would provoke the sense of hearing. But mainstream studios used electronic remixes as their main form, and even if it was orchestral music, many used electronics to imitate the sounds, thus using these sorts of techniques to manufacture music that can batter the audio-visual senses.

But the opening tune was classical yet modern, a fusion of musical instruments and electronic music. The musical style was different from the music of those disaster movies, but it still built up the same shock and effect of provoking the senses!

To be able to perfectly make it work, this was no easy skill. Definitely not a youngster...

That was not right; to be able to mix classical and modern and blend electronic music with traditional musical instruments so perfectly, the manner and the shocking intensity it had was not weak at all.

They all remembered a person. The one who had started a new wave of people being interested in symphonic structures.

Professionals in this field with interest in symphonies had all heard Fang Zhao's four movements of the "100-Year Period of Destruction," and the music from the opening sequence made them remember the third movement in the series, "Mission." But these two pieces were entirely different. The core of the former was "movement," like the dazzling flames from the dynamic explosions, whereas the latter's theme was "calm," like the spirit fires within the gravestones, quiet yet brave.

"Fang Zhao? Is it him?"

This was what many music professionals were thinking.

However, the pure game players would not take notice of this. Although they might have calmed down after the opening sequence and music, they were still eagerly anticipating the game. However, this time, their vigilance had been raised. Especially the experienced members of the e-sports clubs. They might not have been reliable elsewhere, but when it came to games, they had keen perception.

"Following this might be an arduous journey."

Over at the virtual projects department's side, Zu Wen and a few others who had been excitedly hooting a moment ago had become quiet too. They were also aware of the message that Fiery Bird were trying to transmit.

Zuo Yu shivered a little. When he saw the opening sequence and heard the background music, he felt uneasy. He knew that the background music had been composed by Fang Zhao, and as Fang Zhao's bodyguard, he had been with Fang Zhao through the entire journey of gathering materials. Now he finally understood why Fang Zhao had gone to the cemeteries to gather materials, because for Fiery Bird's opening sequence, the finishing touches were the gravestones!

How many hot-headed people could be subdued?

However, whatever Fiery Bird did, there was always a motive. Zuo Yu had also detected the message. The going was going to get tough.

"Boss, ready to go in?"

The others all looked at Fang Zhao.

The entrance into the game was at the bottom of the twelve gravestones.

"Wait a moment," Fang Zhao said.

Before entering, there was actually a choice. Whether to enter straight away or choose to pay one's respects before entering.

Impatient people would choose to enter straight away. As for others that wished for the martyrs to bless them with good fortune, they would choose to pay their respects. In their group, some wished to enter straight away, and some wished to pay their respects, but ultimately they all looked toward Fang Zhao. They had chosen to enter as a group. If they were to enter, they would do it together.

Hearing Fang Zhao say "Wait a moment," they all knew which choice he had made.

"Makes sense. Boss respects the martyrs very much," Rodney said.

Fang Zhao did not speak, glancing at the twelve gravestones ahead. He had visited each

of their originals. Compared to other people, he felt differently when it came to these gravestones.

After the opening sequence had ended, only the area they were at was lit up. Elsewhere in the distance had become dark. And just like in the worship district back then, behind the giant gravestones were countless smaller tombstones that seemed like the reflection of stars on the surface of water.

With wine, there is no difference between heaven and Earth. Let's drink, old friends!

As per the previous time, Fang Zhao chose alcohol as an offering.

Long time no see, the world I once had.

Zuo Yu eyed Fang Zhao, not knowing whether he was imagining things, but he always felt that the expression in Fang Zhao's eyes when he was paying his respects was a little frightening.

The others were also very curious about Fang Zhao's worship method. They wanted to follow that method and pay their respects, but they were stopped by Fang Zhao. In the end, they all used their own accustomed methods to pay their respects.

Zu Wen even threw in a few bows. As he paid his respects, he said, "May every martyr bless me. Don't let me be too unlucky, don't let me die of hunger..."

After a few long-winded sentences, the team formally entered the game.

As a team, they were all randomly assigned to a place.

Zuo Yu looked at his surroundings. "Warehouse?"

This was a warehouse for junk items. It was quite empty, and it seemed like someone had rummaged through it. A few cases for storing junk items had been flipped over.

"We get guns right at the start?" Checking his equipment on hand, Zu Wen realized he now had a gun. "This should be Fiery Bird's so-called welcome present, right?"

Yesterday, Fiery Bird headquarters had announced online that "There will be a small present for everyone at the launch of the game. We hope everyone will like it."

"It will be good if we get a gun, hehe."

"How do I only have a knife and no gun."

"Mine is a gun."

"This gun is too old."

"With these little bullets, what can we even kill?"

A standard police issue handgun from the Old Era—according to its model, one magazine held about 15 to 20 bullets. That was not a lot; this would be troublesome.

"Don't tell me there might be items hidden in other places?"

Zu Wen, Rodney and a few others discussed searching the other areas of this warehouse.

"Lower your voices," Fang Zhao said.

Zu Wen laughed and replied, "Got it, got it. Boss, your nerves are getting the better of you. It's just a game; what matters is that we have fun. Don't be so solemn. After all, we have three lives." He listened cautiously and did not hear any suspicious sounds in their surroundings. The few technicians had played games together for a long time and knew how to coordinate and warn each other. Furthermore, when they played shooting games, their roars and cries were even louder. Since it was their first time playing a Fiery Bird game, they were too excited. They wanted to enjoy it first.

After all, it was a game, and things did not happen according to reality here. Upon entering the game, players had three lives, but after those three lives had been used up, their next death would cause them to be barred for a week before they could re-enter. Of course, lives could be bought with money, but only after the second day would players be able to log in once more. This was the strictest Fiery Bird had ever been regarding the value of lives in their games.

In short, the three lives let Zu Wen and the others feel relaxed. They could continue playing even after dying once.

Fang Zhao wanted to check the surroundings but was stopped by Zu Wen and the others. "Boss, just take a seat here. Let us handle the scavenging." They had to look

after their leader well.

Zuo Yu stood guard besides Fang Zhao and nodded. "Yeah, Boss, you just sit over here. Let them go search for food, don't worry. If any bandits or savage beasts or whatever come along, I will take care of them."

"There's a small kitchen over here!" At the back, someone had entered a room.

"Eh? Is this a decompressor from the Old Era?"

"No, I remember from the information given, this is the Old Era's microwave."

Fang Zhao listened to the other's discussion and reminded them, "I advise you guys make as little noise as possible."

The few over there were probably too excited and did not make much of it.

Fang Zhao did not continue nagging. He quietly sat on a box nailed to the floor.

Zuo Yu wanted to say, "Boss, don't be too nervous," but Fang Zhao was facing the steel door in front of them, seemingly deep in thought, so Zuo Yu did not say it out loud. He kept thinking that, after the boss had entered the game, there was something slightly wrong with his state of mind. The expressions in his eyes seemed very penetrating, but maybe it was just the two scars on his face.

Chapter 126

If You Don't Listen to Your Elders, Log Off and Wait

In the small kitchen behind them, Zu Wen and the others were very interested in all the Old Era cooking utensils. At this age, most of them had played a Fiery Bird game before, but this was the first time they had entered a game on its release date.

After they'd come of age, they had been able to formally log into the game, but by then, there had been lots of strategy guides, and basically all they'd done was play according to others' past experiences. It was not particularly stimulating, but now they could only fumble around themselves. This sort of experience was a novelty for people who liked games. Even if they had previously played other games based on the Period of Destruction, none of those could compare with this Fiery Bird version with its attention to detail.

Zu Wen found an egg after rummaging through the kitchen. Because the Old Era's microwave was very intriguing, he placed the egg in to play around with it.

"Is there electricity?"

"Yeah."

"What else do you have to set up? Why isn't it automated? How troublesome."

"Hmm, I should just randomly pick one."

"This one... Whoa! the machine is starting to revolve!"

Zu Wen and the others surrounded the front of the microwave, their heads all gathered together as they watched the egg spinning around inside, as if it was a rare sight.

Zhang Yu and Fu Yingtian, who were in charge of standing guard could not contain their curiosity and looked over.

"Doesn't seem like there are any changes."

The words had just left the lips when there was a "BANG," scaring the few of them into taking a step back.

"Ex-ex-exploded?"

"Why did this egg explode when placed inside? Was it from incorrect usage? Song Miao, don't tell me I used it wrongly?"

Song Miao did not understand either. "Perhaps. I have never used such an appliance either."

Zu Wen had even gotten addicted to playing with it. "Let's look for other stuff to test it out!"

"Look around and see if there is anything else."

"Eh, there are fish here!"

Outside, Fang Zhao, who was sitting on a box in the warehouse, let out a deep sigh. He felt like hitting someone.

Zuo Yu who was guarding Fang Zhao diligently, also could not help but cast a few curious glances over. He was also very curious toward the things from the Old Era. Other than the game letting everyone experience the background of the Period of Destruction, it also satiated the curiosity everyone had of the Old Era.

Therefore, now that Zuo Yu heard the activity over that side, there was a slight itch in his heart.

"Arghh!" A loud shout broke the cheerful atmosphere in the kitchen.

"F*ck me! Your father got bitten by a fish!" Zu Wen shouted.

A series of banging sounds were heard from the back of the kitchen.

"Enough, Pang Pusong, it's no longer moving."

"It's dead?"

"Did you get any experience points?"

"I gained 0.5 points."

The others felt a little sorry when they heard this. "Only 0.5 points?"

"I'm finished," Zu Wen wailed.

The few of them once again came in front of Fang Zhao. The one making the decisions in the team was still Fang Zhao. If anything happened, they made sure to inform him first.

Rodney briefly explained what had happened to Fang Zhao.

It turned out that, as Zu Wen had been searching for something else to play with, he'd seen a bucket in the corner that was covered. Expecting something inside, he had warily removed the lid and found the bucket filled with water, with two palm-sized fish inside. One was floating upside down, not moving at all—evidently, it was dead. The other was swimming about feebly. Just at the moment when Zu Wen let his guard down, the fish that originally looked weak suddenly leaped out of the bucket and bit Zu Wen. It happened so quickly that Zu Wen couldn't avoid it and got a little cut on his hand.

The fish that had leapt out was flopping around on the floor. Pang Pusong had taken an iron rod behind the kitchen door and bludgeoned that fish to death, receiving 0.5 experience points. As for Zu Wen, who had received the cut, he realized that on his status was displayed "infected." He wanted to cry immediately but was unable to do so.

As time passed, his "infected" value would keep increasing. When it reached a certain critical point, he would lose control of himself and, just like those infected organisms, would attack his own teammates.

"You guys don't have to worry. I will settle this myself!" Zu Wen expertly took out his gun and pointed it at his own head. "Comrades! Wait for me. In half an hour's time, I will surely bring back some strategies, believe me!"

Zu Wen was regretful. He had been too careless just now. He had never expected this to be more treacherous and cunning than all the games he had ever played. A bite from an unremarkable fish could actually force him to disconnect, that was so humiliating!

Bang!

A gunshot rang out.

Zu Wen disappeared from his spot.

Fang Zhao closed his eyes and did not say anything. Seeing Fang Zhao not looking so good, the others did not utter a single word.

"You guys..." Fang Zhao opened his eyes.

"Boss, what are your orders?" The few of them were more well-behaved now. They realized that the few of them had been too foolish a while ago and had probably made their boss unhappy.

"Log off and wait," Fang Zhao said.

"..." The few of them looked over at Fang Zhao, trying to determine whether he was joking.

"Log off and cool your heads for half an hour before coming back."

"...Oh."

This was to let them go offline and reflect, just like facing the wall after doing something wrong.

As a few members exchanged glances, Rodney hesitantly asked Fang Zhao, "Boss, when we are gone, what will happen to you?"

"Zuo Yu is here."

Since Fang Zhao had already given them instructions, it was best to obediently head offline and not anger their boss any further, in case he deducted their wages. After all, Fang Zhao only wanted them to disconnect and reflect on their actions. In half an hour, they could log back in with Zu Wen, perhaps even with the latest strategies to share with everyone.

"Pang Pusong," Fang Zhao called out, "pass me the iron rod."

"...Oh, sure!" Pang Pusong respectfully handed over the iron rod and compliantly disconnected. He had always listened to Fang Zhao.

After the others had also disconnected, only Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu were left in the warehouse.

Zuo Yu thought for a bit and felt he needed to say something. "We are not a professional team, after all, and are just having fun. The others are just too curious; you don't have to be frustrated over such small matters."

"I know."

As Fang Zhao did not seem to want to chat, Zuo Yu did not continue. He just did not understand why Fang Zhao still continued sitting there, not going off to look for food or other stuff?

Suddenly, Zuo Yu's expression changed and he faced a certain direction. He could hear the sounds of gunshots, and there were continuously firing. The sounds did not seem close, but they did not seem especially far either. Most likely, some players in the vicinity had run into a situation.

Had something come along?

He tilted his head, intending to advise Fang Zhao to find a place to hide, but he saw that Fang Zhao's hand that was gripping the iron rod was trembling.

Is this fear? Zuo Yu snickered mentally. Fang Zhao was only 20-plus, and his gaming history was also lesser than most. He had acted so impressively a while ago, but now he exposed his true nature? Actually admitting he was afraid was no big deal; it would not displace his position as the department's boss. Such determination to save his own face!

Could it be that Fang Zhao had known he would be frightened and thus took advantage of Zu Wen's situation to get rid of the others and try and adapt by himself?

The more Zuo Yu pondered, the more he felt this was the case.

But some words just had to be said.

"Boss, I hear footsteps approaching and some roaring. It's not just one, and it's not human. It might be a savage beast. Do you want to head to the kitchen and hide?"

"No need."

"Don't worry boss, I'm here. Later on, you just have to stay behind my back. If the situation doesn't look too good, you disconnect first."

Zuo Yu did not hear Fang Zhao's answer, but he did not continue asking. He attentively watched the warehouse's steel door.

With his back to Fang Zhao, Zuo Yu didn't see that, as the footsteps and roars got closer, Fang Zhao's hand that was gripping the iron rod trembled less and less. At the moment when the footsteps stopped outside the steel door, his trembling ceased.

Fang Zhao could hear own heartbeats as though they were drumbeats, and he could hear his blood flowing as if it was a surging river. He was not afraid. Rather, he was fired up.

Perhaps the functions of the 10th gen console were really too good. Even the imitated smells were 70% real.

Everytime he took a breath, he could smell the foul air reeking of blood. It was as if that period from long ago in his memory had all lumped together. All the feelings and sentiments he had suppressed since his rebirth seemed like they had found an exit and were about to erupt.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The figures that had appeared in front of the steel door roared and smashed into the door forcefully. The iron chain that kept the steel door locked kept creaking.

Figures glistening with fresh blood on their bodies could be seen through the slit in the door. Their deep-red eyeballs peeked through the gap at the two men in the warehouse as putrid and thick saliva dripped from the tip of their teeth.

During the beginning of the Period of Destruction, due to the sudden disaster, many species, including humans, had experienced mutations. Regardless of whether they were flying or lived in the water, not a single one had been spared.

The mutations had caused them to lose rationality and had warped their temperaments. Some had gradually died out from the mutations, while others had transformed or evolved from their base state, becoming destructive and stronger savage beasts. These beasts only lived for blood and slaughter and had an intense desire to attack humans or other organisms.

Many organisms that had not mutated experienced massacres. The number of species that became extinct during the Period of Destruction was uncountable. Bones or a hard-to-come-back specimen of an Old Era creature that had managed to survive would be treated as a valuable artifact and be hoarded. Although many species had been resurrected due to genetics technology, specimens from the Old Era had a very high value that would never drop. This was how people in the New Era felt about the Old Era.

Aside from this, specimens from the Period of Destruction were also considered valuable pieces of art. Fang Zhao remembered seeing an auction at the start of the year where a specimen of a creature that had arisen from the initial stages of the Period of Destruction had been sold to the highest bidder, a collector from Muzhou, for \$20 million.

That specimen had been from the initial stages of the Period of Destruction. It had mutated from a dog species and had a bright colored coat. Back then, in order to study the parasitic disease that mutated creatures, they had created a specimen. Following the chaos of war, it had been moved from place to place until the Period of Destruction ended and the New Era was founded. The specimen that was lucky to survive a hundred years preserved in liquid was specially made into a dried-out sample, and shortly after, it was sold off at the auction.

Many people in Yanzhou knew about this. These sorts of specimens always created a buzz on the internet for a period of time. Nobody was interested in the scientific name given by historians but instead remembered the nickname given by netizens—Twenty Million.

Unfortunately, the present that Fiery Bird was going to give everyone was just this.

At this moment, on the first day they logged in, all players would experience being hunted by a colony of Twenty Millions.

Chapter 127

Sorry, Too Immersed in Character

Unlike the gleaming specimens that folks in the New Era were familiar with, the ones in the game restored the beasts' original look and personality. These monsters mutated by canine diseases had blood-colored skin covered with brownish blobs. They flashed their fangs, their teeth buried in bloody gums. Their bloodshot eyes oozed the vicious aura of a killer.

Perhaps someone who saw them for their first time would freeze. Most folks had only come across these beasts in biology textbooks or in less sophisticated games. But for Fang Zhao, it was a case of reactivating dormant memories.

Other than rescue missions and scavenging for food, one of their routines in the Old Era was to proactively hunt down these aggressive beasts that had badly mutated during the apocalypse. Each kill meant one fewer beast to deal with.

The chain wrapped around the metal door hadn't snapped, but the shoddy door itself was about to collapse. Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu could catch a glimpse of the shadows releasing killer vibes through the door gap. All these beasts wanted to do was shred the people in the warehouse to pieces.

Zuo Yu took a deep breath. As an experienced former special forces fighter, he was a bit spooked by the game, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. His body was ready to fight. Now that his boss had decided to stay, all he could do was stand there and brace himself. This was his chance to demonstrate his loyalty.

Bang!

The metal door burst open, falling inward into the warehouse and causing a huge thud that sent the ground shaking. The echo of the crash was equally earth-shattering.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

A rapid succession of seven shots.

The moment the door collapsed, Zuo Yu's gun was wielded to maximum effect.

The three beasts leading the pack were down.

Killing three beasts with seven bullets was a decent performance, but Zuo Yu wasn't happy with his accuracy. By his estimation, taking down three beasts should have required five bullets or less.

Was he rusty from lack of practice? He was a regular at the shooting range and he never stopped gaming. After pondering the matter, Zuo Yu concluded the problem lay in his gun. After all, it was a dated model from the Old Era. It was understandable if it functioned poorly. Right, this antique gun must have affected my accuracy.

But the mutated beasts swarming outside didn't give Zuo Yu much time to think. The group that gathered by the door included six, not just three monsters. And others were catching up after hearing the commotion.

The remaining three beasts rushed in and swerved, hoping to bypass Zuo Yu and attack Fang Zhao directly. That was how the beasts had behaved in real life during the apocalypse as well. Even though they had become crazed and unpredictable as a result of their mutation, the instinct to prey on the weak remained etched in their brains. Had Zuo Yu been alone, they would have focused their attacks on him, but Zuo Yu was accompanied by Fang Zhao, and Zuo Yu just took out three of their own in one go, so they elected to attack the other person in the warehouse first.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Another rapid series of three shots, but this time only one beast was killed. Another wasn't lethally shot, merely taking a tumble before getting up again, as if it didn't feel any pain.

"Boss, be careful!" Zuo Yu started keeping track of his bullet count. He took down one beast with two shots. The other was around the corner, about to bypass him and pounce on Fang Zhao, who was standing behind him. Zuo Yu did not hesitate to pull out a knife Zu Wen had found in the kitchen and had passed on to him when Zu Wen had gone offline. Just as he was about to attack, he could feel the strong current brought about by a passing body, which zipped by like a speeding train.

Fang Zhao lifted the wooden crate he was sitting on and hammered the approaching beast with it.

Crack!

The crate disintegrated from the force of the impact, its wooden planks snapping into pieces. The mutated beast was knocked backward into another beast that had just entered the warehouse.

Fang Zhao took two steps forward, walking past Zuo Yu, and started covering him. A flurry of metal batons resembling an abrupt rainstorm followed, delivering densely packed blows. It was as if Fang Zhao had unleashed a one-man tornado.

Zuo Yu froze as he held up his knife. "..."

Bam! Bam! Slash! Slash!

Echoes from the disintegrated crate still lingered when the sound of thumping flesh traveled to Zuo Yu's ears, followed by the noise of cracking bones and the painful yelps of the mutated beasts.

Zuo Yu's eyes peeled open, as if he had seen something incredible, his eyeballs protruding as if they were about to fall out.

One down, two down...

The approaching beasts were slain by the hurricane-like onslaught of metal rods.

The beasts kept coming, but Fang Zhao was unperturbed. He slashed every approaching monster decisively. His moves seemed instinctual, but every blow was purposeful.

Zuo Yu could hear the sound of the metal rod landing on the beasts's bones and muscles. It resembled rolling thunder, the noise so piercing he didn't know how to respond.

One mutated beast collapsed after being struck, but it didn't die immediately, instead climbing up again after regrouping on the ground. But this time, its bloodthirsty eyes skipped Fang Zhao and zoomed in on Zuo Yu. As it growled and got ready to pounce, someone yanked one of its hind legs. The forceful pull sent the beast flying backward on a trajectory, landing on a silhouette that emerged behind it.

Fang Zhao didn't want to give them time to recover, surging forward to launch another

sustained round of vigorous blows.

Slash! Bam!

The blood-tainted metal rod in Fang Zhao's hand was slightly bent.

In no time, armed with his metal baton, Fang Zhao had taken down five beasts. Still holding his knife, Zuo Yu was dumbfounded, wearing a dazed expression.

Was... was... this his young, artsy boss, who couldn't endure any physical hardship?

Zuo Yu was bellowing inside. Has he f*cking gone beserk? Is he so violent because he's been infected as well?

After taking out five mutated beasts with a single metal rod, Fang Zhao dropped the badly crooked baton and calmly removed his gloves without throwing Zuo Yu so much as a glance. The gloves were cotton gloves he'd found in the crate. Now they were soaked in blood.

After tossing the bloody gloves onto the ground, Fang Zhao pulled out his gun and marched toward the entrance to the warehouse. He lifted his gun, smoke emerging from its barrel.

Bang! Bang!

One bullet hit the neck of a mutated beast, the other piercing one of its bloodshot eyes and landing in its brain. The beast collapsed without a whimper.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Apart from the first beast, which consumed two of his bullets, Fang Zhao took out the four beasts that showed up in front of the warehouse with a bullet each.

Zuo Yu observed Fang Zhao trudging through the cluster of corpses. The peace and calm he exuded was definitely genuine. Even though they were in a game, Zuo Yu could feel the frost-like killer aura that Fang Zhao projected constantly. That, coupled with his accurate shooting, made Zuo Yu wonder: between the two of them, who was the one with special forces training?

Just as Zuo Yu's head was filled with self-doubt, Fang Zhao abruptly turned and looked

at him before taking a quick shot. Fang Zhao's cold stare gave him major chills. It felt as if the hair on his skin had bolted upright. His scalp went numb. The authenticity of the moment made Zuo Yu feel like he was no longer just gaming.

Has he gone so nuts as to kill a teammate?

Just as the thought flashed through Zuo Yu's head, he heard the commotion behind him.

He turned and realized that Fang Zhao wasn't aiming at him but rather at a small mutated beast about half an armlength long that had snuck into the warehouse, unbeknownst to him. The bullet struck its head and it instantly died.

What blew Zuo Yu away wasn't just Fang Zhao's accuracy but also the decisiveness with which he pulled the trigger, giving no warning whatsoever. The tremendous confidence that backed up such a level of calm—that wasn't something a newbie who had never held a real gun could muster.

Even though advancements in gaming technology meant more realistic simulations, that type of mental strength and aura couldn't have been a function of the game.

Shooting range practice?

No, it had to be more than that.

To call him an athlete was an understatement. Fang Zhao resembled a seasoned assassin.

No other threats popped up for the time being, and no suspicious noises could be heard in the vicinity. The warehouse was quiet again. The mood took a turn for the spooky. Zuo Yu felt like he had been exposed to a bitterly cold winter breeze.

"You..." Zuo Yu realized his lips were quivering. His voice stuttered.

Zuo Yu had so many questions, but when he met Fang Zhao's gaze, he held them in.

He understood that, perhaps, the less information he knew, the better off he was.

Fang Zhao had used Zu Wen's actions as an excuse to get rid of everyone else, not so his staff could calm down, but to avoid scaring the living daylights out of them. But

Zuo Yu had been asked to stay, meaning Fang Zhao didn't want to hide the truth from him. Discretion was a major job requirement for any professional bodyguard. He was also the one who had shadowed his boss the closest and for the longest period of time.

Zuo Yu realized that, from now on, this boss wasn't going to hide anything from him.

"Boss, you were so... courageous and assertive just now." Zuo Yu swapped out "ruthlessly violent" at the last minute.

Fang Zhao glanced at him and said, "Oh, sorry, I was too immersed in character."

"Immersed in character" my ass! Who are you trying to kid?

Zuo Yu managed to spit out a disjointed question with quivering lips. "Boss... I... I... need to piss like a racehorse. Can I go offline to hit the loo?"

"Sure," Fang Zhao paused and added, "When you get offline, tell them to wait another half hour."

"Yes, sir."

This was the most deferential Zuo Yu had been since he'd become Fang Zhao's bodyguard.

The 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower, the virtual projects department.

After Zuo Yu went offline, he emerged from the gaming cabin. The room also housed the gaming cabins of his other colleagues. It was cleared out and dedicated to gaming purposes. Now it was home to everyone's consoles—every single one of them a Fiery Bird ninth generation upgrade, including Zuo Yu's. This was what so many of their Silver Wing colleagues envied about the virtual projects department—unlimited funds and freedom.

Zuo Yu had been practically living at the office, just like everyone else.

No one else was in the room. Zuo Yu took a deep breath, wiped the sweat on his forehead, and left the room wearing a befuddled expression. He shook his head and sighed.

It was the weekend, but Zu Wen, Rodney, and others were hanging out at the office to

save on home electricity and broadband bills. When Zuo Yu showed up, Zu Wen and company were in the middle of a discussion.

"Oh, Zuo Yu, you're dead too? Where's boss?" Zu Wen asked with a confused look.

"Bullshit. I'm still alive. I just needed to piss. As for boss... boss is doing just fine." Zuo Yu put special emphasis on the last two words.

The others didn't make much of his tone of voice. Rodney was curious about his sweating. "How come you're sweating so much? Is it really hot?"

"None of your bloody business." Zuo Yu didn't want to reveal the true source of his panic—Fang Zhao. He remembered Fang Zhao's instructions and added, "Boss wants you to cool down for another half an hour."

Few of his colleagues were around, so Zuo Yu also sent a message to their chat group asking them to go back online half an hour later.

"Why? Did you piss boss off again and we're collateral damage?" Zu Wen asked.

"Screw you. Are we in a position to question boss's intentions? Just follow orders. If you really want to know, you can ask him yourself when you get back online."

"I'm no idiot." Zu Wen was still ruminating over the fact that he'd lost a life over a small fish and incurred Fang Zhao's wrath once already. He wasn't stupid enough to confront his boss. "I better do some more research. There aren't too many tips online today."

Gaming teams known for posting helpful strategies had only offered crumbs so far. All they did was remind gamers to keep quiet so as not to spur the already sickly beasts into an even more crazed state. Zu Wen had gotten bit probably because he'd been too talkative in the kitchen, sending the sickly fish into action. Other players who'd died after being bitten had similar stories. Zu Wen had been bitten by a fish. Others had been bitten by mice, unknown insects, and so on. The price of carelessness was a quick death.

"If only I had followed boss's instructions in earnest," Zu Wen sighed. "Being sidelined for an hour is pure torture."

Zuo Yu's mouth kept twitching. He wanted to say something, but he didn't know where to start. He couldn't tell them the real reason Fang Zhao had sent them away.

Shaking his head, Zuo Yu headed to the pantry, where he calmed himself with a glass of water. He sat down and fell into deep thought.

People always said that virtual worlds are a window into a person's soul. Was Fang Zhao's behavior in the game his true character?

Up until now, Zuo Yu had pigeonholed Fang Zhao as an artsy young man, but after today, he knew there was much more to his boss than met the eye.

He thought back to the time he'd been traveling with Fang Zhao to gather material for his new piece, when the two of them had been zeroed in on by security guards at every cemetery they'd visited. Who had they been singling out?

Was it him?

No.

It was Fang Zhao.

Back then, Zuo Yu had thought the artist Fang Zhao was giving off a neurotic vibe that drew the attention of the guards. Now it seemed like the guards who had the best nose for dangerous individuals had been spot on.

He also remembered all the posturing and bragging he'd done in front of Fang Zhao and wanted to slap himself on the face.

How stupid he was!

When Zu Wen entered the pantry to pour himself a cup of tea, he saw Zuo Yu curled up on the sofa, mumbling, "I was wrong. I was so wrong..."

"Hey, brother! What's wrong?" Zu Wen asked.

"You don't get it. As a professional bodyguard, I'm under a lot of pressure."

Chapter 128

God Knows What We Just Experienced

After Zuo Yu went offline, Fang Zhao dragged a wooden crate over and sat quietly for a minute, at the same time exchanging his credits for a number of bullets.

What made it better than reality was that everyone in the game had a "bag," and a few small items could be placed inside, including ammunition and food.

Fang Zhao gave a silent laugh.

If only reality was similar to the game. Back then, there would not have been so many casualties.

The game was but a game, not the actual period.

Fang Zhao knew that this was not the world he'd once had, it was just a virtual and incomplete replica. Even though the context was just a game, it was too realistic. The surroundings, even the scents in the air, all of it stirred up Fang Zhao's pent-up emotions that he had suppressed for so long. It was as if, in the depths of his soul, a storm had started to rage.

Not being able to go back to that period, and not wanting to go back—normal people do not want to suffer. He had spent nearly a century fighting for this. Other people did not even get such a chance; of course he had to enjoy it well. This was the world that he and countless others had spent a century's worth of time and lives to trade for.

Fang Zhao did not miss that period, but he cherished the people during that period.

Deep breaths, as if expelling out all the melancholy in his heart.

"That's right, I have to enjoy it well."

But before that, he had to find a way to vent all his long-suppressed tendencies and emotions. Even if he acted similarly to others in the New Era, his soul was mainly filled with memories of those 100 years of hell. Even though he had used all sorts of

methods to suppress them, it was impossible to keep doing so. Now he had found a way to vent his feelings; wasn't this what he'd been waiting for all along?

Perhaps other people might use this game as a form of escape or play it for entertainment, but Fang Zhao was different.

What had happened previously was just a warm-up. The restlessness and agitation had awoken, and Fang Zhao could not just stop now. By chance, Zuo Yu was no longer here.

His eyes were radiating with excitement from all the restlessness within his soul. However, in the blink of an eye, it was restrained; Fang Zhao seemed to entirely blend into the warehouse—even his odor fit in his surroundings.

Other than the warehouse and the kitchen at the back, there were many other rooms on top, probably the dormitories of workers. Fang Zhao never ever let even the tiniest of sounds slip by. He could distinguish every single note in a song, and similarly, he could distinguish the different noises from the sound of activity.

There were people in the room upstairs, yet they also could not be considered people, because they had since deviated from the category of normal human beings. During the Period of Destruction, these "people" were the same as those mutated beasts. They had lost all rationality they'd once had and were now bloodthirsty and violent. They would maintain this sort of temperament till their bodies were incapacitated and they died; there was no way to cure them.

Since there were infected people, there would naturally be people who were fortunate enough to survive. And these people who were lucky enough to survive developed antibodies and became resistant to being infected by that sort of rabid virus. This antibodies were also found in people of the New Era. With these antibodies and methods in the medical field to defend against it, such mortal threats could no longer make a comeback.

But during the Period of Destruction, these sorts of infected people had changed so much that it was necessary to kill them.

A metallic light flashed, and the infected person with sinister red eyes fell to the floor as a wound appeared on its neck. Another lightning quick stab severed its brain stem, interrupting all communication between the brain and the rest of the body. If this had

been a normal person, he would have died immediately from this. These infected humans did not die straight away, but they were no longer able to make any movements or attack and could only lie there waiting to die. It was this way in the game, just as it had been back during the Period of Destruction.

Fang Zhao cleared each room upstairs one by one, and then he exited the warehouse. He had cleared it to give Zu Wen and the others a safer place. When they returned, they would not need to continue clearing the rooms on top.

As to what came after that—it was time for Fang Zhao's own entertainment.

Infected human, kill!

Mutated beast, kill!

Fang Zhao was like a leopard in a grassland, lying in ambush for his prey. Regardless of whether it was the way his body moved, the way he concealed himself, or the way he shot his targets accurately and rapidly, if what he did was placed in textbooks, people would surely think it was exaggerated. Not just Zuo Yu, who'd come from the special forces, even many other soldiers with vast experience might not even have been capable of doing the same.

The bullets that he had exchanged for were used up at an astonishing rate, but although Fang Zhao had exchanged credits for a lot of bullets, his credits kept a large margin and kept increasing more than the amount he exchanged them for. Fang Zhao maintained a high efficiency as he swept through, mostly taking one shot to kill a target. With Fang Zhao in this sort of condition, other than his credits, his experience points rose at an alarming rate.

+10

+10

+20

+1

+5

+10

+1

+30

...

Killing different targets gave a different amount of experience points. However, Fang Zhao did not take notice of his own experience points increasing. All he wanted to do now was some carefree killing, to release some of his long-suppressed emotions. And compared to experience points, he cared more about credits, because in this game, credits could be used to exchange for items.

"Battle of the Century" map, Yanzhou District 79 South, in a seven-floor housing block.

Two players were taking refuge in a room on the second floor. From the window, they could see two nearby mutated beasts.

A person urged his companion, "Hurry, hurry, hurry! Shoot it!"

"Wait a while more, it's out of my firing range. It's still too far, I'm not wasting bullets."

"It's getting nearer, it has discovered us!"

"Don't be so anxious!"

"How can I not be anxious? It's already so close! We will get bitten to death!"

"Don't rush me, I know!"

"They are going to jump! Quick, fire!"

"I know! Anytime now..."

Bang! Bang!

Two mutated beasts that were rushing toward the second floor fell according to the ringing of gunshots, and they did not get back up.

"..."

After a few seconds of silence.

"The two shots were not taken by you?"

"Obviously, you can tell by listening!"

One of them carefully stuck his head out and scanned one round in all directions. Not seeing anyone, he angrily punched the wall.

"We have been KS-ed 1 !"

"I told you to hurry and fire. Look, just a step slower and we got KS-ed."

"Shut up!"

District 79 South, inside a certain office building.

A silhouette noiselessly arrived at his own sniping spot and took out his sniper rifle, which he had used credits to exchanged for. Supporting the rifle on his shoulder, his icy cold stare looked through the scope at the figures that were frantically running about on the street below, his finger resting on the trigger.

In the opposite building, there had been a group who were probably university students. Although they'd had numbers, they'd lacked individual ability and experience. When they'd come up and found themselves being surrounded by so many 20 Millions, they'd panicked and fired in a flurry. They had managed to kill a few, but their party numbers dwindled even faster, probably getting killed or disconnecting after running out of ammo. Now, there were no longer many gunshots.

He had taken advantage of the chaos just now and gotten a few kills, and after that, he'd exchanged his credits for a sniper rifle. He loved the feeling of hunting prey. Every time blood exploded from the body of the prey, it would get his own blood racing. However, as a sniper who liked shooting games, he still had the basic essentials: adjusting his temperament, calming down as he prepared to lock on to his target. Imagining blood spurting out from his prey brought a vicious smile to his face, but his face became rigid in the next moment.

A gun shot rang out, and the prey he was locked onto fell, no longer moving.

He had not fired; someone had stolen his prey from under his nose.

Cursing under his breath, he did not dawdle and continued to take aim at his next target. Just as he was about to pull the trigger, his prey fell again.

"F*ck!"

The third, fourth, fifth...

Through his scope, he watched as each 20 Million fell as gunshots rang out—one shot one kill!

The anger of his prey being stolen gradually subsided and was replaced by an icy chill. Even the hairs on his body were standing.

This was a one-sided massacre!

Who was it?

Definitely not the bunch of stupid students opposite him.

Judging from the sounds of the gunshots, the other party's position was constantly changing, but he simply could not find the person responsible. Only once through his scope did he catch a flicker of a human shadow, but only just that once. After that, even when looking in the direction of the gunshot, there were no traces of anyone. This continued until the gunshots ceased. Now, in his field of vision, not a single mutated beast was left standing.

G*ddamn it!

South District 79, in the hall of a certain hotel.

"Faster, faster, faster! Pay attention to the sides!"

"Leave it to me."

"Watch the southwest!"

"I'm guarding!"

After a series of concentrated gunshots, there was no longer any threat from outside.

The few of them heaved a sigh of relief and, soon after, flashed happy grins. They impatiently checked their own experience points and credits.

"No idea how many we shot dead."

"I think I killed at least a minimum of two!"

"I definitely hit one, quite a number of them fell just now."

"Me too!"

The few of them happily went to check their statuses.

Experience points: 0

"..."

"How am I also a 0? I shot over ten times and didn't hit anything?" Puzzled, he continued, "Then who killed those outside?"

Going one round and checking, of the over 10 people here, only two of them had gotten a pathetic 10–20 credits. The others of the group all had 0 experience points and credits from that battle.

"The f*ck! What actually happened?!"

Fiery Bird's "Battle of the Century" official website, in the individual districts forum.

"Any friends here from District 79? I logged off for a bit to use the toilet, and when I logged back own, my surroundings were full of mutated beast corpses! Can anyone tell me what happened?!"

"From District 79 too, I am equally clueless, the number of mutated beast we encountered have drastically declined. In the last half an hour, we have only run into a few. Did Fiery Bird make any changes? This sucks!"

"I'm from District 79, everything is normal here."

"District 79 here, normal. It is rumored that, under normal circumstances, the rate of encountering mutated beast is according to the size of your team. The larger your

team, the more beasts you encounter. After all, we are also encountering quite a number. You probably have less people over there, that's why."

"No! District 79 South Street, it seems like someone had swept through. There is a significant drop in the larger mutated beasts. What is most frightening is that the majority have been shot dead with one bullet! Is there an expert in District 79?"

"Also from District 79 South. Your father saved up many credits to exchange for a large rifle. After lying in wait for half an hour, one finally came, but before I could pull the trigger, it was KS-ed!"

"District 79 South too, same situation! Is there an e-sports club member in our district? Anyone knows?"

"Also District 79..."

"Same..."

The people from district 79 that had disconnected realized that many others had experienced similar situations. Furthermore, they were all from District 79's south area. They had saved up their credits and energy to go all out but suddenly realizing that there were a lack of chances for them to use their weapons. In less than an hour, a large portion had been swept away!

Nobody knew who had shot them all; there was not even a trace of his shadow!

People who'd disconnected due to various reasons discussed it on the forums. In Yanzhou's main forum, the popular posts were dominated by the well-known e-sports clubs. Those professional clubs had a formidable lineup and their own tactics. Their activity was not subtle, and whichever district they were at, everyone would know. However, there were no e-sports clubs in District 79.

Although there were people discussing the affairs of District 79, compared to the districts that the e-sports clubs occupied, there was less popularity. But as more and more people took part in the discussion, its popularity would rise. Although it still not gain more hype than those clubs, the post would not be crowded out that quickly.

As more people joined the discussion, it even attracted many people from other districts who were curious about the hype.

"What's happening in District 79?"

"God knows what we just experienced!"

Chapter 129

SilverWing50PolarLight

"Battle of the Century" had been officially been released for 50 minutes.

In the Yanzhou region, the entire District 79 South's mutated beast count kept decreasing at an alarming rate. And people on the streets of District 79 South only heard gunshots and mutated beasts that collapsed following these gunshots. Not just the beast getting shot, what was even more intriguing was that no one was able to find the person responsible. Nobody was clear on how many members were in that mysterious party!

Even if someone saw something, it was only a flickering shadow. There was just no time to catch his appearance or any special characteristics, and it was just impossible to guess who this person was.

It was simply an extermination!

However, throughout the whole Yanzhou region, although the situation at District 79 South attracted attention, compared to other happenings, it was but a small ripple.

All the big media firms were fighting to report on the activities of the e-sports clubs of Yanzhou and trying to guess which names from which e-sports clubs would appear on the leaderboards.

The globally acclaimed online gaming community, Rising Dragon, had long started a vote to guess which e-sports athletes would place themselves at the top of the leaderboards after the first hour for this grand occasion that happened once every 10 years. The fans of each and every e-sports club were making a lot of noise over this.

Fiery Bird's public website had an experience points ranking, and each continent's warzone had its own charts. There were team leaderboards as well as individual leaderboards, and they were refreshed every hour. These leaderboards were what the e-sports clubs of every continent specifically paid attention too. That ranking was the most accepted way of showing their power and strength. The closer to the top they were, the more attention they would receive. In a business aspect, their value would

rise even higher.

Yanzhou's popular entertainment program "Prairie Fire" had already invited a few retired e-sports stars to their broadcasting studio and were waiting for the leaderboards to display the results before talking about it.

Countless more people were keeping their eyes peeled on Fiery Bird's public website.

Yanzhou's Big Five e-sports clubs had dominated the top five spots for leaderboards for years on end. Other e-sports clubs had been gearing themselves up for this, hoping to squeeze into the front.

It was nearing an hour since the start of the game. Many eyes were on the leaderboards that were going to be refreshed for the first time.

Silver Wing gaming department.

Department manager Wayne looked at the five members in the gaming room and stepped outside to pour himself a glass of water. As the department's person-in-charge, Wayne had not been sleeping well the past few days. He had bags under his eyes and a slight stubble.

This time he had signed five members. Three held dual professions, being actors as well as e-sports athletes. As for the other two, one was a university student who had just signed a contract, and the other had been poached over from another studio at a high price. Besides that, to make it look better, he had collaborated with another private studio and let the five members he'd signed form a team with members of that studio and enter the game together. The team's name was "Lurkers," and for the time being, they had not publicly announced themselves. Previously, news on them had adopted a mysterious stance.

The harder one bragged before a competition, the harder the face smacking after. Therefore, other than the people in the department, other people did not know what Silver Wing's team was called this time around, their prowess, or who their members were.

Silver Wing also invested in games, but compared to Fiery Bird, what they did could only be considered small-scale. And most of the time, they chose to collaborate with other game companies rather than develop their own. Silver Wing was very much like other entertainment companies in the New Era that had the same way of thinking. As

long as it was connected to entertainment and money could be made, they would dabble in it.

Wayne's gaming department's position could not be compared to the film and music departments, but it was more important compared to other small projects. In the past, the virtual projects department had also been below them, but now, as they watched the virtual projects department rise in stature, their gaming department could not help but feel like they were being crowded out. This time around, Wayne intended to use "Battle of the Century" as the wind in their sails and see if he could propel his department up the popularity ladder.

Forget the individual leaderboards—they were amateurs, after all, and had no way of competing with the professional e-sports athletes of business-minded e-sports clubs. When it came to building a star, they would not be able to match up. However, for the team ranking, Wayne believed that, if they could squeeze into the top 50, at least he could be held accountable to his superiors. That would at least give the company some prestige. They might not be a professional e-sports club, but they were still a very reputable entertainment company. Since they had chosen to have a hand in this, the result couldn't be too unsightly.

Competition in gaming was too intense, even more intense than the competition that film and music had. Silver Wing's core was still on film and the performing arts; as long as their gaming side could get by, that was good enough. Top 50 was the target set by the superiors. If they could squeeze into the top 30, Wayne could sleep and wake up smiling.

However, in the first hour, Wayne did not have any hopes of obtaining a good result, all professionals in these industries knew that the first hour was the best for sweeping up points when a lot of newbies were still adapting. At the point where everything was still hazy was the best time to rack up points! When all these people got the hang of things and all sorts of tactics emerged and when all the private studios started purchasing equipment, at that time, it would not be so easy to sweep up points.

Therefore, the professional e-sports clubs would spend the first hour accumulating points. They would kill whatever was there to be killed and get as much experience as they possibly could. After all, these were all business-minded clubs, not amateur teams that played for fun. Every step they took was in the direction of receiving the most benefits. So many companies waited just to use this wave to manufacture a star.

Experience points could show the strength of an individual or a team. Currently, one team could only have a maximum of 20 members. To expand, the total experience points of the team had to increase. But even if there was a limit for members, there was still coordination. Many e-sports clubs' 2nd teams, 3rd teams, and even reserve players would assist the main team and collect even more points to rise up the leaderboards.

Just like Silver Wing's side, other than the five that had signed contracts, there was still a private studio with the purpose of giving points and helping raise the total points of the team. As long as these five rised up, Wayne would have accomplished his goal of producing stars and could use this to hype them up.

However, at the same time, Wayne would not let the chance of admitting newcomers slip by.

Wayne rubbed his tired eyes and urged his subordinates, "Watch carefully, see if there are any potential talents that do not have contracts. Hurry up and sign them up!"

This was not just limited to Silver Wing's side. Silver Wing's old rivals, Neon Culture and Tongshan True Entertainment, had the same thoughts. Many e-sports clubs and professional people in the industry were paying attention. There could never be too much talent. Whether they could be controlled or used, that would only be decided after they were first signed. Even wild mushrooms growing outside one's home could not be given up to their competitors.

There were also players that had their own dreams of stardom and planned to amaze the world with a single feat and soar into the sky in one leap. Even if they lived in some remote area and were without wealth or a good family background, it did not matter. As long as one's name appeared on the leaderboards, there was no need to worry about being found—becoming an overnight celebrity was not just a dream, the path to success was right in front of their eyes!

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 55 minutes.

Transcendental, Big Dipper, HWR, BOOM, 2S, and other e-sports clubs were already waiting.

At 2S e-sports club.

"Are the drafts ready?"

"All prepared and ready to go."

Their e-sports club had prepared drafts to post on their websites after the leaderboards were refreshed after the first hour. Written drafts for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th place had all be prepared so they could react to any position.

As for places after 5th?

Was it possible?!

"I heard the team's total points have crossed the 10,000 mark. Xie He alone has broken 2,000!"

Hearing this, everyone looked relaxed for a moment but quickly calmed down, nervously anticipating as they counted the minutes and seconds as they passed, their eyes on the blank leaderboard. Whether they could have a good beginning for both leaderboards, they would have to wait and see when it refreshed.

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 59:30.

Many people who had gone offline stopped whatever they were doing. Fans that had previously been quarreling in full swing also had a temporary ceasefire as they stared at their screens, counting down the seconds.

0:59:58

0:59:59

1:00:00!

Fiery Bird's website automatically refreshed.

Yanzhou region leaderboard, individual experience ranking. The names on it were ranked in sequence, and behind every ID was the amount of experience points followed by the team the player belonged to.

1. AliveAfter500Years—5267.3—Silver Wing50PolarLight

2. Xie He—2683.1—2S

3. Bai Jiang—2592.4—BOOM

4. Yi Yuan—2546.7—Big Dipper

5. Jess—2458.5—HWR

6. Kong Tianhan—2306.2—Transcendental

...

When they saw the leaderboard for the first time, many e-sports club offices fell silent.

Staring at the screens, the muscles on their faces seemed to spasm as their lips twitched, but they were unable to make any sounds. It was as if someone was forcefully choking them.

"This is impossible!" A 2S analyst's face had become pale, the finger pointing at the screen trembling violently.

As an analyst, he knew the process of how the team members collected experience points, and whether it was Xie He or the other first-rate members he was familiar with, the points had mostly started racking up toward the last half hour. At that time, there had been assistance from the other supporting teams. They had exchanged their credits for equipment to be given to the members of the main team and had people in charge of drawing the beasts over. Especially the last 10 minutes of the first hour, which consisted of wielding the equipment and spraying bullets! That was the real sweeping operation that had cost a lot of capital!

The other e-sports clubs also had similar tactics, so everyone's points were rather close, at most having a 200–300 point gap. But what the h*ll was with 1st place?!

Five thousand points?!

Who the f*ck was this person?

Had the system made an error?!

Checking the global leaderboard, amongst the top ten, there were only eight that surpassed 3000 points—two from Huangzhou, two from Rongzhou, and one each from Xizhou, Tongzhou and Mazhou. Aside from these seven was the one who

occupied the throne of first place, Yanzhou's AliveAfter500Years. This unfamiliar ID had appeared in the public view for the first time and had left the 2nd-place player from Mazhou in the dust; a world champion and gold medalist in shooting was 1700 points behind!

Taking a look at the team he originated from, SilverWing50PolarLight? Where had it popped up from? It had never been heard of before!

But as they checked out the team rankings, SilverWing50PolarLight could not be found in the top 100 of the global team leaderboard. On Yanzhou's team leaderboard, it was only placed at 28. The total accumulated points were actually only 5350.4!

That meant to say, this prodigy had accounted for 98% of his team's points!

Was it possible?

Definitely not!

"Shady activities! One look and you can tell it has a business organization written over over it! Surely they threw money to hire a pro!"

"SilverWing50PolarLight? A Silver Wing team? The f*ck, Silver Wing actually kept silent and made such a bold move!"

"Tracherous! No joke, this is extremely crafty!"

"That's why, money is shameless!"

"Any experts around? Please explain what methods they used to achieve such high points."

"I'm not listening! In any case, they definitely used some underhanded methods."

At the same time, Silver Wing's gaming department was equally at a loss.

Wayne stared at the refreshed leaderboard dumbfounded.

A worker beside him carefully approached and asked Wayne with a stutter, "Boss, is this... our company?"

"It... is?"

Chapter 130

You Guys Are Up To Something Again

Fans of all the various e-sports clubs were not happy when they saw the Yanzhou leaderboards. Where had this "AliveAfter500Years" come from? To think he had actually trampled over the Big Five?!

On the team ID, the two words "Silver Wing" were too big to ignore. Nobody would believe that Silver Wing had nothing to do with this.

Many people criticized Silver Wing for using tricks, but some felt that Silver Wing had done nothing wrong. So what if they'd used tricks? It was a business-oriented company, after all. Just being interested was unreasonable. Whatever tricks or methods they'd used were for their own benefit. Everyone pulled out their own tricks; it was just a matter of which tricks were better than the rest.

Silver Wing's old rival, Tongshan True Entertainment, was also part of the big three entertainment companies of Yanzhou. The boss of Tongshan, Song Shihua, was ashen faced as he smashed his Old Century porcelain cup, which he had gone through great lengths to get.

"I just knew that they were not so simple!"

Song Shihua paced back and forth in his office, cursing as he walked.

Previously, Silver Wing had made the news, concerning the signing of a few gaming stars, but there had not been any hype and it was shortly squeezed out by news of the professional e-sports clubs. Song Shihua had taken it lightly too and thought that Silver Wing only had this much ability. Silver Wing just had a hand in it, but it nothing too serious. But now, Song Shihua felt like he had been cheated!

Was AliveAfter500Years from the SilverWing50PolarLight team the true strategy employed by Silver Wing?

Using other news before the competition as a smoke screen and not divulging the real and important information before creating a big hoo-ha afterward!

Did this move seem familiar?

Too familiar!

This was the g*damn same move they had pulled out with Polar Light!

Speaking of this, Song Shihua had invested more in the gaming department this time. They had signed with three studios in secret and had poached a few e-sports athletes from e-sports clubs that were not that famous but were not inferior either. Previously, they had also not divulged any information on these, and everything had been conducted in secret. The intention had been to place on the leaderboards and hype it up with some news, create a few stars and earning a considerable sum from the game.

These people also did not disappoint. The highest place member ranked 27th on the Yanzhou individual leaderboard, and the entire team was even higher, ranked at 21st place, missing on narrowly on the top 20 by only a few points. This ranking was considered pretty good. At least compared to before, it could crush Silver Wing and Neon Culture.

But now... what f*cking use did it have!?

Compared to the 5,000 points that 1st place had, it was totally insignificant. Speaking about their own achievements would be treated by others as a joke!

Song Shihua was shaking with anger. He called the staffers in charge of the gaming department and proceeded to rip into them.

"You are all the same gaming department. Why is Silver Wing's Wayne's gaming department able to unearth such an impressive person; why can they use methods and silently sweep up such high scores. What about you guys? A bunch of trash! Did I invest so much for you all to eat, drink, and be merry? Thank your whole family for me!!"

Not just Song Shihua, many other people felt the same way. The news that SilverWing50PolarLight hogged was just too great to compete against.

"Eh? Polar Light? Could it be linked to Silver Wing's Polar Light project team?"

"Maybe to increase the popularity of Silver Wing's virtual identity, they used a professional team and some unknown methods to create the ID "AliveAfter500Years."

Silver Wing made another star this time! They have come up with a super ID!"

"It makes sense if you think about it. Even the team name was not wasted. Certainly, as a business-minded company, the hand that Silver Wing just played was beautiful. Everyone imagined that the few kids Silver Wing pushed out a while back were the main force. Why did I so naively fall of it?"

"SilverWing50PolarLight, this team name is so obvious, it refers to Polar Light of Silver Wing's virtual project's department, who was born on the 50th floor."

"Indeed, I heard a rumor last month that Fiery Bird would cancel endorsement deals being just limited to virtual idols. Many people still thought that Silver Wing's Polar Light would lose out big time. Once Fiery Bird revoked the restrictions for virtual idols only, there would be no guarantees that Polar Light would retain its status as a spokesperson. Never did I expect that Silver Wing would play their own hand! That team name is shining and telling everyone they will not let go of the endorsement deal. Impressive! I just have no either where on earth they got this god who can accumulate 5,000 points in an hour."

"To think they could actually find a way to protect their endorsement condition and create such a super ID and create a star, much respect!"

The multitude of online audiences who felt that they had uncovered the truth fell over one another to air their views.

The Polar Light project team that was under scrutiny: "..."

"What happened?" Zu Wen was puzzled.

"Am I dreaming?" Rodney had a dazed look in his eyes.

"What they say makes a lot of sense, but why don't I understand anything?" Fu Yingtian's two eyes were fixed on the screen.

"Does that mean us? Does our company have any other virtual projects department?" Zhang Yu flipped through information of all the company's various departments.

As they spoke, Zu Wen and the others' communication devices started ringing frantically.

Some were from their own friends and family, and others were from staff of other departments within Silver Win. But none of them dared to answer the calls.

Inside the virtual project department's group chat, Zhu Zhen, who was the deputy but had not participated in the game, passed on Duan Qianji's orders: from now on, all staff of the virtual projects department were to enter an information embargo and not divulge any information pertaining to the game! As for when the embargo would be lifted, wait for further instructions.

Silver Wing gaming department.

Wayne looked at the name "SilverWing50PolarLight" that seemed like coordinates as his expression kept fluctuating, following which he abruptly stood up with such force that the chair being dragged along the floor created a shrill screech.

Wayne had decided to personally head to the 50th floor to ask around and had gotten up to leave. As he reached the door, he turned around and scanned the entire gaming department's staff, sternly warning them, "All of you keep your mouths shut! If I found out anybody leaked information, they will be severely dealt with!"

When Wayne reached the 50th floor, the doors of the 50th floor were sealed shut. Many people were gathered outside, probably wanting to find out more. Although it was a weekend, working overtime in an entertainment company was very common, and many people were still here. However, after being berated by the various department heads, they left.

Wayne had just stepped out from the elevator when he received a call from Duan Qianji.

"Director Duan, yes, yes, I am now outside the virtual project department... Okay, I understand, got it..."

When Wayne entered the virtual project's department, he saw the deputy manager assigned by Duan Qianji, Zhu Zhen, as well as Zu Wen and the others, all sitting in the hall.

Zu Wen was an older staffer, and Wayne was more familiar with him. He also reckoned that Zhu Zhen did not understand the matter, so he directly asked Zu Wen.

"Is SilverWing50PolarLight your department's team?"

Zu Wen spoke softly. "Yeah, I was the one who came up with the team name. Back when we wanted a team name, Boss did not say anything, so I took up the responsibility. Since we were operating together as an entire virtual projects department, I figured we might as well use a name that was like coordinates, Silver Wing (Company) 50 (Floor) Polar Light (The project team's core members)."

Wayne watched Zu Wen, his face constantly changing shapes. His mouth kept opening and shutting, but he could not bring himself to say anything. Taking a deep breath, he urgently asked, "You guys... you guys are up to something again! Who is "AliveAfter500Years?"

"That's our boss."

"Fang Zhao?!" Wayne's expression was very obvious; it meant " Are you kidding me?!"

Zu Wen had the same complicated expression on his face. "It's true! It's even more real than the 5,000 points!"

Wayne glanced at the others. Rodney and the rest were all nodding their heads.

"Considering Fang Zhao's type..."

Considering Fang Zhao's type?

He could not continue saying the rest, Wayne really could not see that Fang Zhao had this sort of capability. Wasn't he a composer? Oh, he also held the concurrent post of producer of the virtual project team. But if he could play games this well, why would he even be a producer?!

Zuo Yu, who was sitting at the side, shot a glance at Wayne who was still in shock before lowering his gaze and not speaking.

"Where is your boss?" Wayne asked.

"Boss is at home. It's the weekend, he didn't come today."

"I called him but there was no answer."

"Boss might not have logged off yet."

"Why did you all log off?" Wayne wanted to clear the doubts in his heart.

Zu Wen pursed his lips. "Brother Wayne, you might not believe it, but barely two minutes since we entered, I got bitten by a fish worth 0.5 experience points and was forced to disconnect."

"Then why did you not log back on?"

"Boss didn't allow it. I had to face the wall and reflect on my actions."

"What about the others?" Wayne was unwilling to give up.

"The others also had to face the wall and reflect."

Wayne: "..."

"That means to say, you people have absolutely no idea how Fang Zhao managed to gather 5,000 points?" When Wayne got worked up, his sentences always ended up being high pitched.

Pang Pusong thought to himself, Such a pity he is not a singer.

Faced with Wayne's question, Zu Wen and the other's replies were a series of synchronized nods.

At 2S e-sports club, inside the gaming studio.

Xie He stepped out from the cabin completely drenched in sweat. The energy he had used in the game had been too much. As the captain, he also had to bear a lot of pressure, especially in the last ten minutes, where combat was at a really high standard. He had undoubtedly consumed a lot of physical and mental energy then, and after he came out, his clothes were thoroughly soaked.

After exiting the cabin, Xie He did not bother wiping off his sweat. Waving away the glass of water that an assistant had brought over, he asked, "How did we place?"

The previously clamorous gaming studio quieted down in an instant. The assistant and team doctor that had hurried over did not know what to say at this moment. Everyone had a complicated look on their face.

Noticing everyone's reaction, Xie He felt a lump rise in his throat. Picking up his bracelet that lay beside him, he opened the web page that he had bookmarked.

Before disconnecting, Xie He had felt that his performance in the last hour had been pretty good, a little more outstanding than usual, so perhaps he might even have clinched 1st place. Even if it was not 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or even 4th or 5th were not that hard to accept. But everyone's expressions made him apprehensive; could it be that he had not even made it into the top five? As he clearly saw the placings and point's on the leaderboard, Xie He's hand's trembled. The personal bracelet that was worth a few million fell to the ground.

"How could this be... That's not possible!"

Xie He's chief assistant shook his head helplessly. "It is rumored that Silver Wing's gaming department and virtual projects department collaborated to operate this team. We have no idea who that ID belongs to yet. Silver Wing's side is not leaking much information. Boss reckons that this time around, Silver Wing wants to create a star."

Xie He still could not accept it. "That is impossible!"

2nd place, and he did not feel anything. But the point gap was too big! If the opponent had only had 3,000 points, Xie He would have admitted defeat. But 5,000?

How had he done it?!

Chapter 131

Crazy Killstealing Demon

Whatever other people thought, the game never stopped. The leaderboard had only just refreshed for the first time, and this battle had just started.

Xie He rested for a little while as he recovered some energy and let the team doctor examine him before entering the game cabin once more. He just did not believe that, in the next hour, the opponent would score that high once again! Even if it was a team formed by a cooperative and created under that super ID, there would still be time constraints and limitations, right? Even if it was just playing a game, people would become tired, and energy was limited. Did other teams have the resources, information and allocations that the Big Five had?

On Silver Wing 50th floor, Wayne had not left; he was still waiting there.

Why had he said that the virtual projects department was up to something?

The emergence of an expert had made Wayne very happy. So much so that, every time he looked at the rankings and saw the words "Silver Wing," he felt excited. But for a business-oriented entertainment company, any important matters had to go through the planning team's arrangements before anything could begin. In the past year, Silver Wing had only had two instances that had called for this. The first was the sudden success of Polar Light. Back then, the manner in which Polar Light had appeared had caught many department teams unprepared, and even their spokesperson had only been able to smile; he'd had no answers for the public.

The second instance was this.

When the leaderboard on Fiery Bird's website had been refreshed for the first time, numerous media from the world had focused on the team "SilverWing50PolarLight" and the mysterious player "AliveAfter500Years." Thus, the questioning had started. Silver Wing's chief spokesperson, Lin Dun, once again had no answers for the public and could only smile.

As the manager of the gaming department, Wayne was feeling both scared and

delighted, but he had to consider the company's reputation. The truth could not be publicly announced. If it were leaked, it would be treated as a joke; money invested in the few celebrities of Silver Wing's gaming department could not accomplish anything, but the virtual project department suddenly managed to produce such a hotshot. Now, Silver Wing's public relation team was busy trying to solve this problem.

As for Wayne, he wanted to continue waiting here. He wished to get the latest news firsthand from Zu Wen and the others. Now, the only ones who could contact Fang Zhao were Zu Wen and the others.

Zu Wen and the others had once again entered the game. The one hour that Fang Zhao had instructed them to reflect for had passed, and they had been itching to log on once again.

After logging on, they were once again at that warehouse. The corpses of the few beasts that Zuo Yu had killed before he'd disconnected had already disappeared.

In the game, corpses lasted for a short period before vanishing. As a game, entertainment was still the main point. Players did not play the game to suffer abuse. Games were the point where reality and virtual reality met at the most appropriate point, and that most appropriate point was when players could feel the realistic background and find the joy in games. The piling up of corpses and the rotting smell would definitely be too extreme. Therefore, after a while, corpses of both beasts and humans would disappear.

That was why the game had felt even more empty. During that part of history, there had been too many organisms dying in the initial stages of the Period of Destruction. Entire cities had been enveloped with the smell of rotting flesh; the game had done well to avoid those elements.

"Boss isn't here." Zu Wen looked left and right, not daring to be careless this time. He kept his voice low and carefully scanned his surroundings.

"Boss left a message for us," Rodney said.

In the game, communication was also more convenient. Members of the same team had their own communications platform.

"Go explore freely and adapt."

"He also didn't mention where he is."

Zuo Yu asked in the team chat, "Boss, where are you? Do you need assistance?"

There was no instant reply from Fang Zhao.

"Perhaps he is busy right now," Zuo Yu said.

"Oh, right. Zuo Yu, I didn't ask you back then because Zhu Zhen and Wayne were there, but back when we all disconnected, do you know what happened with Boss?" Zu Wen asked.

Zu Wen felt that, whether it was Zhu Zhen who had been assigned by the top brass or the gaming department's Wayne, they were all considered outsiders. They would only talk about any secrets in private, not mentioning anything in front of these outsiders.

The others also looked toward Zuo Yu suspiciously. Fang Zhao placing first on the leaderboards had shocked them as much as anybody else.

Zuo Yu had no idea how to explain and could only say, "His shooting is very accurate."

Zuo Yu did not mention the part about Fang Zhao brandishing the iron rod and going all out. He was worried it would scare Zu Wen and the others.

"So what do we do now?" Zu Wen was puzzled. "Should we go hunting for beasts?"

"There is probably nothing big here left to kill. We can only pick off a few small ones," Zuo Yu replied.

The place they had been sent to was the city district. Currently, the number of mutated beasts that they could encounter was limited.

Zu Wen was a little gloomy. "Don't tell me there isn't even a rat?"

"There will probably be rats, just much less. History lessons in secondary school mentioned that the rats that lived in the sewers during the Period of Destruction had a greater resistance to the virus, and their immunity toward it was higher. The vaccines were developed through them. On the contrary, it was those pets that were pampered that had a higher rate of infection."

"Then let's go look for some. Let's see what else we can find. Oh, Boss cleared upstairs once. Let's check it out and see if we can find any usable tools."

Zuo Yu was indifferent. Before Fang Zhao replied, he would bring these people to adapt first.

"I can't help but feel like we are holding him back," Zu Wen muttered.

Rodney also agreed. "There is a lot of pressure."

This was the first time they had encountered such a situation.

They had originally decided to cover Fang Zhao in the game, but they had never expected that they would end up being the ones dragging the team down.

Zuo Yu stood at the side expressionless. He thought to himself, You guys have a lot of pressure? Is it more than mine? You only have this pressure in-game, whereas I feel pressured both in-game and in reality!

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 2:00:00.

The leaderboards refreshed for the second time.

Wayne had already situated himself in front of the screen.

After the leaderboards refreshed for the second time, Yanzhou districts two leaderboards did not have much changes in the rankings. The group leader board was still occupied by the Big Five e-sports clubs, and the individual leaderboards also had no changes. However, the gap in points between 1st and 2nd place widened even more.

AliveAfter500Years, who had placed first, had a total of 15,377.6 experience points. Xie He, in 2nd place, only had 6,018.3. The professional marksman from Mazhou, Ma Xier, had 8,195.5.

The difference was hard to believe!

When he saw the leaderboards, Wayne could not help but violently suck in a breath of air. Ecstasy, excitement, and a sense of loss were his main lines of thought. All the while he maintained his gaze on the screen, only his two fists that were clenched on the table

were trembling. He knew that the gaming department's opportunity had come!

The forums started to boil. After the second refresh, many people were terrified.

Previously, they had doubted how he could garner 5,000 points within an hour. In the second hour, the person had straight up racked up 10,000!

Even if the competitor from Mazhou had managed to improve and achieve more than 4,000 points, compared to AliveAfter500Years, he could not keep up at all.

"Is... is... is this really something a human can do?"

"15,000 points! 10,000 in an hour! How did he do that?! Did he go crazy from all the killing?"

"Exactly which district in Yanzhou? I want to go spectate."

There were even people who spent cash to purchase an announcer tool in the Yanzhou Region. Everyone in the districts could hear and see the message he broadcasted: "Anyone knows which district AliveAfter500Years is at? A \$1,000 reward! PM me!"

There was more than one such announcement. It could have been some rich kids, some entertainment media, or a certain e-sports club's personnel using a decoy to obtain information.

But no matter how much these people hollered, no one was able to determine where AliveAfter500Years was for certain. The SilverWing50PolarLight team had restrictions on their public information. Other than the team name, nothing else could be seen.

For players logging into the game, the places they appeared at were randomly allocated by the game.

Zu Wen and the others also never communicated with other people. After being forced offline by a bite, he'd felt too ashamed to mention it to his friends. Besides, the majority of people he knew were online and enthusiastically playing the game. People that were like him, who found themselves in a situation like when he'd been bitten by a fish, were few and far between. The other members of the team were also in similar situations and had not communicated much with their classmates or good friends. This also gave rise to a situation where nobody knew who was in

"SilverWing50PolarLight" or which district they were at.

Analysts had made a list of their guesses. A single player being able to get that many points would have quite some activity, which would not go unnoticed. However, Yanzhou region had 100 little district maps, and there were a number of places with activity. Removing the districts that had the least possibility because they were occupied by the few big e-sports clubs, there were still quite a number of districts that seemed possible. Narrowing it down further, they picked out 7 districts. Some of these districts might also have had professional e-sports clubs there, but who could confirm whether Silver Wing had collaborated to form a team with those smaller e-sports clubs or private teams?

District 79 was among those in the reckoning.

The people of district 79 were depressed. A crazy KSing demon had appeared, or maybe a KSing team. Nobody knew who was responsible, as they could not even catch a glimpse of an ID. It was unclear how many people were involved, as most of the time, they did not even see anyone.

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 4:00:00.

District 79 was swept clean.

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 8:00:00.

District 79 was swept clean.

"Battle of the Century" runtime: 12:00:00.

District 79 was swept clean.

Many people had already somewhat adapted to the game, and their equipment had also improved. Some richer players had purchased equipment from teams that specifically sold in-game equipment. Due to this, the number of people who could KS had decreased, because the standards of everyone had improved.

But nevertheless, AliveAfter500Years continuously placed first on the global leaderboards for 12 hours straight. Every time the leaderboards refreshed, his points would increase by 7,000–10,000 points. Not only were those behind unable to catch up—on the contrary, the point difference kept becoming larger.

The game's players from all regions were unhappy.

"I don't believe this! There has to be a problem somewhere!"

"Hacker!"

"Report him!"

"I strongly request an investigation!"

Fiery Bird had received too many complains today. In the past, no one had dared to question Fiery Bird's games. If there was any hacking software, it would be considered a humiliation to Fiery Bird's technical team, but this time it was different. Not only did Fiery Bird's technical team not get angry, they even released a public statement: "We have investigated thoroughly, and everything is normal."

Chapter 132

Please Let Us Off

Fiery Bird's three words, "Everything is normal," informed everyone that there were no external cheating software or botting 1. All those points had been obtained legitimately by one person.

But at District 79, the core concerns were different. Over at District 79, the players felt like crying. It was not as if all the mutated organisms had been completely cleared. However, as long as there were places with the sound of gunfire, on the streets and other open areas, it seemed as if a sieve had passed through. Anything big or obvious had been cleared, and even lone infected persons were rare.

On the streets, the number of bigger mutated beasts was pathetic, as though cleaners had come and tidied the street. A few snipers lying in wait for prey had waited half an hour, but not a single one had come.

Players who had financial resources but lacked skills knew that there was a limit to their own capabilities. When the game started, they had entered and familiarized themselves with the game and honed their skills. When the time was right, they headed offline to search for equipment sold by those merchant studios and teams. They did not have the strength to fight off these beasts to obtain their credits and experience points to exchange for their own equipment, so they had to resort to these methods.

In 12 hours—half a day—many things had happened.

People selling equipment—teams exchanging credits for equipment or players that picked up the occasional firearm after killing monsters—could quote a price and sell it off to other players. Just fixing a place to make the trade or the buyer could provide coordinates to make the trade.

Special reconnaissance teams had also created their own guidebooks with strategies within that half a day.

When all those players had bought better equipment and read the walkthroughs, they

came online and equipped themselves fully but realized that their surroundings were much emptier.

Not a single monster could be seen. Am I supposed to shoot hairs?! Who knows when the next batch of monsters will appear?

Small monsters? Small monsters are not worth the effort!

Having gone through all that preparation just for this yet being unable to make use of the equipment and tactics, this sullen feeling was rather unbearable!

Yanzhou's Qi'an City, chief editor of Prairie Fire's office.

Qian Cheng looked at his subordinate's reports and pondered for a long time. "Is it District 79?"

The staffer who had come to hand in his investigative report replied, "I'm not sure. There is still no confirmation, and the other districts also do not have a definite situation."

Qian Cheng sat in his office chair. Although he did not have any obvious changes in his expression, the drumming of his fingers on the desk became stronger.

A Prairie Fire staffer angrily said, "They beat around the bush when I ask for their team name, so secretive! Taking advantage of the hype!"

They were pissed. After the possible districts were narrowed down, staff had been assigned to investigate. They had even found a few clubs there and asked, but of the clubs or teams there, some would reply "No," while others would give ambiguous replies but not give a clear position. And immediately after, they would sensationalize the news to attract more attention to themselves. They could not stand these sorts of methods, but they still could not remove the possibility of their identities.

Prior to this, Qian Cheng had thought that, as long as they spotted a team with a player in a killing frenzy while the others assisted and lured monsters in, that would surely be the target they were looking for. But very quickly, SilverWing50PolarLight's other team members' points had started to rise, so now this method could not be used.

After 12 hours had passed, the first position on the "Battle of the Century" global leaderboards remained unchanged. The top ten also did not see many changes.

However, the points gap continued to widen.

As for Fang Zhao, who was being passionately discussed by everyone, he did not bother with the reactions of others. He had blocked the region-wide announcers and was not checking his team chat.

He continuously shot, reloaded, shot, exchanged credits for ammo, shot...

He let go of everything else, just wanting to vent out all his pent-up feelings properly in the game.

When he felt more or less done, only then did Fang Zhao stop. Checking the team chat and seeing nothing important, he left a message that he was safe and sound before logging off.

Fang Zhao dripped with sweat as he separated from the console. His clothes were already soaked, and even without twisting the cloth, sweat was already dripping from it.

His mind and body appeared to be quite exhausted. Unlike other people who considered a rest after each hour of gaming or after a few hours, Fang Zhao had continuously killed for 12 hours straight and had not stopped in-between to rest at all!

This was a thorough venting session!

He was obviously tired, yet a peculiar glint radiated in his eyes.

Pleased!

Relaxed!

That sort of feeling was like heavy rain after a prolonged dust storm—completely refreshing!

Fang Zhao took deep breaths; this was the most relaxed moment he had felt since being reborn! There was no need for BGM in his head to regulate himself, and he did not need to painstakingly suppress it. Those heavily restrained emotions had dissipated somewhat. He was genuinely relaxed, inside and out!

Of course, other than being exhausted, there was hunger.

If not for this body's constitution being strengthened, if it were anyone else, the person would have fainted from exhaustion or hunger already.

In Yanzhou's timezone, it was already 6 p.m. in the evening.

Fang Zhao realized he had received over a hundred calls on his communications device, giving him a scare, as he thought something big had happened, but after checking the messages, he found out the reason. However, he had not paid attention to the leaderboards. Frankly speaking, he did not see it as a big deal and had never wanted to place on the rankings.

All he had wanted to do was vent out his emotions and tendencies that he had kept suppressed for so long. He had never expected it would result in the present situation. Ranked first worldwide?

As he was browsing through, a notification for an incoming call beeped. It was not Duan Qianji but the gaming department manager, Wayne.

Wayne had waited from morning all the way till Fang Zhao had went offline.

Because Fang Zhao had not gone offline all this while, Silver Wing's side was not sure of the situation, had no communication with Fang Zhao, and thus did not dare to release any information. From an outsider's point of view, it apparently seemed like Silver Wing was probably having discussions on how best to deal with the major event, so much so that even some veterans in the entertainment circles could only shake their heads helplessly. "Don't understand and can't guess what Silver Wing is up to."

"Fang Zhao, you finally disconnected!" Wayne's voice was rather excited. When he was excited, his voice became very high pitched.

Fang Zhao shifted the communications further away before replying, "Mhmm, what's up?"

"You do know that you are ranked first on the global leaderboards, right?!"

"I just found out."

Wayne's hearing ability was good. He could hear from Fang Zhao's tone that Fang Zhao

was relaxed and probably feeling happy. He thought that Fang Zhao was feeling this way because he had achieved the top ranking on the global leaderboards.

"Then... what are your plans after this?" Wayne probed carefully.

"Nothing much." Fang Zhao's intention for logging in had been to vent his suppressed emotions. Now that he had achieved his objective, anything else did not matter. How he intended to play in the future depended on his mood.

Wayne clenched his fist tightly, steadied his face, and asked, "Are you interested in working together?"

Wayne explained his intentions. He wanted to use the company's resources, rope Fang Zhao in, and create a superstar in the gaming world. As long as Fang Zhao agreed, the gaming department would rise up. He could already see the glorious future ahead!

"Not interested," was Fang Zhao's reply.

"...Don't reject it right away. Collaboration would benefit everyone. How about this, you are tired after playing for such a long time. Why don't you take a rest first and think about my suggestion."

After ending the call, Wayne immediately contacted Duan Qianji and told her he had been unable to convince Fang Zhao and needed Duan Qianji, the big boss of Silver Wing, to persuade him. If other companies found out that AliveAfter500Years was Fang Zhao, they would surely spend lots of money to poach him!

Just today, a number of companies had expressed interest in buying over the player and were willing to pay the compensation fee! Not just Yanzhou companies, there were interested parties from other continents too!

But what other people did not know was that the contract Silver Wing had signed with Fang Zhao did not involve gaming. If Fang Zhao were to sign with another company as an e-sports athlete, it would not be a violation of the contract.

Thus, a minute after Fang Zhao had spoken to Wayne, he received a call from Duan Qianji.

Frankly speaking, the treatment that Duan Qianji gave Fang Zhao was very good. Regarding the boss of the company, Fang Zhao was willing to give a little face.

As expected, Duan Qianji once again persuaded him to work together with the gaming department. If he had any conditions, he could raise them. She invited Fang Zhao over to the company tomorrow to have a discussion with everyone. Not just Wayne, Duan Qianji also did not want to let such a big opportunity slip by.

After the call, Fang Zhao did not immediately log back in. Instead, he went to check out the "Battle of the Century" forums on Fiery Bird's website. Sure enough, many people were talking about today's placings.

Next, Fang Zhao checked out the Yanzhou region forums. The announcements by all the e-sports clubs were already out, and the ones that were trending the most were related to the Big Five.

Fang Zhao entered the District 79 discussions to see if there was anything big next. Back when he had been playing, Fang Zhao had blocked off all communications, so he did not know a lot of stuff that was happening.

Indeed, all the discussions were about District 79 South, West, and East being completely cleared.

Those people seemed to be talking about him. Browsing a few more post, he was sure they were talking about him.

At this moment, a stickied post appeared.

"To that unknown expert that cleared the district's south, west, and east! Please show us some mercy! Please let District 79 North off! We are only students!"

If it was the real Period of Destruction, someone would have to clear an area. But since this was a game, after reflecting on his own actions, Fang Zhao felt it was not appropriate, like he was bullying kids. After he had cleared an area, others could not play.

Having made up his mind, Fang Zhao logged in with the ID he had created when he'd registered with the game and left a one word reply on that students post—

[AliveAfter500Years] "Sure."

In the next moment, the replies on the post exploded exponentially.

"..."

"This ID..."

"What the f*ck?!"

"What did I just see?!"

"The top ranked worldwide is in our district?!"

"So he is the crazy KSing demon that cleared District 79 South, East, and West?!"

The original poster was a university student. He and a few fellow students had just bought some equipment from others, stocked up on lots of ammunition, and decided to have a proper round of gaming. After seeing the situations at District 79 South, East, and West, he'd then posted on the forums, but little had he expected his post would make that expert reveal himself.

He has appeared, District 79!

The media was quick to catch on like a cat that had caught the scent of a fish, and they headed for District 79. Those that had not been randomly allocated to District 79 bought accounts to enter. Teams that specifically sold District 79 accounts had not expected that their business on the first day would be so good!

However, these people heading to District 79 with the motive of interviewing the player did not achieve their goals that night. Instead, at District 78 East, which bordered on District 79 West, the sound of condensed gunfire rang out.

The players in District 78: "..." A profanity had appeared in their minds.

Chapter 133

Morning, Boss

Those reporters ordered to District 79 shivered. Gaming was not their forte; glib talk, secretly taking photos, and ambushing celebrities were their true life's calling!

Therefore, those that had obtained accounts for District 79 looked for places to hide after logging in. They had not come to slay monsters but to spot someone!

A member of a media forum contacted his colleague.

"Anything happening on your end?"

"Nope, just a bunch of players fighting off a group of beasts that appeared from nowhere... I'm considering whether to pick off some scraps. Who knows, I might gain some points."

"Forget about it. Considering the standard of your marksmanship, it's better not to take that risk. At my side, someone took the opportunity to play a little. In less than five minutes, he lost three lives and got a scolding when he disconnected. I reckon his wages are going to be deducted."

"...I guess I should just wait instead."

"This game is a little too scary," a reporter who rarely played games added in. He had been temporarily dragged over to assist. He used to report on culinary and culture, and his field of expertise was literature and art. Today, the company's gaming entertainment section lacked manpower, and since he was free, he had been transferred over to help out and lay in wait for that mysterious *AliveAfter500Years* to appear. It was rumored that, if luck was good and one managed to catch him, there would be a pay raise. The assignment sounded easy enough, so he had accepted. What he had not expected was that, upon entering the game and seeing those sickening beasts, he would nearly scream; his legs were still jelly.

"You are just a scaredy-cat. You will get used to it after playing these games more."

"The sky... The sky is already dark! That AliveAfter500Years might have gone to bed, right?"

"Have you ever seen a gamer that sleeps so early? Just wait, he wouldn't go offline so early. At most for a little rest, and then he will log back in. Don't bother about anything else, just listen for gunfire."

"Nothing will be coming out at night, right? I have never used a gun before. I didn't even handle a gun during my military service."

"Don't worry, just take shelter in a safe place and wait. Close the doors and windows and don't make any unnecessary sounds and you will be fine."

After AliveAfter500Years had revealed himself, District 79 was now filled with the eyes of the media. Some were reporters hoping to catch some news, while others were players that had been paid to shadow him.

Other sorts of mutated beasts came out at night. Due to the lack of light, players with night vision would fare better, but for those without night vision, many times they would not even catch sight of anything before dying.

Reporters from many media groups holed themselves in places they felt safe, not daring to step out, just listening out for the gunfire that was mentioned in the information. However, they did not hear gunfire but, rather, strange roars and blood-curdling screams that frayed their nerves and made them feel chills down their spines.

It was more difficult at night; a moment of carelessness could result in the loss of life. Therefore, many players just disconnected straightaway. Compared to during the day, there were fewer players. But there were still players that liked this sort of even more intense environment.

The time zones across the world were all different. If it was daytime in a continent, that region would also experience daytime in-game. This resulted in gamers that were placed further behind taking advantage of daytime and going on a rampage, sweeping up points and rising up the rankings.

However, the global leaderboard's top ten still did not see drastic changes.

When a region entered night time, players that were not suited for a night environment and disconnected did not go to sleep. Instead, they paid attention to

information related to the game. Some people were busy buying equipment, whereas others were busy memorizing strategies in preparation for resuming the fight the next day. There were also some that watched gossip news.

"The f*ck! How is he still sweeping up points!"

"AliveAfter500Years is online again?"

"I asked my cousin's classmate's relative's neighbor in Yanzhou a while back. It was all quiet in District 79."

"You don't say, of course District 79 is quiet! He has gone over to District 78!"

Indeed, very quickly, a piece of news appeared. It was a screenshot of an announcer. Someone at District 78 had sent that message.

"District 78 has been swept clean! Listen to the sound of gunfire, AliveAfter500Years has appeared!"

"Why has he come over to our district? Bullying us at District 78 because we don't have an expert?! Why doesn't he go over to District 80?!"

Someone from District 80 immediately replied, "Over at District 80, the monsters are few and the roads are bad. Big god, please don't come over."

The expanded map of the Yanzhou region only displayed 100 districts, and the lines were drawn out well. As the names of many places during the Period of Destruction had already become hazy, in the game, the places were just straightforwardly labeled as districts and given a number each. As for District 79, on the map, its position was between District 78 and District 80.

After a short while, those stationed at District 79 received instructions from their own bosses: "Withdraw first."

"We are no longer keeping watch tonight?" a reported squatting in District 79 asked his colleague.

"Nope, he's already gone to 78. There is nothing left to watch."

"Have we just wasted an hour waiting for nothing?"

"Anyone have District 78 accounts? I want to head over for a look."

Reporters in District 79 left in succession after receiving their instructions. Some went to purchase District 78's accounts. They definitely did not dare to run alone from District 78 to 79. There were dangers en route that could make them die a hundred times over. They were reporters, not gamers.

District 78's players that sold accounts and equipment had originally logged off, intending to rest. When they heard that AliveAfter500Years had come over to District 78, they were immediately awakened, not because of panic but because of excitement. They could smell the influx of people coming over to District 78, and they could raise the prices of their equipment. Profit!

As before, the number of reporters hiding in District 78 increased. Some were temporarily hired by media from other continents. Noticing that player being so active on the leaderboards even at night drew a lot of interest. They were all thinking that maybe they might get some big news tonight.

However, as these people arrived at District 78, Fang Zhao logged off.

The environment at night used up much more mental and physical strength than daytime. A moment of carelessness could easily result in injury or death. In addition, he had already played for a long time during the day. In the evening, he only had a little rest while eating and had played five hours straight after that. He was too tired now.

After a bath, some food, and browsing the news, Fang Zhao laid on his bed and slept. This was probably the first time he'd had proper sleep since being reborn, a peaceful rest.

Still, reporters in District 78 continued hiding in their spots, pricking their ears up and shaking from the beastly roars outside, all the way till they received instructions from their superiors to withdraw.

The night was in no way tranquil. Players excitedly discussed their harvests from the first day, sharing their own experiences and interesting stories. Fans' were busy keeping tabs on the stars of various gaming clubs. The media was especially lively. Today, a real expert had emerged in Yanzhou, not from the Big Five, but from Silver Wing, an entertainment company. Everyone had their own guesses on who AliveAfter500Years was, but no matter what, no matter who he was, it was

sensationalized.

The next day, Zuo Yu came over early in the morning to pick up Fang Zhao. As Fang Zhao's driver cum bodyguard, he needed to fulfill his obligations. He felt that he might only be a "driver," and if he did not perform well, who knew when he would be dismissed. Zuo Yu really liked this job; there was not much to do and the salary was high. The only drawback was that the mental pressure was rather high. His boss was even more capable than him, and he felt a little guilty to be getting paid so much.

Meeting Fang Zhao once more, Zuo Yu was feeling complicated. That little bit of superiority he had once felt had completely vanished. He could no longer face Fang Zhao in the same casual and playful manner. He instead had to be respectful just like the majority of other bodyguards. He was also curious as to how Fang Zhao had managed to get so many points, but if Fang Zhao did not say, he also could not demand answers. Besides, there would be chances to find out in the future.

Zuo Yu spoke about the incident with Wayne coming over to the virtual project department.

"Boss, are you going to collaborate with the gaming department?" Zuo Yu asked.

"Depends on the situation." Fang Zhao had come over today because of this matter. He had to see what plans Silver Wing had and discuss the terms and conditions. If the conditions were satisfactory, he did not mind collaborating and gaming with Silver Wing. After all, being idle was still being idle.

"Oh, right, I have a question for you," Fang Zhao said.

"Go ahead." Zuo Yu unconsciously sat up straight. His boss's question needed to be taken seriously.

"Do personnel from the military and police play a lot of these sort of games?" Fang Zhao asked.

"This sort, uh, actually, military and police forces rarely play this. If they do play, they also treat it as training. There isn't much time for games, and they rarely go all-out when playing. Those that go all-out, other than professional e-sports athletes, are sportsmen. The guy from Mazhou who is ranked second after you is a professional shooter."

Noticing Fang Zhao taking an interest in this topic, Zuo Yu continued to explain, "Actually, it is not that hard to comprehend. Let's use this analogy: over at Muzhou, there are shepherd dogs and police dogs. They do not train a police dog using methods for training shepherd dogs and do not let them take part in sheep-herding competitions. The same goes for shepherd dogs. The two kinds are trained differently. However, if one day, a police dog is suitable for a sheep-herding competition, the people of Muzhou would not treat it as a police dog anymore, because it is no longer suitable."

Zuo Yu did not know whether he was explaining it to Fang Zhao or telling himself. Zuo Yu's voice sounded downcast. "If they get used to the mentality of games, when it comes to executing a real mission, that could result in losing one's life."

When he finished, Zuo Yu glanced at the rear-view mirror to see Fang Zhao's reaction. Fang Zhao was only looking out of the car window, as if thinking of something. Zuo Yu was unable to discern his state of mind from his face and did not know whether Fang Zhao had understood his words.

When they were approaching Silver Wing tower, Zuo Yu said, "Today there are a lot more people camping outside Silver Wing. We will enter another way."

With the matter of the emergence of AliveAfter500Years and SilverWing50PolarLight, the number of reporters loitering outside Silver Wing tower was a lot more. Today, the car that Zuo Yu drove was not the usual one but a less conspicuous one, and they entered the tower through another entrance that was rarely used. Silver Wing's 50th floor was already sealed shut, and they were afraid that, if it was opened, someone might slip in if they were careless.

Fang Zhao rode the elevator up to the 50th floor. When the elevator doors opened, he realized five people were standing just outside. From the staff badges on their chests, he could tell they were from Silver Wing's gaming department. Out of the five, Fang Zhao recognized three. Back when he'd headed to the film department, he had run into them in the elevator. The other two were unfamiliar. Fang Zhao guessed that they were probably signed by the gaming department separately.

Just as he was about to ask what they were doing here, the five simultaneously looked over, their eyes looking as if they had just seen a gold bar, and they bowed toward Fang Zhao as though they had practiced it. "Morning, Boss!"

Fang Zhao: "..."

He checked his surroundings; he was at the right place. This was the 50th floor.

Chapter 134

Pry Away the Foundations

"Hey, hey, stop shouting. Who are you calling your boss, take a look at the place!" Zu Wen had been about to head to the company's cafeteria to grab a bite. When he'd stepped out and saw the scene at the door, he'd suddenly raged.

How dare you do this at our virtual projects department's main entrance, trying to pry away our department's foundation?! If you poach him, are our department members supposed to go hungry?

"Shoo, shoo, shoo. Run back to your gaming department!" Zu Wen used his hands and waved them away. Toward them, his face was black as hell. After that, he turned around and ran over toward Fang Zhao for some bootlicking. "Boss, don't bother them, let's go in and talk."

The five of them seemed as if they were stuck behind, following Fang Zhao tightly as they entered the virtual projects department. Zu Wen tried to squeeze them out, but it was to no avail.

"Wayne said that we would be working with you in the future," a youngster with explosive hair said.

When they had first been recalled to the company and encountered Fang Zhao in the elevator, they hadn't thought much about it, since Fang Zhao had a different occupation, but who would have expected this sort of situation to occur?

On the first day of the game, Wayne had set them a target. After giving their all, they were dog-tired when exiting their cabins. Seeing their results, they were partly proud and partly apprehensive. They were proud, as they felt their results were better than expected and they might not even have achieved better if they went another round. They were apprehensive because their placing was not what they'd expected. They were all in their twenties, and the oldest among the five was 28. This was also the first time they had experienced the competitiveness of the leaderboard. Even giving their all every day, the ranking would not rise up, and a moment of carelessness would leave them biting the dust.

After disconnecting, they had originally been wondering whether it would be praise or criticism from Wayne, but when they'd come out, only the assistant assigned to them had been there; Wayne had been nowhere to be seen. The other people in the gaming department had strange expressions, seemingly excited and worked up yet at the same time regretful. The five were also unable to obtain answers from the others, and the only reply they got was to do their best.

On the leaderboards, SilverWing50PolarLight and the number-one-ranked AliveAfter500Years, who'd maintained his position since the first refresh, had really aroused their curiosity. They'd wondered if the rumors were true, and other than the five of them, Silver Wing's gaming department had collaborated with the virtual projects department to sign others. Or perhaps formed another team?

Only after night had fallen had they gotten to meet Wayne. When they'd found out the truth through Wayne, their minds went blank as their jaws dropped. They'd had no idea how to react.

Fang Zhao?

The composer, head of the virtual projects department?

Totally unexpected!

Wayne had spent the night explaining stuff to them and giving new instructions.

Having been in control of the gaming department all these years, Wayne also had his own methods. He was not an indecisive person, so when it came to making a decision, Wayne just gave up on the original plan and did not let the five log in to continue gaming. Rather, he got them to register a new username to join SilverWing50PolarLight team and enter district 79. To just dump all the hard work of the first day and bank on someone else, the decision was firm.

But no matter what opinions Wayne had, he still had to first get Fang Zhao to agree.

Therefore, early in the morning, the five of them had run over to the virtuals projects department and stood guard, armed with a nervous urgency. Especially when they saw Fang Zhao, it was as if they had seen a dazzling light of hope.

Fang Zhao had stopped the five. "Don't bother shouting first; nothing has been decided yet."

Receiving a message from Duan Qianji, Fang Zhao stepped into the elevator and headed for the top floor.

In Duan Qianji's top-floor office, Duan Qianji, Wayne, and another deputy manager from the gaming department were already seated there.

A large smile appeared on Wayne's face when he caught sight of Fang Zhao, the sort one got when meeting a lover again after a long time.

Duan Qianji's assistants and secretary retreated, leaving the four alone. There was no need to worry about any strategic information leaking.

Duan Qianji did not beat around the bush and instead went straight to the two proposals that she and Wayne had come up with.

The first proposal was in line with the opinions of the outside world. They would go all-out to create a new superstar and let the AliveAfter500Years ID become a super ID, utilizing all the resources of the gaming department to assist Fang Zhao. Once that happened, Fang Zhao would become the first ever globally popular superstar produced by Silver Wing in the gaming circles.

However, Fang Zhao did not have much interest in this. Yesterday he had already turned it down once when speaking to Wayne. If that really happened, it would imply that he could only follow in the path and accomplish the goals the company designated for him, and he would have much less power to make his own decisions. Creating a superstar and whatever did not matter much to him, he did not need to rely on that to eke out a living.

Facing Fang Zhao's rejection once more, Duan Qianji and Wayne could not help but feel a little regret. After all, this solution was the safest and simplest at this point in time, and the benefits were great. However, as Fang Zhao did not have a contract with the company as a gamer, they had no way of forcing him.

Wayne shared his thoughts, "I knew you would reject it, so that brings us the the second proposal we discussed."

What they meant to say was that, since Fang Zhao had not agreed to the first proposal, they could all try collaborating. Silver Wing would request Fang Zhao lead the few members of the gaming department. This was their motive behind signing those five. The original plan had been to build them up and create five gaming stars.

After listening to their views, Fang Zhao fell silent for a bit before asking, "So you mean to build up five average gaming stars?"

Hearing Fang Zhao's words, Duan Qianji and Wayne, who were rather impressive themselves, knew right away that Fang Zhao definitely had other ideas.

"What do you propose?"

"I don't have one. I have received the information on the five members that you sent, including their in-game performance yesterday. To promote them individually would not be easy," Fang Zhao replied.

"We can collaborate with professional assisting studios," Wayne said. He meant those that helped to provide equipment, draw monsters, and provide suppressing fire and leave the kill for the employer, letting the employer gain as many points as possible. Certain studios and teams provided these one-stop services. Previously, Wayne had engaged a studio to do so, to provide assistance for the five members to rack up points. It was a pity that even with that assistance they had been unable to even compete with Fang Zhao, who had done it alone. Even the scores of all five added up could not compare.

Fang Zhao ruthlessly rejected the notion. "My team would have no such service from these studios."

"Even if we do not use any studios, just relying on the few of you would not be enough. If we wanted to score high points... only relying on your own team—I don't mean to be a wet blanket, but even though I am not too well-versed on this matter, five members are still too little. Even if we count you in, forget about the Big Five gaming clubs, we would not even be able to compete with those second-tier gaming clubs. Zu Wen and the others are all amateurs, and we can't count them in since they still have to work on normal days," Wayne analyzed.

"Then recruit more." Fang Zhao did not seem anxious when Wayne questioned his suggestion. Continuing on, he said, "You mentioned previously that you would keep an eye out for talented young players. If they seem decent, just sign them."

"You make it sound easy. I don't mean to strike you down, but those with excellent qualities didn't even give us a second look. We had a name list and sent out invites, but not a single one replied. If you don't believe me, you can try it out..."

Wayne had not finished when he abruptly paused and his eyes widened, as if he had remembered something important. He clenched his fists that were resting on the armrest tightly and even his breathing stopped for an instant.

It was not that they were unable to sign anyone despite offering a high fee, it was just that Wayne was unable to sign anyone that met his criteria, because he was not capable enough to poach those outstanding gamers.

No matter how much he could offer, Wayne still knew that, in the gaming circles and in the eyes of many professional gamers, he was not considered a big deal.

Wayne? Who the hell was he?

This was the first thought that came to the minds of gamers who saw that name.

This was the reason why Wayne had received such pathetic replies after sending out countless invites. Many people did not even bother sending a simple reply of rejection.

Total disregard!

However, Wayne could understand. Silver Wing was an entertainment company, and it touched on less aspects in e-sports, as its core was still film and music. Therefore, in the eyes of many, Silver Wing and other entertainment companies were all the same, dabbling a little in the gaming industry because it was profitable. Gamers with a professional ambition generally would not consider these sorts of entertainment companies. In the past there had been no lack of examples. There were some who had been lured over to an entertainment company and had a brief period in the limelight, but after that, they had fallen from grace and were never mentioned by anyone in the gaming circles.

Therefore, as the manager of the gaming department in a mixed-entertainment company, there was great difficulty involved when Wayne tried to poach his targets.

But it was different with Fang Zhao!

AliveAfter500Years still held the top spot in the global rankings and had wide acclaim! Which professional gamer would not recognize this ID? Furthermore, Fang Zhao apparently seemed to be able to continue holding onto the top spot.

No one spoke in the office; the only sound was Wayne's increasingly heavy breathing.

"Wait a minute!" Wayne hurriedly opened his briefcase, took out a file, and solemnly said, "Please take a look at this list of names!"

Wayne's hands were trembling as he handed over the list to Fang Zhao. This list of names was the result of three years of work. Three years ago, he had approached these people, but unfortunately, he had been unable to poach a single one. The names on the list, especially those on the top, would create big news if they could be poached! Poaching three would let them occupy the recent headlines of the e-sports scene! Poaching five... Poaching five over, their gaming department would soar!

After handing the list of names over to Fang Zhao, Wayne watched Fang Zhao's expression. He had originally expected a gasp of surprise from Fang Zhao, but he had never expected that Fang Zhao would just scan through it once and ask, "Only from Yanzhou?"

"You... you still want to... poach from other continents?!"

"Are there any?" Fang Zhao asked.

"No, but I can start taking notes immediately!" Wayne hurriedly declared.

"Let me first take a look at these names. Let me make this clear: my team, my decisions."

"This... is a project the company is investing in, after all..." Wayne was a little awkward. He felt a little uneasy if he was unable to control it himself.

Fang Zhao put down the file and prepared to leave. "All right, find someone else instead."

"Hey, youngster, don't be so hasty. I haven't said no!" Wayne quickly pulled Fang Zhao back to his seat and stuffed the list of names back into his hands.

Chapter 135

Downright Masterful!

Wayne felt like he was walking on water when he returned from the penthouse suite to the gaming department...

"Boss, do we have a deal?" his staff asked anxiously.

The dreamy look on Wayne's face subdued somewhat, replaced by a manager's grim authority. He cleared his throat and said, "Yeah." But thinking back to the visions of a grand future that popped into his head, he couldn't help smiling again. "Ehem. Everyone hunker down a bit. Tight lips. Understand? Maybe our day has finally come," Wayne instructed.

"Got! It!" his staff responded in unison.

Wayne didn't reveal too many details. He had wanted to spill the beans to boost morale, but he was also worried that Fang Zhao's poaching attempts would fail, in which case he would lose face, so Wayne decided to hold back, at least until Fang Zhao had secured a few defectors.

In the end, Wayne and Duan Qianji had agreed to Fang Zhao's terms. Since Fang Zhao would be leading the team, he would call the shots, as long as he managed to poach the top gamers. Wayne was also a businessman. All his decisions were based on personal interest. Even though things had evolved beyond his control, as long as he could profit, he would not hesitate to agree to Fang Zhao's terms. This was a one-in-a-million opportunity.

Inside the office of the executive producer for "Prairie Fire."

Qian Cheng had been in a bad mood the past few days because he had failed to land the scoop he'd so desperately wanted. He'd sent an army to District 79, but *AliveAfter500Years* had headed to District 78 instead. He'd reassigned his reporters to District 78, but there had been no sign of the crack gamer then.

"Any movement on Silver Wing's front?" Qian Cheng asked his staff.

"No," one of his staffers responded.

The editorial staff were also puzzled.

"This doesn't feel right. They haven't so much as put up a smokescreen. That's not Silver Wing's style. If they were thinking straight, shouldn't they have been bragging like crazy about their gamer sitting on top of the global leaderboard? Silver Wing has always enjoyed blowing the smallest triumph out of proportion, and yet they are silent now. Unless there are some shady shenanigans going on behind the scenes?"

Qian Cheng shook his head in silence. He didn't get it. Why was Silver Wing so composed this time?

"I have a bad feeling about this," Qian Cheng continued. "It feels like Silver Wing is up to something major again."

After pondering a bit, Qian Cheng issued his marching orders. "Don't let up on Silver Wing. Keep a tight watch."

"Then should we still assign folks to District 78 and 79?" someone asked. "There's big news in other districts as well, and we're quite short-staffed."

Qian Cheng thought it over. "Let's stay put in District 78. Reassign most of the reporters in District 79 to other districts. Just keep a few to keep an eye on things."

Amid the flurry of activity, inside a building in District 79 West, a silhouette moved cautiously along the wall, careful not to make the slightest sound. After tiptoeing a bit, the person stopped to thoroughly take in his surroundings.

After remaining still and making sure he was alone, the man whispered, "Hi everyone, this is your old friend Strong Bubbles. Welcome to my live broadcast. I am now situated in a furniture mall in the Old Era."

He was a webcast host. Live broadcasts were allowed in "Battle of the Century," but journalists had to apply. Only applicants vetted and cleared by Fiery Bird could report live from the game. Not everyone could qualify.

This particular host had a good reputation and was accredited, but this was his first gaming gig. He used to host lifestyle and travel shows, but there were too many personalities covering the same beat and thus too much competition. There was never

a shortage of hosts willing to put their lives on the line, such as folks who attempted dangerous climbs, ventured deep into the forest, or scuba dived into great depths to uncover natural beauty. He wasn't that adventurous, which was why his viewership numbers dwindled.

"Battle of the Century" had a huge budget, and its production values were superb. The game was extremely realistic. Gaming hosts focused on strategy in their live broadcasts, but he was different. He was using the game to chart a new career path.

The Old Era was undoubtedly a novelty for folks from the New Era, so after switching beats, this host saw his viewership figures climb again. He maintained his fan base, while new viewers were gamers who were curious about the Old Era. Quite a few of them were underaged. Children were not allowed to play "Battle of the Century." All they could do was tune in to live webcasts every day. Some of these kids were interested in watching monster slaying. Others were not but were rather drawn to Strong Bubbles's levelheaded but stimulating reporting style. It was a nice change of pace and made for pleasant viewing. The latter demographic included both gamers and non-gamers. The gamers tuned in to the live broadcast to get their fix when they themselves couldn't play because of work or other engagements.

As an experienced host, Strong Bubbles knew how to pick a location. His staff had opened several accounts for him. He picked the one that gave him access to District 79 for the sole reason that the furniture mall was there. It was a strategic location and easy to hide in, and next to the furniture mall was a major intersection. Even though he was on the first floor, the windows were covered with a wire mesh, so he could observe developments at the crossroads from a safe sanctuary. He could also see other players kill monsters. Strong Bubbles had no intention of switching locations any time soon.

The footage seen by viewers was decided by the host. The host could choose from various vantage points, including his own. Strong Bubbles had chosen his own. He liked sharing what he saw with his own eyes.

Just as he was about to share an amusing anecdote from the Old Era, he was interrupted.

"Sounds like gunshots. They're getting louder. Also, is that the sound of a motorbike? Even though there aren't that many beasts in the city, there's still a sizable population. The sound of a motorbike might draw the attention of the beasts and overshadow

other sounds. It would be hard to detect threats by sound. I wonder if the rider factored this into consideration. Wait..."

"The gunshots are quite regular. It seems there might be a team of shooters. Let's wait and see." Strong Bubbles held his breath and peeked through the window to locate the source of the gunshots.

The sound of the motorbike and gunshots kept getting louder. Soon, he saw a speeding shadow pop up some distance away. There was only one silhouette.

A huge black motorbike with a clear outline and a chiseled body charged at the crossroads, rumbling at a high frequency, as if milking its engine for all it was worth. It was a wild beast heaving and panting frantically.

"Is that the heavy-duty motorbike T-Rex?" To prepare for his broadcast, the host had crammed on Old Era trivia. When Fiery Bird had released its game-related merchandise, he'd also bought a T-Rex model, but the model he'd bought was the racing version. What appeared now was a street version with lights and mirrors.

He didn't have a clear view because of the metal mesh covering the window, so he took a chance and opened the window, pressing his face toward the mesh to get a better look. His personal safety was secondary now. He had to go all out for the live broadcast.

Looking through the metal mesh, he still couldn't identify the rider of the motorbike, because the rider was wearing a helmet. All he saw was his right hand on a handle and his left pulling out a short pistol and firing all over the place. The proximity of the shots was spooky. Almost every shot killed a beast.

The closer he approached the intersection, the more dangerous it was. The sound of beasts crying traveled from all four directions. The gunshots became even more frequent. Some of the beasts were still hiding in buildings. Once they poked their heads out, they were shot.

Bang!

Another shot, which threaded the gap of a window on the building to the right, hit another beast.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

One beast fell after another.

By now, the rider had reached the crossroads. Beasts were approaching from all four directions, the sudden surge of bodies and flesh resembling a tsunami. If it were someone else, four guns wouldn't have done the trick. There was no time.

Yet the man on the bike betrayed no signs of fear.

Screech!

The sound of the motorbike's wheels revolving against the ground made for a long piercing noise. The rider swerved and sped forward.

Man and machine combined for a menacing T-Rex, lethal shots spraying from the barrel of the rider's gun nonstop. During the turn, the gun was reduced to a blob. He was moving so quickly you couldn't see the gun clearly. All you could see were mini explosions emerging from T-Rex Central.

The smell of gunpowder was everywhere, as if auguring an imminent detonation.

The beasts weren't slow either, but...

Down!

Down!

Downed with a shot!

This was a meeting of two powerful currents. Yet the end result was utterly one-sided.

One person facing beasts attacking from all four directions—and yet his firepower had the upper hand. Those beasts couldn't get anywhere near him.

Every shot and every move seemed to be carefully plotted. The level of anticipation and mental fortitude was mind blowing.

Every single viewer watching the live broadcast stopped what they were doing and stared without so much as a single blink. They held their breath and clenched their fists, as if they themselves were in the midst of battle. Some viewers let out the occasional scream.

The rider even managed to shoot some beasts in the head during his turn.

If it were them, they could never have managed to hit the bodies of the beasts so easily while sitting still on the bike. Let alone their heads, the motorbike was swerving.

What kind of skill level was this?

After a rainstorm of shots, the black motorbike waded through the corpses on the ground and sped off. The gunshots kept coming. For the rider, the battle wasn't over. It was just that the sound of gunshots had moved on to the next intersection, leaving behind the angry, disgruntled howls of beasts who had arrived too late.

The host took a swallow, carefully maneuvered back into the room, and shut the window. His hands were still shaking when he closed the window, still rattled from the scene he had just witnessed.

No more than 30 seconds had elapsed between the time the rider had emerged in his line of sight and the rider's departure. Many viewers watching the live broadcast were left in a cold sweat, their muscles stiff from the tension of the moment, taking forever to recover.

Viewers that were logged onto Strong Bubbles' chat forum finally came to their senses and went berserk.

"F*ck!"

"That kind of driving..."

"A 360-degree swerve while shooting at the same time. Oh. My. God."

"That was a street version of the T-Rex, no doubt about it. It's the third T-Rex that has shown up in Yanzhou since the game was launched. But this is the first person who took the T-Rex into a fight! Bad*ss!"

"Yesterday I took an ordinary motorbike from the basement garage for a spin. I lost control and broke my bones. Thank God it was in a game. I was alive and kicking again after an afternoon of rest. Watching this dude take off on his bike has given me the goosebumps again. I think I might crash again."

"Our friend upstairs missed something. The rider swerved 360 degrees, switched

weapons, and fired. He switched weapons when he turned and fired. I'm just not sure how many times. But judging from the sound of the gunshots, there were definitely two types of guns in action. Several beasts were shot when they leaped forward. Those shots were definitely inflicted by a different gun, maybe a shotgun of some sort. Everything went down so quickly I couldn't see clearly."

"Did you guys see the way he switched guns?"

"Not at all."

"Bubbles: Did you tape the broadcast just now? I want to watch the rerun in slow motion. I want to know how many times he switched weapons during the short period he was swerving his bike."

"He actually switched guns at a time like that? Even a delay of 0.1 seconds could mean losing your life, not to mention the consequences of switching to the wrong gun."

"My dad just asked why I was watching the live broadcast on my knees."

"Downright masterful!"

"Forget about accuracy—isn't it easy to screw up with such a fast weapon switch? Last time I ran into a beast, I was going to switch to a shotgun, but I was so emotional that I didn't realize until I was about to pull the trigger that the thing I switched to was a chicken leg. I was so freaked out I tossed it. The price you pay for not organizing your toolkit."

"Brother upstairs who switched to a chicken leg: did the beast eat the chicken leg?"

"I don't know. I was in a hurry to bolt. I didn't dare look back."

"Hey, let's not go off-topic. Stay on message. Didn't the rider just now seem familiar?"

"I couldn't get a clear view because he was wearing a helmet, but now that you mention it, yeah, I've seen the face somewhere."

"Even though the helmet wasn't a biker's helmet and his outfit wasn't a biker's kit, don't you think the dude looks a bit like the mystery man from the race between 2S and BOOM a month ago? Especially the way he swerved at the intersection. The difference is that he swerved a full 360 degrees this time, not 180 degrees, and he

didn't lift his front wheel, but he switched weapons and fired."

"His accuracy reminds me of the District 79 legend AliveAfter500Years! Only he could manage such a massacre in this neighborhood. Wow, I finally witnessed the way the top player in the world racks up points. So you're saying this guy is the mystery rider who passed Ke Zimo and Olaf during the practice match between 2S and BOOM last month?"

"It's the same person?"

Chapter 136

What Is He Playing At

If the mystery rider during the previous month's practice match was the same person as the global ranked number one player from District 79, AliveAfter500Years, that meant that...

"They faced off against each other right from the start!"

To go up against the Big Five e-sports clubs, not only was courage needed but also the strength to back it up. All these years in Yanzhou, there had been people who had challenged the top and had threatened the positions of the Big Five, but ultimately, the Big Five still held firm. Now there was a competitor who possessed the strength and courage, or rather, an unknown person that had the backing of Silver Wing who had declared war on the Big Five early on!

A lot of people guessed as much.

Whether reality was the same as the guesses of others, today was no ordinary day at District 79. There was a flurry of activity, and many players watched as the figure riding the heavy-duty motorbike swept through the streets, accumulating points like a furious roar of thunder.

"He is coming back again!"

"That point-sweeping machine is back to kill once again!"

"That method of sweeping is just way too berserk!"

"First time seeing for myself the point-sweeping prowess of the globally ranked first position, mad respect! Coming online was totally worth it!"

When many of the players in District 79 heard the sound of concentrated gunfire, they knew that this big god had once again returned from District 78. He appeared riding Yanzhou's third street version T-Rex, and his point sweeping was even more intense!

Chief editor of Prairie Fire, Qian Cheng, was regretting. He had just transferred a number of people away from District 79. Initially, he had thought that the target would not return back to District 79 anytime soon, so he'd only left a few people to keep watch and instead sent a larger group over to District 78. However, in a flash, there was the sound of activity at District 79, and he hurriedly transferred manpower over there. But it was still a mistake after all, and the amount he could photograph was limited.

Reporters in District 79 managed to get a few photos, but as they did not have ample preparations, they were not as vividly detailed as the video that the host Strong Bubbles had managed to snap.

The staff at the studio of Strong Bubbles's live broadcast hurriedly edited a video of that point in time, making a few segments of the video in slow motion and analyzing it before releasing it in the afternoon.

"I was in a kneeling position as I watched him disappear into the distance. That was too impressive!" The host's, Strong Bubbles's, exclamation was in no way exaggerated. Even now, as he recalled that scene, his thoughts were surging. He might not have been a game enthusiast, but as a spectator, he'd felt his blood racing for the first time.

Players that had received the news went to search for the video from Strong Bubbles's webcast, especially those that were from elsewhere and had only seen various news from other media that were rushing to get the news of what had happened in District 79. However, the material in those reports were no good. Some only had photographs, while others had videos where only the roaring sound of the machine and gunfire could be heard, as the image was too blurry. When they saw the information that Strong Bubbles's webcast released, they rushed over to watch. Many players who were playing the game temporarily went offline to watch the video and see for themselves what the media described as "Downright masterful!"

As the video had been edited, at crucial parts, the video was put in slow motion, letting everyone have a clearer understanding of what had happened during that brief moment.

"How frightening! Is this b*stard even human?!"

"If I did not watch this video, no matter how many people said that they saw him personally, I still wouldn't believe them."

"If it was not in slow motion, you totally wouldn't be able to see his hand movements, and you wouldn't actually see him switching guns. The way he switches is too fast!"

"Switching three times? He can actually switch his gun three times at that moment? And every switch has a purpose. Just take a look at his marksmanship and you can tell how impressive his control is!"

"I was watching his actions in slow motion as he loaded the gun with one hand, too cool! It's a pity a monster was obstructing and the gun cannot be fully seen. Does anyone know what model of shotgun he uses? I once picked up a similar model but couldn't use it and chucked it somewhere. I'm trying to remember where I left it at."

"I picked up a similar one, but it was a different model. Old Era guns are more or less the same. This sort that is strenuous to use, I threw it away, but I have changed my opinion now!"

"So this is the rumored Big God that is number one on the global rankings, AliveAfter500Years?"

"It's definitely him. Watch the leaderboards when it refreshes, his points always have a steep jump. Every time it refreshes, I feel shaken. On the first day, I thought his points were already ridiculous, but never did I expect that it would get even more ridiculous later on!"

"This is the strength of the global number one! Where are those that were making a ruckus about hacking?! Where are those that have studios and teams using hidden methods to help them rise up the rankings?! If you have the guts, repeat what you guys said!"

"Just watching the way he operates, is there even anyone who can do the same? The way he thoroughly sweeps up points, there is no equal, right? I dare to say, as long as he logs on to sweep points, he will always be the champion on the leaderboards! If some day he gets dislodged from his position, it will be because he no longer plays."

On the website, everyone who saw that video could not remain calm. Even those e-sports club members that were resting were dumbfounded.

How could a studio produce such a person. This was completely his own prowess, based on rigid killing!

Viewers watching the webcast of Strong Bubbles kept increasing and increasing. The number of clicks in half an hour increased from six figures to eight figures, and it was about to hit nine figures soon. And this was all within 30 minutes!

"Viral!" someone in the studio excitedly said.

Another staff told the host who had just disconnected, "Bubbles, you made the right choice! Using this game to do a webcast indeed has much greater prospects than before! Look, just a few days of playing and we got our chance!"

"An advertising company wants to collaborate with us... Oh, and a media firm wants to buy our information... Money, money! This time we are going to be rich!"

"Wait a minute! Do not reply to those first, business has arrived! Rising Dragon's chief editor has left us a private message!"

"Rising Dragon? The world's greatest online gaming community?"

"Yes, that's them. The message is verified; it's authentic. They wish to purchase the exclusive usage rights for the original video, and the price they offered... is very high..." The Bubbles's broadcast studio staffer's voice trembled as he saw the quoted price. If he had the rights to decide, he would have long agreed to it.

Ultimately, Rising Dragon had offered a price that nobody in Bubbles's broadcast studio could say no to, and they bought the exclusive usage rights for that video. Hence, other than Bubbles's broadcast studio, in the rest of the world, only Rising Dragon could use that video footage.

Therefore, on the second day, in Rising Dragon's news section, hanging on the headlines was the portion of the video at the intersection, where the bike did a 360 swerve turn as the rider switched guns and fired with rapid precision in a killing frenzy. And it was probably the best news of the week!

What followed this short video were the frantic shrieks of players who saw the news. They were unable to do anything but kneel down on the spot!

People who did stunts were excited and continuously tried to copy that 360 spin. There were even some that saw this as a business opportunity and started their own training classes to specifically teach people who were interested how to do so, but all these were done in game. Trying it out of the game could result in the loss of life. Even

if there were people willing to try, professional stuntmen did not dare to teach.

Players who were fans of shooting games were also worked up and gave rise to a fad where players would have contests to see who could kill the most targets within three gun switches.

Gun enthusiasts also saw a rise in interest and gave players an analysis on how that gun model could be loaded with one hand and how to effectively use every type of gun.

But whether they were stuntmen, professional shooters, or gun enthusiasts, nobody was able to do all three at once. They either crashed the bike or broke their fingers when switching guns, and forget about shooting accurately. The more they understood the actions and the difficulty of it, the more they felt that person was not mortal.

All the voices of doubt gradually died down with the emergence of the video and analyses from all sorts of industry experts.

On the global leaderboard of "Battle of the Century," AliveAfter500Years's total experience points had increased by a huge chunk within half a day. The global number two had actually closed down the gap previously, but when it was refreshed, the gap had widened again. When it refreshed once more, number two was already left in the dust.

In Mazhou, when Ma Xier, the world-renowned gold medalist shooting superstar, saw the video, he was totally at a loss.

In an actual shooting competition, Ma Xier was confident he could win, but in the game, he no longer believed so. Forget about shooting, just that short period where the rider had swerved a complete round on his bike, switched out his guns, and fired accurately, that was just perfect. Every single movement was just on point. Even after he watched the video for an hour in slow motion, he could not find a single fault.

That sort of self confidence and gun sense could not have been produced by a studio. That was true strength, a powerhouse!

Regarding a powerhouse, Ma Xier had respect for him. The depressing feeling he got from being trampled on dissipated somewhat. However, he would not give up on climbing up the leaderboards.

District 79 was bustling again. There were people from Yanzhou as well as from other

continents had used all sorts of methods to get to the district.

And when many people wished to catch a glimpse of that god up close and reporters from the media had already camped at the best spots for taking photos and videos, they once again drew a blank.

"West side, any movement?"

"Nope, what about you guys at the north side?"

"Nothing here."

"All clear to the east."

"Nothing in the south other than a few others from the industry looking to steal the news."

On that day, in the aftermath of that sweeping session, District 79 once more fell into a strange lull. Although there were still other players hunting monsters, compared to the roaring thunder of that day, it was considered peaceful, but hidden in the shadows of that peaceful quiet were countless frantic reporters and webcast hosts.

For two days in a row, it had been the same! Nobody even caught a glimpse of him! On the contrary, there were a number of players courting disaster by trying some gimmicky imitations of riding and gun switching. Not only did they waste people's time, they were killed and became examples for any other pretentious wannabes. Up to three or four could be photographed daily.

These were just treated as jokes and did not have much impact. This was not what the entertainment reporters were looking for!

Taking a look at the leaderboard, first place was still ahead by a wide margin. It was just that his score had not changed in two days.

Had he disappeared from the game?!

After going crazy for a day, he had not appeared online for two straight days. What was playing at?!

In Prairie Fire's chief editor's office, after receiving reports from his subordinates, he

did not let them withdraw from District 79. This time they had to watch till the death!

Qian Cheng even mobilized his subordinates. "Bring out the paparazzi in you! Be more patient than a sniper and continue lying in wait! According to my professional sense of smell, there will be big news soon!"

Chapter 137

The King Summons

Yanzhou's Western region, a small town close to the mountains, in a certain household in a normal housing block.

Former 2S e-sports club's mainforce captain Jinro had just picked up his wife and son after work and from the kindergarten respectively. When he arrived home, he rushed into his study immediately without removing his shoes or changing his clothes. He opened this week's edition of Rising Dragon's news, which he automatically subscribed to, and watched that short video clip once more.

Receiving the news on that day, he had went to watch Strong Bubbles's webcast, but as Strong Bubbles was not from the industry, the video handling and commentary were not suitable for professional gamers like himself. Since Rising Dragon had bought the usage rights, the commentary and analysis were now much more detailed. Two days had passed since then, but the popularity of that video still had not dropped. Every day there were professional game analysts from every continent giving their opinions and comments.

Indeed, every time the video was refreshed, new comments would appear. The video followed the comments and appeared everywhere.

"That control is just too strong!"

No matter how many times he watched it, Jinro would just sigh.

Being proficient in the use of guns in real life did not mean it would be the same in-game. To be good at virtual reality games, one relied not on one's body's qualities but rather the brain!

Just watching the speed of his switches and shooting reaction, one could see that his control was amazing, definitely godlike! Number one on the global leaderboards definitely had the ability to back it up and indeed deserved his reputation. Whether or not he had any strong backup supporting him, this person was without a doubt an expert!

But Jinro still had some doubts. Looking at his movements, this person did not seem like a newcomer, but nobody within the gaming circle had heard of this god before. There had been absolutely no foreshadowing of him emerging. Jinro had even asked a few friends who specialized in shooting games, but nobody knew of this person! Nobody could guess who he really was!

Two days had already passed and there was still no news on who AliveAfter500Years was.

As he was thinking, Jinro's communication device rang.

"Hey pal, what's up?"

"What else, the matter with the number one big god on the global rankings. Any new info?"

"Nope, I asked everyone I know, but no one has anything for me," Jinro replied.

"Oh." The voice on the other end sounded regretful. "I had hoped to meet him."

"You could also go to Qi'an City to look for him. Maybe you will find him there?" Jinro suggested.

"I'm too busy and can't leave. Recently, business has been rather good. The equipment you helped me obtain was sold for quite a sum. When the time comes, I will send the money to your account. Hey, I almost forgot, there must be quite a number of e-sports clubs that contacted you recently, right? Were none of them acceptable?"

"Nope. They are willing to pay the penalty fee, but those few e-sports clubs have internal problems and are not willing to relinquish authority, yet they still expect me to change their predicament immediately. How is that even possible?"

The silence on the other end lasted quite a while before there was a reply. "You have been retired for eight years already. Do you really intend to wait another two more years?"

At that time, due to a problem with strategic decision-making within the team, Jinro had fallen out with the management of 2S e-sports club and been placed in cold storage until the end of his contract. With the situation back then, if Jinro had wanted to leave, he would have had to fork out a large penalty fee. 2S was willing to release

him without complicating matters as long as Jinro signed a 10-year agreement that had the following terms: Jinro would not sign a contract with any professional e-sports clubs in Yanzhou. If not for these conditions, 2S would not have let him leave so easily. Even if they wanted good relations, they were still a business-minded club, after all, and when taking into account benefits, good relations did not mean much.

Therefore, if Jinro signed with any other e-sports clubs, it was necessary for his new employers to pay that large penalty fee. Given Jinro's status and influence within the gaming circles, excluding 2S, two out of the remaining four were willing to sign him and pay the penalty fee, but Jinro had turned them all down.

In the last few years, other clubs and companies had approached him, and some private studios had contacted him, but Jinro had not agreed to sign with any party. Now he only collaborated with a few small teams, providing training services and selling equipment. These few studios were opened by old friends, who had helped him during the toughest part of his contract termination. After it had settled, Jinro had returned the favor, obtaining good equipment for the studios to sell, earning a share of money for himself and helping his friend's studio gain reputation.

As a person with a professional e-sports athlete background, before his skills deteriorated, Jinro did not want to go on like this. Especially for the release of "Battle of the Century," Jinro indeed had thought to sign with a club. This time he had carefully considered a few, but none of them were suitable. When he looked at a club now, he did not completely base it on their reputation, but rather, he considered their potential and internal management. Due to various reasons and restrictions, Jinro had not logged into "Battle of the Century" using the official account he had registered with Fiery Bird a long time ago. When training or collecting equipment, he used other dummy accounts.

"Try to decide as soon as possible. This time, 'Battle of the Century' is an imitation of the course of history. History never repeats itself. Any moments you miss are gone for good and will never return. Don't tell me you intend to continue using dummy accounts to exist in the game?" the other party advised.

Jinro gave a helpless smile. "This I know..."

There was a beeping notification of a new message. Jinro checked and saw that he had received a new private message. Opening it, the contents were a District 79 account, a login password, a set of coordinates, and a time. At the end of the message was the

sender's name—AliveAfter500Years.

"!!"Jinro stared at that ID, trying to determine its authenticity.

On the other end of the communication device, the other person was still talking, but after a long time without any reply from Jinro, he was dissatisfied. "Hello, Jinro, are you still listening?! Hello hello!"

"Sorry, something urgent came up, I'm hanging up!" Jinro ended the call and went into his gaming cabin, entering the account and password. After logging in, he realized he was indeed in District 79! Bringing up the account's friend's list, he saw there was only one—AliveAfter500Years.

And this account's avatar settings were set to the height and weight that Jinro was accustomed to.

It was actually real!

The person who had contacted him was indeed the global number one, AliveAfter500Years!

The accounts inventory had a number of guns and melee weapons. Other than these, the other party had provided all sorts of equipment.

What was the meaning of this?

A declaration of war?

Unlikely. The other party was ranked first in the global leaderboards and did not have any reason to declare war. Even if he wanted to do so, he would not go as far as to find a person who had maintained a low profile in the gaming circles for a number of years.

Then what was the other party up to?

Could it be...

Thinking of that possibility, Jinro's breathing quickened.

Within gaming circles, there were rules that everyone knew. For example, if a newcomer wanted to join a team, the captain and other core members would have to

evaluate the newcomer. A recommendation alone was not enough to bring someone in, the newcomer still had to go through an assessment and gain approval from the team before being accepted. Most of the time, they used this sort of method, setting a place and time they would do battle.

In this case, could the other party have had this idea?

...

In a city in the southern region of Yanzhou, inside a popular plant store.

A man wearing work clothes was holding a potted ball cactus bigger than a human head in one hand as he was tidying up the store. This man was muscular and built like a tank.

There was the notification sound of a new message. After he placed the cactus on the shelf, he checked the message and froze on the spot. After a while, he twisted his rigid neck to look at the plants on the shelf before turning back to view the newly received message. The muscles on his face were completely taut and trembling slightly. His expression did not give anything away, but as a whole, he looked very weird.

Immediately after, he hurriedly rushed to the back and put on a gaming helmet that he occasionally used while tending to the store.

...

In a certain university dormitory in Yanzhou's north.

In the four-men dormitory, everyone had their own room. At that moment, the room doors were open. Three guys were in the living room watching a movie, and the remaining one was in his room sleeping.

The guy sleeping had been gaming throughout the night. The others in the dormitory were used to it and had even heard that their roommate, who was especially good at games, was going to sign with a certain e-sports club. They were going to get him to give a celebratory treat after he signed.

The three in the living room were engrossed in the movie when they heard a "thud" from the room, like the sound of someone falling off their bed.

"What happened, Schwarzer?"

The voice from inside sounded distracted. "N-nothing, Could... have been a dream..."

The other three did not bother, still thinking, Has that kid become stupid from playing all those games? He can't even tell if he was dreaming.

As for the guy who had just fallen off his bed, he took a look at the message he'd just received and muttered, "What the f*ck!"

...

At a certain coastal city in Yanzhou.

Inside a restaurant, a father and son sat facing each other at a corner table.

"2S, Transcendental, Big Dipper, BOOM and HWR have all sent their invites. Which one are you going to choose?" As his father cum manager, he could not help but feel anxious for his son. "Such good opportunities and so much competition, if you do not hurry up and decide, the spots will be stolen!"

"There is no rush," said a youngster with a pair of huge earphones hanging around his neck. Leaning forward unhurriedly, he bit on the straw of his drink as he played around with it, as though not taking his dad's words to heart. He slowly explained his thoughts to his dad. "I don't wish to join any of the Big Five at the moment. The competition there is too intense. If I were to join, I would have to start from their second- or third-string teams. If that is the case, wouldn't it be better if I joined a slightly weaker club? This way I might be able to enter their main team straightaway."

"I still think that you should pick one of the Big Five. With your ability, you can definitely jump from their second or third string to the main team in a short time. After all, they are the Big Five! Still, it's fine if you really want to join the main team of another club, but you should make the choice fast!"

The youngster continued sucking on the straw. "What's the hurry. Let me check this message first."

The father could not stand his son's behavior and was really itching to give him a smack. Just as the father was about to reprimand him, his son suddenly sprayed a mouthful of drink over, stood up with an urgent look on his face, and started running

toward the exit.

"Let's go, go, go!"

"What happened?"

"I need to find a console to log in!"

"There is still so much food left; what's the rush?"

"Hurry! This is urgent! Let me check whether there are any game cafes nearby and log in for a little. No, that won't do. Gaming cafes might not be safe. We should head back!"

...

...

Eight people in different parts of Yanzhou had received a message from AliveAfter500Years at practically the same time. As if a king had summoned his subjects—no matter the intention, the people that received the message were willing to give it a try.

Chapter 138

Just Fight Again

The coordinates provided by AliveAfter500Years were near the border of District 79, quite far from downtown. Jinro couldn't see another soul. A factory-type structure stood by the suburban highway. Most players wouldn't spend much time here because there wasn't any food. You needed food to survive in the game.

After logging in, Jinro headed to the coordinates. The location his account had entered the game at wasn't far from the coordinates, about 2 kilometers. Although for newbies or players who were relatively unskilled, even covering 1 kilometer unscathed was quite difficult.

This must be a preliminary test, Jinro thought.

Judging from the footage of AliveAfter500Years mowing down monsters on his heavy-duty bike, if he wanted to, he could totally set the entry point of Jinro's account to the exact coordinates, but he'd chosen not to. The purpose of setting the entry location 2 kilometers from the final destination was to test Jinro's abilities. If he couldn't gain safe passage through these 2 kilometers, AliveAfter500Years would most likely drop him.

The time of the meet was 10 a.m. the day after tomorrow, but Jinro headed straight to his destination right after logging into the game using the account number in the message from AliveAfter500Years. It took him some time to avoid and get rid of all sorts of mutated beasts, but no one was around when he arrived at the location.

There weren't that many threats inside the building where the coordinates were located. At least when Jinro arrived, he didn't see any mutated humans or beasts. The space looked like it had been cleared out. As for who was responsible, wasn't it a no-brainer? Perhaps no one other than AliveAfter500Years was capable of the job. Only that supergod could execute a clean sweep at will.

The building was five stories tall. Every floor had been swept, including every single room and every warehouse. Jinro took a quick tour. Apart from a few small beasts, he didn't locate any other threats. The sweep had probably taken place not long ago. Few

new beasts had shown up.

Just as he wrapped up his walkabout, Jinro noticed an approaching figure.

Jinro scanned the person quickly. His clothes were tainted with some blood, but not much. He was a fast mover, taking no time to climb over the 3-meter-tall wall surrounding the factory without so much as a whisper, but he wasn't AliveAfter500Years. He lacked that kind of aura.

Maybe it was another person who'd gotten the same message from AliveAfter500Years?

When the thought struck him, Jinro didn't hide. He waited for the person to climb the stairs, but he didn't let down his guard either. If the new visitor wasn't who he thought it was and instead made an aggressive move, he would be able to fend off the attack.

The other player paused when he saw Jinro. Clearly he hadn't expected any company, but soon, surprise shifted to excitement and he dashed toward Jinro. "Would you happen to be AliveAfter500Years? How do you do, Supergod? I am..."

"I'm not him."

Schwarzer was all geared up to introduce himself when he heard the denial and was plunged into disappointment. "You're not him? Then why are you here?"

"I got a message from him." Jinro still hadn't let down his guard.

When he heard Jinro's answer, Schwarzer cast aside his disappointment and enthusiastically said, "Me too! I rushed over as soon I got the message. My entry point was about 2 kilometers away. It took me a while to get here."

"Same here." Schwarzer's response took Jinro by surprise. He had expected the visitor to be a fellow invitee, but this man spoke like a newcomer. Yet clearly this person couldn't be underestimated. Covering 2 kilometers wasn't easy for a rookie gamer, and his new friend appeared unharmed. He also seemed quite relaxed.

"I thought I was the only invitee." Schwarzer looked around. "Any others?"

"Yes." Jinro looked out the window.

Schwarzer followed his line of sight. Someone stood on the wall surrounding the building, twirling a short pistol with his fingers. He met their gaze. The man didn't look out of sorts, or perhaps the character settings for the accounts included in the invitations didn't include any defining features. Schwarzer couldn't identify the person, but his gut told him this was also a tough customer.

Crack!

It was the sound of boots stepping on shards of glass.

Schwarzer shifted his attention to the entrance of the room he and Jinro were located in. Standing there was a tall, bulky man, as built as a metal tower. He gave off killer vibes, whether because it was an inborn quality or he was fresh from a killing spree. He was clearly a big fellow, but before he stepped on the glass fragments, Schwarzer had not detected his presence whatsoever.

And who's that? Schwarzer glared at the big fellow, who was entering the room.

"BlackWizard?" Jinro was even more surprised this time.

"BlackWizard" Milo, another master who was exceptionally fast at switching weapons; he was fairly well-known in e-sports circles. He'd risen to fame around the same time as Jinro. BlackWizard was his regular ID. Most gamers knew each other by IDs. Quite a few folks knew of BlackWizard, but few knew his real name.

The big fellow's gaze lingered on Jinro and Schwarzer for two seconds before landing on Jinro. "Former 2S stalwart and captain Jinro?"

"You actually recognize me." In fact, Jinro wasn't too surprised that Milo could identify him. Milo had great instincts. Even in a game, he could dig beneath the surface.

"How come you're not retired?" Milo said in a confused tone. "There's been no word of you for such a long time. I didn't expect you to be invited as well." He turned his attention to Schwarzer. "Who's this kid? And the kid behind me?"

The person twirling his pistol on the wall had arrived as well.

"He probably got the same message too," Jinro said while looking out the window.

Zip!

A nimble figure glided in from outside. Her short hair was dyed like camouflage. It was a woman, someone both Jinro and Milo knew.

"Jasmine?" Jinro was caught off guard once again. Milo and Jasmine were both freelancers. They had never joined any teams or factions. They were both good enough to rank within the top 50 in Yanzhou on most of the major games.

Making the top 50 as a freelancer was not easy at all. Jinro had speculated that AliveAfter500Years had invited them to audition for a team, but the appearance of Milo and Jasmine led him to have second thoughts.

What exactly was AliveAfter500Years planning?

Schwarzer looked out the window, then at Jasmine. This is the third floor. How did she get up here?

After climbing in from the window, Jasmine eyed the gathered crowd and frowned, oblivious to the gazes thrown her way, before standing in a corner.

The big fellow Milo asked, "You got a message too? AliveAfter500Years actually invited you?"

The woman addressed as Jasmine finally spoke. "You were invited, so why wouldn't I be? I'm ahead of you in the rankings."

"I don't have much time because I need to keep an eye on my shop."

"Sure, you're busy. Just find another excuse next time."

Milo and Jasmine were on friendlier terms because they were both freelancers.

Realizing he was in the presence of well-known figures in the gaming community—all more senior than he was—Schwarzer started to get nervous. His professional e-sports career hadn't even kicked off—he wasn't even considered a newcomer, at most ranking on the level of an intern. He didn't dare butt in when these senior gamers spoke, so he focused his attention on the bloke standing at the entrance to the room, the one "BlackWizard" Milo had also called a kid.

"Hey, I'm Schwarzer. I got the invitation too. And you are..." Schwarzer said enthusiastically.

The man gave him a sideways glance. "SillyBloke from Yanbei University of Finance?"

Schwarzer's smile disappeared instantly. He looked like he was staring at a heap of trash. "SmellyBug from Ocean University of Yanzhou?"

When he heard their conversation, Jinro knew what was going on. Yanbei University of Finance and Ocean University of Yanzhou had long been among the top four universities for e-sports. Even in their less glorious days, they had ranked among the top eight. They were longtime rivals and had quite a few run-ins. No wonder the two of them spoke to each other in that tone.

Schwarzer had shined in gaming competitions in the first half of the year. Word was that quite a few clubs had already put out feelers. And the other kid was from Ocean University. Even though Jinro didn't know his name, he was certain the other kid was also a talented newcomer.

After the five of them showed up, another three appeared. One was from HWR Club's first team. His contract was about to expire and he was still negotiating his extension. Everyone wanted a piece of him. Lo and behold, he was here too.

Jinro couldn't identify the other two folks and they didn't introduce themselves. Milo figured they were from the amateur gaming community.

Be they pros or amateurs, veterans or newbies, every person had thought at the outset they were the only invitee. They hadn't expected that players other than themselves had been invited.

Schwarzer was about to suggest that they take a stroll on the other floors when a ninth person appeared.

He wore battle fatigues that were popular during the Period of Destruction. He didn't wear a helmet and had two scars on his face. He didn't look out of the ordinary, and his gaze was quite peaceful, but anyone who was eyed felt as if they were shoved up against the wall.

Jinro hadn't felt this way in a long time. The last time was in front of his mentor, but that had been a long time ago. He had been a team leader since then, and former newbies were now more senior than he was. Standing in front of this person, he felt a genuine sense of fear.

Milo's pupils shrank. He was sure he had never seen this guy, but he was absolutely certain this was...

"AliveAfter500Years?" the eight of them said, nearly in unison.

Before he'd showed up, they had all wondered what kind of person the man who held the coveted top spot in the global rankings was. How would they recognize him? Now they knew they hadn't needed to worry about identifying characteristics at all. When they saw him, they knew instinctively: this is him!

Schwarzer was so emotional his voice started shaking. He wobbled over and said, "How do you do, Su-su-supergod?"

Schwarzer had prepared a whole list of questions for AliveAfter500Years before logging into the game, but now he was stuck after a simple greeting.

The eight of them fell into an extended silence. It wasn't they didn't want to speak; their heads were all filled with questions, but all of sudden, they were afraid to talk. Especially when they were stared at.

"Pretty fast." Fang Zhao was happy to see all eight. He'd gotten online again about an hour after he'd sent out his message. He'd wondered if anyone would wait until the scheduled time the day after tomorrow; he hadn't expected all eight to show up right away.

The group was still silent, but a strange feeling crept up in them. Praise? They were just a teeny bit excited.

As the eight wrestled with the feeling, the next sentence shook them to their senses.

"I'm going to give you a chance to kill me," Fang Zhao said. "Right here, 10 a.m., the day after tomorrow. No restrictions."

For many professional gamers, the greatest accomplishment wasn't their points total but taking out a worthy opponent.

Even Schwarzer, who grew up worshipping the big stars in e-sports, wanted to take down his idols.

Back when he'd been in Secondary Two, Schwarzer had issued a challenge to a few of

the gaming stars he'd idolized, but it had just been a drop in the ocean of fanmail the stars received. No one paid any attention to a kid in Secondary Two.

Now he was in university. He was a grown man and had been exposed to greater variety of hit games. His list of idols was changing. He had just started worshipping AliveAfter500Years and he'd actually been offered the opportunity of a duel.

He was ecstatic. Moved.

"Anyone wanna back out?" Fang Zhao asked.

None of the eight uttered so much as a grunt. Their eyes were oozing anticipation. It was impossible to stay calm when you had the chance to cross swords with the gamer sitting securely at the top of the global rankings. They were all wondering whether they had what it took to take out this supergod that took the gaming world by storm out of the blue.

No one would choose to back out now.

"Great," Fang Zhao continued. "If anyone isn't happy with their account settings, I'm happy to switch you to a smoother account."

Still no one spoke up. Their account settings were all set according to their preferences. There was no need to switch accounts.

"If you don't have any other questions, you're dismissed. You can familiarize yourselves with the location. This is my first time as well." What he meant was that he was no more familiar with the location than his eight invitees. The difference was that he'd swept the building that morning.

Schwarzer had a case of shivers. He had noticed on his way here that there were no mutated humans or beasts. Had they all been killed? No wonder AliveAfter500Years's points total had risen again today.

Noticing that Fang Zhao was about to go offline, Jinro seized the opportunity to speak up.

"Please wait." Jinro summoned the courage to return Fang Zhao's gaze and ask, "Your eminence, Is this your test for us? If we pass, will we be invited to join your excellency's team?" Jinro had started addressing Fang Zhao with honorifics unconsciously.

This was the same question on the minds of the other invitees,

Fang Zhao had no reason to be coy. "Yes." His objective was recruitment.

Jinro relaxed instantly. This was the answer he'd wanted to hear.

"What if I want to pass your test but not join your team?" Milo AKA BlackWizard asked.

Fang Zhao glanced at him and responded, "That's OK. Just take part in a second fight."

The eight gamers: "..."

What was that supposed to mean? Were there dire consequences?

Chapter 139

Report at Silver Wing Tower 50th Floor Tomorrow

In his professional e-sports career of close to 20 years, this was the first time Jinro had heard someone speak to him this way, just like the way he would frighten his son with "If you don't listen, you will get a beating!"

Once the scarred-faced AliveAfter500Years left, the atmosphere among those eight returned to the silence from before.

"You want to beat me?" The heavy-set Milo scoffed as if someone had told him a joke. Before that, in his heart, he'd kind of revered AliveAfter500Years, but now he was angry. "Is he threatening me? I shall see whether he teaches me a lesson the following day or I finish him off!!" Milo's eyes were burning with anger, not just because of the arrogant words from the other party but because, as a veteran gamer, he also wished to kill the globally ranked number one!

The same intentions could be seen from the other's expressions as well. However, AliveAfter500Years was just one person, while they had eight on their side. There would only be one chance, and it depended on who was quicker or more capable.

"Are the scars on his face intentional?" Schwarzer was curious.

"It feels kinda familiar, like I have seen it somewhere before." HWR's Dorrian seemed to ponder. Seeing everyone's gaze on him, he put up his hands and said, "I only said the scars seem familiar, but as for who he is, I'm still clueless."

"He doesn't seem very young," Milo said. The other party gave off an aura like that of someone senior. Especially his manner and his pressuring gaze, they did not seem like something someone too young was capable of.

Jinro nodded his head in agreement. "Mhmm." Now he had even more doubts. Even if he was considered retired, he still kept up with news of the gaming circles, and he'd never heard of such a person.

"Whatever, I shall go explore a little." Jinro was itching to start planning his counter

attack.

"Tsk—" Jake from Ocean University sneered but did not say anything. He left to familiarize himself with the area as well. He could not let Jinro kill AliveAfter500Years before he did.

This building could not be considered very big, and not a lot of time was needed to familiarize oneself with the place. However, it was not exactly small either. There were many spots to set traps and a number of hiding places as well.

As the eight busied themselves in the designated building, after Fang Zhao disconnected, he did not log in for another two days straight. Midway through, he received a number of messages from the gaming department's manager, Wayne.

Wayne paid close attention to the developments at Fang Zhao's end. But after a few days, not a single person from the name list had been recruited, and every day, he heard news of some of the players on the list being signed up by clubs or companys. Waking up every day and browsing the entertainment news was torture for him.

He was anxious!

How could he not be?

He had envisioned a bright future, but now, the anticipation had turned into apprehension. He was worried that the bright and beautiful vision he had would end up with nothing. The more hopes he had, the greater the disappointment, and he had not been sleeping well these few days.

Unfortunately, Fang Zhao still kept him waiting.

At 9 a.m. on the day.

Wayne called Fang Zhao once again and received the same reply.

"Still waiting?! How much longer do we have to wait?! Fang Zhao, I don't mean to criticize you, but I just want to say, if we can't go down this path, wouldn't it be better to change our strategy earlier than later?" Wayne scrunched up his tired eyebrows. "Actually, many of these people who want to join a team would have found somewhere to go even before 'Battle of the Century' was released. The remaining few would all be snapped up within a month after the start date, and after a month has passed, there

won't be any more big movements, because everyone will already have a stable roster and proper plans. Therefore, we don't really have much time."

"Wait till tomorrow," Fang Zhao replied.

"Tomorrow?" Wayne's heart skipped a beat as his raised brows trembled. He then probed further. "That means to say, you have already gotten one?"

Fang Zhao only had one sentence. "We will find out tomorrow."

Wayne was so anxious he nearly dropped his communications device. "Can't you give me some reliable info?!"

"Nope."

After ending the call, Fang Zhao did not immediately enter the game. Instead, he went on to Fiery Bird's public training platform to warm-up and waited till 9:59 a.m. before he exited the training platform and logged into game.

There was a three second invulnerable period when logging in. Logging in at this time, Fang Zhao chose the same spot where he had disconnected, and right at the moment the three seconds were up, Fang Zhao abruptly sidestepped to the left and raised his gun.

Three seconds were up.

Bang!

A bullet hit the ground behind him. If Fang Zhao had not sidestepped, the bullet would have nestled in his head.

At the same time, a figure collapsed from a corner ahead. The person quickly vanished, leaving behind only a gun.

One.

Fang Zhao counted in his heart. Raising his head, he looked out of the window and toward the building opposite. After that, he retracted his gaze and continued moving forward.

They had not appeared with their full firepower and tried to suppress him right then and there. Fang Zhao had expected as much. He had handpicked the eight of them from Wayne's name list, and not on a whim.

After that, there was the sound of gunfire or objects smashing in the building, breaking up the tense silence.

Outside, on the road. A heat wave was rising, scattering dust all over the place.

A few mutated beast pricked their ears and faced the direction of the building where activity was coming from before scampering over toward the sounds.

Crash!

With the sound of something being struck, they looked over toward a rusted steel door on the second floor. There was a high dent on the steel door, as if something had rammed hard into it from the inside and it had protruded out. The rust on the exterior of the door flaked off and floated down as the door shook violently. After a few more groans, the entire door fell down too.

A mutated beast used an abandoned car as a springboard and leapt to where the steel door on the second floor used to be. Only a gun was lying there.

Bang!

A bullet hole appeared in the brains of that mutated beast that was just about to enter the building.

Bang Bang Bang!

Successive shots rang out, and the mutated beasts that were approaching were all killed. Only some had been shot by Fang Zhao, while others had been shot by people hiding within the building. Fang Zhao did not conceal his movements, but the others that had killed the beasts were using guns equipped with silencers.

The gunfire within the building continued on. There was a momentary pause, and then suddenly, concentrated gunfire erupted. The glass windows shattered into a million pieces and bullet holes appeared in the walls. Inside the fourth floor, fragments of wood, porcelain, and other stuff flew everywhere as light bulbs exploded and pieces of the walls and ceiling rained down. Then the sound of all gunfire ceased. The sound

of a person falling amidst all the activity of things smashing would not be obvious at all.

The short moment of peace was broken by continuous gunfire once again.

The silence after every bout of gunfire took on a formless pressure that kept expanding.

Outside the building, on a road that was shaded, a gust of wind carried dust off into the distance. From time to time, a few mutated beasts would head in the direction of the noise, but not a single one could enter the building. Every single one was killed before it could even come near.

Half an hour later.

All the sounds of gunfire ceased. This time it was not momentary and lasted for a long while.

Jasmine with her camouflaged hair steadily walked over from the opposite block and paused outside the entrance, using a jittery hand to brush aside her fringe as she took a deep breath before entering.

At the spot on the third floor where they had last seen AliveAfter500Years.

"Oh, everyone's here?" Jasmine's tone was seldom so relaxed, and she no longer felt so jittery.

Milo was crouched on the ground, biting on a piece of wood he had picked up. He did not look well. Seeing Jasmine entering, he bit down and spat out a bunch of wood fillings. "Are you very happy?"

Jasmine raised her eyebrows but did not reply, instead glancing around. All eight of them were present.

"Where is AliveAfter500Years?" Jasmine asked.

"No idea, probably disconnected already." Jinro stretched his arms and gazed at the ceiling, as if pondering a profound question.

Schwarzer spoke. "Does this mean we failed? I was immediately kicked offline. Just

one kick, I'm not exaggerating."

When Schwarzer thought back to that moment, he could not help but feel his insides churning. He had set a trap to attract AliveAfter500Years while he had hidden himself. He wanted to take advantage of the moment when the opponent's attention was drawn to the trap and use his nimble skills to do a surprise attack. In the end, he had been kicked offline by the opponent. The dent in the steel door had been all thanks to him.

"I hid myself in the other building but was found out immediately."

Unlike the others who had hidden within the same building, Jasmine had not done so. AliveAfter500Years had said where he would appear but had not said that everyone had to be there. Therefore, she had hidden herself in the opposite building. Unfortunately, at the moment she'd thought she was about to succeed, she had been shot offline by the opponent before she could pull the trigger. The hunter had become the hunted.

Noticing Milo not uttering a single word, Jasmine kicked him. "What about you?"

Milo's face became dark; he clearly did not wish to talk about it. "It's already over, what's the use of talking about it?"

Indeed, Milo did not want talk about it. He had been given special treatment by AliveAfter500Years.

Regardless of whether it was close-quarters combat or whichever gun he switched to, he had been completely suppressed! He had been given a taste of what despair felt like!

Originally, Milo had thought that the opponent hadn't been able to find a way to deal with him and had been stuck in a deadlock for a long time. Now, after hearing the others, he became aware that the opponent hadn't necessarily had no idea how to deal with him. As for why he would accompany Milo and dilly-dally...

Milo could not help but slap himself. "You and your stupid mouth!"

Even his favorite automatic rifle had been taken by the opponent!

When he'd logged back in later and asked everyone, they'd still had their guns; only

his had been taken! That was simply revenge! Special treatment!

Milo wondered in his heart: if only he had not shot his mouth off, would he still have received special treatment?

He'd suffered a beating and suffered bullets and still compensated with his favorite gun. It was so demoralizing. How could he even have the face to speak about it?!

"So what do we do?" Schwarzer asked. He had suffered quite a big beatdown today and actually felt the disparity between them. Yet he still seemed to be in good spirits. He had lost at the hands of his idol. Although he had been kicked offline without any mercy, his aspirations did not change. His idol was still his idol!

"Wait a minute, I just received a message." Jinro received the notification of a new message on this account and stopped talking to check. He was a little nervous, but very quickly, his eyes glowed.

"I have one too." The huge Milo hastened.

Beside him, Jasmine did not make a sound, but from her manner, she was checking a message too.

"I received it too."

"Me too."

"Same here..."

Schwarzer looked at everyone starting to check their messages. He was the only one who had not received a notification.

"You guys, what message did you all get?" Schwarzer asked.

"Report at Silver Wing Tower's 50th floor tomorrow," the seven of them said in unison. They had all received the same message, but the moods of each were all different.

"Why... Why don't I have it?" Schwarzer's face had turned pale, and he felt his whole body turning cold.

Out of the eight, only he had not received a message. That meant to say, only he had

been rejected?

Schwarzer really wanted to join AliveAfter500Years's team. Not because of the team's prospects but because he could get closer to his idol. Although "Battle of the Century" had only started recently, the ID AliveAfter500Years would always be number one in his heart.

Jinro opened his mouth, intending to console this newcomer who had not yet officially stepped into the professional gaming circle when he heard Schwarzer say, "Ah! I forgot to remove my communications block!"

Jinro: "..."

"Hahahaha, I also received it!" Schwarzer left behind his gloomy outlook in an instant and could not help but run around happily.

"Are you going to sign with Silver Wing?" Jinro asked.

"Of course!" Schwarzer nodded his head without any hesitation. He asked, "Are you guys not signing?"

Milo stood up calmly and dusted himself off. "Boy, you shouldn't rush it. This sort of thing needs a lot of consideration. Be careful you don't regret after signing."

Jasmine coldly nodded her head in agreement.

HWR's Dorrian, who was returning to being a free agent, said, "That's right, you need to think carefully about this."

"But he said 'Report at Silver Wing Tower's 50th floor tomorrow.' After tomorrow, will he still be accepting people?" Schwarzer asked.

A moment of silence.

After a while, Milo said, "If he no longer accepts, then so be it. After all, we are freelancers and free agents who don't wish to sign with any gaming club, let alone an entertainment company."

The other two amateurs replied, "We are just amateurs, there is no rush to change our professions."

HWR Dorrian said, "There are many clubs that want to sign me. Now my employers also wish to renew my contract.

Yanzhou Ocean University's Jake added, "My dad has received close to twenty invites."

"Oh, you guys continue to think it over. I shall log off first to buy tickets! I'm going to Qi'an City's Silver Wing to see *AliveAfter500Years* in person!" With that, Schwarzer impatiently disappeared offline.

The remaining seven fell into a strange silence once more and went offline one after another. After logging out, those living outside of Qi'an City all did the same thing—check on tickets and airfare.

Although they might have said there was no rush, their actions betrayed their words.

Chapter 140

That's Me

The next day.

Fang Zhao had been called over last minute by Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch for a meeting. As a member of the advisory team and evaluation panel, other than playing the game and sending electronic files over to Fiery Bird, every once in a while they would be gathered for a meeting. Of course, it was not necessary to attend in person—an online conference would be enough—but Fang Zhao headed over not just for this. Zachary, the engineer from Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch who had helped Fang Zhao install the 10th-generation console, wanted to show him the latest data from his machine's usage.

Before he went over, Fang Zhao made a call to Wayne and informed him to wait at the 50th floor today.

Even if Fang Zhao did not say so, Wayne would still run to the 50th floor and sit down. Yesterday Fang Zhao had told him there would definitely be a result today. Wayne had not been able to sleep at all last night, as he'd spent the whole night thinking. Today he was even more mentally exhausted and his eyes were bloodshot. When he reached the office, he did not get any rest, only using some apparatus to give himself a little relief.

Wayne tried fishing for more information from Zu Wen and the others. "Zu Wen, did your manager tell you anything?"

"Yeah, Boss said there might be a few newcomers today." Zu Wen and the others were also curious. They had no idea who the newcomers that Fang Zhao had mentioned were.

Wayne asked a few more questions and realized that Zu Wen and the others really did not know much, so all he could do was wait in the virtual project's lounge.

Today Fang Zhao had not let Zuo Yu drive and handed him an assignment. In the message that Fang Zhao had left for the eight, other than the message asking them to

report at Silver Wing's 50th floor, he had also left a contact number, Zuo Yu's work number, which was different from his own personal number. On normal days, they would use this number for certain things.

At 9 a.m., when many companies had just started work, the ground floor of Silver Wing tower was filled with people hurriedly coming and going.

Zuo Yu received a call, went down, and saw Schwarzer, who was toting a large travel backpack and curiously examining his surroundings.

"Schwarzer?"

"Yes, that's me!" Schwarzer's eyes were full of excitement. "And you are?"

"I spoke to you just now. My boss's instructions are to bring you up."

Zuo Yu did not dither for long at the entrance. There were many reporters there and it was not good to loiter for too long.

"Do you need help with your bag?"

"It's fine, thanks." Schwarzer sized up Zuo Yu. After they entered the lift, he asked. "Is your boss AliveAfter500Years?"

Zuo Yu looked him in the eye. "My boss is the manager of Silver Wing's virtual projects department."

"Oh." Schwarzer felt a little disappointed, but he still spiritedly asked, "That virtual projects department on the 50th floor? The place where the SilverWing50PolarLight team is at? Is AliveAfter500Years there too?"

"...Sometimes."

"Will he come today?"

"Yes, but he has other matters to attend to; he will come in a little later."

"Hahaha, it's all good as long as he comes!"

The moment Schwarzer followed Zuo Yu and stepped inside the 50th floor's virtual

project's department, Wayne's eyes followed him.

"Schwarzer?!" Wayne remembered every single person on the list of names given to Fang Zhao. Schwarzer was still a university student. Wayne had originally wanted to sign Schwarzer on as a reserve, but because his performance in a university e-sports competition had been too outstanding, a whole bunch of other clubs had wanted him and Wayne hadn't had a way to beat them. Wayne had never expected to see Schwarzer here!

This is the newcomer Fang Zhao spoke about?!

"Hi, I am Wayne, manager of Silver Wing's gaming department." Wayne was so excited, his face turned red and his eyes brimmed with tears of excitement. After worrying so much for these few days, they finally had one! And a seedling full off potential at that!

"Oh, hi." Schwarzer put down his bag and looked all around, examining the fabled and mysterious 50th floor of Silver Wing. He had really entered and was sitting on Silver Wing's 50th floor sofa! At the thought of meeting his idol in a bit, Schwarzer got even more excited, thoroughly surveying the layout of this place. There was a thick "Battle of the Century" atmosphere all around, probably because the virtual idol Polar Light was endorsing the game. There was also a photograph of a curly-haired dog in a golden frame.

At the side was a display cabinet filled with models of Old Era stuff such as bicycles, motorcycles guns etc. There was also a model of Polar Light and a "100-Year Period of Destruction" series Divine Punishment storage card.

Schwarzer shot up from the sofa and rushed over. "Is that... is that the 'T-Rex' model that beat 2S and BOOM in the match back than? This material, it is the limited edition one!"

Zu Wen and the others came over to look at the new guy. They no longer kept up with university e-sports scene, but when they'd spoken to their juniors, they had heard of the name Schwarzer and knew that this little fellow had skill.

"You can touch it if you like. This was sent straight from Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch. However, you have to be careful. If you break it, our boss will get angry. And the consequences for making him angry are very severe," Zu Wen said.

Beside him, Wayne had been thoroughly disregarded.

Wayne had sent Schwarzer an invitation message before, but unfortunately, he hadn't gotten a reply. It had probably been deleted a long time ago. Wayne was also not foolish enough to bring up the matter. The atmosphere now was so good, why would he make things awkward? After all, it was not something to be ashamed of, and besides, Schwarzer seemed to have totally forgotten about it.

"About that, Schwarzer, are you willing to sign with Silver Wing? Do you want to sit down and discuss the contract?" Wayne asked.

"Contract? Lets not rush into things, I want to wait till supergod AliveAfter500Years returns before discussing." Schwarzer might be a fanboy and a little impulsive when it came decision-making, but he was no idiot. Signing the contract depended on whether AliveAfter500Years would come. If he did not get to see him in person, there was no way he would sign a contract that easily.

Wayne still wanted to say something when Zuo Yu's communications device rang again.

"I'm heading down again to pick another one."

"An-another one?" Wayne was no longer in a rush to discuss a contract with Schwarzer, nor could he sit still. He just stood there, staring straight at the door.

After a while, the door opened and Zuo Yu walked in together with a guy wearing a cap and shades.

When the guy took off his cap and shades, Wayne astonishedly exclaimed, "Dorrian?!"

Dorrian, a member of HWR's main team who had reached the end of his contract. Previously, there had been a lot of speculation from the media regarding the choice he would make, whether renewing his contract with HWR or signing with another club. No one had expected that he would actually be here!

A big smile appeared on Wayne's face. Silver Wing intends to snatch players from under those e-sports club's noses!

Dorrian laughed as he saw Schwarzer, who had his hands all over a model. "You are rather early, huh. Even earlier than me even though I stay in Qi'an City."

Schwarzer was reluctant to put the model back in its place. "Hehe, I'm just anxious to

meet my idol. I wonder how many will come today.

Wayne's ears pricked up when he heard Schwarzer say those words. Does that mean there are still others?

Dorrian was the same as Schwarzer; he would not be discussing anything related to contracts until he met AliveAfter500Years in person.

Half an hour later, Zuo Yu's communication device rang.

This time, Wayne could not even stand still. He followed Zuo Yu down to pick the person up. When he saw Jinro, he suddenly felt a rising ecstasy in his heart and had to take few deep breaths to force himself to calm down.

Jinro, this was Jinro! The former captain of 2S's main team!

Due to a dispute years ago, Jinro had retired and no longer livened up the professional circles, but he had not completely disappeared from the gaming world. People just rarely mentioned him much. It was not that e-sports clubs did not want him; rather, it was rumored that Jinro had no desire to return to the professional circle and there was not much activity from him. What methods had Fang Zhao actually used to be able to entice such a person over?!

No matter how many could be signed in the end, these parties coming down was already amazing.

Schwarzer, Dorrian, and Jinro played board and card games as they waited. After that, the fourth and fifth people arrived in quick succession. They were the two from the amateur circles, August and Yu Zhongqing. These two had quite a reputation in Yanzhou's gaming circles and were on Wayne's list. Back when Wayne had sent out the invite, Yu Zhongqing had replied with a rejection message, saying he did not want to change his profession at the moment. Looking at things now, Wayne had been rejected for not being qualified enough!

Milo and Jasmine arrived around 2 p.m., and the last to arrive was Jake, as his father had purposely wasted time, but at Jake's insistence, they'd still arrived before 3 p.m.

"We are here just to check things out and have not decided whether or not to sign," Jake's father said quickly after entering. He still hoped that his son would sign with one of Yanzhou's Big Five e-sports clubs. After all, the Big Five's reputation was

everywhere. Even if he did not sign with the Big Five, being a main team member of a decent e-sports club was fine too. But why were they at an entertainment company? Didn't this sort of company put profits over everything else? Rumor was that these sorts of entertainment companies were only suitable for retirees, and professional e-sports athletes would only consider it after they were past their prime. Jake's career had not yet officially started, so what prospects would joining such a company bring? It didn't make sense! Had his son been brainwashed?

Regarding their respective manager's or assistant's limited understanding, the eight did not bother to explain. They just chilled and played board and card games on Silver Wing's 50th floor.

Zu Wen, Rodney, and the others did not show much expression on their faces, but in their own department group chat, they could not help but excitedly talk about it.

Among this group, Jinro and Milo had risen to prominence during the period when Zu Wen and the others were still in secondary school. Especially Jinro, who had been extremely popular during their secondary school days. Back then, Zu Wen had even become a 2S fan and had bought a set of 2S clothes with their sword and stars insignia. When Jinro had retired, he'd no longer paid as much attention to 2S.

Time passed slowly till it was 4 p.m. The eight playing games seemed a little distracted, raising their heads to look at the door once in awhile.

Zuo Yu's communications device rang again.

Wayne looked over anxiously and was about to ask whether a ninth person was coming when Zuo Yu said, "It's Boss."

Everyone around, including the eight playing games, stopped what they were doing and looked over.

"...They are all here... OK... yes... yes... I understand." Once the call ended, Zuo Yu said, "Boss is coming over, prepare a conference room."

Schwarzer had put down his cards and was sitting down and eagerly awaiting his idol's arrival. "That means supergod will also be coming over?!"

Five minutes later.

The doors of the 50th floor virtual projects department opened and Fang Zhao strode in. Scanning everyone in the lounge, he told Wayne, "To the conference room first."

All eight had done preliminary research on Silver Wing's 50th floor virtual projects department and knew Fang Zhao was the young composer and also the manager of the department. After Fang Zhao had walked in, they had all glanced behind his back, but there was only the door closing.

"Where is the supergod?" Schwarzer asked, still staring at the door.

"Where is AliveAfter500Years?" Milo also asked.

Fang Zhao faced them. "That's me."

The eight: "..."

Dead silence.

Even though his voice was not loud, the two words kept repeating in the heads of those eight. Each word rang like the sound of thunder, frying their minds blank as they remained stunned and dumbfounded.

Half a minute later, Jinro then took a deep breath and broke the silence in the room. "Are you... being serious?"

"This joke is too cold. I can't even bring myself to laugh." Jake's face was rigid. He could not imagine the globally ranked number one, an expert who had so tyrannically oppressed them like he had been chopping vegetables, would actually be around the same age as himself!?

Schwarzer pointed a trembling finger at Fang Zhao, his face full of shock. "Who did you say you were?"

Jasmine, who always looked cold and expressionless, had widened her eyes as though she had seen a ghost.

Milo stood up and his eyes scanned Fang Zhao from head to toe, but he found no trace of similarity with the expert in-game. "Impossible! I don't believe this!" The Fang Zhao before them was a youngster who dabbled in art, totally different from what he had imagined.

Fang Zhao welcomed their looks of doubt and measure and did not get angry. "It's all right, let's have another round."

Milo: "...". He suddenly had the urge to slap himself.

Fang Zhao glanced at Zu Wen. "Let's use the game consoles for a bit."

"No problem!" Zu Wen inquired with the others and eagerly went to open their gaming room. He did a simple tidying up of all the junk they left after gaming on normal days.

Inside the gaming room, other than Zu Wen and the other's consoles. there were also the five machines brought over previously from the gaming department that belonged to the other five, enough for 9 people to use.

Walking into the gaming room and seeing those consoles, the eight of them simultaneously felt a nervous apprehension, but that did not quell the doubt within their hearts. They still chose to unravel the truth in-game! Whether he was the real deal or an imposter, they would find out once they tried!

Five minutes later.

Wayne and the others waiting outside had not yet touched their tea when the doors to the gaming room opened. Fang Zhao walked out first, seemingly no different from before. Behind him, the others came out one after the other, but...

Schwarzer's head was full of sweat, Jake's face was pale, the veins on Milo's head seemed like they were going to rupture, and even the usually steady Jinro seemed dazed. The eight all had different expressions, but the outcome was all but written on their faces—a complete thrashing.

Two hours later.

A radiant Wayne stepped out of the conference room taking big strides, beaming as though he had won the lottery grand prize of a few hundred million. When he stepped into the elevator, he was still on a call with someone. "Tell publicity's side that the virtual projects department and gaming department want to hold a joint press conference. We are going to sign some new members!"

Chapter 141

Eight Successive Bombshells

Yet another seemingly peaceful morning.

Every day, there was countless news to attract the public. Numerous promoters talked about their assigned topics and entertainment reporters busily tracked down online and offline activity, trying to unearth news not known by many.

Whoever's placing rose once more, which celebrity had a sex scandal, XX e-sports club signing a promising talent, XX's transfer saga... this sort of news occupied the headlines of the entertainment circle's news and was mostly about e-sports celebrities. However, seeing these every day, this sort of information would no longer be considered big news and would be a hot topic for that day only. Generally speaking, it could be considered peaceful.

In "Battle of the Century," at District 79, reporters camping every day to catch AliveAfter500Years followed the same routine everyday: log in, wait, nothing, log off. After doing this for so many days, they were starting to lose hope.

However, on this morning that seemed relatively peaceful, Silver Wing, which had been continuously followed by the media, released a piece of news.

"Silver Wing's virtual projects department collaborated with the gaming department to form the 'SilverWing50PolarLight' project team, specializing in "Battle of the Century," and have signed Yanbei University of Finance's rising star, Schwarzer."

The matter of Silver Wing's virtual projects and gaming departments combining to form the SilverWing50PolarLight team was not really considered news. Even before, when Silver Wing had remained silent, everyone could have guessed as much. Today was just their official announcement.

And the news of them signing Yanzhou's talented rising star was not such a big deal. Schwarzer's name was only associated with university e-sports, and only those medias that covered such areas would understand better. Other people, including professional e-sports athletes, might not have necessarily heard of this name.

"Schwarzer? The student who just started year two of university? Was he signed up to be kept in reserve? Or will he be thrown straight into the main team? None of this was mentioned."

"This time, Silver Wing's actions disgust me. The kid is only in year two of university. He's full of ignorance and was just tricked to go over."

"Using AliveAfter500Years as bait, probably?"

"University kids are just so gullible. A seedling with potential, wasted just like that."

In the mainstream line of thinking, most people thought that only AliveAfter500Years was strong, not Silver Wing. Who knew what shady business they were up to? Therefore, even if the gaming industry was frequently being flooded by this ID that had abruptly risen up, people that were serious about going down the path of e-sports would not consider an entertainment company like Silver Wing.

Regarding this piece of news, the people who were following Silver Wing closely let the news pass and did not place any importance on it. Instead, they felt a little disappointed. They had kept silent for so long, as if preparing a big move, but it turned out that instead of a wave, it was just a small ripple. Disappointing, a complete letdown!

Ocean University of Yanzhou.

When students of Ocean University saw the news, they broke into hysterical laughter. They had always been at odds with the students of Yanbei University of Finance.

"Hahaha, is that fool that short of money? Instead of joining a proper e-sports club, he actually went and signed with an entertainment company!"

"Does he mean to go into singing or acting? Do you reckon he wants to be like those has-been e-sports celebrities and have a dual profession?"

"Signing a contract shows he wants to walk down that path. Did he not consider it carefully and plan it properly?"

"Idiots just love doing stupid things!"

"Do the people at Yanbei University of Finance only think about money?"

"He will surely regret it. Anyway, us at Ocean University would never do something so foolish!"

Many at Ocean University scoffed at Schwarzer's decision. However, an hour later, they were given a smack in the face, a full-forced smack.

An hour after the news of Schwarzer signing, Silver Wing released yet another piece of news.

"Silver Wing has signed Yanzhou Ocean University's recent graduate, a champion in many continental university e-sports competitions, Jake."

Schwarzer had only suddenly risen in prominence in the first half of the year. Although his performances were outstanding, the time he had been well-known was short, and it was only within the university e-sports scene. Jake was different. Although Jake had not officially stepped into the professional circle, he had made a name for himself a few years ago and he'd won numerous awards during his university days. His reputation was bigger than Schwarzer's, and Yanzhou's best clubs were also keeping an eye on him.

Compared to the previous news, this piece attracted even more attention.

"Yet another one has been fooled."

"That is why I said university students are all naive. A recent graduate is the same. Wait till he has experienced society for two years—no, one year is enough. At that time, he will surely be regretting."

People in the industry only took it as a small laughing matter, feeling sorry for two newcomers that were about to be ruined by Silver Wing. But at Ocean University, it was as if the news had instigated a raging tsunami.

"It hurts!"

"What the f*ck! Did I see wrongly?!"

"What is going on? Why did J-god sign with Silver Wing?!"

"Fake news! I don't care, this is surely fake news! Where is the school's rumor-refuting association? Quickly come and clarify!"

Although Jake did not have that great a reputation within professional circles, and he was still a far cry from those really famous, within the university circles, especially within Yanzhou Ocean University's e-sports circles, he was considered a godlike figure, and almost everyone believed that, as long as Jake marched into the professional circles, he would surely soar! Previously, it had been speculated that he would enter a professional e-sports club, not an entertainment company.

Yesterday, on the school's forums, there had been people discussing which e-sports club would sign Jake in the end. After all, the game had been out for nearly a month already. Generally, all transfers and contract renewals would be completed within the first month. Never had they expected to get a rude awakening today!

"Could it be that J-god has some unspoken difficulties?"

"Was he forced into it? I heard that these sorts of big entertainment companies that stick a foot in everything have some hidden tricks up their sleeves!"

On social platforms, Ocean University's student union condemned the news at Silver Wing's site and demanded to know what underhand methods they'd use to compel Jake to sign a contract. There were others who went to Jake's social profile to inquire, but regardless of whether it was Jake or Silver Wing's public site, there were no replies.

Popular media Prairie Fire's chief editor, Qian Cheng, gravely instructed his subordinates, "All of you watch closely. My sixth sense is telling me that today Silver Wing will make a big move."

An hour after the news with Jake, Silver Wing once more released another piece of news. "God-tier player August from the amateur e-sports circles has signed with Silver Wing."

Many people in the amateur circles knew that August's family owned a company. His parents and brother managed the company, and he had a stake in the company but was idle. On normal days, he stayed in the company playing games. Last year, August had said that he wished to change from being an amateur to a professional, but there had been no news of him signing a contract. Nobody expected that news to come out now.

People in the amateur circles were stunned.

It was reasonable to say that August did not lack money, and he had always placed top ten within the amateur circles, so why would he not think things through and instead sign with Silver Wing?

But after the third piece of news was released, Silver Wing once again kept their silence. August did not appear either, instead allowing everyone to make all sorts of guesses.

And as this third piece of news was published, many people realized that the news had been released in one-hour intervals! And the degree of shock was greater each time! In an hours time, would there be even more earth-shattering news?

With the outside world making all sorts of guesses, Wayne, who was sitting in his office, smirked. He just wanted to let everyone experience his mood yesterday, how he had felt his insides churn everytime Zuo Yu answered a call. Everyone was probably experiencing the same, right?

Only three so far! It was still early!

Indeed, many people had begun waiting for the hour to pass. An hour was actually not a long time. A round of games was enough for an hour to pass by.

One hour later, as many people expected, Silver Wing released another piece of news once again.

"Yu Zhongqing, who has a higher ranking than August in the amateur circles, has signed with Silver Wing."

Yu Zhongqing kept a lower profile in the amateur circles and rarely interacted with others, but his control was good and he had great battle sense, and he had a higher ranking. Many e-sports clubs wished to rope him in, but unexpectedly, Silver Wing had beaten them to the punch!

These two famed players in the amateur circles, August and Yu Zhongqing, had actually been signed by Silver Wing. The previous news of Schwarzer and Jake could not even be considered important now.

Look, two more seniors from the amateur circles have been conned. When the students of Ocean University thought this way, they felt a little better.

At this moment, many people could not even continue gaming and were now waiting for more news from Silver Wing's side. They felt even more anxious. The media no longer treated it without any importance. People within the industry with a keen nose knew that Silver Wing had not completed their move. They were waiting for bigger developments to come.

It was noon, and many people who were having their lunch breaks. Some ate from lunch boxes in front of their screens while others gathered in cafeterias and discussed as they ate.

An hour later, Silver Wing released their fifth piece of news, which made many who were eating spew out their food.

"Freelancer Milo?! That renowned freelancer 'BlackWizard' Milo?!"

"So he is the BlackWizard. No wonder I found the name familiar."

"To actually pull this freelancer over, how did Silver Wing actually convince him? Did they throw money at him? Milo isn't poor either."

"Maybe BlackWizard wants to say goodbye to his life as a freelancer?"

Although "BlackWizard" Milo had his own store, his heart was bent on gaming and he taken part in many professional competitions. He had risen to prominence a long time ago, and his reputation compared to August and Yu Zhongqing was even greater.

However, at this time, although everyone was curious about the reason BlackWizard had signed with Silver Wing, they were even more curious as to who else would follow.

"What I really want to know now is, other than BlackWizard, who else has been poached!" This was what many internet users and media wanted to know. Now paying close attention to Silver Wing were not only similar entertainment companies but every e-sports club as well.

An hour later, Silver Wing announced that freelancer "Jasmine," who had been given the nickname "Little White Flower" by the masses, had signed with Silver Wing.

"What the hell!"

"Why did Little White Flower also sign?"

"This Little White Flower is not pure and white at all. Calling her a man-eating flower is more appropriate. She ranks even higher than BlackWizard!"

"I'm not interested in BlackWizard or Little White Flower. Now I really want to know who else they have lined up."

"Can't they release all the news in one go? Why do they have to announce one every hour! This sucks!"

"So anxious!"

Many people went to the social platforms where Silver Wing had announced their news and posted "Who else?"

Silver Wing had not done a conclusion, so there would still be more!

They felt that an hour was so g*ddamn long. Why couldn't time hurry up?

Another 60 minutes finally passed. As before, Silver Wing continued dropping bombshells, and this time an even bigger one.

"Silver Wing has signed e-sports athlete Dorrian, previously from HWR's first team and a core member."

This piece of news stunned a lot of people.

What? Dorrian? A core member of HWR's first-string team?

Wouldn't renewing his contract with HWR be good? Even if he didn't wish to sign with HWR, weren't other e-sports clubs good enough? This was a true powerhouse produced by one of the Big Five! Didn't he have a number of clubs in contact with him already?

In the eyes of the many who paid attention to the Big Five, Dorrian was most definitely a pure-blooded e-sports athlete of the highest quality. How could he sign for an entertainment company like Silver Wing?

After their initial doubts, the online masses became delighted.

"Impressive, to think Silver Wing actually poached from the core of HWR!"

"No, this can be considered poaching from the Big Five! A core member of their first-string team! This is an exception!"

"Hahaha, you never get to see an entertainment company poach from the Big Five and actually be successful. Dorrian is in his prime, his skills and body capabilities are in peak condition."

"Dorrian surely didn't sign with Silver Wing to retire. There is surely some reason that we don't know."

"Seven already! I've waited since noon and even skipped my afternoon nap just to wait for this moment. Finally a piece of shocking news; looks like I didn't wait for nothing!"

"Speaking of which, there are already seven and Silver Wing hasn't released a concluding message? Are there still... more to come?"

"Given the increasing magnitude of shock the seven pieces of news have brought, the following people after Dorrian are going to be even more unexpected."

"Could it be that Silver Wing poached not just once from the Big Five but twice?"

"I am already shivering."

If bystanders could guess that much, the media could too, which scared the Big Five into hurriedly checking on which of their talents wanted to jump ship. Whether their contracts were up or not, they also needed confirmation, but they could not find a single one. The situation of Dorrian signing with Silver Wing had been beyond expectation, but since his contract had already expired, HWR could not control it. But after Dorrian, who else was there?

At this time, even without Silver Wing promoting, the entire Yanzhou e-sports scene, whether students, media, or other players, had their eyes peeled on this matter.

This round, everyone felt that time was crawling especially slowly. The audience felt like they were holding their breath up until the appointed moment and collectively breathed out once it was time. But before they even had time to take a second breath, Silver Wing announced this:

"Jinro has signed with Silver Wing."

There was no need for introductions. Just this name was more than enough.

Anyone who saw the news thought their eyes were playing tricks on them and slowly reread this piece of news a couple of times, as if they were deciphering an ancient language scroll.

A minute after the news was released, Prairie Fire published a screenshot of an ID search within the game. On it was an ID many senior players were familiar with, "Jin9ro," a name that had accompanied students during their primary, secondary, or university days. Perhaps a few newer players weren't that familiar with the ID, but eight years ago, there hadn't been anyone in the circle who wouldn't have recognized this ID! That was none other than the captain of 2S, one of the Big Five!

The ID that had vanished eight years ago had reappeared and returned to the professional circle.

Although the points this account had accumulated were still zero, fans who had once supported him did not doubt his ability. They believed that this ID would once again rush to the very top of the leaderboards.

Inside 2S e-sports club, the atmosphere was strange.

There were still a number of active players from the same period as Jinro who had once served under him. There were still a few in their first-string team, while some had already been demoted to their second- or third-string teams, or even switched clubs. Other people might have had no idea of Jinro's ability now, but they used other means to find out.

This eight years for Jinro had been a settling period for him as he got rid of his hot temper and impatience. He was now more matured and harder to deal with.

Back then, Jinro's agreement with 2S was to not sign with any professional e-sports club for the next 10 years. However, entertainment companies did not count as e-sports clubs. 2S had never felt the need to bother about these sorts of entertainment companies and had even hoped that Jinro would sign for them, waste his talent, and go on the decline, but Silver Wing was different!

This was a Silver Wing that had produced the number one on the global leaderboards!

No one knew what they had installed, but since they could already produce the number one AliveAfter500Years, could a second or third or more be in the cards?

In the eyes of many reputable e-sports clubs, Silver Wing was like a monster that had revealed its sinister intentions, and they had to guard against it! They might not have suffered any serious setbacks, but they had all received a huge shock.

After the eight pieces of news had been announced, Silver Wing finally posted a concluding message that said they were happy to be able to sign the eight, and signing with Silver Wing would not disappoint them.

Seeing the concluding message, many e-sports clubs and entertainment companies heaved a sigh of relief. However, for the general public, when they sighed, they felt a little regret. They were still anticipating even more explosive news to come out, but still, they had seen enough excitement for the day.

Some reviewers posted their comments on Silver Wing's news today. "Silver Wing could become Yanzhou's Big Six."

Ranked sixth in terms of skill in Yanzhou's e-sports world was by no means a disparaging remark.

An entertainment company that had previously only had film and music as its core—a company that had only followed the crowd to dabble in gaming to earn more money—would actually be assessed as being capable of squeezing ahead of all other e-sports clubs and placing right behind Yanzhou's Big Five as the number six? This was considered to be a really high evaluation in entertainment circles!

"What lofty ambitions!"

These three words summed up the evaluations by critics and reviewers in entertainment circles after the conclusion of Silver Wing's eight pieces of news.

The internet was also abuzz.

"Eight successive bombshells! Silver Wing wants to fly high!"

"Hooking one could be considered a trick. Landing two could be considered as having high deception skills. But three, four, five... eight! These eight are still old hands within the circle and at their prime, how could these people be so easy to deceive?!"

One braindead, two braindead, all eight brain dead?

No way!

This time, nobody said anything about AliveAfter500Years fishing again.

"Indeed, the low-profile kept by Silver Wing previously was to prepare for such a big move!

As for the press conference that was going to happen, before Silver Wing had sent out the invites, many medias outlets had taken the initiative and applied to participate in this press conference. Even the big and popular media firms that would be invited even if they did not apply had also done so just to be safe.

Over at Silver Wing, the staff in charge of handling the invitations was about to cry from staring at the screen full of emails. The venue had a limited capacity and they had received too many applications. They were not too familiar with the gaming circles, and Silver Wing had never experienced such a situation before. Some of the names and companies on some of these emails had never been heard of before. Even though their reputation did not seem high, he did not dare to reject them. This matter was very important, and any mistakes would not just be met with a paycut. Therefore, he could only request that management provide more manpower and send over a few more people who were better versed in the gaming circles to make the decisions.

At the same time, the eight players that starred in Silver Wing's news today had also updated their statuses on their own social platforms. They all had the same reply to all the interrogating from the online audiences:

"Our boss is AliveAfter500Years."

Many online users started to understand.

"Does this mean that AliveAfter500Years is going to personally lead a team?"

"Definitely, Jinro was even willing to give up his captain position to sign with Silver Wing. Surely he acknowledges that person's strength and recognizes the team's strength and future prospects."

"Are the eight that signed with Silver Wing... really foolish? Why do I feel that they have made a very wise choice?"

"Following the global number one, I wonder how that feels like?"

"I suddenly feel a little envious of them."

"They have surely seen god AliveAfter500Years already. I'm so jealous, I also wish to see that god in person.

"The more we talk about it, the more I wish to enter Silver Wing."

Many people had seen the video of AliveAfter500Years's godly maneuvers. With the general public's opinion being swayed, a number of other professional gamers had a thought. Maybe signing with Silver Wing is not a bad choice?

However, while the online audiences were discussing this, the eight who had just updated their statuses had a raging fire in their hearts. This is not what I wanted to say! You guys don't know that the truth lies behind this line! You people have spent so much time and effort to find the truth, entertainment reporters have spent so much time trying to dig out the truth, but it is right there within that one line! This was today's ninth and biggest bombshell! These statuses transmitted the most important information, and it was literally put in front of everyone!

Chapter 142

The Distance Between Virtual and Reality

Having signed with Silver Wing, the eight of them could not update their statuses on social platforms as and when they liked. However, for the eight simultaneous statuses, they had obtained approval.

Silver Wing's side did not reveal who AliveAfter500Years was right away. According to suggestions from the publicity department, by keeping the media in suspense, they would continue to pay attention. Thus, Silver Wing had decided to only release news of the signing of the eight players, hiding the biggest boss's ID for the time being. Yet they did not intend to completely hide it. The statuses of the eight actually laid the truth in plain sight, but no one would think in that direction.

For the SilverWing50PolarLight project, although it was a collaboration between the virtual projects department and gaming department, the virtual projects department held all the authority to decide. The gaming department only assisted them. After all, Fang Zhao was leading the SilverWing50PolarLight team as he did with the Polar Light project team, both of which were under the virtual projects department.

The "boss" mentioned by the eight actually pointed to the boss of the virtual projects department, who held all the authority and was also AliveAfter500Years.

Therefore, in the future, even if anyone asked why Silver Wing had kept hiding the fact, Silver Wing could reply: "We did not conceal it. In fact, it was revealed way earlier, but you people did not understand it."

According to common sense, there was really nobody that thought in that direction. When it came to managing a e-sports club, the manger was a manager, an e-sports manager was still a manager, and the captain of the main team was still an e-sport athlete. Never was a captain the manager of a company project. Thus, the general public only had one thought on the eight statuses: AliveAfter500Years was their boss, the captain.

Even if anyone made a guess in that direction, it was with the intention of a joke and not for real.

The press conference was held at the convention hall in Silver Wing Tower. Fang Zhao would be attending and wearing company attire that showed his rank as a manager-level staff. He did not have the sinister scars he had in-game, and since he had long released his suppressed emotions, he looked a lot more mild and refined.

Backstage, the eight of them twitched their lips simultaneously when they saw Fang Zhao.

The heavysset Milo grunted. "A beast in human attire!"

"Don't talk nonsense. That's not how you use it," Jinro said. However, he understood what Milo meant. What Milo wanted to say was that Fang Zhao was like a violent beast beneath that human skin. Jinro agreed with Milo's thoughts; Fang Zhao in person was totally different from his in-game persona. They could not be blamed for doubting him. Even they had not considered the age factor. With such a large contrast, anyone would have doubted, let alone believed it.

"There are so many people in the hall!" Schwarzer nervously said. He had stuck his head out to take a peek previously.

Among the eight, other than Schwarzer, the others had already gotten used to these sorts of setting and were more calm than him.

Jinro's feelings were more complicated. He had left the professional scene eight years ago and had since kept a low profile. He had not used his normal ID during these eight years, using only other temporary or smurf 1 accounts. During this duration, he had not appeared in such a situation where he had been the focus of the public eye, and returning to what he had experienced in the past, he could not help but recall things that had happened a long time ago.

"Prepare yourselves. You are up soon," a staffer reminded them

Many media groups from all over had gathered in the convention hall to observe the words and actions of everyone on stage, thinking how to go about grabbing the news.

Beside Prairie Fire's chief editor, Qian Cheng, sat a middle-aged man. He had thick eyebrows and big eyes. He looked rather prim and proper, but many entertainment reporters looked even more proper than him. There was nothing really unusual about him and he would not give anyone a lasting first impression.

After the press conference started, Qian Chen would speak to him in a low voice from time to time. When it was not convenient to talk, they would use messages to communicate.

This man was not from Prairie Fire, but today, Qian Cheng had brought him along under the identity of a Prairie Fire employee. This was not how the man looked like normally—he was wearing a disguise.

This was the man many reputable people in the industry termed "Yanzhou's best paparazzi," Wang Tie. Nobody knew what he looked like, but people in the industry knew one thing: there was no news he could not unearth, only a price you could not afford to pay. It was rumored that his keen sense of "smell" would not lose to the guards at the Cemetery of Martyrs.

This time, Qian Cheng had spent a rather large sum to engage Wang Tie's services to help him find the real AliveAfter500Years.

Qian Cheng moved closer and asked in a low voice, "Found anything?"

Wang Tie stared and pointed his finger at the person currently speaking. "What is his background? Virtual projects department manager Fang Zhao? How much do you know about him?"

"You are talking about Fang Zhao? That young fellow is really capable. Silver Wing's virtual projects department rose from the ashes under him. Recently, what astonished people most was that, as a composer, he had some reputation and was good at symphonic styles. He collaborated with great master Xue Jing on a textbook that has had great sales volume and they did a global lecture tour. Why, is there a problem?" Qian Cheng asked suspiciously.

Wang Tie shook his head. "A composer? An artist? Then it's no wonder."

Fang Zhao give him a strange feeling, but he had been overthinking. The other party was a composer, so Wang Tie felt relieved. People who dabbled in arts were different from normal people. Having a weird feeling about him was nothing too surprising.

Seeing Wang Tie shake his head, Qian Cheng sighed. He had said it before, how could Fang Zhao be AliveAfter500Years?

After Fang Zhao had spoken and returned backstage, Jinro and the others went up to

stage to take a seat.

"Until now, of all those that have gone on stage, does not a single one seem suspicious?" Qian Cheng was unresigned, watching the going-ons on stage.

Wang Tie frowned, focusing his eyes at the people being grilled by reporters. Including the eight in the limelight, Silver Wing members and other staff, none were spared. Every time he looked toward the stage, he had a strange feeling, as if he when he stretched out his hand, he could touch the truth, but a thick fog clouded his eyes, distorting the truth. He rarely encountered this sort of contradictory feeling.

So odd! There was surely something weird!

But what had he overlooked?

Seeing Wang Tie creasing his brows, Qian Cheng knew that Wang Tie had encountered some difficult problem. He did not chase for a reply, but he paid close attention to Wang Tie's reaction, observing the minute changes in his expression.

On stage, the normally lively Schwarzer was feeling uneasy with the hundreds of eyes on him. Luckily, they had arranged for him to speak less, and there were not as many questions thrown at him. With Jinro and Dorrian around, the others could relax more. Today, among the eight people, the reporters were mostly focused on Jinro and Dorrian, who were were from the Big Five. Schwarzer had the least to do among the eight and only had to be responsible for smiling.

The reporters posed a number of penetrating questions, but they were all deflected by the experienced Jinro. But when a reporter asked who AliveAfter500Years was and whether he was present, this time Jinro did not immediately reply. Together with the seven others, he faced the reporter who'd asked, showing off a profound smile.

The reaction of Jinro and the others made the reporter feel as if he had asked a really stupid question. When he sat back down, he replayed the question in his heart a few times but found nothing strange. Had he been too direct?

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked a colleague.

The colleague was not sure either, as the reaction of Jinro and the others was puzzling. "I don't think... so?"

Wayne stepped out to answer. His reply was simple. "The identity of AliveAfter500Years will remain a secret for the time being."

Do you wish to know? If you do, find out for yourselves. In any case, I'm not telling you! Curse me? Even if you curse, there is no way I'm telling you!

Wayne just loved watching reporters being helpless and getting pissed.

The reporters present asked Jinro about his experiences over the past eight years, Dorrian about his reason for choosing Silver Wing, and posed all sorts of questions to the others. There were lots of questions answered, but Qian Cheng couldn't bring himself to be delighted. He simply had no interest toward these questions. As he watched time slowly ticking by, the answer he was dying to know most had not yet been found by Wang Tie.

"Still no progress?" Qian Cheng asked again.

Wang Tie paused for a bit and shook his head. Even though he felt that he was one step away from the truth, he just could not catch the bluff. Therefore, he had no choice but to give Qian Cheng a definite answer.

Qian Cheng was disappointed. "Maybe AliveAfter500Years did not come."

"No, I feel that there is a high probability that AliveAfter500Years is present. Did you notice that, when they answered a few questions concerning AliveAfter500Years, they seemed a little nervous? Especially 'BlackWizard' Milo, compared to Schwarzer who is purely fanboying. He does not have the same composure as Jinro either, so his reactions are the most honest to observe and think over."

"Is he afraid?" Qian Cheng asked.

"To be precise, he is afraid of the consequences. He is worried about saying the wrong things. Not because of the nervous atmosphere here, but rather, the consequences from someone present! Therefore, my guess is that the person you are look for is right here!" Suddenly Wang Tie paused for a bit and looked upward.

"What's wrong?" Qian Cheng asked upon seeing his reaction.

"I'm getting the feeling someone is watching me through the surveillance cameras."

"Did they recognize you?"

"I don't know."

At the lounge backstage, Fang Zhao's eyes were fixed on Wang Tie through the surveillance monitors.

"How sharp," Fang Zhao said.

"Boss, this person seems like a problem. Shall I go check it out?" Zuo Yu asked.

"No need."

Toward the end of the press conference, Fang Zhao once more took to the stage to take a photo with the eight signings, Wayne, and a few other Silver Wing leaders and staff. Once the conference ended and the reporters had left, Jinro and the others could finally relax back at the 50th floor. Recalling the reporter who'd asked whether AliveAfter500Years was present, all eight of them found it funny.

The distance between virtual and reality could be very far yet very close. Some people might be separated by a very large distance, but through the use of the internet for face to face communication, one could feel as if the other party was right beside. However, there were times when the actual person was standing right in front of them, yet people would rack their brains to try and find the truth elsewhere.

SilverWing50PolarLight was placed under the virtual projects departments. In the future, their "work area" would also be on the 50th floor. Wayne also had no other option. Fang Zhao was the one who had roped the recruits in. Besides, the area was large and good for planning, and there was enough space to open another gaming studio.

The company provided the eight of them with Fiery Bird's 9th generation console, which they could use if they wanted to log in at the company. Although this sort of entertainment company was not as professional as a e-sports club, entertainment company's had lots of funding, so equipment was not an issue.

The eight players' contracts were different from other celebrities in the company. Every single one had differences in their own contracts, but generally speaking, they had considerably more freedom compared to the contracts of e-sports club players. This was what they had discussed before signing. Everyone had their own custom-

made contracts.

As the game had already started, there was not a lot of time left. Fang Zhao gave them three days to prepare. Schwarzer, who was still a student, had to bring along his Silver Wing contract and return to school to sort out some administrative issues and apply for a long-distance curriculum. The others also needed to settle some personal matters, but three days was more than enough.

Three days later, in the gaming studio on Silver Wing's 50th floor, Jinro and the others, plus the five previously from the gaming department, logged in. The team had been expanded by Fang Zhao and the maximum capacity had increased from 20 to 25. However, Zu Wen and the others had to work and generally would not be able to participate in some activities. Zu Wen and the rest had actually wanted to withdraw and form their own team, but that had been rejected by Fang Zhao. Instead, Fang Zhao drew up the "Virtual projects and e-sports staff combined" daily training regime.

Jinro was using his own old account. Logging in for the first time, he was bound to a team and appeared at the spot where Fang Zhao was, the building that Fang Zhao had first met them at.

As Milo's account was in another district too far away from District 79, he had applied for a brand new account. Milo's old ID was BlackWizard, so his new ID was BlackWizardMilo. Dorrian had also applied for a new account.

The previous five members of the gaming department had not stayed idle during this period. Fang Zhao had assigned a task as well, to head from the city and arrive at the coordinates Fang Zhao had given to them. They did not have Fang Zhao's skill and ability to ride a bike and travel across the city, so the time they spent was much greater, but they still managed to accomplish the task, albeit with great difficulty.

Adding the eight with Jinro, the five from the gaming department, Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu, a total of 15 people gathered at the coordinates.

After logging into his new account and seeing the points value of 0, Schwarzer asked Fang Zhao, "Boss, what is our mission for today?"

Fang Zhao looked at the highway right in front of the building and said, "First let's clear out this road."

"Oh yeah!" Schwarzer used the system's screenshot function to capture a video of him

speaking a few words. After he logged off, he went to his social platforms and posted:
"The glorious path of an e-sports career starts from cleaning the roads! For today,
everyone please call me Mr. Road Sweeper!"

Chapter 143

A Reporter That Separated Himself from the Inferior Ones

Fang Zhao's reason for them to clear the roads was firstly to let them practice and adapt to the operations of the team. The second reason was so he could observe each individual's style and ability up close. Although he had investigated each of them, studying through videos and observing up close was different. Through their impromptu performances and emergency responses, Fang Zhao would be better able to understand them, and through this understanding, Fang Zhao could then assign them roles and adjust the team's formation.

Although Schwarzer from Yanbei University of Finance and Jake from Ocean University of Yanzhou might have had some conflicting disputes due to their school's bad blood, in-game, all private matters had to be set aside. Fang Zhao had dragged them aside to talk about this. If there were any actions that dragged the team down, the offending party would be kicked out right away. This was something that had been clearly stated in the contract.

The activity of 15 people's movements was not small. It was still fine when out of the city, but as they got closer, more and more people noticed them.

Fang Zhao had not let them used silencers, and because of AliveAfter500Years and Jinro and gang's signing with Silver Wing, if the reporters at District 79 did not notice, they should give up being reporters.

Recently, SilverWing50PolarLight as a search term had seen a rapid rise. Previously, when the eight had signed, the popularity of this topic had exploded. Now that the entire team was no longer being secretive, it was a good opportunity for news!

Players in District 79 felt like crying. Previously, there had only been AliveAfter500Years who "swept the streets." Now they had an entire "street sweeping" team to deal with; how were they going to steal experience points now? Especially wherever SilverWing50PolarLight was, as all the monsters nearby would be attracted over. Some players tried to imitate their way of luring monsters, but it did not turn out

well. Their own strength was lacking, and they were wiped out.

The art of luring monsters was not something everyone could do. Therefore, many District 79 players were mulling over whether to switch to another district, such as District 78 or 80. Almost every district with a big e-sports club was experiencing this sort of situation. Of course, there were also people who wanted to follow the SilverWing50PolarLight team and pick up their scraps too.

Thus, recently, the forums for District 79 had many similar posts:

"The amount of monsters in the city are limited. Have you considered switching over to District 78? Team migration!"

"District 79 has changed. It has become Silver Light's District 79, heartbroken." "Silver Light" was what players called SilverWing50PolarLight in short.

"There are just too few creatures in the city. And lately they don't even seem to be increasing. Maybe after Silver Light wipes them out, the replenishing rate can't keep up? The system has not even announced any big quests. Are we supposed to find them ourselves?"

"Let's form a hunting party and head out from the city. It is rumored that there are a lot more monsters outside of the city area. We don't have to head too far. If we set off in the morning, we will still be able to return to a city and find a safe place to disconnect by night. Those interested, number off!"

However, unlike the complex feelings of players, reporters in District 79 were going crazy just trying to grab any piece of news. Dying a hundred or so times did not even embody the amount of work they put in. Given their lousy skills, these reporters were easily killed by monsters after they stepped outside. As lives were limited, a death would stop them from logging back into the game until the next day even if they had money to spend. Thus, these reporters would have a few accounts, and every day, after dying, they would switch to the next account, and the next. After all, the motive was to obtain news, not to collect points and rise up the leaderboards.

District 79's account peddlers were raking in the big bucks everyday. They used to envy their fellow peddlers who were assigned to the same districts as the big e-sports clubs. Most of them were from studios, and their locations had already been assigned. Everyone had their own tasks. The experienced and accomplished persons were

assigned the better districts, while others were randomly assigned. Back when they'd logged into a district without a single small e-sports club, they had made plans to either switch districts or waste away and die. Never had they expected that AliveAfter500Years would appear and let them live again!

Due to the high profile appearance of SilverWing50PolarLight, District 79 was once again all the rage. Even if they could not match up to districts that contained the Big Five, given the online searches, they had already surpassed the popularity of a few mid-tier e-sports clubs.

So much so that even some retired e-sports players were recruited by news media outlets to be bodyguards for their reporters.

Although this virtual supply chain was often criticized, but it continued thriving as it was so profitable.

Previously, an account for District 79 had cost around \$200–\$500, but now, prices had jumped by anywhere from five to ten times! The price of equipment had risen even more!

Especially a few larger peddler studios that had joined hands to dominate District 79's account market and jack up prices. Every day, studios could be seen displaying these kinds of advertisements for accounts: "District 79 account, XXXX studios, while stocks last."

There were so many reporters out to grab the news it caused quite a bit of a disturbance for team Silver Light. A few times, when the team was vigorously killing within the city, some reporters rushed over to try and get an interview. As a result, they were surrounded by monsters and killed. Afterward, these reporters criticized Silver Light's members for just standing aside and not helping. Originally wanting to discredit the members of Silver Light, it backfired, as online players were not foolish.

"With such a low IQ, he still wants to be a reporter? Go back home and drink milk instead!"

"Courting death and still wanna drag people along! All gamers know that, at these times, any external distractions can cause injury or death. Just by obstructing them, you were in the wrong, and you actually have the face to criticize Silver Light's members?"

"If it were in the Period of Destruction, this kind would have long been beaten to death, right?"

"No, there were no people so stupid during the period. They were all running for their lives."

Milo and the others heaved sighs of relief when they saw the discussions online.

"But those reporters are indeed troublesome. We aren't like those big e-sports clubs with people to specifically block off reporters. We only have 15 over here. Unless we kill off those reporters too? I really don't dare; these reporters can twist a story so well, and it makes me waste a bunch of time." Every time Milo saw these reporters appearing in the thick of killing, he felt like killing them all the same, but he was already past his impulsive age, and having signed a contract with the company, he was part of a team and could no longer do as he liked like when he'd been a freelancer.

"Those reporters are so irritating!" Schwarzer had actually enjoyed the feeling of being chased by reporters and experiencing the treatment of a celebrity, but after two days, he'd gotten sick of it. He would rather not have this sort of treatment. He just wanted to play a proper game, was that so hard?

Former HWR core member Dorrian shared some knowledge with his younger teammate. "That's what you have to go through as a celebrity. Don't think that they will let you off just because we are in the virtual world. Rather, they can be even more sticky in this world. Of course, you mustn't be too naive and try to talk sense into them. These people won't stop, especially entertainment reporters. If you ever get stopped by them, try not to say much. Even if something happens, leave it to the public relations team to handle it. Don't do anything on the spot, as that will cause more complications. These people love to stir things up. Even if there is nothing, they can still make something happen. You can ask Vice Captain Jinro; even if he has been away from the scene for eight years, he won't have forgotten his past experiences."

Jinro nodded his head silently, agreeing with Dorrian's words, but he couldn't think of a good reply.

Everyone glanced at Fang Zhao, waiting for him to speak. Should they disregard these troublesome people and continue clearing the city, or should they do something else?

Fang Zhao drummed his fingers on the table. "Since you find them troublesome, then

let's make it so they can't keep up."

On that day, the members of Silver Light all did a little self-reflection. Indeed, if they were just like Fang Zhao, they would not have to worry about that problem. Taking a look at Fang Zhao, when he'd first exploded on the global leaderboards, District 79 had been full of reporters lying in wait, but very few had been able to grab any news; they had all been just trying their luck.

External disturbances were one thing, but lacking the ability to handle it was an irrefutable reality.

After the meeting ended, Schwarzer grumbled to Zu Wen and the others, "So much pressure!" He had always thought himself to be number one, but after entering the team, he had realized there was always someone stronger.

Schwarzer felt like Fang Zhao treated them as soldiers and trained them as such. Their minds and bodies were exhausted, but aside from the grumbling, Schwarzer enjoyed that pressing and intense feeling he got. His skills had improved tremendously under pressure, and he understood better about creatures from the Period of Destruction. He had also learned a lot about firearm usage, troop formations, and other military skills. He had shed all the unorganized behavior he'd had when he'd played on his own. This was a professional team!

And the thing that gave Schwarzer the most pressure was not the harassment from reporters or the skill gap between him and his teammates. Instead, it was the captain, Fang Zhao, that made him feel the most pressured. During their "street cleanings," Fang Zhao would cover the back, but the feeling he gave was like a slave driver with a whip, urging them from behind. Anyone who made a mistake would be whipped.

Today, Fang Zhao had accepted an invitation to give a lecture at Qi'an Academy of Music and left Jinro in charge. This had happened a few times, and the team members had already polished up their team work. Besides, Jinro was experienced and used to leading a team, so Fang Zhao was not too worried.

Without Fang Zhao around, the Silver Light team was clearly much more lively.

And on this day, they met a reporter.

The team had decided to increase their speed and leave the reporters behind. Even though they were not as refined as Fang Zhao and could not make the reporters totally

disappear, they were still able to get rid of a few. However, this reporter was not like those unskilled and troublesome entertainment reporters. Huo Li was a war journalist, and from what he said, he had entered the game to better understand the Old Era and the Period of Destruction and hoped to take some photos that could move people.

When he encountered the Silver Light team, he requested to tag along and guaranteed not to interfere with the team's plans. He also promised to not release any photos of the Silver Light team without permission and showed all the photos he had previously taken to Jinro and the others.

He was indeed different from those entertainment reporters. The photos Huo Li took were taken from angles that could shock and move people. His photography skills were extremely professional, and his photos were of cities after experiencing a disaster. He had decent skill, and just as he'd said, he did not provide any trouble for the team, just taking photos from the side and generously letting Jinro and the others view the photos he had taken.

After clearing a wave of monsters, the team had left behind other reporters, and when they found a place to rest, Huo Li told them of his own experiences at battlefields.

And among the team members, other than Fang Zhao, Schwarzer was the only one who had not completed his military service and was still curious about this.

When Huo Li was recounting his stories, he did seem rather like a teacher preaching to his students, and those listening could not help but respect him, yet he could discuss with them like a fellow student.

"You know, there are some things that I cannot say due to confidentiality issues, so I have to be a little vague," Huo Li said.

Schwarzer enthusiastically nodded his head. "I understand, I understand!"

As Huo Li raised his head and looked up at the the Period of Destruction's sky filled with dust, his tone full of melancholy. "In places where you can't see, there are still many wars. There are wars on other planets and wars within our own planet."

"Eh? Within our own planet?" Schwarzer curiously asked. He frequently browsed the internet, but he'd never seen such news.

The others also pricked up their ears.

Huo Li laughed faintly. "As a reporter, one needs to have the bravery to expose the truth, and we war journalists are part reporter, part soldier. For every war, we use our lives as a wager. Work comes first, and life is secondary. To get a a vivid report, we need to enter deep into war zones and not hold back. A proper constitution and a well cultivated sense of professionalism is needed. When people talk about war journalists, they use words like 'unafraid of hardship,' or 'brave dedication,' but these are too one-dimensional and vague. A real war zone is nothing like a game. Once a person dies, he really is gone for good."

Huo Li reminisced, "I shall not talk about those within our planet. Those on other planets, I have experienced more. Once, when I followed a team into a war zone, weather caused the operation to encounter some problems, and under those nasty weather conditions, our communications equipment malfunctioned. We were unable to find our bearings and did not have control of the situation. Encountering danger, all we could do was buckle down and fight. That sort of desperate situation united us, perhaps similar to the way people during the Period of Destruction did. That memory is still deeply moving, yet it is full of pain and sorrow. That is not something that can be described unless you have felt it for yourself."

Huo Li spoke about battlefields and how he had followed troops into war zones. There was quite a lot of stuff that he made vague due to his confidentiality agreements, but that did not stop him from explaining the situations clearly. Whether it was his life following the military or the circumstances in the war zone, despite the details being fuzzy, it did not seem fabricated at all,

Jinro and Milo made eye contact. The doubt in their hearts had lessened. They had not dropped their vigilance, but this person really did not seem like a liar. Furthermore, Huo Li had displayed some skills in the skirmish earlier, and his photos were different from others, supporting his claim of being a battlefield reporter. When Huo Li was narrating his story, his eyes seemed to exude honesty as well.

Huo Li did not just talk about his war zone experiences, he also showed them photographs he had taken in-game. His photos had the ability to influence. If Huo Li had not revealed that they were taken in-game, Jinro and the others would have believed that these were photographs that had been left behind from the Old Era. A building that they had passed by so many times could be so different in a photograph. This was the skill of an expert.

Huo Li also told them some little-known history of the Period of Destruction. Although his tone was gentle, every word seemed to carry an interested feeling, and even the always rational Vice Captain Jinro was entranced.

This was a reporter that separated himself from the inferior ones. In their hearts, their impression of Huo Li was very favorable after a short while.

"Reality is way more cruel than a game. What happens in games are just minor matters that cannot be compared to reality. However, games are for entertainment, so it is not necessary to compare them. I was just expressing the cruelty of reality; just listen, but don't mind it. Do you want to know the origins of my name?"

At this moment, Fang Zhao came online and came over from his log-in spot.

As everyone on the team wore a helmet during combat, when Fang Zhao came, Huo Li was unable to see his face.

The team that had been lazing around listening to stories immediately changed their behavior. Even if they were sitting, they now sat upright and tense. Schwarzer also no longer giggled.

The footsteps of his boots were not loud, but it provided a solemn atmosphere and Huo Li's entire mental state unknowingly tensed up.

When Fang Zhao looked toward Huo Li, Huo Li could feel the hairs on the back of his neck stand. Even though he could not see Fang Zhao's eyes hidden behind the helmet, he could feel that extremely suffocating glare on him, as though it was piercing through his body.

Jinro had already left a message telling Fang Zhao about the matter with Huo Li.

"Don't stop. Continue with what you were saying." Fang Zhao found a place to sit down.

Schwarzer coughed lightly. "Huo Li was just about to tell us the origins of his name."

"Yeah, Huo Li, what special meaning does your name have?" Milo asked. He did not like leaving a story unfinished.

The solemn atmosphere became slightly warmer.

Huo Li laughed. "All right, continuing on. Huo Li (Fire Chestnut), it means that every single thing that we do is like obtaining a chestnut from the fire. Chestnuts are placed into the fire to be roasted, and if we wish to eat the chestnuts, we have to brave the dangers of being burnt by fire. This is similar to us battlefield reporters. Every time we want to get a chestnut, we suffer scars. However, this is our choice. We will bear whatever consequences. Isn't there an old saying, "the path we choose for ourselves has to be completed even if we have to crawl? Who cares if there are thorns and brambles along the way."

Schwarzer and the others had a momentary flash of admiration for Huo Li. Only Fang Zhao did not have any reaction.

"Exactly! War journalism is so challenging! Like a real hero! Don't you agree, Boss?" Schwarzer looked toward Fang Zhao, waiting for a reply.

However, Fang Zhao did not reply to Schwarzer and instead said, "In the old era, there was a phrase called 'obtaining the chestnut from the fire' and a story 1 behind it. The story goes like this: A monkey deceived a cat to obtain a roasted chestnut from the flame. The cat did it and managed to obtain the chestnut, but its paws suffered burns. In the end, the chestnut was eaten by the monkey, and the cat paid for being swindled and received nothing. I actually feel that the name Huo Li is to remind yourself not to be used by others but to be the party receiving benefits. Don't you agree, future king of war journalism and current Yanzhou king of paparazzi, Mr. Wang Tie?"

Dead silence.

Wang Tie/Huo Li: "... That is so g*ddamn right! How do I answer?

Schwarzer and the others now shot daggers out from their eyes. Now they were not just on their guard but had a strong attacking intent.

Wang Tie was a name they had recently heard a lot in private. During meetings, Wayne had mentioned this paparazzi king's experience. Apparently he had followed a certain famous celebrity and offended certain high-ranking people; he was a god at causing trouble! Of course, he had not escaped unscathed and had been sentenced to prison. Considering his splendid history, the people in charge specially jailed him in a foreign prison and restricted his access to the internet. Originally, everyone had expected to go three to five years without seeing him, but unexpectedly, he had been released early, apparently due to him rendering meritorious service that reduced his sentence.

Upon receiving news of this individuals return, Silver Wing A-listers and above all increased their vigilance and were afraid of this paparazzi catching their scent, especially their newly formed gaming team. Never had they expected that he would actually chase them into the game! Was what he'd previously said all a fabrication? Pretending it was that real, was... was the entire thing a show!? Forget being a reporter, he should just be an actor!

Wang Tie's calm and collected manner finally became forced.

The favorable atmosphere he had spent so long to build up had undergone a 180 degree change and now seemed frigid. In front of him were 15 pairs of eyes and 15 gun barrels pointed straight at his brains, ready to take his life! They simply did not have any intention to hear his explanation.

The current paparazzi king who'd accepted his first assignment after being released from prison had been caught on the spot as he had neared his target.

Having been called out, Wang Tie grimaced. "Brothers, could there be some sort of misunderstanding? Let us talk instead of using force."

Chapter 144

I Know Who You Are

Given the circumstances, escaping was not an option. Wang Tie didn't think he could evade the watchful eye of the world's No. 1. All he could do was go offline.

But that didn't turn the tide in his favor, so Wang Tie wouldn't just bail like that. Leaving would just leave too many questions unanswered and aggravate the standoff. He had indeed gone undercover to unravel the mystery behind the world's No. 1, but he hadn't done anything to harm the team. He would do all he could to ease the tension. Who knows—he might end up making some progress. He was in a game, after all; the worst-case scenario was getting shot dead. He could always get online another time or even log in with a new account.

But for someone who prided himself on his skills of disguise, it was a major blow to have his cover blown. Otherwise he would have been able to take things in stride when he'd been identified.

Schwarzer already had his gun trained on Wang Tie. He had learned a valuable lesson today. He was too naive. He actually believed all the bullshit this piece of crap had spewed. He had been warned about the importance of being on guard for journalists since he'd joined the team. Even though he hadn't yet risen to fame and wasn't that popular, he would have to learn to keep his guard up now.

But this fellow had managed such a convincing disguise. Except for Fang Zhao, everyone on the team had thought him to be a war journalist. Boss had earned his chops indeed. He could actually identify Wang Tie despite his ingenious disguise.

As Jinro was guarding Wang Tie, he thought back to the sequence of events, reviewing if he or any of his teammates had revealed any secrets. Thankfully, due to Fang Zhao's cautioning of late, they had become much more tight lipped. They had never let down their guard completely.

The others did the same, reviewing their comments over the preceding period. They only relaxed when they made sure they hadn't let any secrets slip. They would be punished if they'd made any mistakes.

"Hear me out," Wang Tie probed. But he soon realized that his audience had no interest in an explanation. They were simply waiting for their captain's command to beat the crap out of him.

Maybe it was better to go offline after all?

Wang Tie was pondering his options when he saw AliveAfter500Years raise his hand and make a subtle hand gesture.

The 14 folks who were glaring at Wang Tie with menacing looks turned and left. Milo and Jinro wanted to say something, but they ended up holding back, retreating in silence to a spot about 20 meters away.

Wang Tie blinked his eyes quickly.

This team's MO seemed different from the other Yanzhou e-sports teams he knew well. They appeared to be the product of military-style training in Rongzhou. What stood out to him was that there were no dissenters. Their levels of obedience and execution were superb.

Wang Tie had started wondering if this world No. 1 was from Rongzhou when he heard the man standing in front of him say, "I could ID you just like that even if you switched faces."

Wang Tie cast aside his thoughts immediately. After recovering from the shock of the comment, he started frowning hard, weighing the veracity of what had just been uttered. Self-doubt was creeping into his mind.

He had initially thought that his formidable opponent had just been bluffing. What had given him away was that fleeting moment of raw reaction just now. But now he was wondering if that wasn't the case, if this fellow could truly identify him immediately.

Wang Tie's gut told him that AliveAfter500Years wasn't bluffing.

Had his skills deteriorated since he'd left prison? Wang Tie started reflecting.

No, the problem couldn't possibly lie with him.

Wang Tie shook his head gently. No one had managed to recognize him since his return unless he identified himself, and that included Qian Cheng.

If the problem didn't lie with him, then the reason was his opponent. How on earth had AliveAfter500Years recognized him? The reason Wang Tie was so feared, the reason he was so obnoxious, was his incredible flair for disguise, down to the look of an eye. If he had lost his touch, he could no longer move freely.

That gave him a bad feeling.

As a seasoned journalist, Wang Tie was used to putting up an act in front of people and toying with them. No one could recognize him. But now, the tables had turned. He was the one on the defensive.

He had already lost this round of battle.

But did his opponent have something to say, given that he had asked the others to step aside?

Wang Tie heard his opponent say, "Do you mind if I check out the photos you took inside the game?"

Even though AliveAfter500Years was polite, he still projected an imposing figure, so Wang Tie didn't dare relax either. "Not at all," Wang Tie responded. He showed AliveAfter500Years the photos he had played for Jinro and company, all the while trying to figure out what his opponent was up to.

"These are decent shots. Are you interested in taking an assignment?" Fang Zhao asked.

The question caught Wang Tie unaware. "Who do you want to shoot?"

"Us," Fang Zhao pointed at himself and then the 14 others standing at a distance.

Wang Tie froze. Usually, people hired him to invade the privacy of others, to record all those dirty secrets. No one had ever made this request before.

If these were normal circumstances, Wang Tie would have demanded an exorbitant salary, but he didn't this time after weighing the pros and cons carefully and factoring into consideration the questions he wanted answered the most.

"What you're saying is that I take photos of you and sell them to the media?" Wang Tie asked in a cautious tone.

"No, I mean I want to hire you to shoot a publicity video for us from the perspective of a war journalist."

"A publicity video? You want a well-known Yanzhou entertainment journalist to shoot a publicity video for you? Like you said, I'm the king of Yanzhou paparazzi," Wang Tie said in a tone that mixed self-mockery and pride. I'm not just any entertainment reporter, nor the average paparazzi reporter. This mofo is the bloody king when it comes to my trade in Yanzhou. But he had never shot a publicity video for a gaming team.

"You said yourself that you're a war journalist," Fang Zhao said calmly.

"Oh, everything I said before was bullshit, how I'm a war journalist and what not. I just wanted to string them along. I'm not the king of war journalists. I know my limits," Wang Tie said with a wave of his hand.

As he uttered his response, Wang Tie observed Fang Zhao's facial expression to see if he was infuriated by the rejection. If Fang Zhao threw a tantrum, he would get offline quickly.

Fang Zhao stared at Wang Tie and, in a deeper, coarser voice than his appearance suggested, said, "No, more than 80 percent of what you said about your wartime experience was true."

Wang Tie wanted to respond with a laughing "How would you know? You weren't around," but he held back at the last minute, and the smile on his face vanished.

Jinro!

Jinro had recorded everything he'd said and passed it on to Fang Zhao. What a sneaky bastard.

Jinro had alerted Fang Zhao by message as soon as Wang Tie had appeared. In fact, Fang Zhao had logged in briefly at one point, but he hadn't entered the game. He'd gone offline after reading and responding to his messages. He'd responded to Jinro, instructing him to record his conversation with Wang Tie and sending it to him.

So even if Fang Zhao hadn't been around, he had heard all of Wang Tie's comments about his wartime exploits.

Fang Zhao continued to speak in a measured tone, "I have the ability to separate fact from fiction." And it was precisely his even temper that suggested to Wang Tie that he wasn't kidding or exaggerating; he was making a factual statement.

Wang Tie had better instincts than most, and it was precisely because of his stronger instincts that he felt all the more acutely the suffocating feeling of facing down the relentless stare of a giant beast.

Still, Wang Tie was mentally quite tough. Even if he was unsettled and in discomfort, he could still maintain a calm appearance. He continued negotiating. "Shooting a video for you isn't out of the question, but can I see what you look like? I have never seen a world No. 1 in person."

Wang Tie thought Fang Zhao would refuse or make a counteroffer. He hadn't expected him to agree readily. "Sure."

Fang Zhao's avatar was revealed when he took off his helmet.

Wang Tie studied this mysterious world No. 1 supergod carefully. He didn't look too old, but his avatar had no bearing on reality. Old geezers could pretend to be handsome young men in a game. His skills of disguise allowed him to pose as a university student even if he was more than 100 years old in reality.

The scars didn't mean anything either. Lots of folks used avatars with tattoos or scars, whatever distinguished them.

The only thing was that this face looked a bit familiar.

As far as pro-gamer avatars were concerned, their choice of build might be completely reckless, but their faces bore at least some resemblance to their actual appearance so they could be easily recognized. The face before Wang Tie seemed very familiar—he had seen it not long ago.

Who was it?

Where had he seen it?

Was it at the press conference at Silver Wing the other day?

After canvassing his outstanding memory, Wang Tie's eyes burst wide open. He looked

like he had removed a rock and discovered treasure underneath.

"I know who you are!" Wang Tie said in an emotional voice.

Jinro, Schwarzer and company looked over when they heard Wang Tie yell. Milo switched to a gun with a silencer to kill a monster that had been drawn by Wang Tie's voice. He scanned his surroundings, shifting his gaze to Wang Tie along with the others after confirming that there were no other approaching threats. They all wanted to see the look on the face of the No. 1 paparazzi journalist after figuring out their boss's identity.

And yet...

"You're Fang Zhao's father?" Wang Tie asked.

Fang Zhao: "..."

Jinro and company: "..."

As soon as he uttered the question, Wang Tie noticed the 14 disciples who had retreated 20 meters staring at him like he was an idiot.

Jinro and company secretly cursed. Are you f*cking blind?

You managed to recognize Fang Zhao's face and yet you mistook him for his father?

Wang Tie realized his mistake. He recalled the personal details of every staffer in Silver Wing's virtual projects department and started shaking his head. "No, Fang Zhao's parents are dead. He doesn't have any siblings either. Are you... his uncle? Or cousin?"

"Why don't you figure out yourself." Fang Zhao got up and walked toward Jinro and company. He was no longer looking at Wang Tie. "As for my offer, let me know when you've made up your mind."

When he finished speaking, Fang Zhao led his team away to proceed with their mission. This time, Wang Tie stayed behind. He planned on never following them again. He went offline instead.

Inside a high-end apartment near downtown Qi'an, Wang Tie removed his gaming helmet. He wore a confused expression.

His mission going awry was one thing, but what bothered him was failing to achieve the objective of his mission.

Wang Tie looked at his bracelet and noticed about a dozen missed calls. They were all from Qian Cheng. He had probably called for updates but hadn't wanted to intrude. Qian Cheng had hung up after a single ring every time.

Wang Tie called back.

"You offline? Anything?" Qian Cheng asked anxiously.

"I found out quite a bit."

"You saw him? Did you figure out his true identity?"

Wang Tie paused and responded, "No."

Qian Cheng was a bit disappointed, but he pressed on. "Even if he was difficult to identify, what did your superb instincts tell you when you saw him?"

This time, Wang Tie didn't answer. He let Qian Cheng wait before hanging up altogether.

What did my instincts tell me?

That I have met my match.

Chapter 145

It's Really the Same Person

The 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower. Jinro and his 12 teammates emerged from the gaming room. Everyone was so tired they could collapse. Ten of the 13 would have dropped dead if they hadn't had assistants or the specially assigned medical staff to hang onto.

Dorrian sat down with help from his assistant. "It's OK if Boss Fang isn't around, but what about Zuo Yu?" he asked.

"He's got an assignment. He logged on from home. He has to go out with boss after logging out. It's easy for him pick up a tail if he stays at the office." Dorrian downed a glass of water and rested while he received a medical checkup.

This was the level of treatment that well-endowed companies could afford. Pro gamers were different from amateurs in that their workloads were much heavier. Their physical conditions had to be closely monitored. They were tracked by dedicated staffers every day. All the pro gamers had to worry about was gaming. The rest was taken care of by their backups. This was the difference in treatment between pros and amateurs.

Dorrian accepted the towel his assistant passed to him and wiped the sweat from his face. He was famished and exhausted. "I never felt this tired at HWR. Even I feel the pressure, let alone Schwarzer and the others," he said with a laugh of resignation as he shook his head.

Dorrian's assistant had been with his boss at Silver Wing for some time now. He knew the pressure Dorrian spoke of wasn't pressure to climb the individual or team rankings or career advancement. Fang Zhao never spoke of rankings or point totals. He all but ignored the team ranking, but he scheduled tasks for his team on every workday. There were tests, including written ones, and assignments to be completed inside the game. Those who didn't pass faced heavy punishments. What Fang Zhao repeatedly stressed was this: the bottom line during the Period of Destruction was survival. Regardless of what you wanted to do, you had to figure out how to survive first.

It seemed as if Fang Zhao wanted to squeeze every ounce of potential out of them. When they were gaming, not only were they stretched physically, their brains never saw any rest. When they were on break, they were thinking about all sorts of background knowledge about the Period of Destruction that Fang Zhao had passed on, especially tips on weather prediction and picking up small details in your physical surroundings. Fang Zhao was adamant that they would come in handy later.

Many pieces of information could be found in history books or writings from the Period of Destruction, but not everyone could finish reading all these books, and even if you memorized the key points on paper, you might not be able to flexibly put them into practice in reality. Meanwhile, Fang Zhao excelled at using real situations in the game to illustrate his points.

What impressed Dorrian the most was their encounter with the destructive forces of nature two days ago. Fang Zhao had warned them about situations like that and had taken advantage of the scenario to teach them how to observe changes in their physical environment.

That day, a massive storm with wide coverage had hit the entire southern part of Yanzhou in the game. Districts 50 to 100 had been affected to varying degrees. District 79, where the team was located, wasn't the hardest hit; that fate had fallen on folks in districts 60 to 70. Only about 10 percent of the players online at the time had survived.

Before the storm, many players had thought they could escape unscathed by just going offline when they came across a natural disaster they couldn't weather, but when such a moment arrived, they realized they were too naive.

They couldn't go offline.

All they could do was watch the horrendous disaster unfold. Some players even had the privilege of being blown into the atmosphere for a truly first-hand experience of the destructive power of Mother Nature.

Just as folks were thinking they would get offline earlier in the future when things didn't feel right, the players who survived realized their experience levels had skyrocketed.

Not from killing monsters.

Nor completing missions.

But as a reward for surviving a terrible natural disaster.

The system awarded experience points by gauging the players' coping skills, their location, and their ability to avoid the storm. For example, players who survived a previous storm in Yanzhou, especially survivors in sectors 60 to 70, saw their experience levels hit five digits and received bonus points in the five-digit range.

That kind of point bump usually required days of non-stop monster killing for the average player. For most players who were decently armed, hitting 10,000 points would take a week of killing or even longer.

So many players who weren't online or had gone offline early on regretted their decisions. Why did I leave early? Maybe I would've had a stroke of good luck and survived a natural disaster, which would have raised my experience level significantly. That would be like getting paid for doing nothing.

But this was also a tough call for players. If they died during a natural disaster, they would be docked major points. Only if they survived would they see a major bonus. Going offline was the safest move. Players who were more conservative usually chose to go offline.

Even though the Silver Light team wasn't located at the center of the storm, they weren't far away. After barely scraping by under the leadership of Fang Zhao, every team member saw their experience level and points total increase by the thousands.

"This is just the beginning. A natural disaster of this severity was considered peanuts during the Period of Destruction," Fang Zhao told his team afterward.

But the reason Fang Zhao put so much pressure on them wasn't because he was carrying out orders from Silver Wing senior management. For some reason he was intent on passing on all his knowledge quickly, especially to vice captain Jinro, conducting special training sessions for him after the team went offline.

Dorrian once asked Jinro in private if Fang Zhao planned on leaving the team soon. If Fang Zhao left, then he would change his plans. The reason he and his teammates stayed was because of Fang Zhao. His presence shielded them from a lot of hassle, so they could focus exclusively on gaming and not have to worry about miscellaneous matters.

Dorrian's priority was to enhance his skills while having a good time. That was also

why he never complained despite being worked to death every day; he knew this training was good for him. The knowledge Fang Zhao passed on would enable him to do well even if he jumped ship.

But if Fang Zhao left Silver Wing or if he stayed at Silver Wing but was reassigned to other projects, Dorrian had no reason to stay. Jinro told him not to worry. He said Fang Zhao indeed was grooming Jinro to take over the team because he was about to take an extended leave—not because of a transfer but because he had to fulfill his military service requirement.

Dorrian was dumbfounded for some time when he got his answer. After pondering the matter more carefully, he realized that yes, their boss was only around 23 or 24 years old. Fang Zhao was more than 10 years younger than him, a fresh university graduate of a year or so. It was just that Fang Zhao's behavior made Dorrian completely ignore his actual age. No wonder Wang Tie hadn't been able to acknowledge his mistake. Fang Zhao could pass for an older man in anyone's eyes.

No one could avoid military service, and the longer the delay, the more factors came into play, especially after one started working. Work would likely get busier as the years went by, and the work assignments more pressing. That was also why so many people chose to serve when they were enrolled in university. The saying "procrastination is deadly" was absolutely on the mark.

Quite a few celebrities had been exposed as not having served at the peak of their fame, when their careers were in full bloom. There was not much room for maneuver under intense media criticism. When they would return from military service a year later, they could no longer re-establish themselves in the entertainment industry.

It was best to serve in the military early. From a gaming perspective, if you took the long view, "Battle of the Century" had just been launched. Going out of action for a year wasn't a big deal. Considering Fang Zhao's abilities, even if his ranking dropped, reclaiming the No. 1 spot wasn't out of the question.

Not to mention that Dorrian often got the impression that Fang Zhao didn't take the game that seriously. He had been quite engaged at the outset, but as the days passed, he'd spent less and less time gaming. But every time Fang Zhao got online, he underwent a total transformation. He was a completely different person, as if he had gone crazy.

Two months after the launch of "Battle of the Century," Fang Zhao was still the world No. 1. The other top players would only have a shot at overtaking him once he started his military service.

Meanwhile, the subject of Dorrian discussion was headed to his favorite paper shop.

Zuo Yu was his driver as usual. He had just gotten offline not too long ago, but he was in better shape than Jinro and the others, so he wasn't so weak as to not be able to drive.

Fang Zhao got a call from Wayne en route.

"I wanted to discuss the publicity video again. Have you found a cameraman? I looked into a few of the better cameramen on our payroll. They're all engaged right now, but it shouldn't be too difficult to reassign them." Wayne was in a hurry.

Since their discussion in Duan Qianji's office, Wayne had been reflecting. Was he losing vision? Was he getting more and more narrow-minded, so much so that he wasn't as charismatic as someone who had graduated from university a year ago? That feeling became even more acute after Jinro and the seven others signed with Silver Wing, so Wayne had decided to regroup. He couldn't only focus on short-term gain.

Wayne now had a new goal. He was going to build a truly professional e-sports team, not the type to simply kick ass and cash out. His model was the business-minded e-sports clubs. He wanted to build a sustainable e-sports team within Silver Wing.

The only thing was that gaming teams were typically launched with much fanfare. He had his team, but other teams held mass pledges and released publicity videos before the launch of the game. These were all moves that raised the stakes and boosted branding. Silver Wing would no doubt sign more gamers, so they had an image to maintain. If they skipped the mass pledge, at least they could manage a video, no?

The only thing was that Fang Zhao wasn't happy with the work of the few Silver Wing cameramen that Wayne had shortlisted. He'd wanted to look elsewhere. Wayne had to wait for word from Fang Zhao. He had called today for an update.

"I've found the right guy, but he hasn't agreed to the shoot yet," Fang Zhao said.

"Who? Who is it? As long as he strikes your fancy, we can offer more money. Is he fully booked?" Wayne was curious now.

"I don't want to scare you," Fang Zhao said with a laugh. "He's not a professional cameraman, but he's the right person for this shoot. I should be hearing back today. I'll let you know his answer tonight after I head home."

"Oh, which big shot is this? You can't rattle me. Kid, you're always so mysterious. Professionals aren't good enough for you—and yet here you approach an amateur. But as long as he's the right fit for this shoot, I'm open to it."

Wayne felt reassured after hearing Fang Zhao's response, but he couldn't help wonder who Fang Zhao had lined up after hanging up.

In the meantime, Fang Zhao's car had arrived at the paper shop.

This wasn't Fang Zhao's first visit. He picked a design among the new additions and grabbed one of his regulars. He was going to write the score for the team's publicity video himself.

Fang Zhao paid for the scoresheets and was about to leave when a young man entered the shop carrying an instrument case. When he saw Fang Zhao, surprise and emotion consumed his pubescent face. He smiled shyly and bowed politely. "Teacher Fang."

Fang Zhao glanced at the young man, signaled Zuo Yu to wait in the car, and then turned his attention to the student. He pointed to a lounge area in the shop and said, "Mr. Huo Li, shall we have a seat?"

The student who had just been reserved and shy suddenly froze. He gave Fang Zhao an incredulous look, as if he had lost it.

Fang Zhao ignored him and proceeded to the lounge area. "Like I said, no amount of disguise works on me."

Wang Tie, who had disguised himself as the student, wore an expression of utter shock, as if he had met an alien. He scanned Fang Zhao from head to toe. He was still in disbelief—the aura Fang Zhao projected now was completely different from his aura in the game.

Were they really the same person? Multiple-personality disorder?

Wang Tie was absolutely baffled. "How on earth did you recognize me?"

Fang Zhao didn't answer, responding instead with a laugh. Wang Tie felt like he had been attacked by a frosty breeze. He was so pissed he kept shivering, He wanted to move his chair back.

People were difficult to read, and people from the Period of Destruction were especially complicated. Fang Zhao had been able to survive the apocalypse for nearly 100 years and climb to a leadership role. Of course he had a sharp eye.

Back then, Fang Zhao had come across quite a few folks with even better disguises than Wang Tie. His ability to see through disguises was honed from years of experience and superb judgment, as well as instincts that were much stronger than Wang Tie's.

But Fang Zhao didn't say any of this out loud.

Wang Tie had come here today to verify something. He didn't want to admit that he hadn't been able to unravel Fang Zhao's fundamental character the first time they'd met. Wang Tie was so confident that he wasn't willing to admit that he had misread Fang Zhao, so much so that he'd ignored his instincts when the name "Fang Zhao" flashed in his head when he'd seen Fang Zhao's face in the game. He'd refused to believe the answer, so he'd figured AliveAfter500Years to be one of Fang Zhao's relatives.

Wang Tie was avaricious, full of himself, and a bit arrogant. He felt he had lost this round of battle. He'd even started doubting his own ability. On the matter of Fang Zhao, he'd branded his investigation a failed mission.

Fang Zhao chatted with Wang Tie in a box seat inside the lounge area of the paper shop for about an hour. An hour later, still in disguise, Wang Tie left, wearing the emotional expression of someone who had just had a heart-to-heart with his idol, and drove away, but after leaving the shop, Wang Tie's excitement vanished, replaced by mixed feelings and a sense of failure.

When he got home, Wang Tie got another call from Qian Cheng asking for an update.

This time, Wang Tie didn't fudge, saying upfront, "I'm passing on this assignment. Per our agreement, I'll refund you twice my fee."

Qian Cheng was too stunned to react. "What?"

Wang Tie's response was too shocking. Qian Cheng took a few seconds to recover. "You really have no way of nailing down his true identity?" he asked.

"Oh, I know who he is, but I can't tell you right now. But I can tell you one thing."

Qian Cheng's ears pricked up. "What?" He wasn't going to miss a word.

"People can transform themselves," Wang Tie said in a resigned tone.

Qian Cheng: "..."

Chapter 146

Young Man, Stop Being So Solemn

Qian Cheng's mind kept repeating Wang Tie's words after he ended the call.

Transformation?

What transformation?

Could it be like in the movies, transforming into a werewolf when there is a full moon?

"Tsk—"

Qian Cheng chuckled. He did not believe the bullshit Wang Tie had spouted. However, there was not a lot that would make Wang Tie give up an assignment and firmly refund the money. Could it be that, after serving a jail term, this paparazzi king had lost his nerve?

No way.

Qian Cheng drummed his fingers on the table, recalling every word that Wang Tie had said. Mulling through, he picked up a few things. Wang Tie so readily refunding him, could the paparazzi king be afraid of the other party's status?

Someone who could make Wang Tie be afraid, could it be one of Yanzhou's high levels? Generally, these high-level people were not enough to make him behave this way, unless it was the bigwigs right at the top of Yanzhou?

Qian Cheng's mind was filled with unlimited possibilities. In his heart, a hint of fear arose. Although he reported a lot of entertainment news, matters regarding bigwigs had to be dealt with differently. There were things that he could not reveal even if he knew. If he were Wang Tie and met with this sort of situation, he would do the same and keep his mouth shut. As for Wang Tie making an error in judgment, Qian Cheng simply did not consider it.

An oversight by Wang Tie? Ha, is that possible?! Qian Cheng scoffed.

At the other end, Wang Tie did not know that his few words had removed the reigns on Qian Cheng's line of thought. Even if he knew, Wang Tie would not have minded. Others were free to do as they wished. He was just feeling puzzled; how had Fang Zhao recognized him?

Also, the last sentence he'd said to Qian Cheng was not nonsense. He really felt that Fang Zhao's online and offline persona were two different persons. More importantly, what made Wang Tie unable to accept the most was Fang Zhao's age.

No one would believe that the game's top killing machine, who could create a raging storm of bullets in a few seconds, could actually be a refined composer who had graduated a little over a year ago. Although there were cases of cultured people being cruel in games, in Fang Zhao's case, this was the first time Wang Tie had ever seen something like that.

Why had he been unable to investigate? Because it was so hard to imagine the two together!

Wang Tie's face distorted as he recalled how he had been recognized. Today, he had not only changed his appearance, even his stature had been modified, and his traits were totally different from when he had been at the press conference. Having such a complete difference and being found out made him uneasy.

Accepting Fang Zhao's request to shoot a film of the Silver Light team was firstly to use this process to resolve the bewilderment in his own heart and better understand this Fang Zhao person. This was the first time in his life he had ever encountered such a situation, and if he did not clarify things, he would not be able to rest in peace!

Secondly, many people in the entertainment circle had learnt of his early release and were more vigilant. Now it would be much harder to unearth secret news of big name celebrities. Instead of spending a lot of time trying to break their defenses, why not accept Fang Zhao's assignment first? Besides, the payment was quite large, and Fang Zhao had already given him the down payment upon accepting the job. From the information on Fang Zhao, he understood that Fang Zhao was rich, so he did not have to worry about not being paid.

As Yanzhou's king of paparazzi, Wang Tie had never shot a professional publicity film. However, Fang Zhao wanted him to shoot it from the angle of a war journalist, and he could only try. He had been a war journalist, and it was this service that had gotten

him released early. Regarding this, Wang Tie was not lying, just as Fang Zhao had deduced.

"Huo Li" was an alter ego he'd created after being released, to remind himself not to ever get incriminated by others again. Having experienced it once was enough. His ID in-game was also that, and Fang Zhao had temporarily added him to the team, making it more convenient to communicate and share the development of the film.

Although Wang Tie was extremely loathed by people in the industry, every time someone wanted to investigate a certain celebrity and the difficulty was high, they would still find Wang Tie. Why? One part was his capability, the other his reputation. He knew a lot, and the reason why nothing much happened to him was that people turned a blind eye and did not upset the equilibrium, as Wang Tie had tight lips!

But if he were to really run away, both sides would suffer. Back then, before Wang Tie had been sent to prison, he had made a vicious move, causing the other party to be toppled and lose all backing from his family, cutting off a path of retreat for the other party. This was how vicious he could be. After all, he was already down and was not afraid of falling further. That incident had made many people hate him. Now that he had been released early, would he still be afraid?

But no one knew that, every time Wang Tie was speaking to Fang Zhao, he was keeping his words brief. He had no choice; he could not pretend or lie, as he felt that he would be caught on the spot.

Compete in strength? Wang Tie really felt that he would definitely lose out. Cheating the other party and running away and hiding? Wang Tie would not consider that. He felt that this was way too cowardly. A person could not live in hiding all his life, and he still had a long way more to live, so he could only face it head on.

What could he do? He was also in despair!

When Fang Zhao had mentioned the matter to Wayne, as per Wang Tie's request, Fang Zhao only mentioned "Huo Li" the war journalist" instead of the infamous "Wang Tie." Wayne knew that Fang Zhao did not reveal the entire matter, but since it was a request from Fang Zhao, Wayne did not probe further. He only had one request—shoot a good video. When it was done, Wayne would inspect it, and if it was not up to standard, he would use a company videographer.

"Oh right, Fang Zhao, for the publicity film's accompaniment music, will you be composing, or do you want to let Flying Pegasus handle it? Recently, Flying Pegasus have completed two film accompaniment music projects. They are idle now," Wayne told him.

Fang Zhao knew that Wayne had more he wanted to say, so he asked, "What do you think?"

"I was thinking maybe we should let Flying Pegasus handle it this time? Aren't you very busy?" Wayne suggested.

"What are the other reasons? Say them all," Fang Zhao replied.

"Err, actually, I feel that your musical style does not suit the majority of gamers. I'm not saying that your compositions aren't good—everyone can see the results for themselves and you have the recognition of figures in the music industry—but Fang Zhao, although I'm not so well versed in e-sports, I know what sort of music gamers like. Your works includes too many things, and you perfectly combine classical music with modern elements, but my suggestion is that you do not need that much meaningful music. What is needed is enough 'boom,' that sort of explosiveness! What gamers like is less classical elements and more electronic music."

At this point, Wayne paused, considering carefully how to express his opinions fully and not cause a bad reaction from Fang Zhao. He really did not want to offend Fang Zhao, who was the man the Silver Light team approved as their boss. Wayne was not considered a big deal in their eyes, so to achieve his own lofty ambitions, Wayne know that he needed to placate Fang Zhao, but there were things that still needed to be said. After all, he was a businessman. All his opinions were in the direction where the most benefits could be obtained. Therefore, when it came to choosing musical styles, he was more inclined to choosing the company's elite cooperative, Flying Pegasus, to create the accompaniment music, as the results would surely be even better.

"Continue," Fang Zhao said.

After considering, Wayne felt that Fang Zhao did not seem angry, and he gradually became at ease. Continuing, he said, "I'm really not saying that your works are no good, but our publicity film is mainly for gamers, not music lovers, to watch. However, these groups of people come into contact with electronic equipment the most, especially some veteran gamers. What they appreciate and enjoy are those more mechanized

and electronic styles. Although they don't necessarily dislike your '100-Year Period of Destruction' series, if the music style was changed, the results would be better."

Fang Zhao was not a man without reason. He was indeed attentively listening to the opinions and suggestions. What Wayne was saying was not entirely correct, but at least half of it made sense.

"So this time, how about just letting Flying Pegasus complete it? All you have to do is lead the team. According to your plans, you want to serve your military term next year. November is ending, and it will be December soon. You also have to attend classes at Qi'an Academy of Music, so time might be a little tight, and you surely have a lot of matters to attend to. There is no need to waste time on this matter," Wayne advised.

"Do you have a few tunes to recommend of the style you mentioned?" Fang Zhao asked.

Wayne knew that Fang Zhao had not given it up. Pausing, he finally said, "The kind full of vigor and explosiveness. Eh, I did not study music, so I don't know how to express it. How about this." Wayne's mind thought of a bunch of ideas in those few seconds, and he suddenly said, "Visit some nightclubs. I can recommend you a few."

The names of three nightclubs came out from his mouth. Wayne explained when it was suitable to enter and the times to enter so Fang Zhao would surely manage to hear the music. This reaction was that of an old hand.

"The music frequently played there is the sort I am talking about. Just take it as you gathering materials and listen a little. When the time comes, we can see whether you are able to do it. Young man, stop being so solemn all the time. Take a look at yourself; that lifestyle is just like that of an old man. Look at all the people in the company of the same age. Which one is like you?"

"Be more lively and enthusiastic. If you are unable to find anything stimulating online, why not take this chance to visit nightclubs and have fun and open your eyes. The ones that I recommend are places where the music is what I really like, explosive! These places are top grade, and professionals like you who have high requirements for sound equipment will definitely not regret it. After all, the expenses of gathering materials will be paid by the company, so don't worry, just keep a copy of the electronic bill. When the time comes for you to submit a claim report, I can be your witness. Even if Director Duan knows, she won't say anything."

Wayne had said a lot, but his main idea was: All expenses will be handled by the company, so hurry up and gather materials at the nightclub!

After ending the call, Fang Zhao looked at his communications device, pondering over the words Wayne had said.

Like that of an old man?

Was the difference with "others of the same age" that obvious?

Chapter 147

Such a Great Generation Gap

Fang Zhao was still mulling over Wayne's words the next day on his way to the Qi'an Academy of Music.

As a composer, Fang Zhao touched on styles that were rarely used. Whenever people in the music industry talked about Fang Zhao, they would mention his four-piece series, "100-Year Period of Destruction," which had become his trademark style—classical combined with modern. This had given rise to a wave of popularity for symphonic epics due to the perfect blending of traditional and electronic music.

But whether it was his global lecture tour or his symphonic epics, after a few months had passed, he'd gradually been forgotten by people. The pace of life in the New Era was very quick. Other than those in the industry who were meticulously studying this, other people found new things to pay attention to.

Fang Zhao's works had been considered academic and received a lot of praise from professionals in the industry, but they were not "in touch" with people. Xue Jing had told Fang Zhao this before.

"Academic stuff can last a long time or a brief moment. It lasts a long time because of its impact due to what it encompasses: the numerous feelings pertaining to life and the significance of history make it worthy of being investigated. Pulling it apart bit by bit and analyzing it, it deserves to be passed on to future generations to study, but in the academic music circle, it can be considered purely fashionable, and the wave of popularity will only last momentarily, and that is why it can be considered brief."

And what Wayne had told Fang Zhao yesterday, about reducing the proportion of traditional instrumental music and increasing electronic sound effects, that was what the masses in the New Era could more readily accept.

Adopt a more direct method to express?

When Fang Zhao had been producing the "Period of Destruction" series, he had studied some popular and trendy New Era music. Only after that had he blended

electronic music together with traditional instrumental music.

All that Wayne had said, Fang Zhao knew, but his understanding was not good enough. And as for such things, Fang Zhao knew that he would not be able to find the answer in schools. Xue Jing had mentioned the difference between academic and liberal. Liberals were under the category of non-academically inclined, and people within the industry liked to term them "laymen." This was more random and miscellaneous yet, at the same time, more in tune and easier to accept by the normal masses.

Fang Zhao had accepted the Qi'an Academy of Music's request to give three classes for their students every week. Today, when the lecture ended, as per normal, he stayed behind for a while to dispel the doubts of his students and help them with any difficulties they encountered.

The reason behind not giving an internet lecture was to make it convenient for teacher and student to communicate and resolve problems.

Although Fang Zhao lacked teaching experience compared to the other teachers, he was popular and the take-up rate for his classes was always high. Why?

One reason was indeed his capability, and not just limited to music composition. Besides being a composer, he was also a manager of a certain department in Silver Wing. In Silver Wing, this position was already considered high. Many people with ten years of working experience might not necessarily climb to such heights. But everyone knew that Fang Zhao's success could not be duplicated. It only existed due to luck and ability coinciding at the same time.

And the other reason for the popularity of this class was that Fang Zhao had only graduated a bit over a year ago and was not much older than the students. He felt approachable and not too distant, and students felt at ease discussing their problems with him. Some wanted to worm their way closer to him. Who knows, if they could maintain good relations, Fang Zhao might be able to help them out.

Therefore, if it was impossible to replicate Fang Zhao's success, they could just cling on to him.

Many students did not address him as "teacher." Instead, they use the term "senior" and felt this term was an easier way to get closer.

Wang Tie had disguised himself as a student and enquired about other students'

impressions of Fang Zhao.

"Nice guy, pretty amiable. Although he doesn't say much or laugh, he has a lot of patience. A caring senior indeed."

These were the remarks he got about Fang Zhao from those students. But when he found out, Wang Tie really wanted to tell those students, Amiable my ass! You would be scared shitless if you knew about his other side!

Today, after Fang Zhao's class, a few students did not immediately leave, instead gathering around Fang Zhao to ask questions.

A year four university student asked, "Senior, could you take a look at this score? I keep thinking it ought to be correct, but no matter what adjustments I make, it doesn't seem right. Look, these are the few edited versions, and it sounds wrong. Senior, what do you think should be changed in this part?"

Fang Zhao glanced at the score and said, "Try it one octave lower at this part... lower—that's too much... Right, just like that."

"Eh, its really different now."

When he was done with this, the other at the back promptly squeezed over. Fang Zhao recognized him. This was a year-six student, who would be graduating next year. Recently, he and two other students had formed a band, and they were moonlighting at a certain nightclub. Recently, he had encountered problems during the composition of his graduation piece.

"Senior, listen to this bit. In order to not repeat the front portion, so as to prevent it from becoming stale, I should add an instrumental tune. I have decided not to use electronic music and instead try some forms of traditional instrumental music. However, I am not that versed in traditional instruments and have tried quite a few and asked some people, but I am unable to achieve the result I want." That student pulled a long face and scratched his head. Over the past two days, he had been struggling with this problem and had lost quite a few hairs over it.

"What have you tried yourself?" Fang Zhao asked.

"I tried a lot. Oh, right, these are the ones I have tried, over twenty different traditional instrumental tones," that student said. Actually, he had not tried all the instrumental

tones. When he had been recording the sound effects, he had bought all of them straight away.

Fang Zhao noticed the twinkling in his eyes and knew he was not speaking the truth, but he did not point it out. Instead he said, "Play the instrumental tones and listen to them one by one."

The student did as he was told. "Ah? Oh."

"Change to the next. Change again. Change again. Change again... Right, this is it."

"This? I feel it obviously doesn't fit," the student hurriedly said. When he had first bought the instrument source material, he had listened to this, a trumpet note, but had immediately eliminated it after listening once. The tone felt rustic and too acute and totally did not fit the musical style of the piece, which evoked thoughts of a degenerate addict.

"Don't use 'I feel.' Try blending it into your composition. After you have listened to it, come tell me your thoughts," Fang Zhao replied.

"Yes, yes... Uhhh, senior, are we not listening to the other instruments? I can play them for you too. It won't take long. A minute will do!" The student hurriedly played out the other few instrument tones he had saved. He was really not optimistic of Fang Zhao's choice. A trumpet tone was his least liked type.

After playing, the student eagerly asked, "How is it?"

"No chance," Fang Zhao replied.

"...All right, I will go back first and try it out." The student thanked Fang Zhao and helplessly left.

By the time Fang Zhao left the classroom, it was already 6 p.m. Today he had not let Zuo Yu pick him up. Zuo Yu's assignment had been to keep an eye on Wang Tie in the game.

After a simple dinner in the school's cafeteria, Fang Zhao called for a taxi and headed for a nightclub that Wayne had recommended: Space.

"Space" was the name of the nightclub, opened by a great master of electronic music.

Here, the primary genre was electronic.

When Fang Zhao arrived, it was only a bit after 7. For people with an enriching nightlife, this was considered very early.

"Is this your first time here, sir? Are you alone? Do you have any requests?" a server asked as he showed Fang Zhao in.

"Just me. I need a suitable place to listen to songs," Fang Zhao replied.

The server stopped in his tracks and eyed Fang Zhao suspiciously. Visiting a nightclub just to listen to songs?

"Fang Zhao noticed the server's reaction. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing, sorry. It's just that... if you are only listening to songs, this way, please." The server turned toward another direction and led Fang Zhao over.

From Fang Zhao's age, the server had thought that Fang Zhao would be similar to other youngsters his age. Coming to a place with bustle with excitement, who knew that Fang Zhao would actually just wish to listen to music. Generally, these sorts were those that had fallen out of love, failed in their business, or encountered setbacks, but the person in front of him did not seem to be disappointed or frustrated. Spending so much money at this location just to listen to a few songs, what was he up to?

Fang Zhao did not care about the server's peculiar gaze. His ears caught a song, electronic with a slightly slower tempo than the fast paced electronic music that was fashionable nowadays. The beat was still as strong and there was a portion with singing in the middle. The style was more random, and the singer's low bass-like voice seemed like idle chatter.

Over at the dance hall, under the murky lights, young men and women were moving about, swaying their bodies to the beat. As they brushed past each other, their eyes intertwined and tacit smiles were flashed. The wantonness and flamboyance of youth, brought about an unrestrained extravagance.

Only at this moment did Fang Zhao realize: Such a great generation gap!

However, Fang Zhao was a person who dared to do things. For the sake of producing a musical style that would be accepted by youngsters in the New Era, he was willing to

change.

Why not listen to Wayne's suggestions, learn to be more lively, enthusiastic, and flamboyant?

How about some dancing?

Chapter 148

Sketchy at First Glance

Fang Zhao planned on observing the behavior of his "peers" before acting. If he waltzed in right now, he would probably end up being one of the weirdos.

So Fang Zhao decided to set up post there and carefully observe people's responses to the mood of the music and their physical reactions.

Once he decided, Fang Zhao removed a small notebook and pen from his pocket. His ears captured every note that was played, and his eyes were glued to the action in the main performance hall.

The night was still young. The songs being played weren't huge hits, and the performers were no big shots, but the quality was good enough to generate a decent atmosphere and avoid an empty house.

According to Wayne, this club started off with slower songs that were still forceful and explosive before picking up the pace as the evening progressed and the time got late.

Fang Zhao planned on carefully observing this transition. He was approaching the matter with the scientific rigor of academic inquiry.

Perhaps on account of the early hour, the spot the waiter had recommended had great acoustics. As Fang Zhao made his way to his seat, he could tell the acoustics kept getting better and better until he reached his destination.

This was a semi-enclosed box seat without a top. The 3-meter-tall wall behind him was solid, dressed with a few decorations and an electric guitar that had not undergone the types of simplification characteristic of the New Era. It was an exact replica of the electric guitar Fang Zhao was familiar with from the Old Era, although it definitely wasn't from the Old Era. Items from the Old Era were antiques and therefore valuable. As much as the club owner wanted to flaunt, he wasn't silly enough to display real antiques on the wall.

The semi-enclosed box seat was separated from other boxes with glass walls. The

transparency of the walls could be adjusted, and different colors and patterns could be added. The side of the box facing the main performance hall was a curtain made of a special material. The curtains could be lifted or draped. There were also different forms of draping. In their default mode, a light curtain descended, the type that could be disrupted by a gentle breeze, but in "total lockdown" mode, the curtains stiffened into opaque boards that couldn't be breached without major force.

Fang Zhao kept the curtains up so he could take in the action in the main performance hall.

As a waiter brought plates of fruit and snacks, he stumbled on Fang Zhao fetching his notebook and pen.

For folks in the New Era, their bracelet doubled as a phone, computer, and credit card. Everyone took notes electronically. People who used physical paper notebooks were a minority. People like Fang Zhao who carried a notebook with them in their pockets were even rarer. A look of surprise flashed through the waiter's eyes when he saw Fang Zhao taking careful notes on the sofa, but the server quickly regained his composure. It wasn't in their place to pass judgment on the fetishes of their guests.

Fang Zhao noticed the curious gaze of the waiter, but he didn't mind. He was busy identifying every single note emitted by the stereo equipment. The New Era was an information age defined by new technology. Musical tastes were different from those of the times Fang Zhao was familiar with. Even though he had been adjusting for a year now, he still hadn't fully absorbed and integrated musical preferences from the New Era. He had absorbed and internalized only to a certain extent. Critics hailed his work as the perfect blend of classical and modern styles, but Fang Zhao knew that his compositions had major shortcomings. This time, he wanted to try something new and overcome those limitations.

The electronic music of the New Era used various contemporary musical tools and advanced post-production software to constantly push the boundaries. This was extremely appealing to Fang Zhao. Even though he still wasn't used to this style, he was willing to learn, to absorb these new elements that had evolved over hundreds of years.

Naturally, watching videos or concert footage through virtual platforms was no rival to visiting an actual concert. The particles of scent floating in the air, the vibrating sound waves, and the scattered ambient noise all constituted elements that could

stimulate. Sitting there, watching the scene unfold and listening to the music, Fang Zhao's brain was flooded with ideas.

He recorded his feelings, his observations, and all his discoveries into his notebook. His ears never stopped capturing the melodies playing, even during the process of taking notes. He lifted his head from time to time to watch the people hanging out in the main performance hall.

In the box seats to Fang Zhao's left, a group of young professionals who had just gotten off work were joking around, venting their pent-up emotions from the workday. When they finished chitchatting, they would hit the dance floor and start getting jiggy with it.

A heartbroken young man was drinking in the box to his right. "Don't hold me back. I want another drink! Why did she have to break up with me?" His friends couldn't do anything about it.

Only Fang Zhao's box was eerily quiet.

People who passed by Fang Zhao's box all cast him curious glances. They had probably never seen such an odd scene before.

Just as Fang Zhao was writing furiously, three young men stepped into his box. They were dressed more or less the same, probably colleagues from the same company who had just left the office. The sleeves of their white dress shirts were rolled up to their elbows. Their unbuttoned collars revealed firm chest muscles. Their hair looked messy but had, in fact, been meticulously done. The trio projected a youthful, unkempt flair, the type that was popular with the ladies in the club.

A square-faced man approached and knocked on the table in front of Fang Zhao. "Kiddo, can you do us a favor? Can you switch boxes with us? We've paid our bill already."

Fang Zhao looked in the direction he was pointing. He had passed the box the man was pointing to en route to his box. The acoustics were much worse, and the box didn't have a view of the main performance hall.

Fang Zhao calmly said, "I'm sorry, but why don't you try someone else? I'd like to stay put."

The man's facial muscles twitched, and he shifted his attention to Fang Zhao's notebook. "Hey, are you a primary student? You came here to do your homework after school?"

He suddenly reached out for Fang Zhao's notebook, only to discover a hand carrying a fountain pen pressed on top of the notebook once he touched it. He pulled to no avail, his muscular arm twitching a few times. The notebook wouldn't come out.

The man's two companions also approached. They laughed when they saw Fang Zhao's notebook and fountain pen. "You're actually using a paper notebook and an antique fountain pen. Even primary students don't use this stuff anymore. Perhaps only kindergarten students in diapers do."

The other man also poked fun at Fang Zhao. "You're wrong. Even kindergarteners don't use this stuff anymore. Stuff like paper has long been passé, but it seems people like cultivating an image by using paper notebooks to pose as artsy and intellectual. It's easier for artsy types to score chicks."

Fang Zhao shook his head and ignored his visitors. These kids weren't worth his time.

"Hey, I said..." The tallest of the three rolled up his sleeves and was about to get in Fang Zhao's face when one of the other men held him back.

"What are you holding me back for? People like this deserve a beating. What this mofo can't stand the most is these pretty boys who act all artsy." The man who was restrained fumed. The smell of alcohol sprouted from his mouth.

Fang Zhao got a real kick out of that comment. Pretty boy? He qualified as a pretty boy? There were so many celebrities at Silver Wing. Someone like Fang Zhao was considered a pedestrian. Perhaps when placed among the masses, his looks could pass muster.

Fang Zhao wasn't upset by the insults. He wasn't a hot-headed kid who was easy to provoke. For him, it was like a few kindergarten students telling an adult "don't leave after school." He would just let it pass. An elder like him wouldn't stoop to the level of arguing with these kids.

Wayne had said the good thing about this club was that people didn't dare start any trouble. Folks that did never ended up pretty. So Fang Zhao knew these three kids wouldn't take things too far. Probably all the well-situated boxes had been taken or

reserved, so they wanted to swap boxes. Naturally, they'd targeted someone who struck them as a softie. After surveying their options, they'd zeroed in on Fang Zhao. He was alone and looked like he would be easy to bully. They were thinking they could force him out with a few threats, but lo and behold, Fang Zhao wasn't easily intimidated.

The tall fellow wanted to make a move but had been stopped by his companions. They didn't dare behave recklessly here. You had to choose the right venue to start a fight. They didn't have the guts to go all out here, but they could still deliver a covert blow.

After the three men left, they went straight to the club's security chief, telling him that one of their guests looked out of sorts and was perhaps dangerous.

The trio were old customers and knew the security detail well. It just so happened that the head of the detail was on patrol, so they rushed forward to pass on the tip. They coyly used vague language, throwing around words like "maybe" or "possibly."

The most honest-looking of the three described Fang Zhao's behavior. "We're just three concerned customers. We're not trying to settle personal scores or disrupt the atmosphere in the club. We just happened to see the guy when we went to the bathroom just now. That fellow looks quite odd." He was completely earnest and didn't embellish, but he stressed points that he knew would touch a nerve, like the way Fang Zhao observed the main performance hall and how he took notes and drew in his palm-sized notebook at the same time.

"You could never tell from the way he looked at the main performance hall that he was here to have fun. That's the type he is... Anyway, I can't be more precise. The bottom line is that there is definitely something wrong with that man. I think you'd better investigate. Even if it turns out to be nothing, you've ensured the peace of mind of your customers, right? You know, everyone who passed that box found him odd," his companion said as if he was still spooked.

The security chief got anxious right away. People in their line of work assumed the worst when they noticed something out of the ordinary. They then proceeded to eliminate any potential threats to the club one by one. So once he heard the description, his first reaction was that someone was plotting something at the club and had even zoomed in on the main performance hall, which was the busiest and most crowded location in the club. If this was an attempted terrorist attack, such as an explosion of some sort, the club's reputation would end up in tatters. Even though

he trusted his security screening equipment, he had to make sure.

So after being briefed, the security chief led a few colleagues to Fang Zhao's box seat.

He checked the number of the box seat, then turned his attention to the serious-looking man who was sitting inside taking notes, doodling and in deep thought. The security chief knew instantly that he had the right box. The scene did seem a bit off.

The security detail in the club donned outfits not unlike the uniforms of any major corporation. The security guards wouldn't come across as threatening or menacing.

The security chief walked into the box with four of his staffers. He remained courteous.

"Sorry to bother you, sir. We're part of the security detail at Space. This is just a routine sweep to ensure the safety of our club. I hope you will cooperate. May I ask what you are doing?" the security chief asked.

"Listening to the music and taking notes. Is there a problem?" Fang Zhao asked.

A problem? Hells yeah! Who the f*ck comes to a club to listen to the music and take notes? Are you nuts?

The security chief scaled back his smile somewhat, but regardless of what he was thinking, he still had to be polite on the surface before he had ascertained that the subject was dangerous. This was a high-class club; even the security staff had to pay attention to their demeanor. They had to be on their best behavior. That was what made for class, not thugs who bared their necks and sported tattoos. If they threw their weight around at the outset and offended a customer, it was their boss who would lose face.

"Do you mind if I take a look at your notes? If they're private, then never mind. Could I also see some ID please? A company ID would be ideal."

Fang Zhao examined the visiting party then nodded. "Sure."

He handed over his notebook.

The security chief was caught by surprise. He had never expected the subject to hand over his notebook without putting up a fight. He still had to examine the notebook carefully.

"Thank you for your cooperation." Even though he was just a security guard, he was exposed to a wide range of people at Space. When he felt the paper as he took Fang Zhao's notebook, he knew it was very high quality, typically favored by professionals. He had noticed a professional author use the same type of notebook in the club. Several of the club's senior executives also liked to carry high-end mini-notebooks in their pockets and tuck custom-made antique fountain pens in their breast pockets. They never had any use for them; it was all for show.

But the person before him was hard to read. He might really be an artist who behaved differently from a normal person.

So when he received the notebook, the security chief turned up his charm. His smile became more beaming, but after flipping through the notebook and reading its contents, his smile turned stiff and tenuous and his cheeks kept twitching.

One of his underlings peeked over this shoulder then shot Fang Zhao a befuddled glance.

What the hell is "acoustic design through non-linear thinking?"

And what the hell is "the complex fission of New Era sound"? Sound can actually fission?

What kind of space is the space in the "irregular virtual simulation, flooding and stereo treatment of sonic space"?

"The expressive artistic potential of electronic music after simulation, a change in quality, reassembly and rebirth..." Oh, this seems a bit more accessible. I understand the first seven words. But what the hell is "expressive artistic potential"? What kind of potential is that?

The security chief felt put on the spot, even though he was the graduate of a top university, let alone his staffer. He felt like he was illiterate.

I... I... I... can't understand any of this!

But even though he couldn't understand the notes, he could tell it was a professional analysis.

He kept flipping.

It was a fairly new notebook. Quite a few pages in the middle were left empty. The last few pages were filled not with words but undecipherable symbols. They appeared in spurts—a few lines would be followed by a gap of two lines, then another few lines. The lines were of varying length. They resembled some sort of code.

The security chief pointed to the scribbles on the last few pages of the notebook. "And these are?"

"Music scores," Fang Zhao responded.

"M-music scores?" That put the security chief in a bind. It was difficult to probe further when it came to scores because privacy and intellectual property were involved, but no one could verify that this was indeed a score. What if it was some type of code, and the club's security hang in the balance? He had a professional tendency to assume the worst, but when personal privacy and intellectual property were on the line, he would stop pressing.

He returned the notebook to Fang Zhao. Just as he was about to ask for identification, Fang Zhao tapped on his bracelet to bring up his professional credentials.

After scanning the information, the security chief's facial expression softened multiple times. He gave Fang Zhao a polite bow. "So sorry to interrupt your listening session. Please accept a small gift as a token of our apologies. Please continue. This is a great spot for listening. There are fewer disturbances. Have a good time."

Fang Zhao nodded and didn't raise his voice when he said, "This is indeed a great spot. Those three folks wanted to swap boxes with me. I refused."

The security chief froze, turned, and signaled his men to leave.

After leaving the box, his men asked out of curiosity, "Boss, who was that?"

"Manager of the Silver Wing virtual projects department, member of the Yanzhou Music Association, honorary lecturer at the Qi'an Academy of Music, and special adviser to Fiery Bird..." The security chief gritted his teeth as he finished his sentence. Even though he maintained a smile, the fear that flashed through his eyes gave his men chills.

"Track down the three men from just now, take them outside, and give them a refresher on our house rules. How dare they play me?" The security chief actually

didn't mind being used as long as the tip was accurate. Being used wasn't a big deal if the security of the club was at stake, but who were they reporting as suspicious? An honorary lecturer at Qi'an Academy of Music. A special adviser to Fiery Bird. The words "special adviser" blew him away. More impressively, the man was so young.

Geniuses always behaved differently than normal people. It was understandable for them to be a bit neurotic and act unconventionally.

Fiery Bird was a household name, and any average person knew the weight the title "special adviser" carried.

And Qi'an Academy of Music? Their boss graduated from the Qi'an Academy of Music.

Their big boss was quite sentimental about his alma mater. Who knew if Fang Zhao knew their big boss. If he uttered one word to their big boss, who knows, he could be fired. He had to report the matter to his superiors so he could cover his ass if there was an investigation.

Fang Zhao's train of thought hadn't been interrupted by the sudden inspection. After the security guards left, he kept taking notes. It was already past 8 p.m. The beats in the club started to pick up. More people started hitting the dance floor in the main performance hall.

"Senior alum? Senior alum Fang Zhao?"

"That can't be. What would senior alum Fang Zhao be doing at a place like this? It is him!"

The two shocked students stood in front of Fang Zhao's box to take a closer look. It was indeed the Fang Zhao who had just delivered a lecture to them earlier in the day.

The two students had approached Fang Zhao with questions after the lecture. Fang Zhao remembered them. They were year-six students, students in their final year under the new six-year curriculum. They would be graduating soon and were thus under a lot of pressure. It made sense for them to kick back a bit by partying in the evening.

"Senior alum, is it just you? What are you writing?" one of the students asked.

"I'm listening to the music and jotting down my thoughts and analysis."

"You're such a great role model for our generation."

This wasn't a music appreciation class, it was a noisy club. What kind of person would do something like that?

This was a completely different level of enlightenment. From another planet.

Chapter 149

Reference Book Taking Human Form

The two were year-six students from Qi'an Academy of Music. The guy was Thomas and had asked Fang Zhao for help after class. The girl was Cheng Lan; with a short bob and a straight fringe, she seemed the more lively of the two.

According to them, the coming Tuesday was Cheng Lan's birthday, but since they had a full day of lessons and all sorts of assignments then, they could not make time. Thus, the celebration had been brought forth to today, when their friends were all free, and they had come over after school to celebrate.

They had booked a private room a short distance away. The others had not arrived yet, and Thomas and Cheng Lan had just gotten here. As they had been about to go to their private room, they had seen Fang Zhao as they were passing and came over to greet him.

Seeing Fang Zhao so conscientiously taking down notes, the two on the verge of graduating felt a little guilty. Compared to Fang Zhao, they were just squandering their time!

"So much pressure!" Thomas sighed. "It's rare to find the time to come out and enjoy."

For year-six university students, the better the university, the stricter the requirements for graduating. As Qi'an Academy of Music was Yanzhou's best music academy, the graduating requirements were even more stringent.

Students that had consistently outstanding grades and a solid foundation would be starting to find internships at companies instead of worrying about all sorts of graduation evaluations. However, those like Thomas who did not normally work hard would have to put in a lot more time and effort in a bid to save their grades, at least to beautify their results for this crucial year, which would make it easier to get a job after graduating.

Thomas's eyes were on the electric guitar hanging on the wall. As he thought of something, he paused and asked Fang Zhao, "Senior, how much do you know about

ancient instruments? Aren't you good at creating music of the symphonic style? Although the instruments used by the band are not ancient instruments, they were developed from them. I heard that you are well-versed in that; have you come into contact with a few of these ancient instruments?"

"Ancient instruments?" Fang Zhao nodded. "I do know some."

The "ancient instruments" he mentioned were what people of the New Era called instruments that were from before the Period of Destruction. They were also called "old-fashioned instruments" or "old-style instruments." However, for academic people, "old-fashioned" and "old-style" were not terms that they wished to hear or see, as they seemed degrading toward art. Thus, the term "ancient instruments" was used.

"What do you wish to know?" Fang Zhao asked.

Thomas gave a mischievous giggle and sat down on the sofa, rubbing his hands together before raising one and pointing at the electric guitar hanging on the wall. "That one. I have it from a reliable source that, in the final exams, among the questions tested will be one on an electric guitar. However, throughout our six years of university life, we simply have not had a single lesson concerning the ancient electric guitar."

"Right, right, right!" Cheng Lan also joined in the laughter and politely poured a cup of tea for Fang Zhao. "Actually, Senior, we picked this place so that we could see the electric guitar up close. Everyone knows that ancient instruments, even if they are replicas, are more expensive, especially those in the electric guitar category. It is almost impossible to get one for less than \$10,000. As for good imitations or those made from better materials, they cost much more. It's totally something that us poor students can never afford. The one here at Space is an imitation of an electric guitar, and not New Era versions that have evolved. As a pure ancient instrument, it is a high-grade manufactured one. That's why we wished to come over and... study it."

Fang Zhao could understand Thomas and Cheng Lan's point of view. The 100 years of the Period of Destruction were like a break in history. No matter how many videos and electronic records and various other methods preserved information from that time, there was a limit to how much ancient instruments could be preserved. In the New Era, archaeology teams were continuously making new discoveries, but ancient instruments were rare. During that extraordinary time, instruments were not considered important, and not much effort had been made to conserve them. That was

why there were very few instructional videos regarding instruments and why the prices of instruments from the Old Era could be jacked up. It was only during times of peace that such things were of use.

Instructional videos from the Old Era were not as high quality as those of the New Era, and there were not a lot. They weren't perfect either. People from the music industry that had survived the Period of Destruction were even fewer. Even if they had survived, after 100 years of struggle, they might not necessarily have still remembered their knowledge and techniques. Not everyone was like Fang Zhao, who could simulate an orchestra playing in his head.

For other stuff, Fang Zhao might be less knowledgeable, but regarding ancient instruments, the two had asked the right person.

"What aspects of the electric guitar do you guys want to know about?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Not much, we just want to clarify how it's supposed to be used." Thomas was scared Fang Zhao would find him troublesome, so he hurriedly said, "The testing criteria will probably not be so detailed regarding ancient instruments. After all, how it works will definitely not be tested, so Senior can just explain a little on its usage."

Instruments used by New Era symphonic orchestras might produce the same tones as ancient instruments, but the shapes differed greatly. After hundreds of years of development and technological advancements as well as changing materials, the shapes of instruments had changed. Ultimately, instruments had to be easier to operate and convenient to carry; otherwise they would be replaced by the increasingly perfect electronic instruments and would truly become "antiques."

Nowadays, many students from music academies only needed to use a music keyboard to produce music. Along with some downloaded source material, they could simulate all the sounds they wished to produce. This was cheap and practical, and there was no need to learn various instrumental techniques.

In comparison, the Old Era's electric guitar was just too hard for these students! Luckily, all they needed to understand to pass the exam was some theory and how it operated. If they were required to learn ancient electric guitar techniques, these students would not be willing.

Cheng Lan also echoed Thomas. "It's true. We bought a few instructional videos and watched people using it, but it feels too difficult. There were a lot of points that were hard to understand. Senior, could you explain a little to us?"

"I remember there being a lot of instructional videos online," Fang Zhao said.

From Fang Zhao's memory, he knew that the original owner of his body had tackled the exams by using free videos and materials from the school's library and had banked on his good memory and a little luck to score highly.

Thomas grimaced. "Those are actually not reliable at all. We can only view a lot, but after that, we need to summarize them ourselves." This was the reason they felt so pressured. It was a lot of work!

Those free videos were difficult to understand, and the person explaining probably did not understand it well. As for those genuine authoritative instructional videos, those cost a large sum. Even after spending so much money, one would not necessarily obtain the information they wished to, and the videos might not be completely accurate. A few years ago, someone had verified with a few reputable musicians and ancient instrument researchers and found out that there were two grave errors in the instructional videos.

Although the musician had refunded the money back to buyers, many students had already answered wrongly during the examinations and lost marks. It was too late for regrets. Therefore, generally speaking, examination topics on ancient instruments were extremely easy to lose marks on.

In the past centuries, there had been people who'd managed to figure out ancient instruments such as the electric guitar, but afterward, they had not publicly released the knowledge that they had spent a hard time researching. The only ones that could get such information were their disciples or the later generations that took over. Other students had no way of understanding it. This was the norm in the industry and the reason why Xue Jing so appreciated Fang Zhao's sharing of his various techniques and knowledge when he had helped compile "New Voices in Symphonic Composition."

Fang Zhao nodded. He understood where the two were coming from. "You might not necessarily remember if I only use words. How about this, take the the electric guitar off the wall and I will give you a little demonstration."

"Demo... Demonstration?" Thomas stared blankly then happily got up to retrieve it.

As he took it down from the wall, Thomas was very cautious. He was afraid to knock it against anything. Even if it was just an ornament here, if there was any damage, it would be recorded and they would have to pay before leaving.

The cost of the electric guitar in his hands was estimated to be in at least the six digits. The owner of the place had money and loved these sorts of instruments. Even if it was an ornament, he would not use one of shoddy quality.

As he handed over the electric guitar, Thomas's hands were shaking. He confirmed Fang Zhao was holding it before slowly releasing his grip.

"Senior, please be careful. This thing is really expensive." Thomas then remembered, Fang Zhao doesn't lack money! Even if it was not publicly announced, they could still estimate how much Fang Zhao had earned from the copyrights of his previous works.

Since Fang Zhao was rich, Thomas and Cheng Lan's confidence increased, and they were no longer as hesitant as before. They curiously felt the electric guitar. In the past, whenever they came here, they would be afraid of touching the electric guitar in case they damaged it. What little money they had was enough for them to enjoy a little, but if they were to compensate, they would really vomit blood.

"Senior, we will pay for your expenses here!" Cheng Lan was very happy today. Regardless of whether Fang Zhao could teach them what they wanted, they wanted to pay for him, since he was willing to help them.

"You don't have pay for me." After Fang Zhao had received the electric guitar from Thomas, he went on. "Bring the others out as well."

Thomas was puzzled. "Others? What others are there? Isn't there only one guitar?"

Cheng Lan elbowed him. "Blockhead, what was the point of watching the instructional videos? There is still the amplifier, audio cable, effects pedal, and the other equipment!"

"Oh! Right, right! There is other equipment. Oh, my stupid brain! Senior, you just wait here. I'll go find them."

Thomas and Cheng Lan found a cabinet on the wall that seemed to have some

ornaments. Pressing a button on it, the cabinet automatically opened.

Thomas looked at Cheng Lan. "This big one is an amplifier... right?"

"If I remember correctly." Cheng Lan looked at Fang Zhao, and seeing his nod of approval, she smiled. She had not remembered wrong.

"I know that's an audio cable, but what about this? What are these for?" Thomas looked at a lump of objects and flipped them over to take a look, but he remained stunned. "There isn't even a manual here."

This time, Cheng Lan had no idea either. Had this been mentioned in the materials she had memorized before? The video she had watched two days ago had not mentioned this.

"Those are effects pedals," Fang Zhao told them.

"Effects pedal? All of... these? This is different from what we saw in the videos. The video we watched only had one effects pedal, and it did not look like this. I think it was called something like a composite effects pedal."

"Mhm, that's for beginners. These here are individual effects pedals," Fang Zhao explained.

"Oh. Understood." Thomas brought everything over and prepared to assemble the equipment.

"Wait!" Cheng Lan stopped Thomas and asked Fang Zhao, "Senior, can I record the whole process? I won't remember it just observing once."

Fang Zhao did not mind. "Sure."

"Thank you, Senior!" Cheng Lan shot a glance at Thomas. "Be more serious, I'm about to start recording."

"Remember to get my face in the video." Thomas took the audio cable, paused, and turned toward Fang Zhao. "Senior, how do you connect this? Don't get up. Just sit there and give me the instructions. I will handle it."

Fang Zhao did not decline. Letting Thomas personally assemble it would make him

remember better, so he sat on the sofa and instructed, "Place the amplifier between the guitar and audio cable. Attach the guitar's cable to the input of the effects pedal. After that, attach the effects pedal's output to the input of the amplifier..."

Thomas followed Fang Zhao instructions and connected them step by step. He used to feel that ancient instruments were troublesome, the equipment was complicated, and using one was complex, but now, after having a hands-on lesson, he felt somewhat accomplished. Actually, it was not that difficult after all! Just connecting them together, how simple!

Something so simple was made complicated by people online!

Cheng Lan stood at the side, recording the entire scene down, including Fang Zhao's explanations of every effects pedal: "distortion pedal," "compression pedal," "tuner pedal," "looper pedal..."

As Thomas was connecting the effects pedals, he picked up one part and saw the words printed on it, "Wah-wah? What is this?"

"Wah pedal," Fang Zhao replied.

"Wah sounds? You mean the 'waahohhwaoohh' 1 sounds?" Thomas's face was full of surprise. "That is an electronic tone!? I actually did not know!"

They normally used the downloaded "wah" sounds on the musical keyboard. he had never known it was the tone of an ancient electric guitar! If this was a multiple choice question, he would have just made a wild guess.

After setting up, Fang Zhao explained while he demonstrated. Thomas sat obediently at the side, listened attentively, and changed the effects pedals when Fang Zhao requested.

In the middle, Fang Zhao also let Thomas and Cheng Lan voice their views and raise questions.

"Senior, the part you just mentioned is different from the reference video we watched," Cheng Lan said.

"Listen to mine."

"...Yes," Cheng Lan answered.

Thomas was more inclined to believe Fang Zhao. "That's why I said the reference video we bought surely had errors. If we had really memorized from the video, we would have lost marks when the time came! Not only was his explanation bad, how did that lazy-ass teacher obtain his professional qualifications? Surely there must be something shady going on!"

Cheng Lan interrupted Thomas's grumbling. "Doesn't matter whether its shady or not, just hurry up and listen to Senior. I am still recording." She was still waiting for more of Fang Zhao's explanations and demonstrations. A while ago, she had only had the mentality of having a try and seeing what little knowledge they could gain from Fang Zhao. Little had they known that Fang Zhao would give them too big of a surprise! A comprehensive explanation! It included all the basics regarding an electric guitar. In any case, it was more than sufficient for them to tackle the examinations!

This was just a reference book taking human form!

If this was shared in the class chat group, the class—no, all the students in Qi'an Academy of Music that needed knowledge on the ancient electric guitar—would be ecstatic!

Chapter 150

Follow the Rhythm, Move About!

When the server was pushing a cart of beverages and refreshments, he realized that this private room had actually drawn the curtains.

A while back, there had been only one person, and he had said he wanted to listen to music, but now, the private room had drawn the curtains and the room was now in "sealed mode." That meant that the private room's roof was also sealed, so people outside couldn't hear what was happening inside, and the people inside would not be disturbed by any activity outside.

What is one person doing in the private room with sealed mode? Listening to music? With the curtains drawn and the room sealed, what music is he listening to?

The server looked at the side. There was no "Do Not Disturb" sign and the curtains were not drawn all the way, meaning that there was nothing secretive going on, so the purpose was to block off the noise from outside.

The server reached out and lightly pulled the curtains apart. He had only opened a narrow slit when he heard the distinct sound of a rapid and concentrated music chord that made him pause as an astonished look appeared on his face.

Servers in Space without a little hearing ability would not get far. As the boss was once a famous electric guitar performer, the staff here, from the manager to the waiters, would at least understand the basics of an electric guitar, and the more they understood, the more they could obtain the favor of the boss and climb higher. Therefore, the staff here spent their free time learning about electric guitars and how to differentiate performing techniques. This was the ability of all employees at Space. They might not know how to perform, but they needed to know how to listen.

Their high salary was not just from serving drinks, guiding customers, or an excellent service attitude. For that sort of requirement, just Qi'an City alone would have a hundred thousand people who could do it, so why had these people ultimately gotten this job?

Hearing ability! Differentiating ability! Comprehending ability!

Thus, before he even saw the situation in the room, just listening, he could make a preliminary judgement.

Someone was performing, and the instrument was an electric guitar. From the clarity and accuracy of the notes, the performer's control in both hands was very strong.

An expert!

Opening the curtains, the server saw the situation inside.

Fang Zhao was demonstrating to Thomas and Cheng Lan the plucking technique. The sounds the server had heard just now were from him using both hands to pluck the electronic guitar.

Seeing the server enter, Fang Zhao stopped and looked over suspiciously.

The server apologized. "Sorry to bother you, take this as a form of compensation for the security team disturbing you."

The server brought out the items on the cart, laid them all on the table, and left quickly.

Fang Zhao glanced at the time; it was already past 10. During this period, Cheng Lan and Thomas had received many calls but had rejected them all. Their friends who they had arranged to meet had been hurrying them. However, Thomas and Cheng Lan had said they had an urgent matter and would head over later.

"It is getting late, and I have said a lot. Although it is not complete, I have covered some of the basics. This is it for today," Fang Zhao said.

Thomas still wished to continue. "Ah? You are stopping? It's actually past 10! Time passes too quickly."

Cheng Lan spoke. "Senior you must be tired. Have a rest. You probably won't accept any gifts, so how about we find a time when you are free to give you a treat." Fang Zhao had said a lot, starting from the basics and slowly delving deeper. They could handle the examinations without any problems now.

Thomas and Cheng Lan actually felt that, if they were to take the test now, they could

get at least 80 if not 90 out of 100 marks. In any case, they would not fail. To prevent themselves from forgetting, the two intended to watch the video a few more times to refresh their memory when they got back.

Cheng Lan asked, "Oh right, Senior, can we share the video we took with the rest of our class? Only people from our class."

"Sure."

"Senior, you can upload the video to your profile under the school's teaching and administrative web page. Then you can set up privileges—for example, a fee for viewing your materials. Many teachers in the school do it," Thomas suggested.

"No need," Fang Zhao replied.

Eyeing the table in front of the sofa filled with drinks and snacks, Fang Zhao told the two, "Leave this pot of tea, this bottle of wine, and this plate of refreshments. As for the rest, bring them with you."

"This..."

Fang Zhao had explained so much today, and not only were the two unable to help Fang Zhao settle his tab, even food and drinks were being given by him. They could not help but feel a little embarrassed. They would come once or twice a month, and although they did not consider themselves to know the place well, they knew that the drinks and snacks served here were more expensive. They would seldom order these.

However, upon Fang Zhao's insistence, they could not decline.

"Then... thank you, Senior!"

The two of them returned the electric guitar to its original state on the wall before thanking Fang Zhao sincerely once more, grabbing the food, and leaving.

The private room's sealed status was lifted. The roof opened and the curtains were drawn back as the upbeat tempo from the music outside drifted back in. Quicker and more explosive, it made it easy to drive up the atmosphere. All the various restless and agitated energy in the air rose up with the music.

Fang Zhao sipped on tea to moisten his throat, then opened the wine on the table. For

this sort of atmosphere, wine was better suited. Following that, he took out his notebook and continued to observe the going-ons in the dance hall.

Elsewhere, Cheng Lan shared the video she had just taken with the class chat group.

At this time, there were still people who were discussing the impending final exams. The things they grumbled about most were regarding ancient instruments.

"We are composing students. Why do we need to learn about those obsolete instruments when we can complete it all using software? Leave those to ancient people!

"Aren't the electric guitar and the classical guitar all guitars? Why are all their points completely different? It's less than a month to the exams and there are still so many points to remember?! I don't have enough brain cells."

"Just from trying to memorize all the material, my hairline seems to be receding."

Just as these people were grumbling, they suddenly received a notification: "Your classmate Cheng Lan has shared a video in the class chat. 'Ancient electric guitar secret manual for examination, do not leak to outsiders'."

Every day, there were people sharing some resources within the group chat. Some were useful, while others were not, but this could only be decided after seeing them. For the sake of their exams, they would not let any shared videos slip by!

Those online viewed it, as they had nothing to lose. After all, they had been watching lots of reference videos prior to this, and the results had been insignificant and had made them even more confused.

"Eh? Isn't that Senior Fang Zhao? I even attended his lecture today."

"Where is this place? Thomas? Where did you and Cheng Lan run into Senior Fang Zhao?"

"One look at the electric guitar on the wall and I know where you guys went. You guys went clubbing! Why didn't you call me along?!"

"I couldn't tell that Senior Fang Zhao can also play the ancient electric guitar?"

"I didn't know that Senior Fang Zhao would actually go to that sort of place."

...

Half an hour later.

...

"Seems decent, but is what he is saying correct? Why does it seem different from the reference videos I watched?"

"Didn't you hear what Senior said? 'Listen to mine!'"

"Seems like a bluff, but if we memorize incorrect points, we will be out of luck for the exams."

...

An hour later.

"I got my uncle to take a look. He said that everything Senior Fang Zhao has said till now is correct. My uncle was the previous chairman of the Yanzhou ancient electric guitar association."

"I don't care. Cheng Lan, Thomas, private message, send me a copy of the video!"

"I want it too!"

"Thomas, are you my brother? If you are my brother, stop ignoring my private messages."

Files shared within the group chat could only be viewed but not downloaded. Therefore, they had to get the original video from the sender.

...

Two hours later.

"F*ck, I saw someone from the other class sharing this video! We have a traitor in our group!"

"Which *sshole leaked the information?"

"What's important is who it leaked from. Didn't we say that, regardless of whether it was your first love, crush, or current partner who asked, we still would not budge?!"

"I have bad news for everyone. Our neighboring school is also circulating the video."

"F*ck! There is definitely more than one traitor!"

"Retarded c*nts! If it spreads too much, the teacher setting the exams might change the questions at the last minute! Isn't this hurting ourselves?"

Cheng Lan was enjoying her own birthday celebration when she suddenly received over ten calls. It was the same with Thomas. Seeing that they seemed urgent, he put one through and found out that, within two hours, the video had been circulated among every music academy in Yanzhou. It was even rumored that there were people from other continents that had gotten a copy through certain means.

If it were other entertainment videos, of course more circulation was better. However, this was an educational and instructional video on a rare ancient instrument. According to Thomas, this sort of video could garner a high price if sold online, and there would be no shortage of buyers. After sharing the video among the class, the two had enjoyed the limelight and been elated after receiving compliments, but now, when they heard the news, they immediately sobered up despite being tipsy from the drinks.

What if Fang Zhao got angry over this? What if Fang Zhao changed his mind and wanted to upload the video to sell? Now that the video had already been circulated, even if it was uploaded, nobody would purchase it. There were already many people who had this video, and it was still increasing by the minute.

Thinking about the consequences, the two could not care about the birthday celebration or whatnot. Immediately rushing over to Fang Zhao's private room and seeing Fang Zhao still there, they explained everything while full of guilt.

"Senior, your video has been circulated. How about uploading a copy onto the school's website? At least it will show that the copyright belongs to you so nobody else can pass themselves off as you.

Fang Zhao was rather suspicious of the news. In two hours, how had it spread so wide?

Rather than regretting not uploading it for sale on the internet, Fang Zhao was astonished that there would be that many people paying attention to ancient electric guitars. However, he still listened to Thomas's suggestions and uploaded the video to the Qi'an Academy of Music's webpage. At the same time, he also uploaded a copy onto social platforms, where it was for the public and free to use.

"Senior, you... are not angry?" Cheng Lan asked hesitantly.

"Why would I be angry? More people understanding is a good thing. The video being circulated that widely means a contribution to the spread of the culture of ancient instruments. It also means that the amount of people interested in ancient instruments is greater than what we imagined."

Seeing that Fang Zhao was not getting angry over this matter, the two who were panicking gradually calmed down. At the same time, their admiration of Fang Zhao grew. At their age, there were not many people in the world who had the same sort of mentality as Fang Zhao. It might only be Fang Zhao alone. No wonder Great Master Xue Jing had so energetically recommended Fang Zhao and brought him along for the global lecture tour. Fang Zhao was worth it! Any other person would have been trying get benefits a long time ago.

"Senior, you aren't going back yet?" Cheng Lan asked.

"No, it is lively now." Fang Zhao noticed that, at this time, the atmosphere at the nightclub was at its apex. Surely he would not miss this chance to observe.

"Since you don't intend to leave yet, how about entering the dance floor and enjoying with us?" Cheng Lan suggested.

Thomas nodded his head and echoed her. "Yes, yes, you can feel the atmosphere better on the dance floor. The experience is totally different from sitting in the private room!"

Fang Zhao thought about it. He had already been a spectator for so long; he could try entering the dance floor and experiencing for himself that sort of atmosphere.

Thomas and Cheng Lan told their friends that they would be entering the dance floor and proceeded to clear the way in for Fang Zhao, both preventing people who were bouncing around from knocking into Fang Zhao and blocking off a few that were clearly not sober.

"Here, here, the sound effects here are especially good. I just love to dance at this spot," Thomas shouted over the blaring music.

Under the blurry lights, intoxicated people had begun to make their way to the dance floor. Like water that had reached its boiling point, the people starting dancing and swaying crazily.

"Don't worry about whether you can dance well or not, just follow the music and your brain, just like how we compose music. Just follow your instincts," Thomas explained from the side.

"If you really don't know how, I can teach you, Senior," Cheng Lan added in.

"Better not. Senior, don't listen to her. Us men need to be manly. Just follow me. Make sure your muscles are not too tense. Watch my shoulders, arms..." Thomas demonstrated a simple motion.

"Just like that. Take one step, remember how each step feels, pay attention to your joints, follow the rhythm, and move! about!"

Thomas had just finished when he saw, from the corner of his eye, a person beside Fang Zhao got sent flying by Fang Zhao's fist.

Thomas: "..."

Cheng Lan: "..."

Brother, I didn't ask you to move like this!



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