

The background is a dark, stylized illustration of a futuristic city or industrial complex. It features curved, metallic-looking structures and a grid-like floor. A person in a dark suit with a glowing red light on their chest is walking in the lower-left foreground. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and blacks, with some highlights in orange and white.

by Lazy Cliché

Superstars of Tomorrow



QIDIAN
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SUPERSTARS OF TOMORROW

- 未来天王 -

- VOLUME 4 -

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[Webnovel]

Chapter 151

Yanzhou's Shadowless Hands

The life drained out of Thomas and Cheng Lan's faces.

"Assault!" someone on the dancefloor shouted, but with the deafening music in the background, only those nearby could hear it.

And the first reaction of people who heard this was disbelief. Assault? Here? Who dares? Don't they know the consequences of creating trouble in Space? Or perhaps the assailant is drunk?

No matter whether a person was sober or drunk, as long as they created trouble here, they would not be able to leave peacefully.

People who were alcohol intolerant would not come here, and if they came, they did not dare to drink much, as they were afraid of the cruel retaliation at "Space." The staff here, from servers to security, might seem polite and well mannered, but if anyone broke the rules, knives would be drawn.

Whenever there were fights, the people closest would be the first to suffer. Therefore, the moment those people nearby heard it, they immediately dispersed and left the danger zone. There were some inebriated people who saw everyone around leaving and became puzzled while still swaying their arms. They were probably lost in their own world and had to be forcibly pulled away by their friends as they mumbled to themselves.

After that, there were more shouts as more and more people realized what had gone on here.

"Let me out, let me out!" People nearby tried to get out and leave this possibly dangerous spot.

"Let me in, let me in!" Certain people from other parts of the dancefloor wanted to squeeze in and had turned on their video recording mode. I heard there is a fight! It's rare for a fight to happen at Space. How could I miss it?

"That's him, the one who beat someone up! Everyone catch him!"

There were people in the crowd trying to personify justice and urging the crowd to catch him.

One person trying to mount a sneak attack from the side had just gotten close when he was sent flying with a lightning-quick kick. It felt as if a thick iron rod had swept him aside, and the contents of his dinner nearly spewed out.

Thomas and Cheng Lan's friends also noticed the commotion, and they squeezed over and asked Thomas, "That is your senior? Why does he have such a fiery temper? Just some dancing and he can send people flying?"

"No, no, no, it's definitely a mistake. Senior isn't that sort of impulsive person," Cheng Lan hurriedly explained.

Crash! Yet another person was sent flying.

Under the flashing lights, the person sent flying was like a fish that had leapt out from the waves, flying through the dance floor in an arc before finally smashing into the ground, struggling a few times but unable to get up.

Cheng Lan was speechless.

A chair came swinging toward Fang Zhao, but he caught it and smashed it into the nearest person, and the retro wooden chair fell to pieces.

A few hot-blooded people in the crowd want to step over to subdue Fang Zhao, but seeing the scene, they stopped in their tracks. The security team would be arriving shortly, so they just stayed there watching the commotion.

Thomas and Cheng Lan's friend said, "I'm not saying anything bad about your senior, but the way he fights is... so skillful. One look and I know he is an old hand. Did he come from a black street?"

The music in the dance floor abruptly stopped and a voice blared out through the sound system. "Everyone stop right there."

"The security team is here!" someone in the crowd exclaimed.

"What do we do?" Cheng Lan was on the verge of tears. They were regulars at Space and knew that nobody who had caused a disturbance could walk away safely. Even if they had a background, there was no telling whether an accident might befall them in the following days where not a trace of evidence could be found.

And the reason why so many people liked visiting Space was the lack of troublemakers, which created a safe and enjoyable environment. Fang Zhao's actions now were undoubtedly destroying Space's image. Under the flashing lights, the ashen faces of the security team could be seen. If not for the light effects, the expressions on their faces would surely scare everyone.

When he saw the security chief leading his team, Thomas hurriedly went over to try and explain.

"Senior did did did did not do it on purpose..."

Thomas had not finished speaking when there was a cracking sound and another person was sent flying, his arm twisted in a weird angle. When he landed, there was no movement—he had probably fainted.

Thomas: "..."

Thomas felt like crying too. Brother! I had just established a mutual understanding with the security team!!

Fang Zhao finally stopped—not because he had seen the security team arrive but because there was no longer anyone around other than Thomas, Cheng Lan, their group of friends, and the security team.

The security chief counted the people lying on the ground: six. They had already reacted promptly. The moment the commotion had been spotted on the surveillance cam, they had immediately rushed over. Had it even been a minute? And in such a short time, Fang Zhao had downed six people. Six people had been immobilized. Their injuries were not life-threatening, but they were not light either.

He raised his hand and signaled his team to first send the people lying on the floor for treatment.

When the security team had found out that it was Fang Zhao that was creating trouble, it had given them a headache. Why is it him?

Since when did artists have such fiery tempers?

But even if the governor's own children were creating trouble, they still had to catch the perpetrator!

All the sound equipment had been completely shut off, and the lights were no longer flashing. The entire dance floor was silent.

"This is your first time here, Mr. Fang, so perhaps you do not know the rules here? Nobody told you what to take note of?" The words were the same, but the tone was different from when they had addressed him back in the private room, with not a hint of respect inside.

The surrounding security team were flexing their arms and cracking their knuckles, and their faces displayed killing intent.

Towards people who smashed up their place, they did not have the normally friendly look. This was them showing off their truly dangerous side.

"I hope the few of you can give a proper explanation." There was no longer a smile on the security chief's face as he glared daggers at Fang Zhao, Thomas, and the few of them.

"They attacked first." There was not a trace of panic on Fang Zhao face as he shifted to the side and stood in front of Thomas and Cheng Lan, blocking them from the security chief's gaze. He continued, "They attacked me first, all six of them. You can check their possessions and you should be able to find something surprising. I also wish to know who ordered them to attack me."

"We will investigate, but first, please head to a quieter spot with us and explain the situation that happened just now—"

As he was about to say something else, a member of the security team ran over and whispered something in the chief's ear. His expression changed. The anger on his face dissipated and was replaced with fear and respect, but that was not toward anyone here. He looked up at Fang Zhao's group, his eyes filled with sympathy.

"Our boss said to invite his junior over for some tea," the security chief said.

"Is it... Mr. Natiwuzi?" Thomas stammered.

"Yes." The security chief moved sideways and raised his hand. "Please."

At the same time, members of the security team surrounded Fang Zhao from both sides. This position meant that, if Fang Zhao did not go, they would use force to make him comply.

As Thomas and Cheng Lan had not participated, the boss had not called for them. Hence, the security chief did not ask them to come along.

Before Fang Zhao left, he told Thomas and Cheng Lan. "Don't worry. I am going over to have a chat with Mr. Natiwuzi. You guys head back first."

With that Fang Zhao headed in the direction the security chief had pointed out.

Thomas and Cheng Lan did not listen to Fang Zhao's words and instead chose to wait here, letting their other friends leave. They waited in the private room Fang Zhao had booked.

The two felt like their blood had frozen and were reproaching themselves for asking Fang Zhao to head to the dance floor.

As they were mulling, Thomas received a call from a dormmate.

"Thomas, our faculty's beauty, the one you have been crushing on, just posted on the school forums thanking you! Thanking you on behalf of the faculty and for contributing to our fellow schoolmates who need knowledge on ancient instruments. She even asked if there was any way she could contact you. Are you surprised? Unexpected? Are you happy?"

If this was under normal circumstances, Thomas would have been over the moon, but now, Thomas was in no mood for anything. He even felt like crying.

"Brother, help me do something." Thomas briefly recounted what had happened.

On the other end of the call, sharp exhaling could be heard.

"Are you sure you are talking about Senior Fang Zhao? He didn't drink, right?" The other party was finding it hard to imagine.

"He did, but not a lot. He still seemed quite sober and said that the other people raised

their hands first."

"That... you have to know, some people get drunk after just a sip of alcohol but still seem sober, but that is just an image! Maybe Senior Fang Zhao was so drunk he could not think straight! But you said he beat six people?"

"That's not the point. The problem is he fought in Space! And was taken away! Brother, hurry up and think of some ideas. See if there is anyone who can help!"

Cheng Lan was also busy contacting people. However it was already in the wee hours of the morning, and many people were already in bed. School teachers, the deans of their faculty, or others might have been able to talk to Natiwuzi, but they were all asleep.

At the other side, Fang Zhao had followed the security chief and left the dance hall through another exit and was taking the elevator upstairs.

On the way up, Fang Zhao tried recalling any information he had regarding Natiwuzi.

Natiwuzi was also known as "Yanzhou's Shadowless Hands." He'd gotten this name because of his strumming speed when played the guitar, which made people think it was beyond the limits of a normal human. He was also among the three fastest guitar players in the world and was a genuine ancient-guitar master.

Natiwuzi was probably around 80 years old, which was considered middle-aged in the New Era. Although he no longer publicly performed and had been maintaining a low profile, stories about him still circulated.

When Thomas and his friends had mentioned Natiwuzi, their deepest impression about him other than his impressive guitar skills was only one other thing: Natiwuzi spoke very little, and he spoke slowly, the complete opposite of the intense feeling he gave off when he strummed the guitar. At least, that was the impression he'd given when attending an anniversary of the school's founding.

After they exited the elevator, the security chief led Fang Zhao through a long corridor and stopped in front of a room. There were quite a number of security personnel stationed outside.

"Is the boss inside?" the chief asked one of them.

"He's waiting." The person who replied swept his gaze across Fang Zhao and gave a groan, as if he had seen a person tired of living.

Fang Zhao did not notice; his attention was elsewhere. There seemed to be music in the air.

The door was opened, and the sound of a guitar being strummed wafted out. An astonished look appeared in Fang Zhao's eyes, and he stepped in to take a look.

Other than a few bodyguards, there was only one other person present, sitting on a 1.5-meter-wide sofa.

This person was none other than "Yanzhou's Shadowless Hands," Natiwuzi. His hair was streaked with grey and it looked like he was 20 years older than he was, totally different from his image in videos online. Fang Zhao had no idea whether it was his original look or he had styled his image this way.

Natiwuzi was dressed casually, and his wavy shoulder-length hair seemed messy. He was sitting in a relaxed position, holding onto a guitar, his fingers strumming it as his eyes stared somewhere into the distance, as if he had not noticed the people entering. His every gesture seemed so random, as if he had separated himself from his surroundings and was in a world of his own.

The security chief and the bodyguards inside were already used to Natiwuzi's manner. No matter the time, as long as it was not urgent, they would have to wait for him to finish strumming a tune before he spoke. Every tune was an improvised composition and was never repeated. The length varied; nobody knew how long he was going to strum this time.

At the start, the chords were slow and unhurried, as if they had left the bustle of a city and arrived at a peaceful little garden. The warm glow of the sun carried a pleasurable sense of freedom and content, capable of soothing even the most jittery hearts.

But gradually, the tune started becoming hurried, as if the sun had been blocked out by a thick layer of clouds. The clouds were gathering as they covered the sky, and the wind picked up as the faint rumble of thunder could be heard.

The security chief was standing there quietly like a statue when he heard Fang Zhao ask, "Is there another guitar?"

What? The security chief thought he had heard wrongly as he stared at Fang Zhao as if the man were a freak. Guitar? Instead of trying to salvage the situation or thinking about how to explain himself, he actually wants to strum a guitar? Did he soak his brains in alcohol?

"Is there?" Fang Zhao asked again.

The security chief did not reply. He did not talk to lunatics. He felt that this youngster was surely drunk and was not thinking straight.

Fang Zhao continued, "Your boss is interrogating me right now. I have to answer him."

The security chief looked up, and the look he gave seemed to ask, "Do you take me for a fool?" When did the boss do any interrogating? Since they entered, he has not said a word! Your father is not deaf!

"I need a guitar to explain my actions just now," Fang Zhao continued.

The security chief continued acting like a statue. Explain with a guitar? Making stuff up, continue making stuff up!

Seeing the security chief still rooted to the spot, Fang Zhao urged, "Hurry, if he gets excited in a bit, I won't be able to interrupt."

Tsk, interrupt indeed. The security chief wanted to say, "Continue making up more stuff," but hesitated as he remembered Fang Zhao's profession. Wasn't it rumored that people that dabbled in the arts could hear or see things that others could not?

Could it be that their boss had used some sort of secret method to produce a sound they could not hear? Thinking of this possibility, the chief shivered and wanted to rub away the goosebumps that had appeared on his neck.

He mulled it over for two seconds then muttered, "Wait here."

After that, the chief made a gesture at someone else and, getting a reaction, turned and exited the room.

The people outside asked their chief as they saw him coming out, "Chief, was that young fellow scared shitless?"

The security chief looked as though he had encountered a trick question. Casting a glance at the asker, he replied, "The boss hasn't finished his tune yet."

"Oh, then I reckon we still have to wait awhile. However, after the boss is done, that kid is going to get it. To think he dared to make a ruckus in our territory!" the guy said.

"But Chief, what are you doing outside at this time?" someone else asked.

"Finding a guitar," the chief replied.

"Finding a... guitar?"

"Yeah. The troublemaking fellow said he needs a guitar to explain to the boss." The security chief did not continue, instead hastily leaving to search for a guitar.

As their chief left, those standing outside the room all had the same puzzled look on their faces.

Explaining and guitars, what did they even have to do with each other?

Chapter 152

Improvised Quarrel

The security chief headed to his own office. He had a guitar inside, which had been given personally by the boss when he had been promoted. He had gotten a display cabinet installed and kept his treasured guitar inside.

Was he really going to lend this guitar to that youngster? He was unwilling to give it up. What if it got damaged? But when he thought about it, the youngster was rich. If it was really damaged, he could get Fang Zhao to compensate more.

It was only because he had seen Fang Zhao's information that he was willing to lend it out. If it was anyone else, would he have been so kind as to give it up?!

He quickly brought the guitar back into the room and handed it over to Fang Zhao. "Be careful, this guitar is expensive."

"What about the amplifier and the rest?" Fang Zhao asked.

"There isn't any," the chief answered. Back then, the boss had only gifted the guitar. Ever since he had received it, it had been kept in the display cabinet. Today was the first time it had been taken out. The security chief warned him once again, "If you damage it, you have to pay."

"I know."

"Wait a minute, you are just going to play it like this? Don't you need the amplifiers, effects pedals, and whatnot?"

Fang Zhao pointed at a not-too-distant corner. "Over there."

"That is... Boss's stuff."

"Isn't that meant for receiving guests?"

"I don't know." The security chief tried his hardest to recall. He did not come here that

often, but he would surely come here a few times a month, sometimes to give reports, other times when matters occurred in a certain area of the nightclub. However, all the times he had visited this room, he had never seen anyone using the equipment in that corner, including the boss himself.

But hearing what Fang Zhao had said, the chief felt a little skeptical. Could it really be for guests to use?

After all, where the boss was sitting was slightly further away from that corner, whereas every time there were guests or anyone giving their reports, the person would always sit where Fang Zhao was, which was closer to the corner.

As the chief was pondering, Fang Zhao had already connected the cables, tested the sound, adjusted the amplifier, and played out a single chord.

And when Fang Zhao played the chord, Natiwuzi's tune paused slightly. When Fang Zhao finished, only then did he continue.

Fang Zhao listened to it and turned his head over to the statue-like security chief. "I just asked; your boss has approved of me using this equipment."

Security chief: "... I don't really understand these people who dabble in music.

Carefully observing his boss's expression, there was really no anger, and the dazed look he'd had was no longer there. The chief also realized that, when Fang Zhao had played, the boss had even turned his head over, and there was a strange look in his eyes. It was somewhat complex, but clearly there was no disapproval in his eyes.

"I'm going to explain the matter that happened in the dance hall to your boss. Wait to the side first." Fang Zhao sat down after speaking.

Every time the security chief saw Natiwuzi playing the guitar, he would praise it to the high heavens. Although he did not know many musical cells and could not understand the meaning expressed in the song, he knew how to watch. There were frequent ancient-guitar performances at Space, and he had seen many, but he had never seen anyone who could compare with the boss. But now, the security chief felt that they had encountered an impressive one this time.

Both Fang Zhao and Natiwuzi were not using the effects pedals. The guitar tones could be comparable to Natiwuzi's performances back then, though not as delicate, but they

harnessed an intense destructive power. This meant to say that the two of them had firm control over their equipment.

The guitars in the hands of Natiwuzi and Fang Zhao were both made from the same sort of wood, and they were of similar design and shape. The two guitars were probably from the same series, manufactured by the same person or team. The wood that had been used provided a fuller bass and resonance.

The bass tune that came from Natiwuzi's side was like the impending thunder from an approaching tempest, seemingly restraining the fury that was about to burst out in his interrogation.

And when Natiwuzi stopped, Fang Zhao paused for two seconds before resuming. Unlike Natiwuzi's tune, this one was peaceful yet intense.

At this moment, Natiwuzi stared at Fang Zhao. His eyes were full of gloom, like dark clouds gathering. The tune he played was gloomy and getting more stifling by the minute.

Fang Zhao's reply was instant, without time for a breather. His response was strong and unyielding.

An unstoppable force meets an immovable object!

This was what the others in the room thought.

The two men holding onto guitars, taking turns to play a tune, really seemed like they were engaged in a dialogue. Gradually, the tempo became quicker and the melody more impassioned.

The two appeared as if they had entered another realm and were completely immersed in it. The other people and objects in their surroundings had just become ornaments in the background.

Actually, the moment Fang Zhao had picked up the guitar to play a tune, the atmosphere of the room had changed, as if everyone in the room had been shifted to another world.

Puzzled looks were on the faces of everyone else in the room.

Makes no sense!

Can't understand!

They just felt that the skills of the two guitarists were very good and the strumming was getting more and more intense. They had never heard these chords before, but it did not sound random. Hearing it placed a large strain on their nerves, but it was not jarring. It was more like their hearing ability could not keep up to the speed and caliber. As if using shoddy earpieces and sound equipment to listen to a high-quality masterpiece, the most essential parts would be hampered and they could not get the clear picture.

They finally understood why people thought that great masters seemed to be from a different dimension. In their absent-minded state, they felt as if this scene was not from the world they were familiar with.

Are these two really having a conversation? Just using guitars?

How mysterious. It made them feel as if these two had not grown up on this planet, or perhaps the two were aliens? Could it be that these two did not live in normal human society?

The security chief had once heard from someone, probably a certain band that had come to perform at Space, that during their performance, it was actually the instruments communicating. Whatever sort of melody was produced by a band member's instrument, the others could reply with the most appropriate answer.

Looking at Fang Zhao, other than the few pauses during the first few chords, he would pick up as soon as Natiwuzi stopped, as though they had practiced together before!

This fellow had not come here before, right? He had never met Natiwuzi? Never had the two practiced before today, so how could they flow so smoothly? Even to the point where they knew when the other party was going to stop and continue on so seamlessly?

Other than that, there was still that skill with the guitar. Where had Fang Zhao, that young fellow, learned it from? By himself, or under the guidance of a master?

There was no need to doubt Natiwuzi, Yanzhou's Shadowless Hands, who had the rank of a great master. Whenever ancient electric guitars were mentioned, everyone would

know who he was. In the past, many popular singers had personally invited him to collaborate.

But Fang Zhao? His skill with the guitar was actually as adept!

Had anyone heard of this person before in the ancient-instruments circle? What was more astonishing was how old he was!

The surrounding bodyguards viewed Fang Zhao in a different light, especially those bodyguards that had been with Natiwuzi for a longer time. Even if they could not understand what they were hearing, that did not prevent them from coming to a conclusion: this young fellow was impressive! To think he could actually face Natiwuzi head on!

Natiwuzi's expression was no longer as gloomy. His gaze was more incisive and his face was becoming increasingly flushed from the playing of the guitar as his cheeks trembled.

Upon seeing this, the security chief and the other bodyguards thought to themselves, the boss's condition doesn't seem too stable. Is he going to flip?

Just as they were thinking this, they saw Natiwuzi sway and suddenly stand up, seemingly like a bird of prey that had been provoked. With overflowing energy and a fire burning in his eyes, he strummed the guitar rapidly!

Under Natiwuzi's hawk-like gaze, Fang Zhao calmly stood up, not showing any signs of weakness. He rapidly played an even more intense tune.

The air seemed to be filled with countless invisible knives, the music like a raging storm that was not letting up! In the small room, it seemed as if there was a formless hurricane!

The security chief felt as if he could hear the wrath of the ocean and the sound of surging waves crashing into a cliff and breaking apart.

Everyone else in the room stood there dumbstruck as they watched the two musicians caught up in their own crazy performance.

The whirlwind tempo kept increasing, and the two were like powerful machines that were out of control as the powerful strumming became more urgent and explosive

and the room's temperature rose.

Natiwuzi's grimacing face was completely red, and he seemed to be in a crazed state.

In comparison, other than Fang Zhao's fingers that were strumming like the wind, he seemed a lot more tranquil, but of course, that was only on the surface.

Strumming faster than the naked eye could catch was not a feat that could be replicated by any youngster in one go just by watching videos on the internet. To actually be able to differentiate the rhythm through hearing and keep up with the speed, his skill was indeed high!

That skill!

In the room, other than the two playing the guitar, everyone else stood rooted to the spot like statues, afraid to even move in case they were scalded by the high temperatures, even forgetting to breath.

Luckily, this stifling atmosphere did not last for too long. After another round of a stormy tune from Fang Zhao, Natiwuzi did not continue, instead hugging his guitar as he stood there panting, the crazed look on his face completely dissipating. His eyes were glowing as he looked at Fang Zhao. There was no gloom or anger; it was purely a look of delight and excitement.

Natiwuzi wiped away the sweat on his face and laughed heartily, like a warrior who just experienced a good fight that left him content. "Hahahahaha!"

And with Natiwuzi's laughter, the explosive atmosphere from a while back no longer existed. The feeling of being dragged to another world also finally become normal, like the calm after a storm.

The security chief lifted a trembling finger to his forehead and discovered a fine layer of sweat had formed. He took a long and deep breath. How was this a conversation? This was simply an improvised quarrel! However, their boss seemed be quite happy despite the quarrel.

After laughing, Natiwuzi said, "You are very good!"

Fang Zhao laughed and replied, "You are really great yourself."

They were not sure which words had triggered Natiwuzi's funny bits, but he once again roared with laughter.

Natiwuzi took out a pen as thick as a thumb from his pocket and signed a bold and cursive name on the guitar: NaZi.

People familiar with Natiwuzi would know that he would only sign this name when facing close friends and family or when he really regarded someone as important and approved of them. At other times, he would only sign "Natiwuzi."

And this guitar was not one that Natiwuzi would use in public performances. He had used this guitar the longest, and it was different from the guitars he used in performances. This guitar was different from the ones used in performances that were custom-made for Natiwuzi.

Natiwuzi had invested in his old ancient-guitar manufacturing company. This guitar was from a series for the masses and was the best model in the series. Natiwuzi had advertised this for his company.

Natiwuzi handed over the guitar he had signed. "This guitar is for you." After that, he pointed at the other guitar, the one Fang Zhao had used, which belonged to the security chief. "You sign too." Natiwuzi spoke slowly, but every syllable seemed like his own bass, every word seemed so deep. Anyone hearing Natiwuzi speak for the first time would feel uneasy.

Fang Zhao had watched videos of some of Natiwuzi's performances and interviews and knew he talked like this. He was not surprised, but it was Natiwuzi's words that made him flabbergasted.

"This isn't mine." Fang Zhao pointed at the security chief who was wiping off his sweat.

"It is now," Natiwuzi continued slowly, word by word. "A waste."

The security chief: "...". Did this mean that leaving it in the office was considered a waste?

Fang Zhao took the pen and signed two words, "Fang Zhao," on the security chief's guitar. Unlike Natiwuzi's cursive signature, Fang Zhao's was distinct and straight.

Natiwuzi's face, which looked over a hundred years old, was smiling so much that all

his creases were appearing. This boss was very happy today.

After receiving the guitar, Natiwuzi still took a photograph with Fang Zhao before carefully placing the guitar at the side. Still smiling, he told Fang Zhao, "It is very late already. I will get someone to send you back first. As for this, I will get to the bottom of the matter and inform you." Natiwuzi might have spoken slowly, but every word was distinct and full of sincerity. He truly meant that he would investigate the incident tonight, and if there was any inside story, he would definitely give Fang Zhao an account.

"Many thanks," Fang Zhao replied.

Natiwuzi waved his hands and did not say anything else. He got his men to escort Fang Zhao out. Only the security chief and a few trusted aides were left in the room.

The smile on Natiwuzi's face completely vanished. With a cold flicker in his eyes, he asked slowly, "Where are the ones that got beaten?"

The security chief took a step forward and respectfully answered. "In the medical treatment room, but they are currently restrained by our men."

Natiwuzi leaned back on the sofa and closed his eyes, as if he was resting. He slowly spat out three words. "Drag them over!"

The security chief's eyebrows jumped. "Drag" was an understatement.

Chapter 153

Boss, You Made The Headlines

Natiwuzi let his men lead Fang Zhao to another exit that was less noticeable.

From the time he had entered Natiwuzi's room all the way till he left, all communications on his bracelet had been blocked, and they only returned back to normal after he got out.

Notification sounds rang out as his bracelet vibrated. Fang Zhao took a look. He had missed over 10 calls and had notifications of over 100 messages.

The messages' contents were all inquiring about whether the "nightclub fight incident" was real and whether he was all right. There were people from Silver Wing, the virtual projects department, Wayne, Duan Qianji... A number of student leaders and teachers from Qi'an Academy of Music had also sent messages.

Fang Zhao mass sent a message informing everyone that he was safe, and he quickly received a new incoming call. The sender was the teacher in charge of his university class back when the original owner of this body had still been alive. When Fang Zhao went over to the school to give lectures, he would chat with his former teacher-in-charge. He was a plump middle-aged man who was always smiling. He seemed friendly, but students who were under him knew how fierce he could be.

This teacher had coincidentally called as Fang Zhao was mass sending the message, so he picked up the call after he was done. Other people who called him after receiving the message had to temporarily be put on hold.

His former teacher in charge sounded very worried. "Fang Zhao, what's your situation over there?"

"It's nothing, I'm about to head home," Fang Zhao replied.

His former teacher's tone had a hint of doubt. "It's really nothing?"

Fang Zhao switched to a video call. "I'm really fine."

When he saw Fang Zhao's image and nothing seemed wrong, only then did the former teacher-in-charge feel at ease. He had been woken up by urgent calls from some of his students, informing him that Fang Zhao had fought in Space and been detained by the security team. The news had scared him awake, and since he had not been able to contact Fang Zhao, he had contacted a few of his good friends. Only after that, when he'd tried calling Fang Zhao again, had the call gotten through.

However, since when were those students so close with Fang Zhao? To actually help Fang Zhao find help in the middle of the night?

Whatever the case, when he'd heard what had happened, Fang Zhao's former teacher-in-charge had become anxious too. Fang Zhao was his student and a junior he looked highly upon. These teachers had discussed in private before and felt that this youngster Fang Zhao had the most potential for development and could best expand the influence of the Qi'an music faculty on the global scene.

And hearing the news of Fang Zhao hitting someone in a nightclub was totally unimaginable!

After that, Fang Zhao recorded a short video message and sent it out, informing everyone that he was safe and all right.

"There are reporters around. It's not advisable to leave from the main exit or other exits known to our customers. Mr. Fang, please head this way." The security personnel led Fang Zhao to another path. "Right, your bodyguard came as well. We let him wait over there."

Zuo Yu saw the message Fang Zhao had just sent. Because he had heard that Fang Zhao had had a situation here, Zuo Yu had gotten up in the middle of the night and driven over fully armed, and he'd even contacted a number of friends in Qi'an City. They had been ready to start a rescue mission. In the end, when he'd just arrived, he'd received Fang Zhao's message proclaiming he was safe, not giving Zuo Yu the chance to perform. When the security personnel outside the nightclub had heard Fang Zhao's name, their attitudes had seemed especially good, which puzzled Zuo Yu, and he'd even suspected that the security personnel were dropping smoke bombs to confuse him. When he received Fang Zhao's reply, it confirmed that the situation was not what he had imagined. It was instead totally different.

"Entertainment news is nothing but trouble!" Zuo Yu lamented as he sat in the car

waiting in Space's underground car park for staff. He had received news of Fang Zhao having a situation, and when Fang Zhao had been uncontactable, he'd went online and seen a few entertainment tabloid headlines:

"Silver Wing Virtual Project Department Member Fights Six People Barehanded."

"Showing His True Colors after Drinking! He Actually Dares to Create Trouble at Space!"

"Exposed Video of Silver Wing Boss Assaulting Others."

...

The more Zuo Yu saw, the more speechless he became. Zuo Yu could believe Fang Zhao had taken on six people; his boss possibly had that much ability. Watching Fang Zhao kick someone straight offline in-game, he knew that Fang Zhao was definitely not as harmless as he looked. But after that, the news became "Silver Wing Boss"? The overexaggeration here was too strong.

There were a few dark, fuzzy, and noisy videos circulating. These videos were shaky, and nobody in the video could be clearly seen. The sounds of shouting, music, and commentary were all jumbled up in a mess. There was not a single clear video, but for sure, the place in the video was Space's dance hall, and in one of the videos, a person was seen hurtling through the air after a kick.

As Fang Zhao came over together with the security personnel, Zuo Yu examined him carefully and realized that Fang Zhao was fine. Wasn't it said that, whether there were reasons or not, any troublemaker at Space would suffer? Why did it seem like that was not completely true?

One security personnel led the way in front of Fang Zhao, and behind him was another personnel carrying a large case and following behind diligently. When he saw that attentive behavior, Zuo Yu even imagined that the guy was trying to steal his job.

"Mr. Fang, your stuff has been placed in the car." The security personnel had been ordered by Natiwuzi to pack the guitar in a case and escort Fang Zhao out.

Fang Zhao heard that Thomas and Cheng Lan were still inside, so he got someone to bring the two out and get the nightclub's driver to send them home.

"Senior, are you really all right?" Thomas and Cheng Lan asked in disbelief once more before they left.

"I'm fine. It's late, you guys hurry up and go home."

Fang Zhao watched them leave with the driver before entering his own car.

The car exited from an underground driveway and took an elevator up and emerged at a flyover.

"Boss, you gave me a big scare today," Zuo Yu said.

"Where did you get the news from?" Fang Zhao asked.

"The paparazzi king that you pulled into the team said you got into a fight at Space. No idea where he got the news from, but he might be waiting outside Space to grab some news. I came the moment I heard the news and even called a few helpers. In the end, since you were all right, I let the others leave."

"A pretty good reaction. You get a pay raise this month," Fang Zhao replied.

"Yeah, just nice for me to treat them to a meal. Even though they were not needed, they reacted quickly and came out in the middle of the night without any questions asked."

"You can submit an expense claim for the food."

"Hahaha, Boss, you are wise indeed!" Zuo Yu's tension finally settled down, and he asked, "Boss, where did those six come from? What did they do?"

"I don't know where they came from, but their target was me, and they seemed quite sinister. Natiwuzi said they had on them a drug that enhances creativity and stimulates the brain."

Zuo Yu shuddered. "You mean the kind of drug that is not prohibited but is loathed by all the older artists?"

Zuo Yu had heard of this even though he was not in production circles. When creating stuff, certain artists would use some medication to stimulate themselves when they were low on inspiration. It was rumored that, after using these drugs, the brain would be very active and their inspiration would be overflowing. It was a shortcut method

used by many young artists these days and involved many industries, such as composing, photography, design, and others. However, older and more prestigious artists detested it bitterly.

Taking medical substances to gain inspiration was not necessarily the most appropriate thing for a creator to do. Even if they could produce a work, it would not be ripe enough or perfect enough, and the creator might miss out on some of their own potential, which could have resulted in them creating a masterpiece. And once they were dependent on substances, their creativity might be restricted.

Sometimes, inspiration needed a longer time to mature and required an accumulation of time and experience, but there were always impetuous people within the circle who thirsted for success and could not wait, hence choosing this path.

There was an old artist that had once accepted an interview and given his views on this matter. He did not approve of using such substances to gain inspiration. There were even examples: once, there were two directors from Yanzhou competing for the position of president of Yanzhou's Director Association. It was revealed that one of the directors had used substances in the process of filming many of his works, and ultimately, for the final vote, many old directors voted against him and he lost the election.

These people probably had not had the chance to make their move in the private room and so had decided to make their move when Fang Zhao headed to the dance floor. Therefore, this had resulted in Fang Zhao's first ever dancing experience ending with assault

In Yanzhou's composing circles, for virtuous and reputable old artists, Fang Zhao only knew Xue Jing. If news was exposed of Fang Zhao using substances to compose, the person hurt the most would probably be Xue Jing. Qi'an Academy of Music might also terminate his employment, and he might even be alienated from the Qi'an music circles.

Zuo Yu's expression became solemn. "Old Master Xue Jing is an academic representative, I heard that Old Master Xue is currently arranging a global lecture tour and will bring you along when the time comes. Could it be that some people are jealous and are trying to make Old Master Xue give up on his recommendation of you? But given Space's stringent security checks, how could these people have smuggled the drugs in? Unless they had people on the inside?"

"That is why Natiwuzi said he would give me a full explanation."

"Boss, bring me along the next time you visit such places. It's safer to have a bodyguard by your side. In the future, there will surely be more such situations." Given Fang Zhao's ability, Zuo Yu reckoned that his boss would keep climbing higher. Whether Fang Zhao walked down the path of a star or an academic, whether publicly or in the shadows, he would surely encounter many such situations. It had only been mind-stimulating drugs this time, but what if there were guns next time?

Fang Zhao knew what Zuo Yu meant. As long as he kept moving forward, there would be people pushed downward and people getting obstructed.

But!

Regardless of the party, whoever was capable moved upward!

Since I am capable and better than you, unless I let you pass on my own accord, you better obediently get lost behind me!

Given Fang Zhao's character, he would not be scared off by such a matter. After all, he had a hundred years worth of experience from a darker time, and his temperament was different from his "peers." If the ones that ordered this had already been surpassed by Fang Zhao, he would leave them further in the dust, but if this had been planned by those temporarily ahead of himself, when Fang Zhao surpassed them, he would stomp on them even more viciously!

Zuo Yu noticed his boss was not the least bit intimidated and asked, "Boss, have you seen the entertainment news?"

"Nope. Why?"

"You made the headlines."

"When?"

"Just... the headlines of various tabloids are about this matter, saying that you smashed a nightclub and have an inflated ego. They even say the prospects of Jinro and the others following you are bleak. Media outlets keep stirring this up." Zuo Yu seemed happy. When he'd found out that the truth was totally different from his reports, he had breathed easy.

Given Fang Zhao's reputation, this matter making the headlines in such a short time was unlikely. Some strings were definitely being pulled in the background. Parties that saw Silver Wing unfavorably could have made the move. Though they might not have had any connection with those people in the nightclubs, they would have pushed for the news of Silver Wing being a joke and been delighted in Fang Zhao suffering misfortune.

Wayne was relieved as well when he found out the truth. He was figuring out their next move together with the public relations department. It just so happened that they could wait for this fire to burn bigger before borrowing the flame.

News of Fang Zhao's fight at the nightclub was published in the wee hours of the morning. Many were still asleep, and there was a limit to the night owls that were still online. On the morning of the second day, when people were heading to school and work, the viewership was a lot greater.

"The f*ck! Fang Zhao? Creating trouble and assaulting others at a nightclub? Did I read wrongly?"

"Visiting a nightclub in the middle of the night and assaulting others? Whoa, I couldn't tell that Fang Zhao had such a fiery temper!"

"I heard he was drunk?"

"Sometimes, a bottle of wine is more effective than a magic mirror."

"I'm rather new to this. May I know who Fang Zhao is?"

"The brother who posted on top, are you new to the gaming circle? You should at least know Jinro-god, right? Let me tell you, Fang Zhao is the immediate superior of Jinro and the others. Early on, I just could not stomach it. They say he is a composer who does not do any proper duties and doesn't understand games, so what qualifications does he have to be the boss?! It is rumored that Fang Zhao makes things difficult for Jinro and the others, only caring about results and making them work overtime everyday!"

Jinro was having breakfast while browsing the news. When he saw the discussion, he nearly spewed out all his food. "Stop talking nonsense! I still wish to live longer in-game!"

The masses online could not know what Jinro and the others were thinking and were enthusiastically discussing this matter.

"Not a single one of these management-level personnel are good. Enjoying themselves in an office, only using their mouths to get things done and visiting a club at night while the people under them work like dogs!"

"Yeah, with Fang Zhao having such a bad temper, I wonder how Jinro and the others survive under him. I hope they aren't being abused."

The online masses had succumbed to influence and now pictured a scene of a rich, evil man bullying his pitiful workers.

There were a number who spoke up for Fang Zhao, including teachers and students of Qi'an Academy of Music, but their numbers were limited, and without a good understanding of the situation, their voices were quickly drowned out.

There were others that knew about Space's background and took delight in other's misfortune. They thought that Fang Zhao had surely suffered some serious injury.

Fang Zhao also received many consoling text messages and calls. Even he could not tell which were genuinely sincere and which ones were making discreet inquiries.

At 10 a.m., renowned ancient guitar master and one of the three fastest guitarists in the world, nicknamed "Yanzhou's Shadowless Hands," Natiwuzi, updated his status on the world's largest entertainment social platform. There were no words, only a short tune of a guitar being played and a photograph. Natiwuzi liked to use audio to express his own feelings.

The photograph was the one taken in Space alongside Fang Zhao. In the picture, Natiwuzi was all smiles.

Those closer to Natiwuzi posted joking replies below.

"The old man is so happy, perhaps he found another long lost son?"

"Or perhaps he discovered another long lost grandson?"

Ignorant strangers inquired, "Why 'another'?"

However, these old friend's would not mention Natiwuzi's private affairs in public.

Quickly, Natiwuzi's old friends added on to the commentary.

"After listening to the audio, all I can say is that the youngster in the photograph with that old fellow is not ordinary! This time, the old fellow was stirred up. Perhaps he has really found another son or grandson?"

Fang Zhao frowned as he read the comments. Son? Even grandson? The other way around would be more accurate.

Afterward, Fang Zhao replied to Natiwuzi's status. Similarly, his reply was without words, just audio of a guitar tune.

Backstage at a theater in Huangzhou, Li Kasi was getting his hair fixed by a stylist when he stretched out his hand and told his assistant, "Bring me my double-neck electric guitar." Li Kasi was just like Natiwuzi, one of the three speed-strumming maestros in the world.

Thus, under Fang Zhao's reply to Natiwuzi's status, Li Kasi uploaded a reply that was also a wordless audio clip of a guitar tune.

On a certain sea far away from Yanzhou, the last of the three great guitar masters, Jiminy, was enjoying the seascape on board a yacht. He chuckled faintly and said, "Makes sense," as he picked up a 10-string guitar.

Jiminy uploaded a wordless guitar tune to Li Kasi's reply.

Therefore, the many media outlets and online masses that were glued to Natiwuzi and Fang Zhao's situation were dumbfounded.

These people... can they even use human language?

Chapter 154

God's Domain

In the eyes of the masses, ancient instruments were a so-called high-end art and were not easily understood. Normally, it was something that could not be used except by professionals.

Among ancient-instrument performers, these three speed-strumming maestros were not the most accomplished, but they were the most well-known.

Why?

Because the masses loved seeing these great masters show off!

This time, all three globally renowned speed-strumming maestros had appeared, and this made Fang Zhao especially conspicuous.

"Who is that young fellow? A new talent in the industry?"

"No idea. Don't tell me these great masters are using music to communicate?"

"Unless... this is the rumored 'God's domain'? No wonder us normal humans can't understand it."

"Anyone able to decipher the audio?"

"Does 'God's domain' mean 'nutcase's domain' by any chance?" someone joked.

"The so-called 'God's domain' is the stuff used by the gods at the apexes of their own circles. For example, the world's three speed-strumming maestros making use of audio to communicate: only those of the same grade would be able to understand."

"That Fang Zhao person, does it mean he is on a similar level to those three?"

"This... doesn't count, in my opinion; Fang Zhao has only coincidentally touched 'God's domain'."

People outside of Yanzhou all followed Jiminy and Li Kasi's new statuses and traced it to Fang Zhao's profile on the social platform.

Jiminy and Li Kasi's fans were mostly non-academic and did not follow the trends, so when Xue Jing had brought Fang Zhao along for his global lecture tour, few among these people had taken notice, but now, with the appearance of the three speed-strumming maestros, Fang Zhao's new image was especially eye-catching.

There was no need to bother about what people on other continents were thinking. Over at Yanzhou, reporters from every single big news firms were cracking their heads trying to think about what to write. Regarding music, they would only listen, and if it was pleasing, it would be downloaded. If it wasn't, it was chucked aside, and everything was based on their own preferences. These reporters would not analyze a song or try to decipher the meaning in a tune, but now, they felt as if they were facing a trick question in their career.

What were they supposed to write if they could not understand it at all?

Reporters of smaller news firms did not have many worries. Whether or not they interpreted it correctly did not concern them. What they cared about was how to write in such a way that would attract the most viewers and to get the masses to discuss it passionately.

At this time, all the news firms were racking their heads trying to plot out the contents of news to be published.

At least the bigger news firms still published proper news, and the contents were somewhat conservative, using the matter with the three speed-strumming maestros to praise Fang Zhao and making guesses about whether Fang Zhao had any blood relation with Natiwuzi.

The smaller news firms were totally different, fabricating news as if they had seen it for themselves. Some mentioned that Fang Zhao and Natiwuzi were father and son, while others said they were grandfather and grandson. Of course, there were a number that concluded the two were up to some shady business in private.

Whatever the case, Fang Zhao smashing up Natiwuzi's territory, getting out in one piece, and even receiving a guitar would have made anyone believe they had some sort of relationship.

However, very quickly, Space released a statement saying that there were customers creating trouble in the wee hours of the morning and disrupting the business of the nightclub. Fang Zhao had acted heroically to help maintain the peace and was a junior that boss Natiwuzi thought highly of.

"So that means the few who were beaten up deserved it?"

"It has already been reported to the police. Seems true."

"True or false, no one knows."

"I don't care who was right or wrong. What I want to know is whether Fang Zhao is Natiwuzi's long lost grandson?"

Certain small news firms were quick to change their tune. Their criticism of Fang Zhao's ruthless temperament turned into praise for his heroic actions.

Some people sneered at them receiving a slap in the face, but these small tabloids paid no heed. They just had to continue fabricating when it came to grabbing people's attention.

What? A smack in the face after the whole affair?

So be it. Who cares whether it's praise or criticism? As long there is traffic and it's popular, if a smack on the left side of the face is not enough, the right side can be presented on a plate for everyone to bash!

Traffic and popularity were the fundamental needs of these small tabloids. When it came to the truth and morality, how important were they?

This was the approach many small media outlets took and was one of the reasons Silver Wing staff found them extremely troublesome. A lawsuit? These people were all experienced hands. Whether big or small, when it came to public opinion, these small media outlets never took the frontline, nor were they cannon fodder. They would just follow behind the biggest company's *sses and pick up the scraps. There were not entirely able to dodge all lawsuits, but more than half the time, they would be unscathed.

Over at Wayne's side, he had enlisted the help of people from public relations to handle this matter and take advantage of it to give Fang Zhao a boost in popularity and

presence in the media. In this sort of superficial society, those who were not outstanding in the looks department had to reveal their faces more often to ensure people remembered them.

As for the main character in this whole affair, Fang Zhao returned home and had a good sleep. After waking up, he first took a look at the progress of the various projects in the department. Following that, he left Wang Tie a message then went into lockdown mode.

He had found some inspiration at Space. Although it was not considered enough to complete a piece instantly, he could first throw all this inspiration into a composition and follow up by modifying it later.

In the afternoon, Fang Zhao received a text message from Natiwuzi inviting him over for a chat. Natiwuzi would share the developments of his investigation into the matter as well as play a little music.

"Remember to bring along the guitar," Natiwuzi had stressed twice.

This time, Zuo Yu had not logged into the game. As Fang Zhao's bodyguard, Fang Zhao was his main priority.

On the way to Space, Zuo Yu could not help but ask, "Boss, did you really come across 'God's domain'?"

Fang Zhao was even more skeptical than Zuo Yu. "'God's domain'? What is that?"

"Don't you know? It's the summit that gods in certain circles can reach, where they can see or hear things that others have no way of understanding. Didn't that occur to you with Natiwuzi's status? The other two speed-strumming maestros also followed after you and replied with an ancient guitar tune. Everyone says that you all were using 'God's domain' techniques to communicate, and people online are saying you have chanced upon 'God's domain'." Nobody else was in the car, and Zuo Yu really wanted to know. "Boss, are you really able to communicate using music?"

Fang Zhao shook his head. "Actually, that is a form of communication using conscious thinking. Through music, one can understand the other party's emotions, but they will not be as detailed as written or spoken communication. It is actually a sort of perception ability when it comes to music and has nothing to do with gods or whatnot. Some people acquire this ability after time, while others are born with that innate

talent. These people might not have any musical knowledge or stepped into any circles, but when they listen to a piece of music, they are able to accurately feel the performer's emotions. Therefore, 'God's domain' is actually not appropriate at all."

"Huh, it really isn't incredible? Discussions online even said that a certain music academy did an early release of test questions to let students analyze the communications in those four audio clips from 'God's domain.' Some of those students are going to cry soon."

"Is there?" Fang Zhao pondered for a beat and laughed. "The teachers setting the exams should be clear on the situation. They are probably just teasing the students."

Zuo Yu also felt a little sympathetic towards them. "Those students are so pitiful."

What were those teachers thinking? After all, it was an open book examination. They could use the current matter the public was discussing and give the students an examination that would leave a deep impression.

Zuo Yu drove the car through the same underground driveway back into Space. Inside the interior carpark, the security chief was waiting.

"Welcome Mr. Fang, the boss is upstairs. I'm here to escort you." The chief was rather polite on the way up. "My name is Qu Wei. Qu as in a tune, Wei as in proud. You can call me Little Wei. I'm the current security chief of the nightclub, and this is my contact number. If you encounter any problems in the future, feel free to contact me. I will personally help you settle it!"

Zuo Yu, who was following beside Fang Zhao, raised an eyebrow. How their attitudes have changed once again after one day! Even "Little Wei"? He is obviously around 20 years older than Fang Zhao and he has the cheek to be called that! What a character!

Qu Wei led Fang Zhao to a larger room on the top floor. This room was used by Natiwuzi for receiving friends.

After Fang Zhao entered, Qu Wei did not leave but stood waiting outside. Zuo Yu also did not enter but found a seat at a nearby coffee table as he took note of the surroundings.

"Hey, brother, a quick question." Qu Wei walked over without the same politeness he'd showed Fang Zhao, but he was still rather cordial. He poured a cup of tea for Zuo Yu

before helping himself to one. Qu Wei curiously asked, "Has your boss trained before? Maybe in the military, or he took up classes? There is basically no second hit in his fighting style. Among the six, only one of them took two blows, while the other five were all knocked out in one move."

A number of things had come to light after this round of internal investigations. Someone had accepted a bribe and created a loophole for the perpetrators to go through, but they had not expected it to blow up such that even the boss would get involved.

To investigate the six people, Qu Wei had watched the surveillance footage over 10 times. Especially the portion where Fang Zhao hit the other guys, Qu Wei had watched it at least 30 times.

"Actually, when I was watching the video, there was something I just did not understand." Qu Wei activated the playback of that portion of the video for Zuo Yu.

Zuo Yu was Fang Zhao's trusted bodyguard, and since Qu Wei was investigating this matter, showing the video to Fang Zhao's attendant was the same. He had already obtained approval from his boss.

"Look at this part, and here too. Doesn't it seem as if he pauses for a brief moment and... How do I say it, I just feel that when he is fighting, he is so nimble, yet he seems a little out of sorts. This situation starts when the third person jumps in. Did your boss discover anything at that time?"

Qu Wei had originally wanted to ask Fang Zhao straight, but the boss wanted to strum a few tunes. The matter was not that urgent and Qu Wei could ask after they were done, but now that he was with Fang Zhao's bodyguard, he could just ask randomly.

Zuo Yu watched the video curiously. Due to the actions of Space's staff, not a single clear video of Fang Zhao fighting in the dance hall had been uploaded online. Those videos online were quite blurry and shook violently. Proper videos had been confiscated not just because of Fang Zhao but because of Space's image as well.

Therefore, this was the first time Zuo Yu had seen a clear video of Fang Zhao fighting off those people from all angles. He also noticed Fang Zhao pausing momentarily at the parts Qu Wei had pointed out. Although brief, these out-of-sorts feeling could only be seen by experienced and attentive persons. Qu Wei was not the security chief for

nothing.

"You realize it too, right? I was very curious; did Mr. Fang notice any suspicious persons or things?" Qu Wei asked.

Zuo Yu paused, took a deep breath, and exhaled while remaining silent for a few seconds. He then said, "According to my experience, and given my understanding of him..."

"Mmhm, what?" Qu Wei leaned closer, wanting to listen to every single word of Zuo Yu's.

"It might be totally different from what you are imagining," Zuo Yu replied.

"Go on."

"His mind might have been wandering."

"?" Qu Wei thought he had just heard a joke, but when he saw Zuo Yu's manner, it did not seem like a bluff.

His mind was wandering?

Letting his mind wander while fighting? And he could actually win?

Plain disbelief was all over Qu Wei's face. If it was true, he had no way of expressing how shocked he really was.

Noticing Qu Wei all wide-eyed as though he had seen a freak, Zuo Yu patted him on the shoulder and, in the manner of an experienced person, told him, "Don't make a fuss over nothing. The boss might have come to realize the stuff in 'God's domain'."

Seeing Qu Wei still staring blankly, Zuo Yu explained, "In layman terms, it means that he found some inspiration for composing during the fight."

Qu Wei: "... " Thinking about composing in a fight?!

Zuo Yu smiled knowingly. "My boss is actually a really gifted artist. Mmhm, you should probably understand."

Qu Wei thought about his boss Natiwuzi's everyday eccentricities, as well as his habit of disregarding everything in his surroundings and picking up a guitar. Suddenly seeing the light, he exclaimed, "I understand!"

Chapter 155

Show Me Your Fastest Strumming Speed

Zuo Yu had noticed this happening with Fang Zhao a number of times in the game. When watching Fang Zhao slaying monsters in-game, there were times where his mind seemed to have left his body. When asked about it once, Fang Zhao's reply was that he had realized something at that point in time.

As for what he realized, Zuo Yu knew as well—song inspirations!

Zuo Yu had even joked that Fang Zhao was lucky not to have lived during the actual Period of Destruction. If such an out-of-body experience had occurred during the actual period, he would have long been dead.

Fang Zhao had only laughed; he had not replied.

Watching the surveillance footage of the dance hall once more, Zuo Yu tried to guess whether his boss had had a realization. However, regardless of the truth, Zuo Yu would not tell Qu Wei.

If Fang Zhao had really found anything suspicious, he would have said it himself. As the bodyguard, it was better for Zuo Yu to keep his lips tight.

Zuo Yu had gone with the reply of "gaining inspiration." At least on the surface, he had given a reply. Whether Qu Wei believed him was another matter.

Inside the room.

Natiwuzi handed over the preliminary findings of the investigation to Fang Zhao. The six men had been paid for this. Their employer was still unknown at this point, and more time was needed to continue investigation.

"The other party is probably experienced, given how he knew which people to employ and how to hide his own identity, but my guess is that the other party isn't one of those big companies. Given my many years of experience, the possibility of a big company using these means is extremely small. At the most, they would give it a push on the

back if they caught wind of it. After all, it is because of you that Silver Wing has a virtual projects department and the currently emerging gaming department."

There was something else that Natiwuzi refrained from saying. If these big companies really wanted to do something, they would target Duan Qianji or other senior management executives, not someone of Fang Zhao's status. Also, their methods would not be so simple.

It was rare for Natiwuzi to speak so much, but this was a sign of his sincerity. In the first place, it was his nightclub that'd had the lapse that had allowed these people a chance to make their move. Furthermore, Natiwuzi wished to invest in Fang Zhao.

"Many times, some small characters without presence will bite you over trivial matters. The moment you are not alert, they might bite off a big chunk of flesh. Luckily, you were guarded this time," Natiwuzi said. Back then, he had been a glittering celebrity too and had his own fair share of troubles.

If Fang Zhao was not aware of the perpetrators' intentions this round, the drugs could have been injected or slipped into his pockets. From there, arranging for a journalist to report about Fang Zhao "using stimulant drugs and visiting a nightclub for inspiration" would have been really troublesome for Fang Zhao.

"Once you get famous, these things become more common. Prepare yourself; these things can't be guarded against, and you can only be careful." Noticing Fang Zhao looking pensive, Natiwuzi continued on, "Most likely, it's some personnel from a small- or medium-sized company. They are probably afraid to do anything to Silver Wing's senior executives, so they targeted you."

"Understood." Fang Zhao had some doubt in his heart, but Wang Tie was also helping him investigate. He would get the findings soon.

After all that, Natiwuzi told Fang Zhao the reason he had been called over.

"Fang Zhao, your speed-strumming skill is quite good. Self-taught?" Natiwuzi asked.

"I learned from someone a long time ago. After that, I practiced for quite some time." Playing it in my mind counts, right? Fang Zhao thought to himself.

However, Natiwuzi had guessed wrongly. He had thought that Fang Zhao was mostly self-taught and had been learning for a long time.

"No wonder you play so well despite not having a reputation in the ancient-instrument circles. In the future, you can come and stretch your legs with the others in the ancient-instruments circle, take part in some performances, or even come to my club to strum a few tunes. Why don't you play a tune now. I know that you did not give your all last time. Show me your fastest strumming speed."

Natiwuzi switched on a camera at the side and prepared to record. He told Fang Zhao, "After this recording, I will upload the video of your speed strumming online. That will dispel people's doubts of you. Don't worry, this guitar of mine is high quality. There will be no issue when strumming. I have used it for so many years already and maintained it well. The quality of the strings could be said to be the best in the world. Just be at ease and strum to your heart's content." Natiwuzi was in a good mood and was speaking a lot more today, although he was still speaking slowly, unlike his lightning quick strumming.

"All-out strumming?" Fang Zhao asked.

"That's right, you don't have to hold back. Let me see how fast you can go!"

Generally speaking, a period was needed for someone to adapt to a guitar that did not belong to them, but Fang Zhao did not need it! During their previous "communication" in the wee hours of the morning, Natiwuzi had seen it for himself. This time, he hoped that Fang Zhao would give him a surprise.

The strumming started with a tune like a silk cloth sliding across the floor, quick and flowing. The density of the notes were concentrated raindrops pounding on the body.

Fang Zhao's wrist was swiveling rapidly on the guitar neck as the fingers of his left hand looked as though they were on a piano keyboard. The speed was still rising, the notes becoming more and more urgent.

Most people could only hear the starting and ending notes. As for the middle portion, unless they used equipment, there would not be able to differentiate it!

However, Natiwuzi had an outstanding hearing ability that an ordinary person's could not compare to. He was praised as one of the world's three speed-strumming maestros, and before Jiminy and Li Kasi had emerged, he had occupied the throne of speed strumming for close to twenty years.

At the start, Natiwuzi had a gratified and excited smile. From the view of one from an

older generation, as he was listening, he could appreciate it in his heart. But gradually, the smile on Natiwuzi's face disappeared, and he no longer pondered, instead focusing his attention on listening. Even so, he found it strenuous, and this sort of feeling was getting stronger.

Fang Zhao's fingers were flying around so quickly they appeared to have vanished. It seemed like a fireball was jumping around on the strings and the guitar was like a reactor undergoing nuclear fission, releasing an immense amount of energy.

The torrential downpour of notes pounded away, and even Natawuzi who had a superb hearing ability capable of slowing music down could not keep up!

Is this Fang Zhao's speed?

Natiwuzi stared at Fang Zhao in shock, not believing his own eyes and ears.

For people without a strong sense of musical perception, it might have only seemed like a dazzling display of skill, but for people like him who had good musical perception, this was simply a colossal blow to him!

And this blow had been brought about by Natiwuzi himself.

His mind was on the verge of shutting down from the concentrated bombardment of notes! His whole body was shocked to the core by that immense energy.

However, at this moment, when the atmosphere had been built up and was on the verge of exploding, it abruptly disappeared. Fang Zhao had stopped.

Natiwuzi regained his composure and waited a full eight seconds before looking at Fang Zhao blankly. Only sounds of exhaling came from his throat, as he could not bring himself to speak. He looked at Fang Zhao with an imploring gaze that asked, Why didn't you continue?

"It's out of tune," Fang Zhao replied helplessly. He had not wished to stop midway either. His mind had been overflowing with inspiration just now, and he had nearly forgotten all about Natiwuzi's motive for getting him to play. However, since the strings had become out of tune and it would become more severe if it was not retuned, he could only break his train of thought and stop.

When Natiwuzi heard these words, the muscles on his face nearly cramped up. Was

Fang Zhao actually able to hear the notes going off-key at that speed?! He had been totally unable to catch up already and had not noticed any off-key notes, yet this young fellow had actually caught it the first time? That meant this little fellow's hearing ability far surpassed his own!

Natiwuzi stared silently for a while at Fang Zhao, as if he was observing a new species, before stumbling over to the coffee table at the side.

Fang Zhao hurriedly put down the guitar and prepared to go over and lend an arm for support. Natiwuzi's appearance seemed as if he had suffered a big blow. His face was pale and his steps were unsteady, as though he might faint at any time.

Natiwuzi forced a smile and raise his hands to wave Fang Zhao off, meaning he did not need Fang Zhao's help. He pressed a button on the coffee table that made a drawer pop out. Retrieving a small bottle of medicine, he sprayed himself a few times, and after some deep breaths, color returned to his face.

Resting on the sofa, Natiwuzi recuperated for a while before speaking. "I am relieved, and I am also glad."

The look Natiwuzi gave Fang Zhao was complicated. It was the sum of all sorts of feelings in his heart.

"I am very relieved that you did not appear back in my day."

If a Fang Zhao had appeared during Natiwuzi's glorious days, Natiwuzi might not have had the cumulative fame and popularity he had now and would not have had that strong self-confidence and haughtiness when playing the guitar.

"I am also glad because, if Yanzhou doesn't have me, there is still you!"

Natiwuzi might be known as one of the three speed-strumming maestros in the world, but due to age, his health was no longer as it once had been during his peak. He was unable to compete with Jiminy who was 20 years younger or Li Kasi who was only 40+ years old.

In New Era terms, 45 was the prime of one's life. Furthermore, both Jiminy and Li Kasi had lots of experience being at the summit, whereas Natiwuzi would slowly decline.

Natiwuzi was not one to concede defeat or admit old age and was still holding back

anger in his heart! Although he no longer gave public performances, he still practiced loads in private. He always felt that he could stake it all and pit himself against Jiminy and Li Kasi for a round. However, reality was cruel, and the changes in his body restricted him.

But now, Natiwuzi felt as if a great weight on his heart had been lifted. He no longer felt regret!

When a disparity was small, people tended to brood and not admit defeat, but if the disparity was large and there was simply no way of closing the gap, even if the person was not as good, he would be at less of a loss.

Natiwuzi clearly recognized that, even if he was still at his peak, there was no way he could compete with the skill that Fang Zhao had just displayed.

When he was younger, Natiwuzi had always heard people say that, when he was strumming the guitar, he was like a robot in human form, achieving feats that were not possible for normal humans. But now he felt that the one in front of him was the real robot in human form! Was that even possible for a human?

Previously, people who had watched Natiwuzi's performance would say that, after watching him, there was nothing much interesting to watch among other's performances, but now, Natiwuzi felt that, after seeing Fang Zhao play the guitar, rewatching videos of his past performance had no meaning anymore.

Taking a deep breath, Natiwuzi felt his strength returning. He grabbed a piece of tuning equipment and surveyed the guitar. Indeed, the guitar strings were out of tune; Fang Zhao was right.

Not in a rush to tune it, Natiwuzi sat down and proceeded to pour Fang Zhao and himself a cup of tea.

"Interested in working together?" Natiwuzi asked. "I own a few businesses besides this nightclub, and there is one that everyone knows of: 'NaZ.' An ancient-instruments brand that specializes in all sorts of ancient musical instruments. The ancient guitar is the main product, and I would like to invite you to be the brand ambassador of 'NaZ'."

Chapter 156

Most Valuable Grave

Perhaps in an attempt to bring the two closer, or maybe as a way of briefing Fang Zhao on the story behind his brand NaZ, Natiwuzi began speaking in a gentle voice. "One of my ancestors fought for General Wu Yan when he recovered Yanzhou, achieving quite a few feats. When the New Era was founded, this ancestor was conferred the title of major general. He also became one of the first antique collectors of the New Era. He helped found both Yanzhou's Collectors' Association and the Yanzhou Museum."

Natiwuzi gave an overview of his family history first. The point was to convey that he was from a reputable family. Even though the brand NaZ was relatively new, it was backed by a powerful foundation.

Fang Zhao thought carefully. He actually did remember the elder who had recovered Yanzhou with Wu Yan, the one Natiwuzi mentioned. He had met Natiwuzi's ancestor when he'd led his troops in the recovery of a particular battle zone. The reason he remembered this person was because the kid liked collecting stuff and hoarded a lot, regardless of whether the items were useful or not, especially items from the Old Era. At that time, the war hadn't been over yet. No one could predict the future. Apart from their daily supplies and equipment, people didn't pay much attention to other items. But this kid was different. He'd had an addiction of sorts.

The first time Fang Zhao had met the elder that Natiwuzi had mentioned, the elder had still been young, only in his early 20s. In Fang Zhao's eyes, he had just been a kid, someone who had been born and raised during the Period of Destruction.

Natiwuzi, of course, had no idea what was going on inside Fang Zhao's head. He continued, "Come to think of it, after the founding of the New Era, the government moved all the scattered martyrs' remains to the newly built martyrs' cemetery. When Fang Zhao was buried, the old man attended the funeral."

Natiwuzi was typically a man of few words. He was a slow talker during his previous conversations with Fang Zhao, but once he started talking antiques and related gossip, he got quite excited. His sentences accelerated quite a bit, unlike his usual tempo.

Realizing that his comment might cause a misunderstanding, Natiwuzi followed up with an explanation. "Don't get me wrong. I didn't mean you. I meant the leader from the Period of Destruction, the martyr Fang Zhao."

Fang Zhao said, "I know. Keep going." He knew Natiwuzi had brought up the grave relocation for a reason. He also wanted to know why Natiwuzi had mentioned the martyr Fang Zhao's grave in particular.

"The collector's gene has been passed from generation to generation in our family. That old man loved to collect and treasured all his items. When Martyr Fang Zhao was buried, he had picked a few beloved pieces as burial items, precious stones of some sort. Word has it they were excavated some 2,000 or 3,000 years ago. They could fetch a decent price based on prevailing prices. Any of them could start a bidding war in the black market. It wasn't just the old man. There were plenty of folks who did the same thing, in Yanzhou and elsewhere."

Probably because he was usually reticent, the brief spiel already made Natiwuzi thirsty, requiring him to down two cups of tea. He was still excited, though, not betraying the slightest sign of impatience. He lowered his voice and kept feeding Fang Zhao gossip. This involved the personal affairs of political leaders from the Period of Destruction, after all. Even though only he and Fang Zhao were present, out of respect, he couldn't raise his voice.

"Martyr Fang Zhao sacrificed himself before the founding of the New Era. Because of limited funds, his remains were kept in storage until the end of the war, when the martyrs' cemetery was built. He was buried in the first row of the core area. Even though his was the second tombstone in the first row, he was buried with many more items than the others. This may sound disrespectful to the martyrs, but from a collector's perspective, judging from the value of the burial items, Martyr Fang Zhao's grave is the most valuable. Naturally, it's coveted by grave robbers."

As the descendant of a major collector, even though Natiwuzi was less interested in other antiques compared to guitars, they were still antiques, after all. They still tickled his appetite.

Natiwuzi slapped himself in the face and lamented, "No one knows how many valuable pieces are in Martyr Fang Zhao's grave or what, exactly, the items are. The people who knew are long gone. There is no mention in footage from the time. All we have are a few vague references in the notes of people who were involved with the burial. That's

why we have more cemetery guards in Yanzhou than in other continents. Even the martyrs' cemetery in Huangzhou can't compare.

Fang Zhao: "... Should he cry or should he laugh?

"Even though Martyr Fang Zhao's grave is ranked second in the core area, extremists and grave robbers love to target his plot. Even General Wu Yan's plot isn't as attractive, and in recent years, people with ulterior motives have spread word that many of the precious artifacts that were seen in archive photos or footage from the era but never found actually ended up in Martyr Fang Zhao's grave as burial items. Anyone with a brain wouldn't believe this claim—the grave is only so big, after all. There are so many artifacts that meet the criteria. A good portion have been confirmed as destroyed during the Period of Destruction by archeologists; how could they be in the plot? Still, many folks robbed Fang Zhao's grave out of greed. Serves them right to have been shot by the cemetery guards. But they also tested the waters for other grave robbers."

Noticing that Fang Zhao seemed preoccupied, Natiwuzi nervously said, "Don't get any ideas. The cemetery guards aren't window dressing. They are authorized to shoot to kill anyone suspicious. Not to mention that convicted grave robbers face stiff sentences. No fewer than 100 people are sentenced to death each year for attempted grave robbing."

Fang Zhao said, "Relax, I don't plan on robbing any graves." He was just curious about what was buried in his grave. Was it filled with antiques?

Natiwuzi glanced at Fang Zhao skeptically. "That's good to know."

The reason he'd brought up the martyr Fang Zhao was to impress the Fang Zhao before him. People always worshipped heroes, especially young people, let alone a young man who was a namesake. Youngsters from the New Era typically worshipped the martyrs who shared their exact name. He also knew that Fang Zhao was not an easy sell, but Fang Zhao was still young, after all. Natiwuzi had just flooded him with stories of Martyr Fang Zhao's heroics and stories of his ancestors, and Fang Zhao seemed receptive, so he thought to himself, He's in play!

After yapping on about his ancestors, Natiwuzi switched gears and started telling Fang Zhao about his parents' generation and himself.

Hailing from a wealthy family, Natiwuzi's mother had been a businesswoman who ran

a chain of hotels. His father had been an archeology professor at Yanzhou University who was a hardcore academic and held key posts at Yanzhou's top government ministry in charge of cultural affairs.

So Natiwuzi had lived a blessed life since his childhood. Coming of age under the wings of his parents hadn't been completely smooth sailing, but it had been much easier than folks without a similar background.

When Natiwuzi was six, he had seen his first antique guitar, a relic that his father and his archeology team had recovered from a dump. He had been instantly captivated. It had truly been love at first sight. Natiwuzi was also blessed talent-wise. Otherwise he would not have risen to become one of the three leading masters of the world out of all these fast guitar players.

He'd made his name in a guitar competition he entered at 22 and from there launched his storied career. Back then, Natiwuzi had been unrivaled among antique instrumentalists, the true world No. 1 of speed strumming. Jiminy had not achieved fame until 20 years later, which had forced Natiwuzi to share world champion honors. A few years later, Li Kasi had come onto the scene, the final link in what eventually became known as the world's three speed-strumming maestros, who have reigned supreme until present day.

Even though there were other talented speed strummers, they were still a notch below the top three.

But Natiwuzi lamented that he had never been as talented a composer as he was a player. He never won any of the most respected awards in the industry. In terms of artistic achievement, he still paled in comparison to those award winners. It was a sore point that even his father had broached with him a few times.

Now, Natiwuzi was an old man. He had been through a lot and gained perspective. So what if he didn't measure up in terms of artistic achievement? At least he was still one of the world's three speed-strumming maestros. He had left his name in the history books.

Speed players like Natiwuzi were considered technical virtuosos. Even though speed wasn't musical in itself, playing fast drew folks who were otherwise uninterested in antique instruments, so popularity-wise, Natiwuzi measured up with those award-winning musicians just fine. In fact, he had many, many more fans. That was what his

father meant when he told Natiwuzi that any career choice meant "winning some and losing some."

As he became older, Natiwuzi hadn't been able to keep up physically, so he had stopped performing in public. Instead, he had parlayed his career background and his connections into a business career. He'd started his own business selling antique instruments under the "NaZ" label.

"NaZ' was brief for Natiwuzi's name. The logo of the brand was a big capital "Z," the slant in the design comprising six guitar strings.

The six-string electric guitar was Natiwuzi's favorite, but NaZ produced four-string, eight-string and 12-string models as well. They also made custom-painted pianos. Other than electric guitars, their lineup included folk, classical, and bass guitars.

A high-end custom-made business was a must for any successful guitar brand. Li Kasi's guitar had 18 strings, and Jiminy's had even more. Fad-seeking nouveau riche fans would order copycat models, but Natiwuzi insisted on using six strings in the company logo. The first time he had seen an antique electric guitar, it had been a six-string. Even though his father's archeology team later unearthed seven-string and eight-string guitars, they couldn't replace the sentimental value of the first guitar he had laid ever eyes on. He himself used a six-string guitar, and six strings made up the slant in his brand logo's "Z."

A light bulb had lit up in Natiwuzi's head when he'd jammed with Fang Zhao for the first time. Later on, he'd researched Fang Zhao and realized Fang Zhao's stature and potential among pop composers. More importantly, he had watched the guitar instruction video that had gone viral. It was quickly deemed the "most orthodox" guitar instructional video by seasoned instrumentalists. The backdrop of the video was the club Space, which was decorated exclusively with NaZ guitars. You couldn't miss the "Z" logo on the guitars. As a result, he had seen a surge in online orders today. Natiwuzi smelled a business opportunity.

"To be perfectly honest, before you arrived, I was going to film you speed strumming and post the video online to let everyone know that there were no backroom shenanigans, that it was all you, but I've changed my mind. I can't post the video right now. I also hope that you refrain from playing at this speed in public in the next year." Natiwuzi gave Fang Zhao an apologetic look, his eyes oozing sincerity. "I'll make it up to you. We can make a deal."

"The reason being?" Fang Zhao asked.

Natiwuzi's voice was already quite hoarse from speaking so much, but he had no intention of stopping. He let out a long sigh and said, "Before I saw you play, I thought a fourth speed-strumming maestro would appear. The Big Three would become the Big Four. But after seeing you go all out, I now know I was dead wrong."

Players who broke strings were a dime a dozen, but rarely could someone stop playing because they noticed an inconsistency in the strings at that speed. Up until now, Fang Zhao was the only person Natiwuzi knew of.

"If you make your debut, then it won't be the Big Three or the Big Four. There will be only one master. Jiminy, Li Kasi, and I will become history. I don't perform any more, so it doesn't matter to me whether it's still the Big Three or not. In fact, I'm more than happy to see you replace me and the others. I know Jiminy well. He rarely performs these days. He likes to spend most of his time traveling. He won't make a big fuss either. But Li Kasi's world tour, which has been in the works for 10 years, is about to kick off. If you appear now, his tour will become a joke. Li Kasi is quite connected, and he's petty. There's no reason to make an enemy out of him. If you launch your career after his world tour, it won't be as awkward. Of course, the most important reason is that I owe Li Kasi a favor. When I announced my retirement and went on my farewell tour, both Li Kasi and Jiminy made some sacrifices so my tour would end on a perfect note."

Natiwuzi was willing to strike a deal with Fang Zhao to return the favor he owed. He had no complaints.

"To be perfectly honest," Fang Zhao said, "I never planned on focusing on speed strumming or posting the video of myself playing."

Natiwuzi: "... So I overthought things?"

But upon hearing that Fang Zhao didn't plan on showcasing his talent, Natiwuzi didn't approve either.

"No, no, no. With that kind of talent, you can't remain unknown. Fang Zhao, I'm just asking for a year. After that kid Li Kasi finishes his world tour, after a transition, I'll do everything in my power to make you the undisputed king of speed strumming. Let's let the world know that, even without me, Natiwuzi, Yanzhou can still produce another global No. 1. It's No. 1 in the world we're talking about here! Can you imagine how

much attention you will receive, how much the spotlight will focus on you? At that point you and NaZ will be household names."

Natiwuzi got so worked up, he stood up as he conjured up his grand vision of the future. He didn't believe anyone could resist the temptation of being the world's No. 1. Even he was overcome with emotion thinking about the global No. 1 title and recalling his glory days, let alone Fang Zhao, who was in his early 20s and had graduated from university less than two years ago.

Little did Natiwuzi expect that, after talking his heart out and getting so emotional that his face was twitching, he turned his head to find Fang Zhao calmly pouring him a cup of tea and pushing it toward him. "Hydrate a bit."

Natiwuzi: "....." Can you throw me a bone here?

Fang Zhao gave him a confused look.

Natiwuzi ground his teeth. "We're talking about the world's No. 1!"

"I know."

Natiwuzi: "..."

After glaring at Fang Zhao for a few seconds, Natiwuzi composed himself and plunked back down onto his sofa chair. He probingly looked at Fang Zhao again. "You're not willing to work with me? Don't wanna work with me? I can sponsor your concerts. We can start preparing in less than a year. I will leverage all my connections to set things up for you. Once Li Kasi's world tour ends, you'll be the world's No. 1! Don't count on Silver Wing."

Fang Zhao remained unfazed despite Natiwuzi's intimidating stare. He calmly responded, "I know working with you in this field is the best option."

Natiwuzi relaxed somewhat, but he was also waiting for the impending "but."

"But," Fang Zhao said while staring at Natiwuzi, "I'm performing my military service next year."

Natiwuzi: "..."

Once again, Natiwuzi's jaded face was on the verge of melting. He said in a quasi-grunt, "Military service? You graduated more than a year ago and you still haven't served?"

It was impossible to bypass something like military service. Fudging your military service was a no-no if you didn't want it to come back to haunt you. The most you could do was leverage your connections into an easier posting.

When Natiwuzi had researched Fang Zhao, he hadn't paid attention to service status. When he had been planning their future, the words "military service" had never crossed his mind.

But a service term could delay his plans by a year or more. That was the minimum. If there were unforeseen developments, the delay could be longer. In the worst-case scenario, his vision might never be executed.

Natiwuzi started brainstorming which strings to pull. "I can set things up for you."

"Thanks, but I've been taken care of."

"Right, Silver Wing must have stepped in on something like this." Natiwuzi relaxed a bit. If Silver Wing had set things up, there shouldn't be any complications, but he still didn't feel reassured. If even one of Fang Zhao's fingers were injured, his plans would be toast.

"Remember to protect your hands!"

Natiwuzi nagged Fang Zhao repeatedly, urging him to keep an eye on his hands. Not a single finger could be harmed.

"I'll do my best." That's all Fang Zhao could say.

Natiwuzi was mad, but there was nothing he could do. Military service was a major complicating factor. For anyone else, given existing medical technology, a broken finger could be fixed, but Natiwuzi knew that for a speed strummer, even if his broken fingers were repaired, he might not be able to play at the same level. Even if he could, it would be a long wait.

What a headache!

Natiwuzi wanted to post the video of Fang Zhao playing right now, but all he could do

was let out a resigned sigh when he remembered the favor Li Kasi had done for him back then.

Forget it, let's put our plans for the world's No. 1 speed strummer on hold. But that didn't mean he was going to change his plans about asking Fang Zhao to endorse his brand.

"Setting aside speed strumming for a second, we can work together on other fronts. How's your folk guitar technique?" Natiwuzi asked.

"It's OK," Fang Zhao responded.

Natiwuzi raised his eyebrows. "That's great." He didn't like playing folk. If Fang Zhao could, that would be a perfect fit.

He'd had a Plan B all along.

Even though Natiwuzi was one of the three speed-strumming maestros, not everyone dug his style. His influence was also waning quickly. In addition, genuine antique-instrument enthusiasts might not be into electric instruments. To broaden his appeal, especially among students, Natiwuzi had planned on expanding production of folk guitars.

Introductory classes were common at the primary and secondary level. Things were even more flexible in university—there was an abundance of student clubs. Natiwuzi didn't want to cede this market. Even though he preferred the electric guitar, he was a businessman; he couldn't expect everyone to follow his preferences.

"I saw your electric guitar instructional video that was posted online. I've been planning on launching online guitar lessons. I've already hired a few instructors, but if you could join them, that would be even better. I can give you a 70 percent cut of the subscription fees and user bonuses. How does that sound? Right, I've also invested in a campus romance that Silver Wing is shooting. The male lead is someone who acts cool by carrying a folk guitar with him all the time. If the movie turns out well, it will spark a wave of nostalgia for folk guitars on campuses."

Chapter 157

Letting Go

Fang Zhao knew the film Natiwuzi mentioned. The film was called "A Guitar Romance," and Fang Zhao also knew the lead actor in the film, Ji Polun.

When Fang Zhao had first taken over the virtual projects department, Ji Polun had been asked to be the virtual idol Polar Light's eye model. Ultimately, he had ended up as a spectating student and helped out with odd jobs in the virtual projects department. Ji Polun was also in the production team's credits for Polar Light's first song.

Back then, Ji Polun had been on a C-grade contract. After that, he had probably gotten a knack for how things worked and improved his acting skills by leaps and bounds. His credentials had to have been decent. If not, Silver Wing would not have signed him back then. Now that his acting skills had improved and the way he treated others was better than before, his contract was now B grade.

Now that the virtual projects department was in a state of high secrecy, Ji Polun could no longer head to the department to chat whenever he wanted. However, he still frequently kept in touch with Zu Wen and the rest. A short while back, when Zu Wen and the others had been talking about company gossip, Fang Zhao had heard that Ji Polun had accepted a film and was the male lead. For his character, it was rumored that Ji Polun trained very hard with the guitar and had professionals tutoring him. He wanted to be better than other actors of the same grade, not just learn a few chords.

Before accepting the role, all Ji Polun had known about ancient instruments was that many were made from wood. He had not even heard of string instruments and did not know how many types there were. He knew that he could use a body double when the time came and pass through it that way, but if he somehow had some slight knowledge on the basics, the probability of him landing the role would be higher. Thus, he'd started his training three months ago.

The company did not place much importance on this sort of low-cost production. Every month, there were film targets for every genre, and the basic scripts were always like placing old wine in a new bottle, with the aim of swaying other investors

to dump money in. "A Guitar's Love" was a joint production with other investors.

When he had heard the name for the first time, Fang Zhao had thought it was a film concerning music, instruments, and youthful encouragement, but it was actually a youth campus-idol flick. Now that Natiwuzi had mentioned it, he recalled that, other than Silver Wing, the other investor was NaZ.

Ji Polun's tutor was from NaZ, and the NaZ brand was all over the film. The guitars used by the male lead were also from the NaZ brand.

"I even came up with the film title." Natiwuzi seem a little proud, but he followed with a frown. "However, the shooting progress is a little too slow."

Fang Zhao nodded his head. "Slow work yields fine products. It is important that the final product satisfies you. I am familiar with the male lead, a really hard working young chap. I even heard that he trained hard over three months just for a particular scene."

Natiwuzi had wanted to chase the other side and exert some pressure, but hearing Fang Zhao's word's, he laughed and said, "Those are rather fine words!"

Natiwuzi no longer wanted to chase them. This was just a part of his plans to expand his brand. The actor for the role had been chosen carefully. Back then, he had only picked Ji Polun because of the calluses on his hands as a result of all the hard practice. Natiwuzi's request had been to use as little editing and special effects as possible for the scenes where instruments were being played. Now that Fang Zhao had mentioned that he was indeed hardworking, Natiwuzi felt at ease. Indeed, as long as the final product was up to his standards, there was no need to nitpick other areas. Anyway, filming was set to complete soon, possibly within the next two days. He could chase them a little more when it came to postproduction.

Given the advancements in technology, the production cycle of a film was not as long as it had once been. This sort of low-cost production took even less time.

Natiwuzi wanted Fang Zhao to give lessons through a a webcast. Fang Zhao did not have a lot of time, but forking out one or two hours was still doable.

When Fang Zhao agreed, Natiwuzi was delighted. He had heard that Fang Zhao had come to Space to find inspiration for composing, so with a wave of his hand, he presented Fang Zhao with a privilege card, which had more prestigious perks than a

VIP card.

Natiwuzi also gave Fang Zhao access to videos of performances in the dance hall. From time to time, Natiwuzi would invite well-known bands or instrumental musicians to perform. The club stored a copy of all the performances, and it was not only limited to ancient musical instruments; there were many different styles, including popular styles that could drive up the atmosphere, and electronic music was the main theme. It was what Fang Zhao wanted.

As someone who did not speak much normally, saying so much in one shot was tiring for Natiwuzi. Thus, Fang Zhao did not continue staying here. After he arranged the preliminary matters of their collaboration, he left with Zuo Yu,

On the trip back, Fang Zhao received an incoming call from Wang Tie.

"I have information." Wang Tie's tone carried an air of proudness for uncovering the truth. "I said that you wouldn't have wasted money. As long as you are willing to spend, I will surely dig the truth out."

Fang Zhao had let Wang Tie investigate the mastermind behind the incident at Space. Given Wang Tie's knowledge of the entertainment circles and his keen paparazzi sense of smell, even if he was unable to discover the entire truth, any bit of information would be fine too. However, Fang Zhao had not expected that Wang Tie would have information after just one day.

"Speak," Fang Zhao said.

"The person who employed these men to act against you is a manager from Zebra e-Sports Club. You should have heard of this club. They are considered among the top 10 e-sports clubs in Yanzhou but are positioned at the tail end, in 10th place. There are over 30 clubs in the whole of Yanzhou, so they do have a reputation, but it's not that great and they can be considered a mid-tier club. However, they have some ambition. The club is currently occupying 10th place in the Yanzhou team leaderboards.

An e-sports club?

When Fang Zhao heard this, he could guess their motive.

"Because of Fiery Bird's annual gala?" Fang Zhao had heard from Wayne, Jinro, and the

others about Fiery Bird's annual gala. Fiery Bird would always invite strong teams and capable individuals across all continents to participate, and all the world's media outlets would focus their coverage during the event. The criteria for this year's conference was the top ten teams and individuals in each continent on the "Battle of the Century Leaderboards."

If a person in the top 10 individual leaderboards belonged to a team within the top 10 team leaderboards, the choices of invites would be pushed back.

As most of the top 50 of Yanzhou's leaderboards was occupied by members of the top 10 teams, even if someone was placed around 20- or 30-plus, there was still a high possibility of them being invited. This was also the reason why many smaller e-sports clubs and gaming studios were exerting all their strength and resources to push certain members forward.

From the start, Zebra e-Sports Club's ambitions had been very lofty. There were rumored to have spent large sums of money and managed to squeeze into the top 10 of the Yanzhou team leaderboards for "Battle of the Century," albeit only being 10th place.

Of Jinro, Dorrian, and the other eight, six of them had been approached by Zebra e-Sports Club, especially HWR's Dorrian, who had been contacted at least 10 times. Ultimately, though, all their targets had been poached over by Silver Wing. How could they not be mad?

Besides stealing their targets multiple times, the main issue was that this SilverLight team from Silver Wing had a strong drive.

Although the SilverLight team was ranked 12th on the team leaderboards, there was no telling when they would rush upward. To the outside world, with a team comprised of such distinguished members, as long as the points-sweeping-machine AliveAfter500Years was still there, rising up the leaderboards was no issue. It was only a matter of when.

"Actually, Zebra did not just target you. They have probably employed methods against others as well. Besides the Big Five, they might have targeted those teams ranked 6th to 9th and 11th to 15th as well. As for why they focused on you on Silver Wing's side, it is probably because you are an easier target. Using dirty tricks and targeting e-sports athletes is condemned in the professional circles. Poaching is fine, but

threatening the safety of an e-sports athlete is a big no. They probably targeted you, the young managing executive of the gaming team, as they did not know your identity in-game."

Any changes to the team's managing level would also affect the team and might even cause them to destabilize. Fang Zhao being the boss of SilverWing50PolarLight's project team had been announced at the press conference, and it was no wonder why he had been locked onto.

When sharing his guesses, Wang Tie seemed to take joy in others misfortune. "They had been eyeing you for a few days, but they hadn't been able to find a suitable opportunity to do something. When the video of you teaching your juniors the guitar in Space circulated online, they then went to Space. As for the rest, you know it for yourself. They most likely wanted to make the music composition circles resent you, but they never expected that you would catch them and even send them to the hospital. The six are still lying in hospital under police custody."

If the six men had not been beaten to the ground by Fang Zhao, Natiwuzi's internal investigation would not have been so quick and Wang Tie might not have gotten his information so smoothly.

"Oh, by the way," Wang Tie paused, "besides me, there are also a bunch of people investigating your incident and putting in quite a bit of effort. They aren't Natiwuzi's men—his men's investigation was mainly internal, and they did not look outward. However, this bunch are different. Although they have spent a longer time, it won't take too long for them to find the information that I uncovered."

Fang Zhao pondered for a bit and replied, "You can stop your investigation."

"Are they from Silver Wing?"

"Most likely."

Wang Tie pursed his lips. "I must say, the people from Zebra surely did not expect that Silver Wing would mobilized so much manpower to investigate."

Only a few people in Silver Wing knew how important Fang Zhao was to the gaming and virtual projects departments. The boss, Duan Qianji, was extremely afraid that Fang Zhao would be poached away and had specifically found Zuo Yu, a former special forces member, to serve as his bodyguard. Zebra might have ambitions, but so did

Silver Wing. Wayne's lofty dreams had only just begun. His soul had nearly left his body when he'd heard about Fang Zhao's incident at Space.

"So you want me to pull back? I will arrange all the information I found in a file and send it over." Once more, Wang Tie asked, "You really don't want me to continue investigating? There are surely others pulling the strings from behind. Otherwise, the people from Zebra wouldn't have been so impulsive."

"You won't be able to find much incriminating evidence for those few anyway," Fang Zhao replied.

"That is true. They are all demons; let's burn these people at the stake and see whether the rest get frightened," Wang Tie replied indifferently. He had seen this a lot of times and did not find it strange. Competition existed all the time, but fair competition was rare, especially in entertainment circles.

During the journey back from Space, Fang Zhao watched some of the dance-hall performances that Natiwuzi had given him, and he gained quite a bit. At night, Natiwuzi also created two compilations of performances and sent them to Fang Zhao. Besides Yanzhou artists, there were performers from other continents as well. These were video clips that could not be found even on the internet.

Since Natiwuzi had provided so much help, there was no way Fang Zhao could let him down. After watching, Fang Zhao also made plans for his online web lessons.

The next day, when Fang Zhao went to the company, Wayne wanted to talk to him alone.

"I'm not giving you such bad ideas in the future anymore! Director Duan called me up yesterday and spent an hour scolding me." Wayne still had some lingering fears, not because of the scolding he had received from Duan Qianji but because if Fang Zhao had really been accused of "using stimulants to compose," it would have caused a lot of trouble in the short term and might have affected Fang Zhao's condition.

"If you still want to find more inspiration, why not just let other company personnel handle the accompaniment music for the publicity film," Wayne suggested once more.

"I have made some progress. When it's done, I will show it to you first. If you still feel it's not suitable, then we can change it." Fang Zhao was not an opinionated person, and if his work was not suitable, he did not mind using somebody else's. He knew that

Wayne had found others to compose and had made preparations on two fronts. He did not mind.

"All right. After all, this has to be completed within this month." At this point, Wayne could not help but say the real reason he had wanted to speak with Fang Zhao. "Are you all able to break into the top 10?" Wayne rubbed his hands together. "It's not that I doubt your ability, just that you haven't been logging in much and you have been letting Jinro lead the team. The members in the team have improved tremendously, but... but the competition is just so great."

As the other person in charge of SilverWing50PolarLight, Wayne felt anxious. When Fang Zhao was not in the office, Wayne had led Jinro and the others in a meeting and had inquired with them, but Jinro and the others had said that Fang Zhao had other instructions. They were to build up their basics and not advance prematurely. For example, driving, shooting, detection and identification of dangerous organisms, concealment, and other skills needed to survive. That was why the team had not gone all out to kill monsters, and making the top 15 at their rate was not easy.

Knowing that the bunch only listened to Fang Zhao, Wayne had known he couldn't dig anything else from them and could only rely on Fang Zhao to do the work.

As Wayne spoke, he watched for Fang Zhao's reaction. When Fang Zhao did not speak, he thought for a bit and said, "The people who plotted against you were from Zebra e-Sports Club..."

Wayne explained the findings of Silver Wing's investigation of the incident. "Luckily for them, we don't eat without paying. Don't worry about it. Leave the matters in the real world to me. I will get people to handle them. As for the game, we can't let ourselves be stomped on, can we? They are just two places above us; we just have to charge forward a little and crush them."

Fang Zhao nodded. "It's about time."

Wayne was all smiles, thinking that Fang Zhao had listened to his advice and finally changed his mind, but he quickly straightened his face and said seriously, "Everyone will be waiting for your good news, then. Oh, I nearly forgot to ask. What relationship do you have with Natiwuzi? Why does the internet think you are Natiwuzi's illegitimate son or a runaway grandson?"

"We are ancient-musical-instrument lovers. We just had an exchange on ancient instrumental skills, and he wishes to work with me."

"It won't affect anything on our side, right?"

"Nope."

"That's good."

On that day, Fang Zhao went to the 50th floor to hold a meeting. Both the Polar Light and SilverLight project teams were present.

On the same night, the SilverLight team that had been crawling slowly up the leaderboards suddenly burst to life, as if the brakes on their car had been removed.

Fang Zhao had taught them all the skills that could be taught. How much they could grasp was entirely up to them.

Fang Zhao would gradually withdraw from the team operations and hand the role of authority over to Jinro. During the operations in-game, Fang Zhao also slowly started to keep his distance or spectate from the sides. After all, Fang Zhao intended to serve in the military next year, and he needed to let them adapt to this new method of combat. Even if they recruited more members in the future, Jinro would be able to handle it well.

On December 9, the SilverLight team rose to the 10th position on the Yanzhou "Battle of the Century" team leaderboards. Zebra e-Sports Club, who had previously been at 10th place, were pushed down to 11th.

On December 10, the system announced the release of a new area away from the original warzones. Gamers escaped toward the newly-released areas nearest their city districts.

The SilverLight team, which had been making preparations beforehand, formed a motorcade and led other original players of District 79 toward the new district.

On December 12, another round of natural disasters occurred. Populations of mutated beast species saw a sharp spike in their numbers as all 100 districts of Yanzhou fell to the enemy.

On December 15, SilverLight team's experience points total was now 9th place on the leaderboards.

As long as they maintained this state, before the month ended, they could charge to 8th.

Chapter 158

Nostalgic Trend

"Battle of the Century," in a certain southern district of Yanzhou.

A large motorcade was traveling toward the destination announced by the game's system.

Milo looked at the map, surveyed the surrounding terrain, and asked the others, "The new district is in this direction, right?" He cast a glance at Fang Zhao, who was sitting on the roof of the car beside them. Seeing that Fang Zhao did not look over, he looked toward Jinro and Dorrian, who nodded. Only then did Milo give a sigh of relief. He had not given the wrong directions this time.

Now Milo only had one word for Fang Zhao: respect!

Prior to this, he just had not understood why Fang Zhao had kept forcing them to learn those skills. When it came for them to start fleeing, only then did he realize the importance of these skills. Others might spend more time trying to adapt midway through the fleeing process, and the odds of losing lives would thus be greater. In addition, once someone lost their life, they might not be able to keep up with the speed of their team. This was due to the time restriction the system placed on logging back in after a death.

And these other people who felt they were unable to kill any monsters or pick up any points following the SilverLight team were now falling over each other to ride on the their coattails, and they could not be chased away. These people were not foolish; they knew the best chance of survival was following the team. The penalties for dying just once were very severe! By following the SilverLight team, they could hide inside the vehicles and avoid greater danger. They also finally realized that experience points did not increase just by killing monsters nonstop. Tiring oneself and dying would lead to the entire week's experience points being wiped, and many times, just by surviving longer, the experience points would automatically be higher.

This was also the reason many people called "Battle of the Century" a survival game, not a monster-slaying game. Survival was of the utmost importance. Whatever one

wished to do, they would have to guarantee their own life first. It was only to live that killing monsters became necessary.

The motorcade following the SilverLight team were not all members of SilverLight. A majority were other players from District 79 that had convened together, and the ranks were made up of many teams, with SilverLight at the head.

Without reporters chasing after them, the SilverLight members were more spirited as they played. However, even though there were no reporters trying to stop them, at all times, the SilverLight team was still the focal point of attention in the motorcade.

Two people were discussing in hush tones. "Hey, have you seen what 500Years-god looks like?" AliveAfter500Years's ID was too long, so people referred to him in private as 500Years.

"Nope, I only saw him killing monsters, and he was so f*cking cool. My eyes could not keep up with the speed he switched guns at!"

"Are you guys new here? What's so great about switching guns? Back when they brought us along when fleeing District 79, the way he drove the car was more like flying. Many times during those drifts, I thought that he would fly straight out! He could even kill monsters while driving, with one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand wielding a gun!" someone else exclaimed, and he clicked his tongue in approval.

"Seems like nobody even knows the real identity of 500Years-god yet. So many paparazzi, but they were unable to dig out any info?"

"Who knows? However, according to past practices, Fiery Bird's annual gala is coming soon. SilverLight seems to have settled in the top 10 and will be invited. At that time, we will all find out for ourselves."

"Oh, that's right. I really hope Fiery Bird's annual gala comes quickly. When is it going to be?"

"I heard it is set 100 days after the release date of 'Battle of the Century,' so soon, I guess. Probably around the 8th or 9th January."

"Isn't that a wait of over 20 days?"

"Just wait. In any case, no one has been able to dig out any information regarding his true identity."

"What about the paparazzi king? Wasn't there a rumor that the paparazzi king who was jailed on another planet was released? Why hasn't there been any activity?"

At that moment, the paparazzi king who was being talked about in private was telling their revered 500Years-god a story.

Wang Tie was at Fang Zhao's side, recounting his own experiences from when he had been a war journalist. Besides being in charge of shooting the team's publicity film, he held a concurrent post of telling Fang Zhao stories. At the start, he had wished to brag about himself, but later on, he had felt like he was in a film during ancient times where those nobles would hire storytellers for entertainment at taverns.

But when he thought about Fang Zhao paying him from his own pocket, Wang Tie changed his attitude and continued telling Fang Zhao about the sights and sounds he had experienced while serving his jail term. Being dragged to be a war journalist was just one of the many experiences from his time as a prisoner.

At the start, Wang Tie had only wished to recount some of his dreadful past experiences to frighten Fang Zhao, since he was enlisting to clear his military service next year. His stories were bound to scare that little brat. However, after finishing his story, Wang Tie realized that Fang Zhao only sighed and exclaimed "There are no easy times." He simply did not look the least bit frightened.

Wang Tie did not understand what Fang Zhao meant by "There are no easy times," but he knew he wouldn't get an answer by asking Fang Zhao. He had already been beaten numerous times by Fang Zhao, and he secretly hoped that Fang Zhao would hurry up and enlist. Without Fang Zhao around, he would be free to do as he wished in Yanzhou. Otherwise, as long as that person existed, he would always feel a pair of eyes on him, making him uneasy.

After talking for a bit, Wang Tie shot a quick glance at Fang Zhao and thought, This brat's mind has wandered again.

As Wang Zhao was thinking, Fang Zhao suddenly faced a certain direction, as if carefully identifying the issue.

"Something's coming, and not just a few."

Fang Zhao's one sentence made all members of the team spring to high alert immediately.

"Prepare for battle!" Jinro roared, getting up and assigning tasks to others. Besides their team, he needed to assign the other people within the motorcade. This group of survivors needed to cooperate and work together as a team if they wanted to head forth to the new district.

"The warning device hasn't even sounded, where is the dang—" before he could even finish, the warning device on his hand sounded.

People beside him rolled their eyes. "A new member? Get used to it. You can do no wrong following SilverLight members."

On this journey, everyone had gotten used to it. From doubts at the start to being fully convinced by now. Most people would not be so foolish as to provoke Silver Light members. Their battle strength was there for all to see, and their survival skills were top notch. In any case, all these people needed to do was follow after the SilverLight members.

But there was some doubt in many people's hearts. Why was it Jinro who was in charge of assigning tasks and not AliveAfter500Years? Had Jinro surpassed AliveAfter500Years and squeezed him out? But normally, Jinro and the others still called AliveAfter500Years "Boss." Could it be that AliveAfter500Years himself did not wish to be captain or vice captain and had passed the roles to Jinro and Dorrian? Or were there some secret circumstances?

The outside was full of gossip, and many tabloids even speculated that SilverLight was having an internal power struggle and that other people had join forces to crowd AliveAfter500Years out.

Some members of the motorcade had asked Schwarzer in private, as they felt that a university student would break easily. In the end, Schwarzer had not revealed any important information. When asked whether he had joined forces with the others to overthrow AliveAfter500Years, Schwarzer was so scared he jumped up. "Overthrow? I don't have that sort of guts!"

Schwarzer would never forget when Fang Zhao had come to recruit him. Back then, he had learned a little martial arts and had wanted to show off in front of Fang Zhao. In

the end, he had been kicked straight offline. It was still painful even now. Ever since then, he had been training diligently, both online and offline.

"Heh, Mr Huo Li, make sure you take good-looking shots of me later!" Schwarzer did not forget to remind Wang Tie before the battle started.

"Idiot, nobody can see what you look like with a helmet on!" Jake chided disdainfully. "Handsome, definitely handsome. Don't worry, everyone, have trust in my skills. When the publicity film is released, you shall all know." Wang Tie laughed.

Jinro pointed out an area in their ranks. "Boss, there are some people in a dormant 1 state there, and they are unable to battle over on that side. They are lacking in manpower, so we have to leave it to you."

"Got it." Fang Zhao walked over.

When everyone was at their assigned spots, the warning devices were all flashing red, but they did not have concrete digits.

First-generation warning devices that could be exchanged using credits had many functions that were not complete. When the beast hordes were smaller, they still worked fine, but when there were too many beasts, they became inaccurate. According to records in history books, the warning devices had further upgraded versions, but for now they could only use the first generation.

The SilverLight team members thought in their hearts, The first gen warning devices are not as easy to use as our boss. As long as Fang Zhao is around, encountering any situation is a breeze.

"Fire!"

With that command, the previously tranquil surface exploded to life. Gunshots from many different types of guns filled the air. Showers of dust rose into the air as bullets peppered the ground. The howls and wails of the horde of mutated beasts, together with the cursing from the human side, all mashed together, forming a strange and fantastic symphony.

Wind picked up dust along the way and carried it off to somewhere far off in the distance.

It was another battle that lasted close to an hour. After the last beast was exterminated, there was only jubilant laughter within the motorcade.

Dorrian looked toward Jinro. "Shall we call it a day?" Generally speaking, after an hour of high-intensity battle, they would all disconnect to rest. While in-game, even if the warning devices were not sounding, they still needed to remain vigilant, which was too tiring. As this was still a game, for the sake of making it enjoyable, the difficulty was also slightly lowered. If it were really during the Period of Destruction, surely some would have collapsed from exhaustion and fallen into despair.

Jinro glanced at Fang Zhao and saw him nod his head. "Let's call it a day. Head offline to rest up. Remember to put away the vehicles. Who was it that forgot to keep them the last time..."

At Silver Wing's 50th floor gaming studio.

When Jinro and the others exited from the gaming cabins, drenched in sweat, the assistants and medical team rushed forward to surround them.

Milo gulped down a glass of water and sat down, panting, allowing the medical team to do a checkup.

"What do you think the boss is doing now?" Milo said, panting.

Jinro glanced at the time. "Probably preparing for his webcast lesson."

Having just logged out of the game and he could immediately prepare for his webcast lesson without being affected...

Schwarzer and a few others eyed each other and sighed. "Simply not human."

"I really want to see the reactions when everyone finds out the true identity of AliveAfter500Years." Dorrian chuckled. "Another 20-odd days."

The other members in the team all laughed as well. Indeed, everyone would be dumbfounded.

At the other end, after logging off, Fang Zhao took a shower before heading into his study to read a little. There was a lot of knowledge he still needed to study about the New Era. Whenever he was free, Fang Zhao would absorb this information.

When the time came, Fang Zhao turned on his webcast and began teaching.

The channel for his webcast was "Silver Wing Education." Fang Zhao would record himself, and the projection would be sent to the "Silver Wing Education" broadcasting studio, which would then stream it to the audiences.

When Silver Wing Education's anchor received Fang Zhao's cue, the image cut away.

Fang Zhao was holding a guitar with the prominent NaZ logo. Behind him, the wall was adorned with NaZ guitars of different types and designs.

"Today, I will not be teaching everyone the strumming technique. Due to the number of viewers and subscribers increasing and asking questions, today I will focus on explaining various guitar types for beginner students and how to choose them. Everyone knows folk guitars, classical guitars, and electric guitars and their special characteristics. Guitars can also be divided into hollow wood guitars, hollow electric guitars, semi-hollow electric guitars, and solid-body electric guitars. Take a look behind me..."

Fang Zhao briefly talked about the different types of guitars, how people of different ages should choose guitars of an appropriate size, how the guitar felt, the grades of guitars, and other fundamental knowledge for choosing one.

Why Fang Zhao had chosen to talk about this was because of the latest fad of a type of pretentious magical instrument—guitar.

The campus romance flick that Natiwuzi had invested in—"A Guitar Romance," starring Ji Polun—had been released, and the advertisements were good. The photograph of the male lead's posture with a guitar strapped to his back captivated the hearts of many. Ancient guitars had seen a sharp spike in popularity, especially among students.

During Fang Zhao's previous webcast lessons, he had not talked about this fundamental knowledge at the start. The viewers of his webcast were mostly industry professionals, and even those who were not in the industry still had experience with some ancient musical instruments, so Fang Zhao had not needed to tell them much and had instead been able to focus on strumming techniques. Now that the webcast viewers were rising exponentially, though, many beginner students had asked questions, so Fang Zhao needed to first use some time to focus on the basics. Even just

picking a guitar to use it as a display ornament, these people also needed to know how to choose a guitar, how to hold a guitar, and how to not get scammed by unorthodox sellers.

...

Inside a certain residential building in Qi'an City.

In the New Era, there were six years of secondary school. A boy who was still in secondary year five carried the present he had pestered his parents so long for, a hollow-center wooden guitar. Adjusting the straps, he copied the main lead's manner before he went on stage to perform in "A Guitar's Love." He adjusted the guitar till it was below his waist level, stretching his face as he looked in the mirror and did a cool pose.

"Handsome! But it doesn't seem like the original."

The boy then adjusted the strap and posture once more, this time following the manner of certain band members he had watched videos of. He adjusted the guitar below his chin and put on a bowtie.

"Even more handsome! But it doesn't harmonize well."

Pondering for a bit, the boy then went online and saw how a guitar should look like when strapped on the back. He adjusted the strap once more, faced the head down, and strapped it to his back.

"Something still feels lacking." As he was saying this, he ran over to his father's drawer and took out an ancient-looking cowboy hat. He plucked a strand of grass from the balcony where his mother's plants were and stuck it in his mouth. Facing the mirror once more, he struck a few laid-back poses.

"F*cking handsome!"

Nailing down his look for today, the boy whistled a tune as he left for school.

He had just left his neighborhood when he saw another fellow male student from his school who was carrying a guitar on his shoulder as if it were an ancient shovel seen in those Old Era movies. Looking at him, it seemed... rather cool.

Whatever, he could change to that appearance tomorrow.

Secondary school and university teachers watched helplessly as they found their own students acting pretentious, changing their guitar poses daily. But to the students, they felt that carrying their own guitars on their backs was showing off their own personality and style!

As nostalgic styles returned this year, the pretentious style of carrying a guitar became a sort of "politically correct" fad in schools.

Chapter 159

Fiery Bird Annual Gala Invite

The more digital the product, the quicker it evolved, as did its look. Thus, folks sometimes preferred to collect antiques instead.

The guitar renaissance generated by Natiwuzi and his company had been very successful. Just look at the different ways young students were carrying or hugging their guitars on school campuses.

Natiwuzi even nudged journalists toward news stories of the more sensational variety, such as a male student confessing his love for a female schoolmate by playing a ballad outside her dorm. Storylines like that happened in the movie "A Guitar Romance." The students were simply imitating the actors in the film.

Fashion and trends were determined by proactive leaders. Natiwuzi had prepared thoroughly for this day.

Amid the wave of promotional activities, not only did Natiwuzi's NaZ brand become a hit, so did Ji Polun, the male lead of "A Guitar Romance."

This point came up during conversations between Zu Wen and company—when Ji Polun made promotional appearances with the press team, he focused on college and secondary school campuses. He carried a guitar every single time but struck different poses, and students scrambled to mimic him. He had generated the buzz befitting a hot young actor.

At the same time, more and more folks tuned into Fang Zhao's webcasts. Every day, Fang Zhao spent an hour lecturing and another hour answering questions online. He also posted altered guitar scores online, mostly simpler pieces suited for beginners.

Many musical pieces had been preserved from the Old Era, but most were ill-suited for New Era tastes. Slight alterations would make them more palatable. The same song would require different scores for the electronic guitar and acoustic guitar. The technique was different too. Fang Zhao would break it down for his viewers. For example, for a piece he altered for the lecture the day before yesterday, the acoustic

version required sliding, while the electric guitar version saw more plucking.

Today, as in previous sessions, after answering viewer questions, Fang Zhao played a song with a new guitar model provided by Natiwuzi.

The student response had been overwhelming, so Natiwuzi's brand had launched a new series called "Rising Sun," targeted at student buyers.

Today, Fang Zhao played with an acoustic guitar from the Rising Sun series. He strummed the strings gently in a seemingly casual manner as a soft but grounded melody drifted from the high-quality wood craftsmanship alongside the live footage.

The song he played today was an updated Old Era piece requested by a viewer. All things retro were the fad of late, with many folks digging out songs preserved from the Old Era.

The song he had played yesterday was an updated happy birthday song dedicated to a viewer who had been celebrating his birthday. The viewer had been so moved that he had awarded Fang Zhao 10,000 dollars online.

Fang Zhao wrapped up his show every day by playing one of the songs requested by his viewers.

"Oh, I wasn't picked again. Is it because there are too many people online and too many requests?"

"Today's show is over?"

"Watching today's live broadcast made me realize that my pretentious guitar pose yesterday was wrong."

"The guitar is so difficult to master. I've made no progress in three days. My fingers are numb from practicing all afternoon yesterday, but now I think these Old Era instruments sound quite nice."

"Hire a private instructor and learn one-on-one."

"Fang Zhao is too good. He's even more skilled than the instructor my mother hired for me."

"I heard that the instructor my father hired for me is also following Fang Zhao's webcasts. He's a younger graduate of Fang Zhao's alma mater."

"The more I look at Fang Zhao, the more handsome he seems, especially when he plays the guitar. He projects a completely different aura. Who knows when Fang Zhao is lecturing at Qi'an Academy of Music next? I'm going to get his autograph."

"Count me in if folks are organizing a trip to Qi'an Academy of Music!"

"I feel like Fang Zhao is a very gentle person."

The Silver Wing gaming team that had just gotten offline from battle: "Hehe." Gentle, my ass!

Indeed, Fang Zhao looked gentler on average these days. He also lacked the fiery temper of his contemporaries. Even Silver Wing staffers had observed that Fang Zhao was much more even-tempered than when he had first joined the company. His temper had improved, and he was no longer wearing an ultra-aloof look all the time.

Every time they heard comments like that, members of the Silver Wing team felt misunderstood. Only they saw the other side of Fang Zhao.

"The deadline is coming up, no?" Dorrian asked Jinro. "Still no news?"

"Three more days." Jinro clicked the rankings page on the Fiery Bird official website and browsed the top 10 teams in each continent. Teams hovering near the top 10 were still locked in a fierce battle.

"We're ranked No. 7 now. If we make a push, we can definitely clinch the No. 6 spot. If boss is willing to play again, we could even make the top five," Milo said.

But they all knew that Fang Zhao didn't spend much time online these days, and even if he went online, he operated separately. It was clear that he was gradually phasing out of the team. The entertainment media was speculating every day about possible internal strife, practically begging for some development that would allow them to put out a 3-million-word feature on the team's internal bickering. Many folks were also hoping AliveAfter500Years would lose his No. 1 ranking, but he clung onto the position, and quite firmly at that.

"Didn't Wayne say he would release our promotional video once we got the invite from Fiery Bird?" Schwarzer was looking forward to seeing the video immensely. Even though he had not seen the final product, he had seen some of the footage Wang Tie had shot, and he had enjoyed it. The final cut was definitely going to be very slick.

"The deadline is the fifth. We should be receiving an invite on the sixth. The sixth is the earliest we'll see it," Jinro said.

Jinro never would have guessed when he had signed with Silver Wing that he would make it to Fiery Bird's annual gala. He had been retired from gaming for several years now. He wondered if folks from other continents still remembered him.

The team's promotional video was ready. For the score, Wayne used the piece Fang Zhao had submitted. Wayne never would have guessed that Fang Zhao could produce a piece that met his expectations.

Wang Tie was no longer tracking them online. He had gone back to plying his old trade, but he refused any assignments that involved investigating AliveAfter500Years. Are you kidding me? He had just escaped the fire pit and Fang Zhao had promised him no trouble. If he waded back into the waters now—did he have a death wish?

After news of Wang Tie turning down assignments broke, more and more folks became curious about AliveAfter500Years. What kind of person could force the undisputed king of Yanzhou paparazzi to turn down jobs? Was he a relative of the governor? Or was he a member of one of Yanzhou's major aristocratic families?

The closer the date got to the Jan. 5 deadline, the more the local media focused on gaming. Even if Yanzhou's Big Three entertainment companies were releasing a blockbuster film, it would be hard to compete with Fiery Bird's annual gala.

Fiery Bird's annual gala was an event gamers from around the world paid close attention to. Teams from Yanzhou that were invited were representing the continent, so naturally, they valued the invitation tremendously, especially given that Yanzhou was home to the world's top player of "Battle of the Century," even though his real identity was still unknown. Folks from other continents were glued to the event, let alone gamers in Yanzhou.

Jan. 5 finally arrived, the cutoff date for Fiery Bird's final rankings.

The Silver Wing team qualified for the gala with a sixth place finish in Yanzhou.

But what pissed off the Silver Wing team members was that the team they had surpassed, Zebra Club, had also managed to squeeze into the top 10. They finished 10th by making their move the day before the deadline, crowding out White Rhino Club, the team originally ranked 10th.

Word was that Zebra Club had played dirty. White Rhino fans and Zebra fans had been tearing into each other online nonstop the past two days.

White Rhino fans derided Zebra fans as despicable, underhanded, and having no shame.

Zebra fans retorted, "Shut up or put up. Playing dirty requires ability too. If you were capable, you could respond in kind."

The two clubs were both named after animals that had gone extinct. This was a popular naming method in the New Era. Fiery Bird, for example, was named the same way. Extinct animals, plants, and so on often offered ideas for company, street, and shop names.

Historical data indicated that rhinos were stronger than zebras, but this time, many folks joked that the rhino got its butt kicked by the zebra. News outlets that had nothing better to do even published comics of rhinos and zebras in battle.

Fang Zhao was scheduled to lecture at the Qi'an Academy of Music on the fifth. Attendance for his lectures had grown on account of the retro fad of late. Fang Zhao's webcast had also helped boost his profile. If the Qi'an Academy of Music hadn't implemented crowd-control measures, Fang Zhao would have been mobbed by even more fans.

Now that Qi'an Academy students and graduates were in such high demand, many current students took part-time gigs. Instrumental majors would moonlight at restaurants that needed live performers or post ads on private tutor platforms, offering their services. In the past, their ads would have gone unanswered for as long as a week. There were too few people interested in learning musical instruments, after all. Secondary students simply didn't have the patience. Now, though, things were different. Qi'an Academy students typically saw their ads answered within an hour.

With the advent of the internet, the "distance" in distance learning was no longer an issue, so the students ads were closely monitored not just by Qi'an residents but also

by parents from other parts of Yanzhou. The hourly rate for Qi'an students serving as private tutors tripled within a month. With the retro trend still on the rise, there was still room for more salary growth. Non-instrumental majors got mighty jealous and started contemplating switching majors.

However, folks who could afford to splurge on a private tutor wanted to hire Fang Zhao, but Fang Zhao was probably unavailable and beyond their payscale. Fang Zhao didn't have time to tutor, not to mention that even if he were willing to tutor, he was just one person. There were too many people who wanted to hire him and not enough of him to go around. Thus, the vacuum was filled by current Qi'an Academy students or Qi'an Academy graduates who wanted to tutor.

But the part-time tutors might not actually know how to teach, so they had to cram as well. Not only did they tune into Fang Zhao's webcasts, they also flocked to his lectures so they could pick his brains in person.

And Fang Zhao didn't hold back either, generously sharing his techniques and insight. When old man Xue Jing found out, he was very pleased. He even wanted to launch a new global lecture tour with Fang Zhao in the new year, but unfortunately, Fang Zhao had to serve in the military.

After the end of today's lecture, Fang Zhao got a call from Hua Li, the head of Fiery Bird's sound effects department.

"Did you see the final ranking? Your new team did pretty well, climbing to sixth place in Yanzhou in their debut," Hua Li said in a jovial tone. "The invitations to the annual gala have been dispatched from headquarters. Folks from our Yanzhou branch will deliver yours to your office. You'll be attending the annual gala, no?"

"Of course."

"Then let's catch up properly then. Kid, you're... full of surprises."

Hua Li had long known the true identity of *AliveAfter500Years*. Quite a few core members of Fiery Bird's senior management did, but the company had done a tremendous job with its confidentiality measures. It was impossible for outsiders to pry any insider information from their end.

"The banquet is on the eighth and there are other activities scheduled for the ninth and 10th. It's best to arrive a day ahead of time. You should start making preparations.

When you arrive, let's grab a drink. I'll introduce you to a few friends. They're all composers, and they've been longing to meet this rising star for some time. I just don't know how they will react when they find out about your other identity, haha!"

Wayne had already briefed Fang Zhao on the schedule. The Silver Wing team was scheduled to leave for their hotel in Huangzhou on the seventh, ahead of the the banquet on the eighth. They had a busy schedule.

Fang Zhao had to put his webcast and lectures on hold for the next few days.

Jan. 6, 9 a.m. Staffers from the Yanzhou branch of Fiery Bird hand-delivered an invitation bearing the company logo to the 50th floor of Silver Wing Tower.

Chapter 160

"Kings of the Battlefield"

January 6 was the day where every big e-sports club could make their presence felt the most.

Even if any of Yanzhou's famous entertainment companies had New Year's films or promotional activities, they would avoid this day. In the past, Silver Wing had only been able to cast coveting glances at these e-sports clubs, unable to do anything about it. But this year, Silver Wing's gaming department was soaking up all the excitement.

After Silver Wing's gaming department was reformed, Wayne had realized his ambitions. The publicity channels had all been arranged, and the promotional events were on standby, not yet started just in case something unforeseen really happened. After all, this was the first time they had encountered such a situation. Even if they were in the top 10 of the team leaderboards, there were still what ifs. What If Fiery Bird decided on only the top 5? Then wouldn't they have celebrated for nothing?

Until the invitation letter with the bright-red Fiery Bird insignia was in his hands, Wayne was in an apprehensive mood. This was the first time he had been so excited in his few decades in the Silver Wing gaming department.

His fingers were still shaking when he reached out and pressed a button to release the news that had been prepared beforehand.

"Let's begin!"

The SilverLight team would have a huge role in today's hot entertainment topics!

The Big Five getting invited was not even considered news. In the eyes of the masses, it would only be considered news if they had not received an invite. On the other hand, the SilverWing50PolarLight team, better known as SilverLight, that had only been established this year and had rushed into the top 10 was the focus of attention for a lot of people.

Other teams that had squeezed into the top 10 had done quite a lot of publicity, and

the masses felt that it was no longer fresh. However, SilverLight was different. Today was the release of their first ever publicity film for the team.

Everyone knew that a publicity film was a chance to do a short self-introduction to the masses and to give the masses a profound impression of the team. However, until now, the Silver Light team had released too little information. The impression the masses had was still limited to the news conference where Silver Wing had revealed the members of the team as well as the leaderboard details.

At 12 p.m., on Silver Wing's broadcasting platform, official website, video streaming sites, and over 10 large screens in city districts, a short, three-minute publicity film played both online and offline.

In the New Era, this sort of publicity film could not be too long, as audiences did not have the patience to watch it, yet it could not be too short either, as time was needed to express the things they wanted to express. Therefore, two to three minutes was the norm.

When Silver Wing's wing emblem and the SilverLight team's tree insignia appeared simultaneously, many hurriedly rushing people stopped what they were doing and looked at the large screens in the plazas.

A familiar electronic music tune played—the brief default music that played when logging onto "Battle of the Century." Familiar images showing the grave conditions of the Period of Destruction continuously appeared.

Mournful cries, loud gunfire, and the sound of a large building collapsing accompanied the buzzing that sounded like an electric current, which continued rising, building the atmosphere up.

Explosions in line with the sound effects filled the screen, drummed up by the increasingly frantic electronic music as the succinct rhythm repeated itself, carrying about a thick Period of Destruction flavor. Then the effects faded, and an expansive horizon appeared.

The video showed a certain office building. The people inside were watching the screen in front of them displaying scenes from "Battle of the Century" with eager anticipation, as if the little seeds in their hearts had sprouted.

A slightly plump middle-aged man who was watching turned around and walked out,

his footsteps coinciding with the drumbeats, and the music's tempo and his movements were one!

Following the person's movements, the scene continued to zoomed out. As he was walking out, words "Gaming Department" appeared suspended on the wall behind him.

The audiences understood what it meant. Oh, so this is the fabled Silver Wing gaming department.

The music heard by the audiences was a not-so-gentle, formulated electronic tone that carried with it a mystical feeling, modulating with extremely detailed changes. The rich tones alternated with a high pitch, bringing about a lively intensity that built upon layers of electronic sound effects, creating a terse and magnificent melody.

As the pulsating music connected, some rapidly edited cutscenes from different angles were shown.

When the plump middle-aged man arrived in front of the elevator, at that moment, an elevator had descended from the upper floors. The doors opened, and there was a young man inside. The two men nodded at each other, the expressions on their faces slightly serious.

People who paid attention to the SilverLight team found them familiar. Weren't they Silver Wing gaming department manager Wayne and the young manager Fang Zhao of the virtual projects department?

On the screen, inside the elevator, the displayed number changed from 51 to 50. The elevator doors opened and Silver Wing's 50th floor's virtual projects department appeared in front of their eyes.

The two men stepped inside the department, and the camera closed up as the sliding doors closed behind them, showing a simple tree-shaped image, the team's emblem.

The imaged faded to black and a line of words appeared—

"Something that we are slowly unable to control..."

During the intermission, after a momentary pause, the music resumed, this time without so much of a rousing melody. It was different from Fang Zhao's previous

works. Beneath the electronic sound effects, the melody seemed grave, sketchy but not losing any of its density. The tempo was both thrilling and powerful.

After the caption faded, in the dark background, someone opened a door.

Sunlight poured in from through the doorway. Against the dark backdrop, the doorway was extremely bright in contrast. The scene seemed both cold and warm, the darkness and light combining to form a divine image.

And the man who had opened the door stood in the only bright spot in the dark background, his back facing the screen. However, the guy standing there gave viewers an uneasy feeling, like a sharp, rigid, and silent knife.

The scene faded once again.

"Been waiting for so long..."

After the caption, in the video, a person in the midst of strength training raised his head and looked straight at the camera with a purposeful gaze, beads of sweat dripping off his face.

Veteran gamers watching this scene could recognize him right away.

The former 2S team captain Jinro, who had disappeared from the scene for eight years.

Eight years was long enough.

Behind Jinro, Dorrian was undergoing stamina training.

Jasmine was doing reaction training.

Milo was doing balancing training.

August, Yu Zhongqing, Jake, Schwarzer, Qi Zi, Ferrerya, Nibali, Mamun, Oz...

Every team member appeared in succession, either running, jumping, working out, or training with others. The video focused on their flexed and protruding muscles and the sweat glistening on their skin.

The music's tempo gradually increased in intensity, drumbeats similar to the

heartbeats of viewers as they gradually beat faster. Those watching were unclear whether it was the background music or the video itself that was affecting them this way.

Another transition.

"We have long been itching to get on with it."

As the words appeared, new electronic tones entered the fray, the rhythm gradually strengthened, and the atmosphere became more and more ferocious.

In the video, analysts clad in work clothes were watching a screen full of data and discussing something. People wearing white robes with a simple Polar Light icon on their sleeves and chests were giving the team members checkups. Beside the team members, there was also another group of people, moving about hurriedly but orderly and serving the team members drinks and handing over towels.

Engineers in charge of maintaining the game consoles were scrutinizing complex holographic illustrations.

This was the first time that SilverLight team's assistants, medical team, and behind-the-scenes personnel had been shown in public!

As the music gradually built up the atmosphere, the engineers did an "OK" hand sign, the head of the medical team nodded his head, and assistants helped the members put on their "combat attire." Once equipped, the team members walked briskly toward another room.

Doors bearing the tree-shaped emblem opened, revealing ninth-generation Fiery Bird consoles arced in a semicircle that filled up the entire screen.

Under the lights, the exterior of these machines reflected with a terrifying luster. The Fiery Bird insignias on the machines seemed as if they were about to burst into flames!

Team members entered the cabin-style game consoles one by one and closed the doors. As the camera panned backward, a white-colored humanoid robot was already standing in the front.

10th-generation console!

A lot of eyes widened as they saw this scene. Silver Wing still had a second 10th generation console? Or had they brought out the same one for somebody to use?

However, at this moment, viewers could not be bothered to do any deep thinking.

The pounding of drums continued to push on, as if foreboding a pandemonium that could not be controlled.

The person wearing the 10th generation console raised a hand then put it down, as though giving a signal.

Almost at the same time, all the "in operation" lights of the 9th-generation cabin consoles flickered on.

In the video, everything seemed to turn into neurons, transcending space and matter. The whole world seemed to turn into data and computer code as the virtual world spun rapidly.

Gradually, it got darker. The fast-paced music abruptly stopped at that moment.

Silence carried an irrational tension, and even the air seemed to stiffen.

Crash!

The sound of a glass object smashing and shattering jolted people's hearts!

The explosiveness breaking the silence with such force seemed to assault the ears and mental states of viewers!

Everything thoroughly exploded to life.

A group of people entered into a building through the broken window, toting firearms. Their actions were well-coordinated, as though they were a team of elite paratroopers.

Close-ups of the firearms flashed by and the camera switched from the wielders point of view until it was face to face with the sinister visage of a mutated beast.

Bang!

Straight between the eyebrows.

Bang, bang, bang!

Blood-splattered bullet holes in the wall, shattered glass, corpses on the ground, a chandelier swaying and on the verge of crashing down, a messed-up corridor...

Music and special sound effects perfectly assimilated and extremely incisive, as though they had deeply penetrated the listener's nerves.

"There is nothing that can stop us."

The scenes rapidly changed, from indoors to outdoors, from the cities to outskirts.

Flashes as bullets sprayed, blood dripping, flying limbs...

Sounds of a sharp knife tearing through flesh, the thuds of a blunt weapon hitting flesh, beastly howls and wails of anguish, the sound of bodies hitting the ground...

The camera fully displayed the violence of these bloody close-combat life and death struggles. The overwhelming and shocking scenes told the audiences everything that happened.

Blood, violence.

A combination of those two tended to make people shudder. However, behind the images were music and sound effects with a strong and unyielding tempo. From the start, it had been the video's keynote and had set the atmosphere.

These were the circumstances of the Period of Destruction. This was mankind's fight for survival!

Violence and blood, but behind it all was overflowing hope!

Quick cutscenes accelerated the violent images. The audiences were unable to fully comprehend all the scenes that flashed through, but they could feel each and every cutscene provoking their senses.

The music and acoustics perfectly complemented each cutscene and increased the acceptance levels of the scenes reeking of blood, completely permeating and battering the audiovisual senses and relaying the message of the video.

Extraordinary camera work coupled with the intricately weaved music made these violent and bloody scenes much more aesthetically exquisite and terrifying! They gave audiences the impression that they were not that grim but brought about a bizarre infectiousness.

These were typical entertainment manufacturing techniques and were more suited to mainstream tastes.

Changing to a final cutscene, a speeding truck charged straight at an enormous mutated beast. Under the overcast sky, incendiary rounds like rays of light flew straight at the oil tanks of the truck.

An ear-splitting boom resounded as the blaze of an explosion filled the sky and the music reached its climax.

"We are the kings of the battlefield!"

The concluding scene showed all the main members of the SilverLight team in-game, gathered together, clad in their combat attire and walking towards the camera. Some wore helmets, while others didn't.

With the static image of the final scene, the music also ceased.

At the bottom right of the screen, the Silver Wing insignia and the SilverLight tree emblem appeared once again.

Of the three-minute film, the first minute and a half was an introduction of the team as well as the support staff, and the latter minute and a half was all edits of in-game footage.

The accompaniment music had been composed by Fang Zhao. During the arrangement, he had used the same style that built up the majestic atmosphere. This was the skill he was most proficient at. Even when trying out new elements, he did not give it up one bit. In order to better compliment the scenes and their sound effects, compared to his previous works, Fang Zhao had lowered the rhythm but maintain the strong tempo. This was his first try at this new method, in line with what Wayne had told him before of more direct explosiveness, yet he had still kept some fine traces of the academic essence.

For people not used to electronic tones and sound effects, they might find it raucous,

but people in the New Era had long gotten used to this sort of lively static and knew how to appreciate the aesthetics of this era's electronic styles.

And in the latter minute and a half of the video, the sounds of gunfire, impacts, explosions, and the footage of bullets flying and blood splattering were all real footage. They hadn't used any special effects to touch it up. It was extremely life-like and infectious, and combined together with the sound, the impact with which it battered the senses of audiences was powerful.

The video did not hard sell the cruelty or the mood and did not overly emphasize the e-sports athletes' considerable efforts behind the scenes. Too much and it would have seemed pretentious.

This video was not like the encouraging styles that other e-sports clubs liked to use. Rather, it portrayed a group of bold and valiant individuals with extraordinary skills, "superhuman" heroes.

This, was also the fastest manner for Silver Wing to break into this market!

And the results of showing this to the public was in line with what Silver Wing had anticipated.

On the internet:

"Oh my! Do these Silverlight people want the sky? Are these even e-sports athletes? More like saviors of the world."

"Sick!"

"I thought I was watching a blockbuster!"

"Suddenly feel that gaming at Silver Wing is awesome!"

At the Qi'an City center plaza.

A middle-aged man in a suit carrying a briefcase retracted his gaze from the screen. Looking around, he asked the nearest youngster close to him, "Sorry to bother you, but I would like to ask something. That movie trailer that just played, do you know which Silver Wing New Year's blockbuster it is? When is it going to be released?"

The youngster was stunned for a moment. "Ah?" When he finally understood what the middle-aged man was talking about, he laughed. "That was no movie trailer. It was the publicity film for a gaming team."

Disbelief was written all over the middle-aged man's face. "You mean that all those people just now are actually e-sports athletes... playing a game?"

"Uh, yeah, that's right. Did you see the tree emblem? That's the emblem of the gaming team formed by the collaboration of Silver Wing's virtual project and gaming departments."

"...A game's publicity film can even be more amazing than a blockbuster trailer," gasped the middle-aged man. He did not play games, but he loved watching movies. However, after watching that publicity film, he now had some interest in that team.

There were many people who felt the same way as that middle-aged man. The SilverLight team's first publicity film had not only attracted the views of gaming fans, it had attracted the attention of a lot of people outside the gaming circles.

Chapter 161

Arriving at Imperial City

Wayne had two goals for this publicity film. The first was to publicize the SilverWing50PolarLight team, and the second was to be an advertisement that let even more people know that Silver Wing were not in it just for a quick buck but had built a genuine and professional e-sports team.

The purpose was to attract even more talent!

To make this project bigger and to ensure a sustained development, recruiting fresh talent was a must. Especially so as to prevent the team's decline after Fang Zhao enlisted in the military, they definitely needed more talent and strength to replenish it.

It just so happened that this was a chance to increase their popularity as well.

Wayne just wanted to tell all the e-sports athletes that desired to jump ship or hadn't found a new employer to come over to his side. There was no need to worry about what to have for all three meals of the day, no need to worry about one's physical state, no need to bother about any material troubles, because there would be a professional team to worry on your behalf!

All you needed to do when you came over was game to your heart's content!

The SilverLight team might have been newly established, but its ability to meet various criteria was sufficient to sway some.

First, they had the strength. There was no need to mention AliveAfter500Years; their young team had successfully achieved Fiery Bird's annual conference invites. The team had capability and potential!

Second, they had money! With the entertainment juggernaut Silver Wing behind them, they did not lack capital. Whether it was equipment or logistics, the team would definitely not lose out to any of those well-known professional e-sports clubs!

Also, after the release of this publicity film, Silver Wing's publicity department would also be giving it a push behind the scenes.

And just as Wayne had hoped to see, with the release of the team's first publicity film, the attention of the masses was placed on them.

On the internet, gamers of all sorts, whether professional or amateur, discussed the trending topic.

"The blinding ninth- and 10th-generation machines are enough to rival the Big Five."

"Dig up the monthly salaries of the SilverLight team members!"

"I want to join the SilverLight team. Is it too late?"

"Does Silver Wing want to be Yanzhou's No. 6?"

"I really want to know, among all the people shown, which one is AliveAfter500Years!"

"He is surely the one using the 10th gen, but his face wasn't shown. The silhouette shown before Jinro appeared might have been him, but the appearance wasn't clear. I have no idea whether that was in-game footage or real life footage."

"Silver Wing has two 10th-generation consoles? I only know that Jinro's superior Fang Zhao owns one."

"Maybe AliveAfter500Years is Fang Zhao? After all, Fang Zhao also has the 10th gen. A short while back, he got into a fight. I heard he beat down quite a few people. With that impressive fighting strength, maybe it really is him."

When that online user had just posted, someone below replied, "HAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"I'm breathless from all that laughing. Given Fang Zhao's appearance?"

"One look and you can tell it's obviously not him!"

"As a born and bred District 79er, when I followed the SilverLight team and fled, I specifically observed them. Their personalities are different, so we can eliminate Fang Zhao from the reckoning."

"Without any video evidence of him beating up a bunch of people at a nightclub, that can only be considered hearsay! How can you believe all the rubbish spouted by rumor mongers? Besides, even if it were real, how could fighting and gaming be the same? In any case, I don't have a favorable impression of Fang Zhao. I heard he oppresses Jinro and gang. How sinister!"

"To the brother on top, you said that rumors cannot be taken seriously, yet no SilverLight member has ever said that Fang Zhao oppresses them. It is just a bunch of people blindly spreading a rumor, and given Fang Zhao style, he doesn't seem like the sinister or crafty sort."

"You might know a person but not his true nature!"

"Wind from an empty cave might not necessarily be baseless. Besides being a composer, there is nothing much else that we know about that person."

"Fang Zhao is just a composer. Silver Wing must have taken into account how he brought up the virtual projects department and let him be the leader of the SilverLight team. Actually, he is just an amateur. We have never heard that he plays games."

"He has a behind-the-scenes supporter, and it's nothing uncommon."

"An adept amateur leader, is it a grievance within the industry or shameless capitalism?"

"That means to say, Fang Zhao probably lent out his 10th-generation console for someone else to use. Fiery Bird set up only eight 10th-generation consoles in Yanzhou. It is impossible for Silver Wing to have two. This comes back to the question: who exactly is AliveAfter500Years?"

"Didn't anyone else notice somebody else who kept his face hidden in the film?"

...

Jinro and the others all saw the discussions online.

As the youngest member of the team, Schwarzer's experience was limited, and he sat there giggling when the first comments appeared online. When he had been watching the publicity film, he had felt like an actor watching his first ever film for the first time—a little shy yet also proud—but as the discussions went on and more people

guessed at the identity of AliveAfter500Years, he could not even bring himself to smile.

Just guessing would do; why had people started bashing Fang Zhao?

Schwarzer carefully peeked at Fang Zhao, and only upon not noticing any rage did he rest easy. If he was the one being doubted and faced with baseless claims, he would definitely be unhappy.

Dorrian, who was sending a text message on his bracelet, noticed and laughed before advising Schwarzer, "Don't pay too much attention to online discussions. When you encounter this more often in the future, you will get used to it."

"I was just thinking, what sort of reaction will they have when they finally know the truth?"

Besides the discussions on characters appearing in the publicity film and people making guesses on AliveAfter500Years's identity, there were many gamers focusing on the short scenes that had been shown in the publicity film, and they were engaged in a thorough analysis.

"After sorting out the publicity film and taking notes of the gun models that appeared, SilverLight has pretty good equipment, but nobody knows if they got it themselves or purchased it from other studios."

"After watching the ending scene with the exploding truck, I even went to try it out, hoping to record a scene of myself walking away from the truck as it exploded behind me. In the end, after shooting holes through the entire truck, it still did not explode. Has anyone succeeded? Please share your experiences."

Very quickly, skilled gamers started to study the film and aim for the oil tanks, trying to create the anticipated explosion effect.

There were others who tried the scene where the team members smashed through glass windows, but they only got themselves hurt instead.

Many people suffered painful consequences trying to imitate drifting with motorbikes or shooting while driving.

Players finally understood those cool scenes and movements could not be replicated by just anyone, and as they now understood the difficulty involved, more and more

players started to pay attention to the SilverLight team.

Various factors and influences created a very strange scene. This year's 6th place, the SilverLight team, had a higher viewership than the other nine teams altogether!

On globally renowned gaming magazine Rising Dragon's page, the SilverLight team kept staying within the top three most viewed topics and had surpassed many well-known e-sports clubs. This had also been a part of Wayne's plan. Concealing Fang Zhao's identity had been to whet the audience's appetites. This would help them gain more viewership, and with viewership came popularity.

January 6, the entire SilverLight team, including the support staff, were given a day off to return home and pack their things.

January 7, a flying transport carrying over 100 personnel and bearing the Silver Wing emblem left Qi'an City.

Zu Wen and the others from the Polar Light team had also been permitted to follow the team. Not just them, other staff from the gaming department's side had been given spots on this trip as well.

Fiery Bird's invitation was for over 100 persons, so besides the medical team, assistants, agents, and other internal staff, there were staff from other departments in the entourage as well. Some were in charge of publicity and some were in charge of diplomatic exchanges, and there was a security team as well.

On the flying transport, Wayne was explaining to Fang Zhao.

Due to the promotion of the first publicity film, the masses had gotten to listen to the accompaniment music. This time, the electronic style was especially suited to mainstream tastes, and a few enterprises fancied it after listening and had contacted Silver Wing's side to purchase the rights.

The price offered was reasonable, and they were willing to postpone using it for a month. After all, a publicity film's effect had time limitations. In an age where online information was flourishing, the enthusiasm for the publicity film would decline after a week. After a month, there might not be any people talking about it anymore. Using the accompaniment music for other things after the publicity film died down was perfectly reasonable.

However, at Silver Wing, there were varying opinions, especially Wayne, who had vehemently objected when he found out about it.

"I was having a chat in the morning with the copyright department staffers. They wanted to sell, but I didn't let them. If they are unresigned, they will probably contact you and advise you to agree. Fang Zhao, I'm not cutting off your source of income, but I just have to tell you why it is not optimal for us."

Inside the cabin, people closest to Wayne and Fang Zhao were the main team members. They also knew that Fang Zhao's works could be sold for money, and when they heard Wayne mention that some parties wanted to buy the copyrights to the publicity film's accompaniment music, in their hearts they were thinking that Fang Zhao could earn another considerable sum this time. However, when they heard Wayne advising Fang Zhao not to sell, they pricked their ears up in curiosity.

Wayne was not deliberately avoiding anybody, and he continued explaining. "If this were the government or other game or film companies that wanted to purchase the rights, I would have no qualms. For example, the Yanzhou military using the third movement of your "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had a good result and everyone benefited. There was no need to prevent that sale, but this time, it's the boss of a supermarket chain that wants to buy the rights. From my experience and understanding, given the character of those kinds, they will choose to use it at the peak of their promotional campaigns. Human flow is also high there, and if everyone gets used to it and becomes conditioned, every time they hear the tune, they will no longer think about SilverLight's might but, rather, discounts. Slashing prices! Clearance sales! Bargains! Are you guys willing for that to happen?"

The audience: "... Of course not!

Staffers at the copyright department might not think too much about it. Besides, after a month, the publicity film's impact would die down, so why not sell it for some money? But Wayne felt that this would make the team a laughingstock.

Now that his ambitions were racing toward becoming reality, he would never do something that would put the brakes on it, and he would not agree no matter how much the other party offered, hence the advice he was giving Fang Zhao.

As a composer contracted to the company, the copyrights did not solely belong to Fang Zhao, but for the company to sell it, they needed Fang Zhao's approval. Since Wayne

had been unable to convince the copyright department staffers, he had decided to directly convince Fang Zhao.

"It's not just this time, Fang Zhao. Although I am just a manager of the gaming department, I have seen many things and experienced a lot. Every year, many good songs get misused by buyers. In the future, if you encounter this sort of situation, be sure to be prudent. Once a mistake is made, the impression it gives audiences can be ruined in the wrong hands," Wayne asserted.

Fang Zhao listened attentively to Wayne's advice and nodded his head. "I understand."

Even if Wayne had not said anything, Fang Zhao would not have allowed his works to be sold indiscriminately. Back then, when he had allowed the rights of the third movement of his "100-Year Period of Destruction" series to be sold to a Leizhou film company, he had given recommendations for which portion of the film to use it for and made certain requests.

Having gotten a reply from Fang Zhao, Wayne could rest easy.

Jinro and the others let out a sigh of relief within their hearts. They were not going to be associated with bargain sales and promotions.

"Oh, right, I forgot to ask you." Wayne remembered something and asked Fang Zhao, "Have you gotten your driver's license?"

"Yes."

"For both flying cars and flying transports?"

"Mmhm."

"That's good. As a celebrity, it's good to have your own license. After all, your bodyguard will not be beside you at all times. If you get surrounded by fans and want to escape, you can find the closest shared flying car to slip away. Huangzhou's entertainment industry is even more intense than Yanzhou, and there will be more people watching your every move. Therefore, after your identity is revealed, you should either head out less or be more careful when you do.

...

When they arrived at Huangzhou's Imperial City, it was already noon.

Given the speed of New Era flying transports, flying from Qi'an City to Imperial City didn't take too long, but once in Huangzhou, there were more inspections, especially within Imperial City, where the checks were even more stringent. Continuously stopping and moving delayed their arrival time till noon.

Huangzhou's Imperial City was the continent's political, financial, and cultural hub. It was also where the alliance's government headquarters were located.

Fiery Bird's headquarters were set up in the northern part of Imperial City. The allocated hotel was located in the vicinity of Fiery Bird's headquarters tower and belonged to Fiery Bird.

The flying transport descended in the allocated parking lot. After landing, they were required to walk to the hotel, just about 100 meters away, which was a short distance.

However, once they disembarked from the transport, everyone could feel the difference in atmosphere.

From the parking space to the hotel, the 100-meter road was full of media personnel armed with film equipment.

Since they had seen the flying transport bearing Silver Wing's emblem approaching, media from all the different continents got excited.

Unlike the reporters in the game's virtual world that tried to stop or interrupt them, here it was only the attentive gazes and bright flashes of lights. The irritating and loathsome attention from the media in-game was also completely different here.

On the ground, there were many broadcasting vehicles adorned with their respective channel's logo. The sky was full of small drones, each staying in their allocated airspace and frantically recording the scenes.

There were no clicking sounds of Old Era cameras. These cameras gave off a unique humming sound, as though it was a buzzing electrical current.

A lone machine was not loud, but what about a few hundred?

The sky was spread with such agitated particles.

Being focused on by all these cameras that would be broadcasting to the world brought about a formless pressurizing environment.

Even if they had been informed of what to expect on the way here.

Even if they had seen images of past conferences.

When actually standing here, there were a number of people who were so nervous they did not even know where to place their hands.

Jinro and Dorrian had experienced this before and could still remain somewhat collected, and Fang Zhao was completely unable to get nervous, but the rest of the members of the team were different.

Even Schwarzer, who had still been laughing and joking in the transport, was at a loss now. He could only flich even though, deep down, he was excited beyond measure. If he had a tail, it would already be wagging nonstop. This was the first time he was really aware that he had become a celebrity, even if just a small and not that outstanding one amidst the group.

Everyone's reactions were captured by the filming equipment and transmitted to every continent.

And among the SilverLight team, the majority of members seemed to be grimacing. Online users at Yanzhou watching the broadcast could not help but harbor suspicions that perhaps these people had just been scolded by their superiors.

Chapter 162

You Are AliveAfter500Years?

Only after stepping into the hotel did Schwarzer and the others relax their facial muscles. They immediately massaged their now-tight muscles and thought about whether their expressions just now had been all right. Those were media personnel from all the different continents!

There were already people waiting for them in the hall. Upon seeing the tree emblem of the SilverLight team, they recognized the team straightaway. After an identification check, the leader of the group got to select the floor to occupy.

Wayne suddenly went forward and pressed a button.

"Sixty-second floor."

Each team had 100+ personnel, and every team had been allocated a floor. Every floor was equipped with game consoles, sound and projection equipment, and a small conference room.

Fortunately, there were also many elevators for so many large groups. However, in the elevator, every time someone spotted clothes adorned with the tree emblem, regardless of which floor these people were from, they would examine the wearer as if he or she were some rare creature. The questions they asked were mainly two. The first was "Are you people from the SilverWing50PolarLight team?" and the second question was "Has AliveAfter500Years arrived yet? Which one is he?"

Regarding these curious looks and enquiries, the members of the SilverLight group always answered "yes" and "arrived" with a knowing smile.

After arriving on the 62nd floor in batches, Wayne began to assign rooms.

After being assigned to two people per room, lunch was ordered. After eating, everyone gathered for a small meeting about re-emphasizing the rules here. All of them were participating for the first time. Not just Schwarzer and the other young members, even Wayne himself was feeling nervous.

Wayne wiped off the sweat on his forehead. "All right, that's all I have. If anybody has any doubts or inquiries, please approach Jinro or Dorrian; those two are experienced."

Following that was free time. Many other teams had already arrived at the hotel, and those who knew people could go and interact with them or head to the places of entertainment within the hotel to unwind.

As the bodyguard, Zuo Yu naturally roomed with Fang Zhao. His duty this round was very important. The moment Fang Zhao's identity was exposed, his workload would increase. He would have to prevent fans and reporters from getting too close.

Fang Zhao had just placed his luggage down when he received an incoming call from Fiery Bird's sound effects department head, Hua Li.

"I just received word that your team has arrived. Have you sorted out your things? If you are done, come over for a chat. Just head straight to the fifth floor. I have a few people to introduce you to." Fang Zhao had no idea who Hua Li was chatting with, but the man sounded like he was in good spirits.

"Sure. I'll make my way over."

"Head to the northernmost corner and use that elevator. I will give you temporary access so you don't have to squeeze in with others. There are too many people today," Hua Li told him.

After ending the call, Fang Zhao checked the messages in the internal group chat. Jinro and the others were preparing to head to the sixth floor. The sixth floor was also a leisure district, but what was different was that it was more suited for e-sports athletes.

When he saw the message, Fang Zhao instructed Zuo Yu. "Go with them. You don't have to worry about me. Let me know if there is anything; I will head straight up."

Zuo Yu also knew that Fang Zhao had been invited over by Fiery Bird headquarters staff and there was unlikely to be any trouble on their own turf. He nodded his head and replied, "Got it, Boss. I will keep you informed."

Following Hua Li's instructions, Fang Zhao found the elevator in the corner and took it straight down to the fifth floor. It was probably an elevator for internal staff use only, as Fang Zhao did not encounter anyone else on the ride down.

The fifth floor was a well-furnished restaurant that seemed refined and cultured. The walls were adorned with paintings that were replicas of antiques left behind from the Old Era. The real art pieces were kept safe in Fiery Bird's own vault and would not be displayed at this kind of place.

The people on this floor seldom discussed game techniques. They were parties who collaborated with Fiery Bird, not e-sports athletes. Some were artists, designers, or composers. For example, people who worked on the background music for "Battle of the Century."

Fang Zhao looked around and spotted Hua Li speaking with a scrawny-looking guy. His face was quite flushed, probably from drinking wine or getting too excited from chatting.

"Hey Fang Zhao, over here!" Hua Li stood up and waved Fang Zhao over. "Come, come, let me introduce you. This here is Gao Se. He is a Qi'an Academy of Music alumnus, just like you. Currently, he is an associate professor for composition at the Huangzhou Academy of Art. We accepted two of his works this round to use as in-game music. We have used many of his previous works for gaming events and are practically old comrades. Thinking back to when we first collaborated, I think old Gao was still only an assistant professor?"

"Yeah, I was only into my fourth year at Huangzhou Academy of Art then." Gao Se did not seem to take any offence about Hua Li's mention of him being an assistant professor, and his tone still seemed slightly proud.

Fang Zhao knew that, although an assistant professor was not considered a high position, over at Huangzhou, an assistant professor's salary and benefits were extremely high, and they even had doctors attending their lessons. Huangzhou was an extremely competitive place, and their assistant professors were not ordinary. Hua Li's words had no intention of belittling Gao Se. Besides, Gao Se had already risen to up to become an associate professor. In Huangzhou, rising up to an associate professorship at Gao Se's age was a rare sight. Without sufficient successes, there was no way to get promoted.

As Hua Li was about to introduce Fang Zhao to Hua Li, Gao Se chuckled. "Fang Zhao, I know who you are. Ming Cang and the others frequently talk about you. I caught a glimpse of you from afar the last time Old Xue came over to Huangzhou, but we didn't get the chance to talk. This time, we ought to have a good chat!"

Originating from the same "QiMu" posse, both of them naturally had mutual connections, so Gao Se knew quite a bit about Fang Zhao.

Gao Se studied Fang Zhao, his expression somewhat satisfied. Given the amount of achievements Fang Zhao had at his age, he was neither arrogant nor hot tempered, and he had an unflustered disposition. It was no wonder Ming Cang and Hua Li praised him to the high heavens when they mentioned him.

No matter how much talent one had, there would always be some arrogance, but in certain situations, arrogance had to be curbed.

Fang Zhao had visited Huangzhou before, during the global lecture tour with Xue Jing. Back then, Fang Zhao had only been supplementary. He had not been the main character and couldn't even have been considered to have had a supporting role. In the eyes of many people during the global lecture tour, Fang Zhao had just been Xue Jing's little attendant and had just been going through the motions, letting people familiarize with his face.

Fang Zhao might have obtained a lot of profit from his few works, received affirmation from other professionals, and become popular among students, but in the global circles, he still could not be considered famous.

Just picking any random person here that collaborated with Fiery Bird and was invited, their files would be full of achievements and awards, and even after 10 pages, the list of achievements might not necessarily have ended.

"I was just talking with Old Gao about persuading you to come to Huangzhou." Hua Li brought out a bottle of alcohol from his bag behind him. "This is from my personal collection. Try some."

One reason Hua Li had called Fang Zhao over was to introduce Fang Zhao to a few seniors within the industry that had collaborated with and been invited by Fiery Bird. These people might not be known by the masses, but within the composition circles, their names were well known. Getting to know a few would be beneficial for Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao sat down and listened to Gao Se talk about his own accomplishments, awards he had won, and high-level performances he had taken part in. He also flaunted the white metal piece hanging around his neck to Fang Zhao. It was a small

medal.

"A Galaxy medal?" Fang Zhao asked.

Fang Zhao knew about this. The Galaxy Awards were the highest accomplishments anyone in the arts scenes could hope to achieve. Regardless of whether one was a composer, actor, singer, painter, or other artistic profession, every single artist wished to achieve a Galaxy Award.

"Haha, that's right! But it's not a Galaxy World medal, just the Galaxy Supernova medal." Even though it was subaward, when Gao Se mentioned it, he seemed rather proud of himself.

Hua Li eyed the medal on Gao Se's neck enviously before helplessly retracting his gaze. The path he had chosen had destined that he would have no fate with the Galaxy Awards. In terms of earnings, Hua Li could beat 90% of the people on this floor, but in terms of artistic skill, 99% of the people here were better than him.

Hua Li was willing to help Fang Zhao because he thought highly of the young man and wanted to accumulate some good karma when Fang Zhao had not yet risen up.

The Galaxy Supernova Award was conferred to a young artist who had sufficient accomplishments in his field. In the New Era, 50 or 60 was still considered young.

"When Old Gao received the award, he was probably around 40?" Hua Li asked.

"No no no, 50, I was almost 50. Forty-nine and a half. Hehe, I still remember it very clearly. After I received the award, Huangzhou Academy of Art awarded me with the lifelong teaching award. That was when I considered myself to have made a mark in Huangzhou. Half a year later, on my birthday, I was promoted to associate professor." Gao Se's face was fully red. As he reminisced proudly with some fond nostalgia, his fingers carefully stroked the medal he was wearing.

"Old Xue also has the Supernova Award, and the Nebula Award too. I reckon Old Xue could possibly achieve the World Award as well," Gao Se said in a revering tone.

The Supernova Award was given to young artists, whereas the Nebula Award, also a subcategory of the Galaxy Awards, was a celebration of the lifetime accomplishments of an artist. Even now, Xue Jing was still so hardworking. He wanted to achieve and contribute more to receive the Galaxy World Award, an award given to artists at the

peak of the industry.

Gao Se rarely saw younger generations due to the pressures of intense competition in the industry, so seeing Fang Zhao, Gao Se was in good spirits and was in the mood to give pointers.

Although Gao Se liked to show off and gave off a hint of the arrogance of a senior, the pointers he gave Fang Zhao were valuable, and he was willing to share some of the realities he had experienced. He hoped that Fang Zhao would take the academic path and not be swayed by money and the overly commercialized market.

"Do not be blinded by small gains, and don't rush. Take it one step at a time and move steadily and surely. Also, do not be taken in by people who spout rubbish all day long. Those people have dreams beyond the heavens and are unable to keep up with their ambitions. They won't go far. In our industry, we need to simmer. In our industry, many try to find the equilibrium between art and commerce and lose themselves. Fang Zhao, you must absolutely not learn from them. If you are in doubt, you can look for Xue Jing to chat. After all, Old Xue is an old hand, and he has high hopes for you. If you are willing to ask, that old man would be more than happy to answer. If Xue Jing isn't around, you can look for Ming Cang. That fellow is in really high spirits now. I heard his son's treatment is going well..."

Probably from the drinks and his high spirits, Gao Se talked a lot, but it could all be summarized in one sentence: Young man, I think highly of you, so work hard, and when you have accumulated enough experience, us uncles will bring you out to pretend and help you fly!

Beside them, Hua Li did not interrupt. From the start, he had planned to pull Fang Zhao into the company, or maybe into companies belonging to a few of his friends, but after seeing Xue Jing bring Fang Zhao on his global lecture tour, he had given up. He knew that academics like Xue Jing and Ming Cang hoped that Fang Zhao would follow the academic path and not be too involved in the commercial market. Young people in this era were too easily influenced by money.

The Galaxy World Award was just a beautiful dream in Hua Li's heart. When he woke up, he was very clear that there was no way he could obtain it, but could Fang Zhao achieve it in the future?

As long as he kept up his standards, the Supernova Award should not be too hard, but

the World Award?

Hua Li was not too optimistic. However, even if Fang Zhao really managed to get the World Award, it would surely be over 100 years from now. By then, if Hua Li was still alive, he would probably be older than the current age of Xue Jing and would have long retired.

Gao Se went on and on for half an hour before leaving when he received a call. An old friend who had also received an invite was looking for him.

After Gao Se left, Hua Li intended to introduce Fang Zhao to a few other people, but Fang Zhao's bracelet had a notification of an urgent message.

He took a look. The sender was Zuo Yu.

Hua Li he knitted his eyebrows and asked, "What's wrong?"

Fang Zhao pointed at the ceiling. "Some trouble upstairs."

The sixth floor above them was a place for e-sports athletes to gather and interact. Hua Li came to a realization.

"All right, go on and head up first. I will find some others to chat with. I have many old friends here. When you have the time, come back and look for me. I will probably stay here till night."

Upstairs.

A place that ought to be boisterous was relatively quiet.

There were many e-sports athletes from every continent, but at that moment, regardless of whether they were chatting or holed up in a corner playing games or watching films, currently, all eyes were focused on a certain area.

At this area was the SilverLight team's group of about 10 people.

Zuo Yu was at a loss. His hands were itching to give someone a beating.

Standing in front of Zuo Yu, Jinro, and the others was an e-sports team from Leizhou.

At the head of this team was a young man acting all high and mighty. Arrogance was written all over his face. He was wearing a leather biker jacket and leather boots and was dressed in a retro style. On his shirt, a bright yellow and elegantly cursive font spelled out the words "Zaro Renault." Inside Zuo Yu's head, the words automatically translated in his head to four shining words—"not a good person!"

A totally pretentious appearance that deserved a spanking!

From his first glance of this senior master, Zuo Yu sent Fang Zhao a text message. The other party definitely had no good intentions, and Zuo Yu had no control over this situation. He wished to strike but could not afford to offend a descendant of a Founding Era's great general.

Zuo Yu's eyelids started twitching as the other party walked over.

Senior Master Zaro, who had been labeled "not a good person," directly walked in front of Zuo Yu and eyeballed him as though he was inspecting a shipment of goods. "You are the one that has forcefully occupied the top position on the leaderboards, AliveAfter500Years?" Not waiting for Zuo Yu's reply, the other party shot out another line. "One hundred million annual salary. Leave Silver Wing and join our Wireless e-Sports Club. How about that?"

Zuo Yu: "... Boss, hurry up! I'm afraid I might not be able to control my own mouth!

Smashing this salary in his face, Zuo Yu almost agreed immediately!

Chapter 163

Resplendent Night of Stars

In Leizhou, when many people mentioned Zaro Renault, the self-indulgent son of the Renault family, their teeth would ache at the same time as their heads. They viewed his style of operation disdainfully yet were unable to do anything about it.

Take this time as an example: When "Battle of the Century" was released, Zaro was captivated once again. He had been unable to take part in the gaming feast ten years ago, as he had been underage and had had limited capital. He might have had ambitions, but he had been unable to execute them. This time around, though, it was different. He did not own a gaming company or an e-sport club, so he bought one straight away! Flexing his financial muscle to the fullest!

But the big e-sports clubs in Leizhou had been wary of him and simply had not allowed him to interfere. Therefore, Zaro had gotten angry and brought out his most consistent methods, throwing huge sums of money to poach. Not only had he poached from within Leizhou, he had poached from other continents as well.

Although what Zaro had done was unreasonable, the high-salaried people under him were capable and simply helped him poach over many gamers with genuine talent.

Of all the teams invited to the annual conference this year, other than SilverLight, another team that had only been established this year was Zaro's Wireless e-Sports Club.

In Leizhou, the Renault family name was a gold-plated signboard. Outside of Leizhou, it also had influence. Even people who did not pay attention would reconsider a few times when they saw this family name.

Now, Zaro wished to poach someone once again, and his target was the global leaderboard's first position, AliveAfter500Years. Other e-sports clubs might desire to poach this person as well, but when they saw Zaro's position, they hesitated. In terms of using their financial muscle to poach, they had no way of beating this person.

Zaro also had his confidence to back him up. He could poach people openly and

candidly. After all, daddy has the money!

Everyone's eyes were on Zuo Yu. No matter how strong he was mentally, Zuo Yu also felt pressured.

Taking a deep breath, Zuo Yu was prepared to tell this pretentious bastard who was in need of a spanking "You got the wrong person," but just as he opened his mouth to speak, Jinro elbowed him and whispered, "Boss is here."

Hearing that Fang Zhao had arrived, Zuo Yu let out a sigh of relief in his heart, as did the others on the team. Being watched by so many people was nothing to get happy about.

Fang Zhao pushed his way through the crowd. "What's going on?"

"It's like this..." Zuo Yu explained the situation in a low voice.

Zuo Yu had originally followed Jinro and the others to the sixth floor to relax and unwind. Jinro and Dorrian knew many old adversaries who were also old friends. They had brought the team's new members to get to know other seniors within the circle. Zuo Yu did not have much interest in this, though; he was not a professional gamer and only followed Fang Zhao and joined in the fun when Fang Zhao gamed.

He might have been a bodyguard, but he was not beneath anybody else. Only in front of Fang Zhao would he act a little more like a bodyguard. When he was not by Fang Zhao's side, he still had the air of a former special forces soldier.

The members of the team did not treat him as an attendant. Zuo Yu was also considered a member of the team. Although he, like Fang Zhao, did not spend too much time in-game, he had proven his strength, and when Fang Zhao was not online, if Zuo Yu was not at his side, he would be teaching the others a few things in-game. If Fang Zhao was considered their military instructor, then Zuo Yu was their deputy military instructor. Therefore, his treatment was also different from the other members.

Zuo Yu had been sitting down idly but realized that quite a number of people had their attention focused on him.

Schwarzer had gone one round with Jinro and returned to chat with Zuo Yu about gossip he had heard from e-sports athletes from other continents, such as which gaming superstars were going to come over and blow their own horns and such.

As he was speaking excitedly, Zuo Yu's hand stretched out in a flash and steadily caught an orange that had been thrown over.

After that, it was Zaro and his entourage that came over.

Noticing something wrong over here, Jinro and the other members came rushing back. Everyone in the area now had their attention placed on this group of people. They were watching the show and waiting for answers.

The group from Silver Wing contained a board member and a deputy director, but these senior executives were interacting with other executives and were not on this floor. Wayne was building friendly relations with a few senior management executives of a few of Huangzhou's entertainment companies. The only one who could rush here promptly was Fang Zhao.

Anyone who had done their homework on the SilverLight team knew who Fang Zhao was.

"They threw the orange, probably to probe," Zuo Yu said.

What was there to probe?

Without a doubt, they were probing to see whether Zuo Yu was AliveAfter500Years! Unable to get a verbal answer, they could only probe. Eliminating the other SilverLight members, the only other suspicious person who had an unknown identity was Zuo Yu.

When Zuo Yu was speaking to Fang Zhao, Zaro sized Fang Zhao up and asked his agent beside him, "Who is this? He seems a little familiar."

Zaro's manager had long anticipated this happening. "SilverLight's person-in-charge, the Silver Wing virtual projects department manager and also a contracted Silver Wing composer. The '100-Year Period of Destruction' series is his work. We used the third movement in the series for 'God of War,' the one you spent 10 million to purchase the rights for."

With the manager's reminder, Zaro had a little impression and remembered it. Not because the manager had mentioned the film and series name but because he had received an unfair beating back when his great-grandfather had shed anguished tears because his emotions had overflowed when listening to the piece. Because of that, Zaro had nearly been disfigured from the beating, so how could he not remember that?

However, after that incident, Zaro had seen his fortunes change. He had specifically obtained all four music videos of the "100-Year Period of Destruction" to curry favor with his great-grandfather and had received many benefits. He had originally wanted to poach Fang Zhao, but unfortunately, Silver Wing were not willing to release him.

"Oh, so it's you!" Zaro started having poaching intentions once again. "Have you considered changing jobs?"

"No," Fang Zhao replied stiffly. "Where did you learn that he was AliveAfter500Years?"

Zaro lifted his hand and pointed over in a certain direction. "They said so."

Everyone's gaze followed the direction Zaro's finger was pointed in. Over there were a few people clad in black and white striped jerseys, members from Zebra e-Sports Club.

The members of Zebra e-sports club looked as though they were about to puke blood. "It wasn't us! We never talked about it in front of him!"

"They said it behind my back," Zaro replied firmly. He was also not dumb. He knew what they were trying to do. Wasn't it just using his hands to confirm whether Zuo Yu was AliveAfter500Years? It just so happened that Zaro was curious himself, so he'd thrown an orange at Schwarzer, who had been beside Zuo Yu. When he'd seen Zuo Yu catch the orange, in his heart, he had come to believe that Zuo Yu was indeed AliveAfter500Years.

With such agility, quick reflexes, and an aura different from the others here, if he was not AliveAfter500Years, who could he be?

Actually, everyone around who had seen the orange-catching scene felt the same way as Zaro. Thus, the atmosphere quieted down, as everyone wanted to listen and confirm their hunch.

Fang Zhao swept a look at Zebra e-Sports Club's members and then faced Zaro. "You got the wrong person."

Zaro felt his own judgement was correct and Fang Zhao was just refusing to admit it. "Wrong person? It's not him? I certainly think it's him."

"Suit yourself." If Wayne had not violently opposed keeping Fang Zhao's identity under

tight wraps, Fang Zhao would not have concealed it. To him, there was no need to make things so complicated, but Wayne's way of thinking was different. Wayne, as well as people from the publicity and public relations department, always considered the options that granted the most benefits. How to attract the most attention? By tempting everyone's curiosity! That was how Silver Wing managed to achieve their high viewership. When media organizations from different continents mentioned Fiery Bird's annual conference, Silver Wing's SilverLight team would also be brought up.

Fang Zhao did not bother explaining more to Zaro. He just told Zaro that poaching was impossible. Following that, he instructed the rest of the team members on what to do next.

Zuo Yu raised the orange that he'd caught and asked Fang Zhao, "What about the orange..."

"Slice it."

Jinro and gang shuddered. They felt that the two words Fang Zhao had just spat out were laden with killing intent.

A slight grin appeared on Zuo Yu's face as he took out the foldable knife he always kept on him. He tossed the orange into the air, made two lightning quick slashes, and caught the falling orange with his free hand. He placed the orange on a plate on top of the table and made another two deft cuts. Releasing his fingers, the orange split into eight juicy pieces, and the sweet aroma wafted out.

He was steady when he brandished the knife, and his cuts had been decisive. The eight pieces seemed as though they had been measured by a robot. Every piece was evenly distributed.

Zaro's eyes glowed, and he exclaimed, "Impressive knife skills!"

Zuo Yu: "... Are you f*cking brainless? Your father imagined that you were the orange before slicing it up. Don't you even have the ability to see that?!"

Finally, Zaro's agent could not put up with it any longer and found an excuse to drag Zaro away. The sixth floor returned to its previous noisy atmosphere. There were still quite a few glances coming their way, but after hearing the news of what had happened, they no longer continued to inquire. After all, everyone would know the answer tomorrow.

At night, after the free time ended, everyone returned back to the 62nd floor to rest.

Wayne had heard about the incident in the day and so told Jinro and the others, "I know what happened. Don't think too much about it. Have a good rest and be in your best condition for tomorrow."

They could not do anything to Zaro, so they had to just place the blame on Zebra e-Sports Club's personnel.

"Some people just love to use these kinds of tricks, tsk." Wayne shook his head and returned to his room, after which he contacted people to cause some trouble for Zebra e-Sports Club.

At the same time, on the internet, a piece of news attracted the attention of many gaming fans.

"According to information leaked from certain parties in the hotel, AliveAfter500Years's identity is suspected to be Fang Zhao's bodyguard."

No one knew the culprit that leaked the information, but there were no photos.

Although there were no concrete rules, there was an unwritten rule that the people within the industry acknowledged. Here, you could take photos of yourself as you pleased, but releasing photos of others without their prior permission or posting them on social platforms was frowned upon. Anyone who violated this rule would be despised and excluded by others in the industry.

Therefore, even if anyone had sold the information, they would not dare to sell the photos taken on the sixth floor.

However, even without any photos, it was enough to excite the gaming fans paying attention to Fiery Bird's annual conference.

"I was wondering why AliveAfter500Years-god had such skills. Turns out he is a bodyguard."

"From an anonymous source, I heard that Fang Zhao's bodyguard was special forces."

"Special forces? That's so cool!"

"No wonder his shooting is so accurate!"

"The global first position would actually serve as Fang Zhao's bodyguard? Does Fang Zhao have such thick skin?!"

"A bodyguard originating from special forces. How did he end up gaming?"

"Maybe they discovered his skills. Recalling back, there were many times where Fang Zhao did not have his bodyguard with him. Most likely, he was letting his bodyguard game and rack up points."

"'Suspected' means it is just a guess and has not been confirmed. Look at you all talking as though you have seen it for yourselves."

"The more I think about it, the more plausible it seems. There has to be a reason for all these baseless rumors."

"Then who is 'LittleFlyingFish' from SilverLight team?"

"Stop all this useless chatter. After all, the truth will be revealed tomorrow. In previous conferences, the global first position would go on stage and speak.

...

Next day, 62nd floor hall.

The SilverLight team members were in a frenzy.

"Where's the hair gel? My hair is messy again."

"Hey, who took the wrong clothes?"

"The f*ck, Dorrian is even spraying cologne! How come you don't show off your flashiness normally!"

"Bag? Where is my bag?"

Wayne instructed the makeup artists that had tagged along to tidy up the appearances of the team members. Relying on themselves was no good. Jinro and Dorrian were still passable, but he could not bear to look at Schwarzer or the other new guys. Better that

the professional makeup team repair the damage.

Today they were not facing the attention of a small circle but rather the camera lenses of media organizations throughout the world.

"Later, when we pass by the signature wall in the conference hall, do we sign our real name or in-game ID?" Schwarzer asked.

Jake scoffed. "Are you an idiot, Schwarzer? Your game ID is the same as your real name! What are you acting all confused for!"

"For those that have an ID different from your name, signing any is fine," Dorrian instructed.

"Zuo Yu, will you be signing LittleFlyingFish or your real name?" Schwarzer asked.

"LittleFlyingFish." Zuo Yu was not comfortable with leaving his real name around.

The entering sequence was in order of ranking. The SilverLight team was placed 50+ globally, and only the main members and team executives could use the main doors to the conference hall. Other members had to enter through another door.

After waiting till 5 p.m., it finally became their turn.

Leaving the hotel, they stepped onto a carpet with a Fiery Bird design and walked toward the large conference hall as many camera lens pointed in their direction. Midway, the team stopped to leave their names on the signature wall.

Although the SilverLight team was ranked toward the back and appeared later as well, when the team showed up, all the reporters were clearly even more excited. The incessant humming of the film drones increased by several decibels, especially at the point where the team was signing their names. Camera lenses focused on every team member writing on the wall.

Fang Zhao signed his own name. Zuo Yu signed his ID name, LittleFlyingFish, which was also telling the reporters that their groundless accusations yesterday had all been wrong.

This was the first time Zuo Yu had experienced this type of celebrity treatment. No wonder many people wished to be stars. It felt great, but he knew that the reason they

could demand so much attention was all because of Fang Zhao.

Once they entered the hall, Fang Zhao separated from the group. Fang Zhao's seat was different from Jinro and the rest, much closer to the front. Being situated nearer to the front was more convenient for when Fang Zhao had to go on stage.

Chapter 164

How Can This Be?!

Fang Zhao found his assigned seat number in the middle of the third row. When he got there, the seats beside his were already occupied.

One was Phoenix e-Sports Club main captain, Bruce from Huangzhou. Bruce was ranked 3rd on the global individual leaderboards, and his team occupied 1st place worldwide. The other person was Muzhou's Ma Xier, who was ranked 2nd on the individual leaderboards.

Bruce noticed Fang Zhao taking a seat beside him and was momentarily stunned before he broke into a smile, "I am Phoenix's Bruce, from Huangzhou, nice to meet you."

Fang Zhao returned a polite smile. "My pleasure. I am Fang Zhao, from Yanzhou. Silver Wing's SilverLight team."

"I know you." Bruce watched Fang Zhao, who did not seem to have any intention of moving, and his mind went blank for a bit, as if cracking his head to solve a hard question. "You... are seated here?" Bruce asked.

"If the seat number in my invitation letter is not wrong, then my seat is right here." As he said this, Fang Zhao touched the exquisite invitation letter on a hemisphere-shaped knob on the seat that seemed like it was for decoration.

Bright white rays flashed then extinguished.

There was no mistake in the seating.

Bruce lifted a finger and pointed at Fang Zhao. His mouth kept opening and closing like a goldfish gasping for air before he managed to force out two words: "It's you?!"

His question might have sounded vague, but Fang Zhao understood the meaning and so nodded his head.

Bruce scanned Fang Zhao as if he was studying an alien.

Ma Xier, who was sitting on the other side, had just finished a phone call and turned his head over, glancing at Fang Zhao and nodding his head politely. After all, they were not familiar with each other, so Maxi did not intend to talk too much. Suddenly, Ma Xier jerked his head back and looked at Fang Zhao, then at his seat, and then back at Fang Zhao once more, his face full of disbelief.

"You are..." Ma Xier looked as if he had choked on a fishbone, and his breathing was ragged. When he saw Bruce's confused face nodding, he exclaimed, "That's impossible!"

Ma Xier was a gold medal athlete who had made his name a long time ago. He had always thought that AliveAfter500Years, who had always been on top of him, would be an even more experienced shooter or, as the external rumors suggested, an elite special forces soldier. But now, he was at a complete loss.

For so long, this person had been above him. The person Ma Xier had given up hope of ever overtaking was actually some youngster twenty years younger than him? And a f*cking composer at that!?

Suppressing the shock, Ma Xier took a few deep breaths then gravely asked, "Are you really AliveAfter500Years?"

He had already gotten confirmation from Bruce, but he could not help but ask once more.

"Yes," said Fang Zhao.

Ma Xier's cheeks twitched when he heard the answer. "How did you choose the name?"

This was not an inquiry but a lament. Not waiting for an answer, Ma Xier went to his own social platforms and posted two statuses:

"What the flying f*ck!"

"I suddenly feel like great changes are going to come."

Just before Fiery Bird's annual conference was about to start, many e-sports stars in attendance posted photos of themselves on their own social platforms. After entering

the hall, Schwarzer uploaded the selfie that he felt was the best looking.

Fans and other gaming enthusiasts could view the live broadcast of the event and get a glimpse of the social-platform statuses of their idols. They might not be able to head to Huangzhou's Fiery Bird headquarters to spectate, but from the internet, they were able to keep up with the event's proceedings enough to satisfy their cravings.

Prior to this, Ma Xier had not updated any statuses. He was not active like those young athletes. This annual conference was not considered novelty, and there was no need to make his presence felt.

However, Ma Xier's fans were waiting. Previously, they had seen other's e-sports idols sharing photos and statuses, but there had not been a single word from Ma Xier. They had still been thinking that Ma Xier had decided not to share anything on his social platform when they received a system notification.

Not only had Ma Xier updated his status, he had updated it twice!

This was a rare sight, not to mention the information contained within the two statuses.

Some fans were puzzled. "What has caused our Warhorse 1 to be upset?"

Mazhou was also known as "MaErsizhou," after great general Ma Ersi of the founding era. According to some legends of the Old Era, Ma Ersi had also been known as a god of war. As a competitive MaErsizhou, the people tended to give the term "God of War" to certain talents that reached the apex of their industry. Ma Xier, as a gold medal shooter, was called "God of War Ma Xier," or "Warhorse" for short.

Many people took notice of Ma Xier posting his two statuses. Fang Zhao also saw it from a screenshot Zu Wen sent over.

Ma Xier had a complicated look in his eyes. "I feel old just looking at you." As a naturally gifted shooting champion, all he ever heard were lavish praises from everyone. He had never received such a shock before.

Fang Zhao really wished to tell him: "You are not old; in my eyes, you are just a kid."

But these words would definitely make Ma Xier feel like Fang Zhao was taking the mickey out of him.

Ma Xier wanted to chat with Fang Zhao more and find out why his shooting ability was so good, but the conference hall abruptly quieted down, indicating Fiery Bird's annual conference was about to start. He could only suppress the doubts he had for the time being.

At the reporter zone, an old and experienced journalist scanned the conference hall and focused his gaze over at the front.

The experienced journalist asked the person beside him, "Take a look at the person between Bruce and Ma Xier. I'm afraid my eyesight might be so bad that I'm seeing things."

"You, old fella, have bad eyesight? You are nicknamed Eagle Eyes and have eyesight that would not lose to youngsters! Forget it, let me see... Ma Xier? Bruce and Ma Xier should be in the second or third seat. Oh, third. I see them. In the middle... the f*ck! Isn't that Fang Zhao?"

"I thought I'd recognized him wrongly," the old journalist said, his eyes still fixated over there.

"That's not right. According to past seating arrangements, the person seated there should be the top ranked player on the global leaderboards and will have to go on stage to receive a prize and talk in a bit. Could it be that AliveAfter500Years did not come, so Fang Zhao is receiving the award on his behalf?"

This sort of situation was not uncommon. Among gaming gods, there were a number of eccentric characters that did not like appearing in this sort of place. On the other hand, there were also those with disabilities and medical conditions. For example, within the top 10 of the individual leaderboards was one whose body was lying in the hospital due to illness. As the brain was unaffected, this person gamed very well, but being unable to leave, somebody was collecting the award on behalf of that person.

As AliveAfter500Years was too mysterious, many people were guessing whether he was one of those with serious illnesses or who was disabled and hence could not appear in public.

The journalist nodded his head. "That might be the case, but... there might be another possibility."

As for the other possibility, everyone had considered it before, but every time people

thought about it, they brushed it aside. It was just too preposterous.

"It's not just us that have these doubts. We shall see in a bit—it's starting.

Like in previous years, Fiery Bird's president reminisced about the company's past, analyzed the present, and shared plans for the future. Following that, the host introduced a few distinguished guests, all who had been gaming gods in the gaming scene for over 10 years, but due to illness or age, they had not taken part this round. They were still involved in industries related to gaming, though, or had switched professions and become actors.

Whatever the case, they were former sparkling stars who still had their own fans. They were also considered the elder generation of e-sports athletes from every continent, and their standing in the gaming circles was rather high.

These people had been invited for two reasons. One was to share a little of their own experiences, and the second and most important was to confer the awards to this year's award winners.

For the awards presentation, the individual awards were first, followed by the team awards. The sequence for the leaderboard's top 10 was 7th to 10th place, followed by 4th, 5th, and 6th, and lastly 1st, 2nd, and 3rd.

"Next, we would like to invite the players who placed in the top three on the individual leaderboards, Phoenix's Bruce, Ma Xier, and SilverWing50PolarLight's AliveAfter500Years!"

The spotlights shined on Bruce and Ma Xier as they got up with beaming smiles. Regardless of what their inner thoughts were, they concealed it well and turned around to wave at the audiences and reporters before heading toward the stage.

Fang Zhao had been called last, so he stood up after Bruce and Ma Xier.

Under the spotlights and the attentive gazes of over 10,000 people, generally, a young person at this sort of occasion for the first time would feel uneasy. Even if he could mask his emotions well, such uneasiness would still be unable to escape the experienced eyes within the members of the audience, yet the calm and unperturbed demeanor was too natural. It did not seem to be an act.

Compared to when he had first arrived in this world, Fang Zhao no longer had those

cold and antisocial tendencies. When he got up from his seat, there was a faint smile on his face. Although not that obvious, he seemed warm and manly, and he portrayed the air of a cultured person.

Many gamers watching the live broadcast online stared at Fang Zhao heading to the stage on their screens, thinking, Bruce, Ma Xier, and AliveAfter500Years were called. Why are you getting up?

"Did the host say anything about having a representative collect the award?"

"...Nope."

"I suddenly have a dreadful feeling."

"Me too..."

"...Same."

On stage, the large screen displayed Bruce, Ma Xier, and AliveAfter500Years's information.

Nobody needed to see the former two's information—everyone was already familiar with them. Now, not only the people present, but those watching the live broadcast as well had their eyes on the area displaying AliveAfter500Years's information:

ID: AliveAfter500Years

Registered Identity: Fang Zhao (Authenticated)

Game Console: 10th-generation 'Rhapsody'...

There was a whole bunch of detailed data in a list below that—for example, monsters killed, natural disasters survived, completed quests, and the like.

No one really cared about the data, though. Everyone was staring at the three lines on top.

The word "Authenticated" was a confirmation. If Fiery Bird acknowledged it, it had to be true.

At this moment, gamers watching online were temporarily stunned.

"WHAT?!"

"So, that means Fang Zhao is actually AliveAfter500Years?"

"I! Don't! Believe! It! I must still be dreaming! Somebody hit me!"

"My mighty and awe-inspiring 500Years-god! How can this be?!"

"Probably... looks... can be deceiving?"

There was a professional artist from Huangzhou who had drawn his own version of AliveAfter500Years's real appearance—tall and ripped like a boulder, clad in high-cut military boots and special combat gear, and armed with special gatling guns. With his iron body and majestic aura, his might was not ordinary.

Previously, that image had been widely circulated in gaming circles, so much so that in many people's hearts they had begun to visualize AliveAfter500Years this way. They felt that even if the real person was not the same, the difference would not be much.

However, now, they all felt a deep sense of spite.

Chapter 165

Give Everyone a Chance

Online, the comments sections of many live broadcasting platforms were exploding.

"Why! AHHHHHHH—"

"My image of 500Years-god!"

"Why is it Fang Zhao, AHH—"

The number of "AHH"s in the comments section showed the audience's current frame of mind.

Others shrieked excitedly when they saw the real image of their idols, but here, when faced with the truth, there was only confusion and rage.

Nobody could blame them. Why had everyone kept guessing that AliveAfter500Years was from the special forces or some extraordinary division?

Although the real world and virtual world were different, nobody could say for certain how a person would fare in-game. In the real world, one might not be able to even catch a chick, yet they might turn into a crazy killing machine in the virtual world. There were also people in the real world built like freight trains, yet in-game, they were wimps.

When industry professionals analyzed AliveAfter500Years's in-game actions, they found his actions simply breathtaking and unexpected. If he was not an experienced gamer, then he had outstanding ability. As this individual had never been heard of in the gaming circle, it had to be the latter.

If it had been Zuo Yu standing there instead, everyone's reactions would not have been so acute, but it just had to be Fang Zhao, a composition graduate. Having never shown up in gaming circles previously, he looked refined and did not look at all tough. One look and anyone could tell he was a man of art and literature and had no resemblance at all to the crazy point-sweeping demon AliveAfter500Years! Moreover, according to

common sense, it was rare for a management-level executive to lead his troops into battle from the frontlines.

How could anyone even f*cking guess that?!

Especially those people who had been flaming Fang Zhao in the past two days. At this moment, their brains had turned to mush. The person they had flamed and the one they had used all their efforts to support were one and the same—what the hell?!

"I flamed Fang Zhao before. Do you think he will sign something if I ask for his autograph in future?"

"I scolded him too..."

"This is just so d*mn awkward."

"That b*stard was just leading us on! The innocent and pure me fell for it!"

They did not approve of Fang Zhao, as they viewed him as an outsider in the gaming industry, an amateur of a different industry brought in to manage the team and instruct experts. Whatever was going on internally within the SilverLight team, in any case, all these spectators could not stomach it. In the past, there were many promising e-sports clubs that had been ruined by having outsiders meddle with them, hence why many online audiences found these actions to be revolting.

Secondly, there used to be rumors of Fang Zhao oppressing the team members, so audiences online did not have favorable impressions of him. Furthermore, when there had been news that Fang Zhao's bodyguard might be AliveAfter500Years and everyone had thought that their idol was actually being the bodyguard of an outsider, they hadn't been able to help but feel disgusted, and the tirades against Fang Zhao had become even more furious.

But now, the more one had furiously blasted, the more they were at a loss.

"Why didn't Silver Wing announce it earlier? What was the point in hiding it?!"

"Business-minded companies are all like this, taking the path with the most benefits. By not announcing, they could keep everyone focused on them. Fang Zhao can't be blamed."

"Maddening! I feel so bothered right now!"

"That... Actually, Silver Wing announced it before, right?"

"My ass! When? How could I not know of this?!"

"Back when Jinro and the other seven were signed by Silver Wing."

"..."

Now that one person mentioned it, Yanzhou's gaming fans all suddenly recalled. Back then, it seemed like that had really happened.

Someone went to browse Jinro and the other's social platform statuses, took screenshots, and compiled them together before posting.

On the day Jinro and the other seven had signed with Silver Wing, they had indeed all updated with the same status:

"Our boss is AliveAfter500Years."

Back then, everyone had thought that Jinro and the others were saying that their team captain was AliveAfter500Years. In many e-sports clubs, captains were called boss, so everyone had gone along with this line of thinking. AliveAfter500Years had indeed been leading the team, and only after that had he slowly handed the leadership over to Jinro and Dorrian.

Now that the truth was displayed in front of their eyes, the audiences now knew. Jinro and the others had actually been telling everyone that SilverWing50PolarLight's boss—the most authoritative figure on the team, Fang Zhao—was AliveAfter500Years."

"How! Treacherous!"

"I feel like my IQ has taken a beating."

"Who could have even thought about it then!"

A series of frantic "ahhh"s once more filled up the comments section.

However, no amount of yelling could placate the swelling outcry in everyone's hearts. All they could do was find an outlet to vent. If not, this would drive them crazy.

They didn't want to blame themselves, and they were unable to condemn Silver Wing, as there was no use putting the blame on a business-minded entertainment company! How about holding Fang Zhao accountable? Oh, that was too shameless.

At this moment, someone suddenly posted, "Wang Tie, you piece of trash!"

The comments section went quiet for a moment.

Eh?

All of Yanzhou's gamers' eyes collectively twinkled. They had suddenly found their venting outlet.

Thus, the audiences' gun barrels turned to Wang Tie and began firing away once again in the comments section.

"Simply trash!"

"Such big news and he didn't catch one bit! So much useful information and he is nowhere to be seen! Wang Tie, are you in hibernation?!"

"The real person was right in front of our eyes! Why wasn't he able to sniff out the truth? To think that Wang Tie is praised as Yanzhou's best paparazzi!"

"Did Wang Tie lose his balls after getting locked up?"

"Wang Tie is no longer strong. We have to change his title of Yanzhou's best paparazzi!"

Wang Tie, who had recently infiltrated Huangzhou and was tracking certain celebrities there: "... Why am I getting scolded?!"

Normally, these people criticized him from meddling in other's businesses, finding fault with him for peeking into the private lives of superstars. Now, they were criticizing him for not providing fast and efficient news.

Wang Tie felt miserable reading through the scoldings online.

He wanted to explain his side of the story to the lively audiences on the internet: You might not believe me if I tell you this. Actually, I found out the truth early on, but I was too afraid to speak out. You were right about me losing my balls, but it was not because of jail. Rather, I was scared sh*tless by Fang Zhao.

Taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from his face, Wang Tie decided he would make two big moves tonight to redeem his title of "best paparazzi." He did not dare to reveal news about Fang Zhao, but he had caught news of other stars, and not just a little. He would prove that his skills had not deteriorated and his nickname was as strong as ever.

In Yanzhou.

At the same time, watching the live broadcast and holding his electric guitar, Natiwuzi nearly threw it away in shock.

Recalling how he had used "world's No. 1" to try and persuade Fang Zhao, Natiwuzi felt his face hurting.

No wonder Fang Zhao had seemed so unperturbed when Natiwuzi had been painting the glorious picture of what being a "world's No. 1" felt like. It turned out that Fang Zhao had already experienced the treatment of being a "world's No. 1"! The gaming circles had even more attention from the public than the ancient-musical-instrument circles! They were way more popular too!

"Heh, that young fella!"

Natiwuzi felt that he needed to strum his guitar for the entire night to calm himself down.

Intense reactions were not just limited to the online audiences in Yanzhou and the rest of the world. At the conference hall, when Fang Zhao stood up, there was a roar from the crowd.

Although everyone would not make a huge ruckus, they would discuss it with their teammates or anyone beside them. If only a handful were whispering softly, nothing much could be heard, but if 99% of the audience starting discussing?

At this moment, all 2S e-Sport Club members had the same complicated feeling. They were all from Yanzhou, and their placing had been higher than Silver Wings, but this

time around, Silver Wing had simply received much more attention, even more than any of the Big Five e-sports clubs. But this was expected, after all. Silver Wing had produced the world's No. 1 in the global leaderboards, and they could understand why everyone would pay attention. They themselves had also been curious.

However, when the truth was placed in front of their faces, they found it even harder to accept it.

"Do you still remember? At the press conference before the release of 'Battle of the Century' at Fiery Bird's Yanzhou branch, that fellow said 'Bring it on'?"

"I previously thought he'd said that as the team's person-in-charge and that he was being arrogant because of the special treatment Silver Wing gave him and the experts in his team. Looking at it now, it turns out he was not relying on others but only on himself!" exclaimed 2S's team captain, Xie He.

Ke Zimo's face was convoluted. "That means that the one who overtook us in the heavy-duty motorcycle practice match was him?"

On stage.

Fang Zhao stood together with Bruce and Ma Xier to receive their awards.

The host and distinguished guests conferring the awards did not appear to be very surprised. Perhaps they had gotten the news beforehand from old friends in Fiery Bird. As they were going to confer awards, they had the right to know the recipient's information before deciding whether to be the one conferring awards.

Thus, if their expressions had been ones of excessive shock, it would have been fake. Audiences online were not so easy to fool.

The one conferring the award was once a gaming god but no longer actively took part in online games anymore due to age. After he had stopped participating in e-sports competitions, he had started investing in gaming peripherals and nurturing talents, contributing lots to the e-sports industry.

"You are pretty good!" said the man who was once a gaming god as he handed the award over to Fang Zhao. He could not say much else. If Fang Zhao was really AliveAfter500Years, even if these people were in their prime, there was no way they could beat him, so there was no point in adopting the stance of an elder giving out

pointers.

Fang Zhao accepted the trophy. "Thank you."

After the prize presentation, just like in past years, as the world's No. 1 player, Fang Zhao could not leave the stage immediately after collecting the trophy. He had to speak for a bit.

Formerly, those award recipients would share some of their thoughts, thank the heavens and the Earth, thank their family and their company, and express how excited and honored they were. Alternatively, they could give an account of how difficult the journey had been. Fang Zhao was not like them; he could not bring himself to pretend and speak such things, but he had other things to say.

Standing on stage, Fang Zhao appeared to calmly use his eyes to sweep the crowd. All the video cameras captured the entire situation and transmitted to the screens in front of gamers across the world.

"I have seen some of the comments online, and I know that everyone finds my identity as AliveAfter500Years really surprising." Fang Zhao had a faint smile on his face as he spoke, and his tone was mild, as if he was about to begin a normal chat with someone.

On the internet, in comments sections.

"Big god! Please don't say it!"

"I'm finished! He has surely seen all my criticism of him!"

"I'm regretting it. I should have used a smurf account when I flamed him!"

"I was originally thinking of heading to Silver Wing Tower to get some autographs a few days after Fiery Bird's annual conference. Feeling apprehensive now. Do you reckon I might get kicked out?"

Those that had previously flamed or cursed Fang Zhao felt as if their faces were burning up.

On stage, Fang Zhao did not speak much about all this, instead continuing. "I also know that a lot of people are unable to accept it. When I received the invitation, Mr. Tang Can contacted me to discuss this matter."

Tang Can, Fiery Bird's deputy director of operations, could always be seen at important Fiery Bird events. People who knew Fiery Bird well would not find him unfamiliar.

When Fang Zhao mentioned Tang Can, journalists with an acute sense sat up straighter. They knew that what Fang Zhao was going to say next was the important part!

Fang Zhao stared straight into the camera lenses ahead of him. What he was going to say next was for all the gaming fans watching this live broadcast.

"I shall give everyone a chance. Fiery Bird will open up a temporary practice area. Starting now, for three hours, there will be an extra 'challenge application' option on the top right of 'Battle of the Century's' login page. The relevant authorities will select ten challengers from the list of applications. Tomorrow morning at 10 a.m., I will be waiting there."

Jinro, Dorrian, Milo, and the others: "... How familiar.

Schwarzer covered his chest—his ribs seemed to hurt. "Sounds like something I have heard before." The memory of getting kicked offline remained etched in his head as clear as day.

All of them remembered memories that weren't too pleasant.

After those words, Fang Zhao gave the audience a polite bow and went off the stage. However, Fang Zhao's words were like a bomb, and they triggered a huge shockwave.

All gaming fans watching the live broadcast rubbed their palms in delight and forgot all about scolding Wang Tie as they rushed to submit their applications. Killing their own idol just once in-game was every gaming enthusiast's dream!

"Bring out the Barrett your father received for completing the mission last time!"

"Don't try and stop me! I want to fight Fang Zhao to the death!"

"The only one able to snipe AliveAfter500Years is me!"

"Out of the way. I will help everyone verify whether it is really him!"

Studios that specialized in selling accounts and equipment also got busy.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, take down all the accounts that are for sale and use them to apply."

"Boss, are you sure about taking down all our accounts that are for sale?"

"All! Immediately! Right now!"

Every studio operated around 100 accounts. These were all resources! They knew that Fiery Bird would not just pick from those professional e-sports athletes and would probably pick a few players from the amateur circles. They wouldn't pick according to the leaderboards. Therefore, they could use all the accounts to apply for it. What if one of them was selected?

If an account got selected, that account's value would skyrocket! They could sell it for a large sum; they might not have to work for even the next few decades! Rich gamers were plentiful, and there were many willing to pay a premium for that chance!

Many players who were scrambling to apply found that the application window actually... lagged for a second!

One second was not long. This frequently occurred in other applications and procedures, but this lag occurring in a Fiery Bird game was just unimaginable!

Exactly how many people had to apply in that moment for such a situation to occur?

Not only were there gamers watching the live broadcast that signed up, but many people present at the conference hall were tempted as well. The stuff that Fang Zhao had said a while back did not restrict professional e-sports athletes from applying. So they could also give it a try?

Many present at the conference hall thought the same and activated their bracelets. They entered the relevant web page to look for the application option.

Ma Xier and Bruce also wriggled their fingers. Their hands were feeling itchy, but unfortunately, they would not be able to get the chance. Fiery Bird's staff were in charge of the screening process and would not pick them. It seemed like they could only request a duel with Fang Zhao in private.

Schwarzer looked around at the people busily trying to apply. Everyone seemed to no longer care about the prize presentations anymore.

"Everyone seems so energetic."

"You can apply too," Jake said.

"No, no, no." Schwarzer shook his head vigorously. "This chance would be better off with those who really need it!"

As for the members of SilverLight team, not a single one wanted to challenge Fang Zhao again. Having been taught a lesson once was enough. They were also not being oppressed. Until they had achieved the necessary ability, there were not willing to suffer that sort of treatment again!

Dorrian also received private messages from some of his old teammates from HWR e-Sports Club who were sniping masters.

The other party asked, "Dorrian, could you help me gauge? Given my skills, what's the probability of me successfully sniping him?"

Dorrian replied with one word: "Tsk!"

Chapter 166

Please Do Not Show Mercy

Because of Fang Zhao words, many people were no longer in the mood to continue watching the awards presentation. After all, the teams following him were always the usual ones. Every year, it was always the same few names, the same few familiar faces. There was no longer a sense of novelty. Other than fans of those teams, everyone else was already discussing the next day's exchange matches.

Fiery Bird's annual conference did not solely consist of the conference. On the second day, there were exchange matches where e-sports athletes and fans got to interact. There were also matches between e-sports athletes and teams. The ones that would be officially broadcasted were those that had been arranged earlier, such as the opening match where Fang Zhao would take on ten challengers.

For team exchange matches, SilverLight did not have an arranged opponent, but they could arrange for a battle in private.

At 7 p.m., after the prize presentation ended, the audience moved to the adjacent building where a sumptuous dinner awaited.

Due to his identity being revealed, Fang Zhao's social status within the gaming circles had increased. He had only just sat down and not yet finished a bun when he was approached by three investment firms regarding endorsement deals. These investment firms collaborated with Fiery Bird and belonged to the gaming peripherals industry, and now they had set their eyes on Fang Zhao. After all, he was the year's No. 1 individual player and had attracted lots of attention. Just taking a look at today's entertainment headlines was more than enough—every single one was occupied by news regarding Fang Zhao, AKA AliveAfter500Years.

Wayne was worried about Fang Zhao's mental state. He still had an exchange match that would be broadcast to the world tomorrow morning and needed to rest well. Huangzhou and Yanzhou had a time difference, and not everyone was able to adapt to it well. Wayne advised Fang Zhao to return to the hotel and rest first. Parties that wanted to collaborate with Fang Zhao would continue to keep in touch after the annual conference had ended.

Fang Zhao did not think anything special needed to be done, but if he continued to stay here, more people would approach him and he would not be able to eat in peace. Thus he agreed to Wayne's suggestion and picked out some food to be delivered to him as he headed back to the hotel.

When he had been in the conference hall, Fang Zhao had received lots of text messages from relatives, friends, and classmates. Even Xue Jing had sent him a few, astonished at how a composer like him played games and could become so famous from playing.

It had not been convenient for Fang Zhao to answer calls in the conference hall, so Fang Zhao had only been able to send text replies. When he got back to his hotel room, he returned a few calls to some important people.

When everything was done, it was already 9 p.m.

Fang Zhao had given his speech in the conference hall around 5 p.m. The three hours for applications was up, so Fiery Bird might have already filtered out the 10 challengers.

Browsing online, the 10 selected game IDs were already published on Fiery Bird's public website. Four were professional e-sports players and four were amateur players. These were filtered out by Fiery Bird staff and randomly selected. These eight were placed near the front of their respective continent's leaderboards but lacked the qualifications to take part in this year's annual conference. The remaining two spots had been picked by a completely random draw by the system and gone to two ordinary players.

The accounts of the two ordinary players had already been bought for large sums of money. There was no concrete amount, but figures online were estimated at no less than 2 million dollars.

The first reaction people in the gaming circles had when seeing this figure for the first time was disbelief.

"It's just a game. Is it worth it? Surely the prices were jacked up!"

"This isn't even considered buying an account, just borrowing the account to play for a bit, and they threw so much money at it? Are those buyers fools?"

There were also people indifferent to it. They had seen this often and gotten used to

it. "It's normal, gaming circles have always been crazy. Extravagant spending is common. The figures spent by nouveau riche gamers on equipment is something you cannot imagine. We can't just use rational thinking to compare."

Nobody knew who had purchased those two accounts, but for the other eight, they had already begun to make their presence felt on the internet. These challengers were slightly famous within their own continents and would not sell away this chance for a measly one or two million. They really wanted to do battle with the legendary AliveAfter500Years and, at the same time, use the chance to publicize themselves.

So what if they lost? At least they get to show their faces to gaming fans all over the world.

The ones that had already been selected posted recorded videos on their own social platforms, with the general idea being: "Delighted to be selected, eagerly anticipating the chance to do battle with AliveAfter500Years-god."

And in the comments section of their latest status updates, there were online users from every continent. Some were just spectating, some left congratulatory messages, and others offered money to purchase the accounts, making the section lively.

Fang Zhao searched for and watched some of the past videos of the eight challengers and did a simple analysis. Even if he trusted his own ability, he wouldn't be so arrogant to think that he was omnipotent. His past experiences had taught him to not think lightly of any opponent. Watching some of their in-game footage, he could understand his opponents' habits and combat styles and make a list in his heart.

After watching, Fang Zhao browsed some Yanzhou entertainment news.

As expected, Yanzhou's entertainment media outlets were all fired up. Today's breaking news had caught many people unprepared, but for Yanzhou's entertainment media, after the unexpected news came delight, and all of them livened up. Previously, they had not known where to start, but once the news was made known, they dug up all information regarding Fang Zhao. Even his old address on the black street was unearthed.

Yue Qing had sent a text message informing Fang Zhao that entertainment reporters had come over. They wanted to take a look at Fang Zhao's old residence and had offered cash rather easily. Although the place had already been bought by Yue Qing

and converted into a storehouse, Yue Qing still informed him.

Fang Zhao expressed indifference. After all, the place now belonged to Yue Qing, and he could make the decision for himself. Fang Zhao did not think his own history in the black street was anything to hide, and nobody but himself knew the real stuff that could not be made public.

This time around, Yue Qing rode on the coattails of Fang Zhao's fame and earned a small fortune, much to the envy of many black street residents.

After that, Fang Zhao did not continue browsing information online. A few of Fiery Bird's staff contacted Fang Zhao and informed him of the next day's arrangements with his exchange match as the opening fixture. They were worried too much pressure had been placed on Fang Zhao, but after speaking with Fang Zhao, they knew they had been worried for nothing.

The next morning.

Tang Can brought a Fiery Bird team and a 10th-generation console over to the hotel's 62nd floor. A video camera recorded the process to prove that there was no substitution of the player.

Actually, when Tang Can had found out the amount of challenge applications yesterday, for a time, he had actually wanted to increase the number of challengers from 10 to 20. He had also asked Fang Zhao, who had not opposed.

Tang Can had also seen the trending video of Fang Zhao riding a motorcycle and going on a monster-killing frenzy. Perhaps whether it was 10 or 20 challengers would not make much of a difference to Fang Zhao.

However, Tang Can had finally dismissed the idea of increasing the number of challengers. This was not a serious competition, it was just an annual opportunity for e-sports athletes and fans to interact, with the focus on entertainment. If they were to suddenly change the plan and increase the challengers, it might result in some trouble arising, and those that had already bought or sold accounts might get furious.

At the moment, on the large screen, the conditions of the other challengers were displayed.

All of them were ready, and some had even gone ahead to lie in ambush.

One of the challengers had specifically sent a voice message to Fang Zhao before entering: "Please do not show us mercy! Everyone wishes to see your true strength, so please do not play around as if it were a normal game."

When experts sparred, they hoped the other party would take it seriously. Only this could be considered showing respect to one's opponents. Regardless of whether the users behind these challenger's ID's were the real owners, at this moment, all they wanted was to see how strong Fang Zhao was. Only then could they determine whether Fang Zhao was really AliveAfter500Years.

Furthermore, they thought of themselves as experts. There was no need to show mercy on experts!

Fang Zhao replied, "All right."

"Ha..." Schwarzer was about to laugh heartily when he realized a camera was pointed in his direction. Realizing the negative impression that would result from laughing, he stifled his laugh into a sneeze.

Back when the eight of them had challenged Fang Zhao, the kick Schwarzer suffered had left a deep impression. He had felt that, for this sort of exchange match, Fang Zhao would go easy, but who knew that the challengers themselves would ask Fang Zhao to not show any mercy.

The SilverLight team members exchanged knowing looks at each other before watching the large screen.

"Mr. Fang, are you ready?" inquired Fiery Bird's headquarter's engineers. They were not worried about the game console malfunctioning, but they were actually using this chance to conduct a study, using the collected information to add to their database, which would help facilitate designing new console models.

Tang Can had approached Fang Zhao for the first exchange match not just to attract viewership and satisfy fans. At the same time, the match was also for Fiery Bird matters.

As of now, among the 100 users of the 10th-generation console, Fang Zhao was the one with the highest adaptability value. The latest figures showed that his adaptability value had already stabilized at 98 and had reached 99 a number of times.

After the 10th-generation console had been released, there were some people who continuously questioned this sort of new console model. They felt that it was impossible for players to completely adapt to this model. Generally speaking, if the adaptability value exceeded 98, it could be considered fully adapted. Fang Zhao's adaptability value had never been publicized. Using this exchange match as an excuse, Fiery Bird could let the doubters of the 10th-generation console know that there were people who could fully adapt, proving that Fiery Bird's decision had been right.

Fang Zhao had already put on the console. "I'm ready."

"Start!"

The group of engineers stared at the screen displaying the data. They totally did not bother about the in-game battle situation; only the data and charts made them excited.

"Having a different machine, different geographic location, and different surroundings could result in not achieving the normal adaptability value. At the start, it's estimated to be 96, possibly 95. For it to rise, the time needed might be slightly longer—" Before that engineer could finish his sentence, the adaptability value had already shot up to 96, then risen to 97, and was continuing to rise to 98. He stared blankly at the screen for a second then put on a serious face. "Pretend I didn't say anything."

Chapter 167

Evaluation Without Question

Nobody else cared about the reactions of the engineers. Everyone else's eyes were fixated on the screen displaying what was happening inside the game.

For this exchange match, Fiery Bird had opened up a district approximately 500 meters in diameter. It resembled an ordinary residential area in a small town from the Old Era. The highest building in the area was only six or seven floors up.

There were online bookmakers offering bets on how long the exchange match would take. SilverLight team members rushed to place the bets after hearing one challenger request Fang Zhao not to show mercy. Given Fang Zhao's style of blitzkrieg, they picked the bet with the least time.

Online, the bet with the quickest time frame offered by bookmakers was "zero to 10 minutes."

All 10 challengers had logged on. As Fang Zhao was the one being challenged, he could only enter after the rest were in. Furthermore, the moment he appeared online, the other 10 challengers would receive his starting coordinates.

Starting coordinates were only visible for a moment. After three seconds, they would disappear. Radar and warning devices were forbidden for this exchange match, but players could bring their own firearms.

Fang Zhao's equipped gun was the same one given to him by the system when he'd started, an Old Era police-issue revolver. From detailed information on Fiery Bird's official website, this sort of gun only had an effective firing range of 50 meters.

This time around, Fang Zhao did not equip a helmet when he got online. Through the system's monitors, fans got to clearly see AliveAfter500Years's in-game appearance.

"It really looks 70% similar to the real Fang Zhao."

"The few scars add quite a touch of personality. I've decided to add a few scars to my

avatar too."

"Scars on the face, seems kinda familiar, hmm."

Nobody wasted time mulling over it. They were fully devoted to their screens. The game's monitoring systems were showing the movements of Fang Zhao and the other 10 challengers.

The first thing Fang Zhao did after logging in was find a place close by to take cover. Many experienced players watching could tell that Fang Zhao had not picked a spot at random. His choice had been a shrewd one, enabling him to avoid sniper fire.

"Why has he stopped moving?" some gaming fans watching the broadcast posted in the comments section.

"Is he waiting for the challengers to make the first move? After all, in this match, he doesn't know the positions of the challengers."

"Someone is heading over!"

The scene cut away. Indeed, one challenger was inching closer to where Fang Zhao was.

Of the three challengers closest to Fang Zhao's starting spot, two of them had started advancing closer.

As for the others, they were probably lying in ambush.

Fang Zhao was still motionless. He seemed to have fused with the wall behind his back, making people suspect whether he had set his account settings to dormant mode.

As for the audience, they watched as the system-displayed minimap showed the distance between both sides as they got closer.

One hundred meters... 50 meters, 40 meters, 30 meters...

When the first challenger was 20 meters away from where Fang Zhao was, he suddenly saw Fang Zhao appear around a corner and raise his gun without any hesitation.

BANG!

There were portraits of the 10 challengers displayed at the top of the live broadcast, and one faded to black.

Killed with one shot! Immediate disconnection!

Time taken: 35 seconds.

The first person to have been killed and disconnected got out of his gaming cabin. He was feeling dejected. Being the first out of 10 people to get kicked out, he wasn't pleased, but he did not blame Fang Zhao.

He had always felt good about himself and was confident in his own ability. His ID could not be seen on the overall leaderboards, but he could place within the top 100 of the subleaderboards for his own continent. For an amateur gamer, this was already considered really good, but now, after less than a minute, he had been killed and forced to disconnect. Up until the moment he'd been shot, he had not even gotten a glimpse of the other's shadow and had had no time to react as his vision turned to black and he was disconnected.

It was as if a bucket of iced water had been splashed over his head, waking him up from his conceited idea.

"Don't tell me the difference is so great?"

The first challenger to fall kept replaying the scenario in his head, recalling whether he had show any openings that the opponent had taken advantage of. He clearly had not made a single sound when getting close, and there was no way the opponent could have seen him.

But soon, he had no time to feel remorseful. The topmost display had changed once again. The second challenger to disconnect after being shot came only three seconds after him. Most likely, when Fang Zhao was handling the first, the second challenger had tried to sneak up behind him but had unfortunately been killed as well.

In less than 40 seconds, two out of 10 were out.

Everyone hoped to be the one to take down the legendary AliveAfter500Years. When Fang Zhao's starting coordinates had been displayed, those who were unwilling to let

the glory be stolen first were also the first to be kicked out of the battlefield.

A silhouette tiptoed carefully to where he reckoned was the best sniping spot. He quietly raised his gun up, calmly waiting for the target to appear.

However, outside the game, the audiences were getting anxious.

"Brother! Don't just check your front! Your side—no, now he's behind you!"

"You are gonna get shut down! Hurry and withdraw!"

"I can already foresee the ending for this brother."

Gaming fans spectating the match all wished they could rush into the game and warn this challenger to evacuate and shout at him: "You have already been exposed!"

BANG!

Another gunshot, and another portrait faded to black.

At 1 minute 27 seconds, 3 out of 10 were out.

"Ha, the sniper had someone knocking on his door! Were his concealment skills too clumsy? He was rather slow to react; is his experience on the leaderboards fake? Or perhaps he had a substitute? Maybe this account was handed to someone else for this match?" someone said in the chatroom.

"Let's watch some more. There are still seven more. Maybe not everyone will be like this."

However, when snipers who thought they had laid an ambush were found by Fang Zhao and shot one after the other, the audience that had been laughing and making jokes about the challengers fell silent. The chatroom and comments section on the live broadcasting platforms became much quieter.

One might be clumsy, two might be clumsy, but could all the challengers all botch their hiding techniques?

The audiences were all watching the live broadcast closely. They all had eyes to see for themselves the standards of these challengers. Although these challengers could not

be considered top notch, they were worthy of their rankings within their own continents. The standard could be considered mid-to-high tier in e-sports circles, and they were way better than the majority of gamers.

Yet they had still been eliminated one after another in quick succession.

When Fang Zhao was motionless, he was like a statue, but when he moved, he could not be stopped. Even the system's monitoring cameras could not necessarily catch up with his silhouette. Many times, it only caught a flickering shadow, just like an apparition.

"I'm starting to believe that Fang Zhao is AliveAfter500Years. If not for the monitoring cameras following Fang Zhao, if I were there, I might not even notice him beside me."

That was also one reason why everyone believed that, in real life, AliveAfter500Years's identity originated from the special forces or was a veteran that had seen actual combat. From the videos of him that had circulated, it proved that he was different from a normal gamer.

Whether it was his concealment techniques, rapid movements, accurate shooting, or even his radar-like awareness, if this was in the real world, it would totally be at the standard of special forces! Even exponents of the military-renowned continent Rongzhou could not compare!

Even e-sports athletes from Rongzhou that bragged about how hard and tough their training was could not perform the movements they saw on the screen in front of them.

"BANG!"

Another gunshot. The ninth challenger had been eliminated.

The match timer showed 8 minutes 30 seconds.

"Really... merciless," someone lamented.

The SilverLight members, upon seeing the rueful atmosphere, could not help but grin slightly.

Is this "showing no mercy"? This is already being too lenient!

Do you know what sort of treatment he gave us back then?

What's so bad about being shot? Why not have a taste of being beaten up before getting shot?!

A sniper being found out does not count for much. At least he's letting you save some face, killing you from around 10 meters away. Have you felt the sullen taste of having a gun pressed to your forehead before being killed?!

Have you felt the pain and suffering of getting disconnected straightaway from a kick?!

That short history of blood and tears would never be told to anyone. Just remembering it left them with heavy hearts. The disparity in strength was just too great, so much so that after joining the SilverLight team, no one had the courage to rebel.

But watching these challengers suffering a similar fate, their hearts felt a little better. Furthermore, thinking about their wagers, the SilverLight members felt much more relaxed.

When these challengers disconnected and left their game cabins, their faces wore blank expressions, totally not comprehending why they had suddenly disconnected. Only after heading online to watch the replay did they understand. Their loss was not unwarranted!

In past exchange matches, with this sort of map and these sorts of players, the matches lasted at least 20 to 30 minutes. But now, was it going to be concluded before 10 minutes?

"Is Fang Zhao really not using 'radar' or any other assistance equipment?"

"Probably not. Didn't Fiery Bird's staff mention it is forbidden? Besides, even if you do use those, what can you even do to him?"

"Nothing."

"As a born and bred District 79er, this brother shall tell you all. All those who escaped following the SilverLight team know that 500Years-god is even more reliable than those warning devices!"

A science student asked, "And why is that?"

"Perhaps... the same principle as a cemetery guard? Born with an in-built hack."

Cemetery guards were widely known to have sharper intuition than sensor equipment, as well as an outstanding perception for detecting danger.

"That kinda makes sense."

"Stop harping on all that! Hurry up and watch. There's just one left."

At this moment, the sole surviving challenger felt like he was bearing a huge burden. In his hands was a high-caliber sniper rifle. Given the 500-meter-wide map this time, even if the map area was doubled, there was no issue. This sniper rifle could still shoot accurately at over 1000 meters!

As long as a tiny bit of the opponent showed up in his crosshairs, he had the confidence to get rid of him!

Whether the opponent was hiding behind a window, a car, or even a wall, he would kill AliveAfter500Years all the same!

However, he had not even caught a glimpse of Fang Zhao. All he heard were some gunshots from time to time. Every time, there were only one or two shots, and every time they rang out, the system gave a notification: one more player had disconnected.

The position he was at was an extremely favorable sniping spot, but since he had camped here, he had only heard gunshots and seen silhouettes of other challengers. Fang Zhao was still nowhere to be seen!

He usually had an accurate grasp of where a target was, but right now, he felt a little foggy.

Undetectable! Unable to determine! Totally no idea!

Where?

Where the hell is he?

Suddenly, he felt a chill across his back, provoking his keen senses. His body became rigid as he moved his line of sight away from the scope of his rifle. A stunned expression was written all over his face. He wanted to turn around and look behind

him, but he didn't have the chance.

BANG!

The 10th challenger had disconnected!

On the display screen, 10 portraits were completely black and the timer had stopped.

Nine minutes 17 seconds.

"It's really within 10 minutes!"

"That... that quick?" A gamer watching the broadcast had not even finished his bowl of rice yet the exchange match had already concluded.

"If it wasn't that quick, there is no way he could have dominated the global No. 1 spot till now."

"Respect!"

"Evaluation complete. Fang Zhao is AliveAfter500Years without question!"

"Now I really believe that he is AliveAfter500Years."

"Say, isn't tomorrow the auction? According to past arrangements, the third day is always the auction."

"Yes. The official website did mention it, but we have no idea what is going to be auctioned. As the No. 1 player on the global leaderboards, Fang Zhao will definitely bring out something to auction. I wonder what it will be."

At every year's Fiery Bird annual conference, they would hold an auction. Social welfare in the New Era was better. As long as one was willing to work hard, contribute, and continue living, regardless of whether they were orphans or teenagers, these beneficiaries would receive relevant aid from various institutions.

People from the Founding Era had emerged from those desperate times. As descendants of those Founding Era pioneers, people of the New Era did not consider themselves useless unless their brains were totally incapable of normal processes. Even if one's body was not robust, if their mind was sound, they could still earn a

living.

Thus, the scale of charity in the New Era was lesser.

The proceeds of Fiery Bird's auction were not for their own use but were totally invested into military constructions.

Having gone through that hundred years of damage, the planet had not yet fully recovered, and excessive mining was still impossible, but development required resources, so there were exploratory missions to foreign planets to search for resources and mining locations. Manpower, material resources, R & D for machines, and many other aspects required lots of military expenditure.

Many who had completed their military services knew that mining on a foreign planet was a real hardship and extremely tiring! Therefore, whenever there were special occasions or donation drives, these people would make a choice of donating to "military expenditures."

Some big companies, famous celebrities, and rich and powerful people would also donate this way. Whether they were flaunting their wealth or if they truly wanted to contribute, all had to go through this process.

Every sum of money accepted during Fiery Bird's auction would be made public with detailed information. This was also under the supervision of relevant departments so nobody had doubts.

Thus, every year, during Fiery Bird's auction, famous e-sports athletes would put forward some of their own items, and fans would bid for them. Supporting their own idols and contributing to military constructions, they were willing to spend this sort of money!

Some gamers already had their own thoughts on the next day's auction.

"Will Fang Zhao take off the clothes he is wearing and auction them? There are this sort every year, right? Shirt, pants, and whatever to be auctioned," someone surmised.

"That's great! Has it been washed? I don't want it if it's been washed. I want those that he wore! No washing!"

"What about your obsession with cleanliness?"

"To hell with that!"

A gaming fan from Huangzhou said, "I criticized Fang Zhao too terribly before. Whatever he produces tomorrow, I will bid on it to atone for my sins. Everyone, please don't fight me for it."

"I think my sins are even greater. Let me have this chance for atonement instead," a Muzhou gamer expressed.

Chapter 168

Pure Slander

For many people who liked to watch videos as they ate, the opening exchange match lasting under 10 minutes was really too short. Normally, when watching a battle, food that could be finished in 3 minutes would be dragged out for half an hour, just right to finish watching a match. Eating while watching competition videos was something lots of game players liked to do, but today, the opening match had unexpectedly ended so quickly!

After the match ended, online discussion became very intense. Some were going through a detailed analysis of the exchange match, while others were making guesses as to how many among the 10 challengers had someone else substituting for them. Yesterday, after the selection of challengers had been announced, a few of the challengers had posted videos, but as long as there was no live broadcast of them logging in, someone else could have substituted for them at the last moment.

Regardless, whether the players had substituted out or not, this exchange match had achieved its goal: nobody doubted Fang Zhao's identity as AliveAfter500Years anymore. Even if there were any remaining skeptics, it was just an extremely small number of people; the majority of gamers had already accepted this fact.

A certain floor in the hotel where Leizhou's team "Wireless" was at.

A youth emerged from his gaming cabin, wearing an expression that was 70% shock and 30% blank. He had been the last challenger to be eliminated.

But when he saw the person sitting in front of him, the youth curbed his facial expressions. Ashamed, he muttered, "Sorry, Senior Master, I was unable to snipe him."

Seated on the chair was Zaro Renault, who seemed to be deep in thought. Hearing what the youth said, he replied, "I feel that you should have used a 10th-generation console. Fang Zhao was using a 10th generation, and the 10th generation sounds superior to the ninth generation. Its a pity I left my 10th generation back in Leizhou."

"...Senior Master, this has nothing to do with the machine. Besides, my performance in

the ninth gen is better than when I use the 10th gen."

"Just a little bit more!" Zaro slammed the armrest in a fit of anger. The other person looked helpless and wanted to say "Senior Master, that wasn't 'just a little bit more'," but he heard Zaro continue, "Just a little bit more and you could have shot him. Whether you hit or miss wouldn't have mattered. I purchased that account and obtained such a mighty sniper rifle and yet you actually didn't manage to get a shot off! I have lost face!"

The youth drooped his head. "...My apologies, Senior Master." He could only say this much. It was not that he hadn't wanted to shoot, but he hadn't even seen a single strand of hair from the opponent! He suspected that Fang Zhao had already perceived his location and had intentionally kept away from there.

Zaro's face was dark and convulsing. Suddenly, he cried out. "How much money does it cost to poach Fang Zhao from Silver Wing?"

His agent mercilessly rejected him. "Just give up on that idea!"

As Zaro's agent, he knew all too well the sort of temperament Zaro had. Unlike Silver Wing, who were prepared to go all out, Wireless e-Sports was just for a round of fun. He also believed that this senior master's passion for e-sports would not persist for long. Since it was only for a time, why was there a need to spend such large sums to poach a single person?

Poaching others was fine. Some others might seem costly, but to them, that was not necessarily the case. However, if they really wished to poach Fang Zhao, that would indeed be forking out a premium! After poaching him over, they would have to operate for longer, and nobody knew how long would it take to recoup the investment. This matter was something he was unwilling to do.

—

On a different floor in the hotel, where 2S e-Sports Club were.

Instead of the boisterous atmosphere of discussion and analysis after watching the exchange match, the area was deathly quiet.

Both were Yanzhou e-sports teams, but till now, they had not come into contact with anyone from SilverLight. The two teams did not have good relations, so they would

not normally hold any practice matches or scrimmages. Thus, 2S's higher management had wanted to use this exchange match as a pretext to test out the renowned AliveAfter500Years's ability. Originally, they had tried to purchase one of the spots for this match, but they had unfortunately been unable to do so.

Given the game's progress and newly released areas, it would be quite some time before they encountered any SilverLight members. Previously, they had felt regret at missing the chance to fight against AliveAfter500Years earlier, but now, this had become joy!

Even if they had managed to obtain a spot for this exchange match, the 2S challenger would probably have ended up like the other 10, and once the information leaked, it would be very disgraceful. Now, the entire internet was discussing the true identities of the 10 challengers.

A gaming pundit from Yanzhou said, "With such a person, Yanzhou is going to be lively in the future."

This brought about considerable pressure to Yanzhou's Big Five e-sports clubs, because as long as Fang Zhao was around, maybe the original equilibrium would be broken.

At the same time, Yanzhou's 10th ranked team, Zebra e-Sports Club, was currently in a terrible mood. On the first day after arriving, they had tried to use Zaro Renault to sound out the SilverLight team on the sixth floor, but they had not expected Zaro to turn around and sell them out. Not to mention that there was still the nightclub incident where Fang Zhao was attacked at their instruction.

A deathly pallor had appeared on the faces of those involved. Given Silver Wing's nature of holding a grudge, these incidents would not be swept under the rug. There were not yet any signs of activity, as Fiery Bird's annual conference was still underway, but the moment the conference ended, Silver Wing's retaliation would come forth.

Touching other people was all right, but having made a move on an important member of the team, Silver Wing would retaliate for real. No wonder Silver Wing's retaliation methods after the nightclub incident had been so vicious.

Silver Wing had always been like this. If you swayed public opinion, Silver Wing would do the same. If you caused trouble, Silver Wing would do it too. Previously, the

nightclub incident had been ordered by two senior management executives. After the incident, those two Zebra e-Sports Club executives had gotten their just desserts. One had been hospitalized and the other had left his job.

The Zebra executive still lying in hospital was full of regret. If he had known Fang Zhao was AliveAfter500Years, even if he'd had 10 balls, he still wouldn't have had the balls to do anything to Fang Zhao!

On the 62nd floor, Wayne was delighted, chatting animatedly with the people around him, probably discussing future plans.

As for Fang Zhao, he wasn't really stirred up. Being mentally over 100 years of age, he was different from other people. Beating those few challengers was nothing to be proud of.

After watching the opening exchange match, among the e-sports athletes from all continents, some turned tail, but there were still others who wanted to pit themselves against Fang Zhao. However, after the opening match, Fang Zhao was nowhere to be found.

Fang Zhao had been invited over to Fiery Bird's headquarters. Engineers were preparing to conduct a study once more. They needed sufficient data to prove the success of the 10th-generation console.

After Tang Can brought Fang Zhao over, he left. There was still too much for him to do, so he could not stay.

Fang Zhao cooperated with the engineers as they ran a few tests. After that, he rested to one side, watching the engineers analyze the data.

A hearty-looking old man with hair the color of snow came and sat beside Fang Zhao. He was Cao Kan, the chief engineer here. Most of the people here had received guidance from Cao Kan, and everyone was used to calling him Chief Cao.

Cao Kan expressed a strong interest toward Fang Zhao. "According to my expectations, of the 100 users of the 10th gen console, I had not expected anyone to achieve an adaptability value of 98 within two years. Never did I expect that in just over three months you would actually hit 99." Cao Ken flashed a kindly smile at Fang Zhao. "Young friend, do you have any interest in working at Fiery Bird's headquarters?"

Fang Zhao looked at Cao Ken but did not speak. Young friend? Adding up your age and your predecessor's age, only then would it be comparable to the person in front of you.

Not getting a reply from Fang Zhao, Cao Ken sighed. "Never mind, you still have your own path to take. I heard that you are an artist? A composer? Heh, that's meaningful. Perhaps we can do some research on this topic, whether the brain of you composers is more active than normal humans?"

"Maybe," Fang Zhao replied.

While Cao Ken spoke with Fang Zhao, his hands did not stop moving. His fingers were flying all over, searching for Fang Zhao's personal information on the internet.

"Eh?" Cao Ken abruptly eyed Fang Zhao suspiciously. "You haven't completed your military service?"

"Nope."

"Then you are in some trouble." Cao Ken brought up a few hot entertainment news articles on the screen and showed them to Fang Zhao. "You are being focused on."

Fang Zhao scanned the articles briefly. Those entertainment reporters had finally found out that Fang Zhao had not done his military service yet.

Why was Fang Zhao's shooting so accurate, why was he so agile? Many entertainment reporters had started their research according to these lines of thought. Since he was not from the special forces, then it might have something to do with his military service. Indeed, there were people who had interactions with firearms or improved their physical abilities during their military service.

Little had they expected that, as they dug, they would find Fang Zhao's university history and that he had not yet enlisted with the military!

This was not hard to find. Just heading to the Qi'an Academy of Music and asking around would do. From Year 1 of university till graduation, there was a record of Fang Zhao's examinations. His school reports were not a secret.

Since there were examination records of every year and there was no gap year in the middle, that meant that, during his university days, he had not done any military service!

Entertainment reporters that discovered this bit of news were thrilled. What they loved the most were currently popular celebrities trying to escape military service.

Fang Zhao was one of the most searched terms on the internet. Although he had not reached the age limit for military service, this topic attracted a lot of viewership.

Furthermore, one who had not done his military service yet had this much skill in-game. Either he was a veteran gamer or he had experience that others did not.

If nobody in the gaming circle had heard of such a godly person previously, then it had to be the latter. As for Fang Zhao's experiences that were different from others... everyone unknowingly thought of the black street.

Thus, when the news was refreshed once more, news articles with these sorts of headlines appeared:

"Shocking! World No.1 Actually Originates from the Black Streets!"

"Unveiling the Little-Known Details of the Black Streets!"

"Exposing Fang Zhao's Life in the Black Streets!"

...

Many people's impressions of the black streets were like this: slum housing, appalling and dirty conditions, fighting and killing everyday, and lots of shady activity going on that never saw the light of day, just like the organized crime syndicates they saw in movies set during the Old Era!

Therefore, online audiences understood.

"So he came from a black street, no wonder he is so impressive!"

"When I saw Fang Zhao had some experience from the black streets, I originally thought it was for a short duration. Seems like Fang Zhao must have lived there for a long time."

"It's rumored that Fang Zhao participated in a black-street gang fight before. Is that true?"

"I heard that people from black streets own guns, and there are gunfights everyday. Fang Zhao didn't just handle a real gun, he even participated in a real battle!"

"I also heard that he is the illegitimate son of a triad boss from the black streets?"

There were also a number of internet users that refuted those claims, saying the black streets were not as bad as imagined. Where had all these gangs even come from?

But these sentiments were quickly crowded out, because a popular web series last year portrayed the black streets this way!

In the minds of these gamers, they had already labeled Fang Zhao as one from the triads.

Artists were already overflowing with inspiration and could not help themselves. With the swishing of brushes, they painted the image in their minds of Fang Zhao's black-street persona: clad in all black, his skin adorned with tattoos, and his eyes hidden behind shades as he smoked a cigarette. One hand held onto a machete as a whole group of people stood behind him. The image displayed a formidable power and haughtiness yet was awe inspiring and cool at the same time!

"Although Fang Zhao looks like a cultured person now, who knows what he looked like back in the black streets? Wasn't it said that Fang Zhao used to look very cool? Maybe he looked just like this!"

"Right, and there are the scars in-game. Perhaps he used to have them on his face. He could have gotten those scars from gang fights and only later use medical techniques to remove them!"

The more audiences thought about it, the more they believed it was actually this way!

In no time, this new image began circulated among gamers.

Fang Zhao, upon seeing his new image illustration: "..."

Yanzhou, Yanbei city's retirement center.

Smash! A watering can was violently smashed onto the ground.

"Utter rubbish!" Great-Grandfather Fang's beard twitched with rage. "Black street

doesn't mean gang activity! These people are just making up a bunch of nonsense! What, what, what... what is this hideous illustration!"

Great-Grandmother Fang sighed beside him. "All these youngsters are watching too many poor-quality shows! What do they think about all day?!"

"What illegitimate child of a triad boss... that is totally slander! Creating rumors and causing trouble! This won't do. I have to speak with little Zhao and clear things up! If these people continue talking, what will the end result be?!"

Although Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother Fang did not exactly know what Fang Zhao's life in the black street had been like, they believed their own great-grandson was not what the rumors perceived him as, taking part in gang fights and whatnot.

Fang Zhao was browsing through the news when he received a call from his great-grandparents, originating from Yanbei city.

"...Got it. Tomorrow, I will clarify... Mmhm, the company's staff have started preparing. Things will be made clear tomorrow... No need... There is really no need for you to step in..."

Great-Grandfather Fang wanted to help Fang Zhao resolve it personally. Although his influence when put on the global scale could not be considered much, if it could help Fang Zhao clarify these rumors, this old man was more than willing to step out.

The chat went on for half an hour. It was rare for Great-Grandfather Fang to talk so much.

After ending the call, Fang Zhao received another call from Wayne. He was informed that Silver Wing would try to contain those online rumors, but it could not entirely prevent them. After all, as long as there was discussion, there would be attention.

"Everything is all prepared. At the auction tomorrow, you can use the chance to explain and, at the same time, announce your decision to withdraw from the team and prepare for your military service." Wayne was afraid that Fang Zhao might be affected by all the slander and rumors online. "Those rumors might not all be from gamers. Some rival companies probably have a hand in them as well. They are just looking forward to squeezing you out. You just have to wait for the best chance. Stay calm, don't worry."

"I'm not worried, and I'm pretty calm," Fang Zhao replied.

Chapter 169

Temporary Withdrawal

It was already late when Fang Zhao left Fiery Bird's R&D department. Fang Zhao headed straight back to his hotel to rest, the online buzz not affecting him one bit. Only, on his way back, the people he encountered gave him inquisitive looks, and some even came up to ask if he had a triad family background.

Rumors online ranged from him being in a gang from the black street to being the illegitimate son of a triad boss to having a triad family background, and now they were guessing whether or not Fang Zhao had ever killed someone. The world would always have people making guesses with evil intentions. Furthermore, the driving forces behind these would love to tarnish Fang Zhao's reputation even more. It would be best if they could drive Fang Zhao out of this circle. Even if getting rid of him was impossible, it would still damage his reputation and popularity. After all, Fang Zhao's name had been trending too much in the gaming circles the past two days.

For this iteration of the annual conference, the limelight had all been stolen by him. Just taking a look at any famous, reputable gaming forum would do. Topics regarding Fang Zhao, regardless of whether they were gossip or posts on his techniques, would occupy at least half the page!

This was the definite result of extreme popularity. Rational fans anxiously awaited more information. Hot-tempered fans took their quarrels online. Fans that supported Fang Zhao and those that tried to defame him argued nonstop. Silver Wing's official announcement was not clear-cut; all it said was to have patience, that Fang Zhao would give an explanation to everyone the next day.

Generally, when it came to the third day of Fiery Bird's annual conference, gaming fans through the world, regardless of time zones, would stay in front of their screens, especially fans that intended to take part in the auction and bid on their own idol's belongings and had long prepared their funds.

And today, the most eyes were naturally on Fang Zhao, the trending topic. Silver Wing had announced that Fang Zhao would be giving an explanation today. Members of the media were rubbing their hands in glee, waiting for Fang Zhao to release his juicy

information.

The auction was held in the same conference hall as the prize presentation.

Just like past years, the first item up for bidding was Fiery Bird's own. Fiery Bird fans across the world held their breath. Even if they could not afford it, just seeing it for themselves was an additional topic to talk about.

Many people speculated that, for this year, Fiery Bird would auction off a 10th-generation console. Many gaming fans not in the first batch of 100 users and who had the assets were all waiting to fight for it.

However, the item Fiery Bird brought out was an old machine, Fiery Bird's first-generation console, Venus.

"One hundred years ago, we, Fiery Bird, first set foot in the gaming industry. Ninety years ago, our first-generation Fiery Bird console was born. It was named 'Venus'..."

On stage, Tang Can vivaciously painted the history of Fiery Bird's games and the development of their consoles.

For gamers, the value of collecting a game console depended on the person that used it previously.

A fifth-generation console used by an e-sports god 50 years ago had been auctioned off for a high price two years back, the value more than doubling.

Something else that could attract gaming fans to make high bids were feelings.

Clearly there were no 10th-generation machines, but the original first-generation console was extremely nostalgic. Especially for gamers over 100 years old, the original console brought back many sentiments.

During the auction of the original first-generation console, Fiery Bird's chairman, shareholders, and other senior executives in the company cheered. There were inscriptions engraved on that first-generation console by the previous chairman:

"Never forget our original aspirations; encourage progress."

Watching the enlarged words on the screen, Fang Zhao asked Jinro beside him, "What

were Fiery Bird's 'original aspirations'?"

Despite being a veteran gamer that had been in the gaming circle for quite some time, Jinro was stumped by this question. Mulling it over for a bit, he replied, "Maybe it's to make the company bigger and better? After that, to manufacture the best games and game consoles?"

Finally, the first-generation console was sold to a 130+ year old entrepreneur for a winning bid of 60 million.

Before "Battle of the Century" had been released, the value of a 10th-generation console had already been hyped up to 60 million. Three days after the game's release, the price had been estimated at around 80 million. Now, it was already more than 100 million.

The original game console naturally could not compare with the 10th generation. Given the production costs and technology of the first generation, getting such a high price was not so easy.

Many of the first generation's microchips and various components had since halted production. Gamers that had used this machine had long chucked it aside, and many of these original consoles had long been recycled.

Even if these machines had been preserved, not every first-generation machine would be able to obtain such a high price. Preserving this sort of machine required meticulous maintenance, which was time consuming. The costs were not cheap either, so generally, not many people were willing to make such an effort.

Furthermore, this first-generation console had an engraved inscription from the late Fiery Bird chairman. This was something that no other first-generation console could compete with. Perhaps, after a few decades, as long as this machine was maintained well, reselling it might fetch an even higher price.

After the auction of the first-generation console, the chatter slowly died down. Everyone was waiting for today's other extremely anticipated person to go on stage.

Fang Zhao was not wearing a SilverLight team uniform but a formal suit Silver Wing had prepared for him. Many people had some sort of idea upon seeing the situation. Indeed, Fang Zhao would be auctioning his team jersey.

It was nothing astonishing and was expected.

Once the set of clothes were taken out, there wouldn't be any surprised looks in the crowd.

Actually, auctioning off the team jersey was something that Silver Wing had contemplated for a long time before deciding on. At the start, Wayne had wanted to advise Fang Zhao to bring out something that would attract more people, such as score sheets, manuscripts, or other such stuff, but later, they had decided it was not appropriate.

Fang Zhao might be really popular right now, but whether it was in the gaming circles or composing circles, he was still a newcomer. The gaming circles might have no qualms, but the main issue was the composing circles. Doing so might give rise to the discontent of many senior composers.

The line of thought was that academics might find these actions disrespectful to his works. Auctioning off score sheets in the gaming circle? Which gamers could understand them?

Nope. Gamers with a professional foundation were too few. A score sheet in the hands of the majority of gamers would be like an ancient scripture. In any case, placing it in front of them was the same: incomprehensible.

If faced with some sensitive composers, they would think, Does auctioning off your score sheet for a high price prove that you are more capable than others? Can artistic works be purely measured by value?

Since it was not just one circle, and as a newcomer without enough qualifications, Wayne advised Fang Zhao to do the same as others and auction off his clothes. That would be the most practical and least offending.

On the chest area of the jacket Fang Zhao had brought out, some people noticed a badge. That was the captain's badge. Furthermore, watching the close-up on the screen, other than the tree-shaped team emblem, Fang Zhao's name was also engraved on it.

Fang Zhao had worn this badge for the first time at yesterday's exchange match; the cameras just had not featured a close-up of it.

"Auctioning off his team jersey with a badge thrown in?" someone commented online.

"This has never happened before, right?"

"In the past, only team jerseys were auctioned, not the badges."

As everyone was busy discussing, Fang Zhao voiced his thoughts. "I received a call from my great-grandfather yesterday. Seeing those rumors circulating online, this old man was very angry."

Hearing Fang Zhao mention his "great-grandfather," everyone pricked their ears up. Where had this great-grandfather originated from? Was he from the rumored black-street gangs?

As if he could tell what everyone was thinking, Fang Zhao displayed a photograph on the screen behind him. It was a box filled with neatly arranged military medals.

The buzzing of discussion in the conference died down.

"The old man would definitely allow me to show this. These were military medals received by my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Both of them served on the spaceship Sirius during their military service.

Sirius was among the space exploration pioneers of the New Era. Although the spaceship had since been decommissioned, it had never vanished from movies and TV and remained well remembered. It represented the significance of that era.

On the internet forums, gaming fans who saw this were flabbergasted.

"Military service aboard a spaceship? Sounds really cool!"

"Cool my *ss! Military service aboard a spaceship is even more tiring than mining! And the risk and dangers are way higher! Furthermore, among the people that served aboard the pioneer battlespaceships, not many are still alive."

"Looking at these medals, Fang Zhao's great-grandfather is at least of a regimental rank and should be qualified to own guns. Furthermore, the guns he has are probably rare models."

"So envious. Fang Zhao has surely played with those guns before."

"Whatever the case, this at least proves that Fang Zhao's family background is not a triad."

This time, no one associated Fang Zhao or his family with gangs. Regardless of whatever they thought deep down or whether they had any doubts, they would not voice it out. This box of military medals and the military service aboard the Sirius were two important points. They had to at least show some respect for these two old folks. As for whether Fang Zhao was really related to a gang and whether he had killed, these were merely rumors. Without proper evidence, they did not dare to blather. A little carelessness could result in trouble. If Fang Zhao's great-grandparents were no longer living, it would be fine, but both his old folks were living well. If they were to get serious about seeking out these rumormongers, that would be tragic.

Fang Zhao did not take notice of the audience's reactions. He continued, "When I visited my great-grandparents during last year's memorial holiday, I spoke about my military service plans with them. However, due to work commitments, I was unable to apply for enlistment last year. This year, though, I have decided to enlist in the April cycle."

There were two enlistment cycles for military service in a year: April and October.

Did Fang Zhao mean to enlist for military service in April? Then what of the game? Was he quitting? What about the team? Was he finally going to relinquish his throne of the first position?

The quiet conference hall once again buzzed with the noise of discussion. Some people were so delighted they wanted to set off firecrackers. They had racked their heads thinking of a solution to force Fang Zhao out, but never had they expected that Fang Zhao would actually be enlisting for military service! Hahahahaha!

There were others who felt regrettable that they would not have a chance to encounter Fang Zhao in-game and who wanted to spar with him before he enlisted.

Fang Zhao paused momentarily before announcing, "From today onward, I will be temporarily withdrawing from 'Battle of the Century.' I will return after my military service has been completed."

Gaming fans were dumbfounded. That fast?!

Everyone had too many questions, but Fang Zhao did not continue. There was no need

for him to speak too much. After all, this was Fiery Bird's auction, not his own personal fan meet. Time was limited, and he had briefly mentioned the important points. Everything else would be handled by Silver Wing's relevant departments.

With Fang Zhao temporarily withdrawing, even if he returned after his military service, the captain position might not necessarily be returned to him. That meant to say that the captain's badge on this team jersey might be the only one of its kind!

Thus, when the auction started, the figure shot up in a straight line.

On the large screen, from the starting bid of 10,000, it jumped to 100,000, 200,000, 500,000, 800,000...

As it went on, the number of people bidding became fewer, but as before, the figure continued to rise.

Chapter 170

Diehard Fan

As this was the first time Silver Wing's e-sports department was taking part in the auction segment, Wayne viewed it with utmost importance. Since there was lots of funding, manufacturing of the team jerseys had been done with the finest materials. Yesterday, when they had been preparing this set of Fang Zhao's clothes, Wayne had personally watched as his staff cleaned and tidied the clothes then wiping the captain's badge till it was sparkling before putting it on.

It could be said that, even if this set of clothing was placed in a store, it would not be sold at a low price. The production cost for these clothes was at least 2,000 to 3,000. With a starting bid of 10,000, three times the cost, it was not considered very high. Wayne had estimated the clothes to be auctioned off for around 35,000, which was considered really high. This was when comparing with past examples of popular e-sport athletes.

If no one bid for it, Wayne would let some internal Silver Wing staffers bid for it in the shadows and jack up the price.

Supporting one's own interests from the shadows was a method that every e-sports club employed. On the surface, it would look better, and Wayne had felt that if the price were not jacked up to at least 1.8 million, he would be letting down Silver Wing's brand.

However, Wayne was now staring with his mouth agape at the figures that were still rapidly shooting up.

Eight hundred thousand... 1 million..... 1.5 million... 2.3 million...

Looking at the bidders, there were some displayed IDs and some anonymous IDs. When it came to online bidding, some people were unwilling to reveal their personal information and would set up an anonymous profile. Confidentiality was something that Fiery Bird permitted.

Passing the 1 million mark, the number of bidders fell drastically, and when it reached

2 million, there were basically only five or six bidders left.

Even if Fang Zhao was a hot topic and his popularity was on the rise, he was still a newcomer to the gaming circles. As it was only a set of team jerseys, 35,000 was already considered a premium and even entertainment media outlets would exaggerate it, but now, the price had been jacked up so high...

In the conference hall, some people watched the SilverLight team with a profound look. To jack up the price, Silver Wing were really going all out.

Wayne's face was rigid. Drooping his head, he sent a message to his staff in the shadows. "That's enough! Stop jacking it up!"

Only appropriate price jacking was considered good work. Overdoing it was not beneficial! This bunch was so unprofessional.

The looks of people in the surroundings made the self-declared thick-skinned Wayne feel like he was on fire.

However, the person in charge of the shadow operations pleaded innocence. "We didn't. It really isn't us jacking up the price. There has simply been no chance for us to step forward!"

Eh?

It's not our own people jacking up the price?

Wayne was really flabbergasted. Was it really Fang Zhao's diehard fans bidding?

Watching the figures on the screen, the current bid had already passed 2.7 million and was still climbing towards 3 million.

Currently, there were only three active bidders left.

Wayne leaned toward Fang Zhao and muttered, "That 'Little Leaf' currently bidding, do you know him?"

"Yes."

"Oh? Who is he?" Wayne was curious.

"Ming Cang."

Wayne: "...That former headmaster of the Qi'an Academy of Music?"

"I just received a message from him. He says his son, Ming Ye, 1 is recovering well, so he decided to win this set of team jerseys as a memorial day gift for Ming Ye," Fang Zhao explained.

Wayne nodded his head. "So that's it." If it was Ming Cang, he could understand.

Fang Zhao's "100-Year Period of Destruction" series had provided a treatment direction for Ming Cang's sick son. There was hearsay that the treatment effects were going well and Ming Cang was very grateful toward Fang Zhao. Whether he really wanted to get it as a gift for Ming Ye or he was simply using this situation as an excuse to help out, either way, that pleased Wayne.

Wayne asked Fang Zhao about another ID that was still in the bidding war. "What about 'ATreasuredKnifeDoesNotAge'?"

"My great-grandfather," Fang Zhao replied. The old master had said he wanted to root for his great-grandson.

Wayne's facial muscles trembled. "...The old master is really awesome."

The three remaining ID's were "Little Leaf", "ATreasuredKnifeDoesNotAge" and "Anonymous." Two IDs were known; only the anonymous one was left.

"Do you know who the anonymous ID is?" Wayne quizzed.

"No idea." Fang Zhao was puzzled too. He really did not know.

As they were talking, the figures on the screen changed once more, and many people in the conference hall could not help but exhale sharply.

Looking up at the current bids, after "Little Leaf" had bid 3 million, the bid had suddenly risen to 5 million. The caller was Anonymous.

It was just a set of team jerseys, not some limited edition item or a treasured belonging of a certain great master that had passed on. It was just the clothing of a newcomer that had risen to prominence. Although there was a captain's badge and Fang Zhao's

reason for temporarily withdrawing, there was no need to be so excessive! This was utterly excessive!

Silver Wing's self promotion? Otherwise, who else would fork out 5 million just to buy a set of clothing?

Zaro sneered as he told his manager, "I have no idea which idiot would actually spend 5 million to purchase such an ordinary set of clothing." Raising his head, he realized many pairs of eyes were on him, and although it didn't happen a lot, he was enlightened and knew what the stares of these people actually meant.

Zaro raised his voice slightly. "What are you staring at? That wasn't my bid!"

Nobody could be blamed for looking at him this way. In the hearts of many, throwing money around had always been Zaro's style. Just yesterday in the leisure district, he had still been talking about wanting to poach Fang Zhao over to Wireless e-Sports Club, and the latest bid being a massive jump from 3 million to 5 million was totally in the style of what Zaro's sort would do.

Following Zaro's outburst, nobody suspected him any more. Although Zaro had all sorts of shortcomings, he wouldn't go so far as to lie about this. People that were familiar with Zaro's style knew that if this Senior Master really wanted to bid, he would not use an anonymous ID. He would want to let the whole world know he had money and then bid excessively. This remarkably foolish person had too much money.

Ultimately, Fang Zhao's set of team clothing was sold to the highest bid of 5 million. This left many people shocked, and the internet started to boil once more. Chat rooms and forums were all discussing this.

And everyone's conclusion after discussing was that such a high bid could only be a diehard fan of Fang Zhao or a self-promotion scheme by Silver Wing!

More people were inclined to believe the second possibility and felt that it was surely a means of self-promotion by Silver Wing! Their internal staff had purposely raised the price!

Whether it was those present in the conference or the online viewers watching the live broadcast, they all felt the same way. Even if Silver Wing had officially announced that their internal staff had not taken part in the auction, nobody believed them.

"Isn't this the highest ever bid in any year?"

"For team clothing, that is indeed the highest ever."

Although there were bids of over 5 million in the auctions of the following items, those items were game consoles, and the manufacturing costs and starting bids were already very high.

After the auction, everyone was still discussing the high price of Fang Zhao's set of team attire. Many people thought, if it really was all a charade by Silver Wing, would it infuriate Fiery Bird? Or perhaps attract more disgust from even more people? After all, most gaming clubs had secret operations behind the scenes, but jacking up the price to such ridiculous extremes had never been seen before. Even if it had happened, the offending parties would be placed on Fiery Bird's unwanted list.

There always had to be a limit when it came to hyping up in a business. If it was overdone, it would not be that popular and would instead result in an adverse reaction.

Wayne was also worried, so once the auction ended, he wanted to look for the highest-ranking board member in Silver Wing's entourage and get him to explain to the relevant Fiery Bird officials. However, before Wayne even moved out, Fiery Bird announced that the anonymous buyer had no relations whatsoever to Silver Wing, that he was just a fan of Fang Zhao.

Someone found it inconceivable. "How fanatical must he be to throw that much money just to get Fang Zhao's team attire?"

"Maybe that person has no lack of cash?"

"Or perhaps he just wants to use it as an excuse to contribute to military expenditures?"

"It's a pity it was anonymous. We won't know who it is."

Fang Zhao was also curious himself and inquired with Fiery Bird staff after the auction concluded, but he did not get an answer either. Fiery Bird placed great importance on customer confidentiality.

Wayne had a positive perspective. "Forget it. Since they actually said it is a fan of yours,

that person will appear in future, maybe at a fan meet or some related event." Besides, it was not their behind-the-scenes methods that had resulted in big news, so he had the confidence to say all this.

As for who had bought it and what intentions they had, Wayne no longer cared. Having been with Silver Wing for so long, he had seen this sort of situation many times and did not find it strange. It was tiring if they had to get to the bottom of everything.

Back at the hotel, Fang Zhao ran into Mazhou's Ma Xier, the gold-medalist shooter ranked No. 2 on the individual leaderboards.

"Are you really going to enlist in April?" Ma Xi'er asked Fang Zhao.

"Yeah. I will hand in my application after Memorial Day," Fang Zhao replied. The time period for enlistment had not arrived yet, but all his company matters had already been arranged. All he needed was for Memorial Day to pass before sending in his application.

Ma Xier watched Fang Zhao with a complicated gaze. Suddenly, he laughed. "Just as well. I am preparing to temporarily withdraw too. There is no meaning in climbing up to first on the leaderboards if you aren't there. Besides, compared to games, I still prefer playing with real guns. Have you played with real ones before?" Ma Xier asked.

"I have," Fang Zhao replied. "I have a member card over at Yanzhou's shooting club."

Fang Zhao had indeed applied for a member card at Yanzhou's shooting club and had gone there to handle some New Era firearms.

"That's great. When you have the time, visit Mazhou, and I will bring you to a shooting range. Shooting athletes all around the world love Mazhou shooting ranges the best. They have the most specialized ranges and large areas. Even Huangzhou's most famous shooting range cannot compare to the one in Mazhou." As Ma Xier talked about Mazhou's shooting ranges, his face subconsciously displayed some pride.

The competition continent, Mazhou, was a heaven for athletes of all sports.

"Sure."

After exchanging contact details with Ma Xier, Fang Zhao headed upstairs.

An hour after the auction, Ma Xier posted a new update on his social platform, announcing his decision to temporarily withdraw from "Battle of the Century." When Fang Zhao returned, only then would he continue. It just so happened that he had competitions in real life and considered them a priority.

Three hours after the auction ended, Fiery Bird officially released some data from the 10th-generation console that Fang Zhao had assisted in obtaining as well as a short video of Fang Zhao on the day of the exchange match. In the video, viewers could see the adaptability video soaring to 98 and even hitting 99 on a number of occasions.

Fiery Bird used this as a pretext to refute the many cynics from within the industry who had spoken up after the 10th-generation console had been released.

When the 10th-generation console had just been released, a professional from the industry had estimated that, in three years, there would not be a single gamer that could successfully adapt to the 10th generation and that it was impossible for the 10th generation to become mainstream in the short term!

After that, he had even said that some e-sports club members did not really use the 10th-generation console and chose to switch back to the 9th generation while shelving the 10th generation, only using it to adapt once in a while at leisure. The expensive 10th generation that gamers could not adapt to was a big mistake by Fiery Bird!

But now, four months after the release of the 10th-generation console and three months since "Battle of the Century" had been released, someone had genuinely adapted fully.

As the user was Fang Zhao, all gamers had the same line of thought: If they could raise their adaptability value to 98, would they be as impressive as Fang Zhao?

With an adaptability value of 98, what would the experience be like? Would judgement and perception be raised? Would movements be more relaxed? Would shooting be more accurate?

Global ranked No. 3 and mainforce captain of Huangzhou's Phoenix e-Sports Club Bruce also used the 10th-generation machine. When faced with his teammates' and fans' inquiries, he replied, "I also do not know. I'm only 95, but I feel like I'm going to break through soon. In a months time, it might be 96. I will let everyone know what the experience is like when I hit 98."

As for gamers without the 10th-generation console but who were well off, they all wondered if they could obtain one to try it out for themselves. Who knew if they had the innate talent to adapt quickly?

Of course, there were others who did not feel so strongly about games and felt that this way of thinking was too crazy. Spending so much money to purchase a game console that they might not adapt to might be a waste! Wasn't it just a game console? There were high maintenance fees just to keep it as an ornament. Were they just going to chuck aside the 9th-generation console that was easier to adapt to and purchase a 10th-generation console? Even if the 10th-generation console had a second batch of sales, there wouldn't be many buyers! Forget about it even becoming mainstream.

As the internet was abuzz with discussion, on the SilverLight team's side, the members were already packing up their stuff. Fiery Bird's annual conference had come to an end, and they would be returning back to Yanzhou the next morning.

"Wayne, bring the others back to Yanzhou tomorrow. I will be visiting Muzhou before returning," Fang Zhao told Wayne who had just ended a call.

Wayne's smiling face suddenly tightened. "What are you heading to Muzhou for?" He was worried that a team in Muzhou wanted to poach Fang Zhao away. This time around, many teams had expressed an interest to poach.

"To fetch my dog," Fang Zhao replied.

Wayne let out a huge sigh of relief in his heart. "Oh, right, your champion dog is still in Muzhou, herding sheep."

The memorial holiday was approaching soon and the people in Muzhou needed to celebrate too. Furthermore, people of Muzhou treated Memorial Day with great importance, and all members of the Su family had to return to Qingcheng. Su Hou would not be staying at the farm, so Fang Zhao had decided to bring Curly Hair back to Yanzhou.

"How will you be heading over? Do you need me to request another flying transport?" Wayne asked.

"No need. The boss of Muzhou's Four Elephants Foodstuff, Su Feng, is here in Huangzhou. I just talked to him, and he will be leaving for Muzhou tomorrow. I will join him and fly straight to Muzhou's Dongshan Farm."

"How long will you be gone for?"

"Three or four days, depending on the situation."

"Then you better bring Zuo Yu with you. Make sure to be careful!" Wayne exhorted. "You are now a famous celebrity and lots of people will recognize you. Put on some disguises when you head out. Also, don't spend too long in Muzhou. The company has planned an interview program for the SilverLight team before Memorial Day. Now that you are especially popular, return a little earlier to record. Otherwise, if you wait too long, everyone will have shoved you to the back of their minds. Online audiences have very short memories."

After exhorting repeatedly, Wayne started to think of topics that could continue hyping up Fang Zhao on the days he was in Muzhou to ensure the audiences didn't forget him.

With Memorial Day approaching, many entertainment companies would be releasing new-year blockbusters, and many celebrities would be in the news. Now that Fiery Bird's annual conference had come to an end, e-sports clubs would postpone climbing the leaderboards and would prepare for some rest and reorganization. Entertainment companies would take over the bombardment of the entertainment news. Perhaps many people would place Fang Zhao at the back of their minds the following day.

Chapter 171

Not Worth It

The next day, Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu boarded Su Feng's flying transport and headed for Muzhou together.

Four Elephants Foodstuff's growth had been relatively good. The influence of Polar Light's image was on the rise because of the SilverLight team and the world's No. 1, Fang Zhao. This had enabled Four Elephant's products to do better than other Muzhou brands and thus be more popular among youngsters. After all, younger people tended to play games or know more about the gaming circles.

"This year's Memorial Day gifts have already been sent out. You guys at Silver Wing have a share too and should receive them tomorrow. How nice that your department will be back to receive them." The Memorial Day gifts Su Feng had sent out this year were more abundant. As profits were great, he naturally wouldn't be stingy.

As they talked about Fang Zhao being AliveAfter500Years and the high price of the team attire, Su Feng mentioned the happenings at Dongshan Farm.

Su Feng laughed. "Oh, that fella Su Hou was recently given a beating by his dad."

Su Hou had been keeping Fang Zhao updated on the goings-on at his side as well as the farm's progress, but lately, Su Hou had only been sending text messages, not video ones, and whenever Su Hou called, he did not enable video mode either.

"An argument?" Fang Zhao asked. What went on in the Su family was no secret. Muzhou's entertainment journalists loved to report on the conflicts within the Su family.

Su Feng's grin was especially wide. "Mmhm. Su Hou got into a fight with his half-brothers. Can you guess what happened?" Not waiting for Fang Zhao to reply, he continued, "I heard that neither side brought their bodyguards, but the other side had two people: one around the same age as Su Hou, and one older than him. Su Hou received some small wounds, but the other people were more severely injured. Because Su Hou had brought a dog! Hahahaha!" Su Feng convulsed with laughter and

nearly fell out of his chair.

"The one he brought along was that little Curly Hair. He really deserves to be called a champion dog. It's fighting strength is quite impressive."

During their conversation, the flying transport had already arrived at Dongshan Farm and was descending to the parking space. Su Hou, who had received the news, was already waiting.

There were no longer any marks on Su Hou's face from his father's beating.

Curly Hair ran over like the wind, encircling Fang Zhao and wagging its tail vigorously, showing that he was excited to see Fang Zhao.

"You seem to be in high spirits." Fang Zhao picked Curly Hair up and examined him. There were bits of grass on Curly Hair's body, but closer to the skin, it was still relatively clean, and he had been well taken care of. Curly Hair had probably just been playing in the grass and so had bits of grass and soil sticking to him.

"Master Zhao! Long time to see!" Su Hou's tone was excited. Previously, Fang Zhao had just been a cooperative partner and someone who had helped him escape a dire predicament. Su Hou had been very grateful for that, but now he totally worshipped Fang Zhao.

Su Hou had been underage for "Battle of the Century," but he had been following the game's news closely. When Fang Zhao had unveiled himself as AliveAfter500Years, Su Hou had been equally shocked, but after the shock had come delight and excitement. Other people would find it hard to even see AliveAfter500Years, but he could speak with Fang Zhao over the comms every week, even though it was only about farm matters.

Before, Fang Zhao had only seen the changes of the farm through video. Now that he was here, Su Hou led the way, telling Fang Zhao what each piece of land was for.

"The soil has already improved, the seeds we planted there have already sprouted and should be able to survive winter, so there is no need to apply antifreeze. Over there is still empty. When spring comes round, we will plant some new seeds my brother has given me. The crop was cultivated in a space laboratory. Actually, it has been cultivated for quite some time already, but they held it back to ensure the fruit was entirely safe. Now, it has been confirmed to be safe, and what I have is the first batch..."

Su Hou professionally introduced Fang Zhao to every place on the farm. Now there were cultivated fields, pastures, and an extended building for the workers to stay in.

Su Hou was also no longer that ignorant little fatty he had once been. He had indeed worked hard at farming.

As they strolled along, a pack of dogs started barking and ran over.

The few large dogs at the head of the pack seemed familiar. There were not from Wu Yi's farm. Those few competition dogs from the previous year had all been returned to Wu Yi. Only Curly Hair remained here.

"Are these the dogs left behind by the previous owner?" Fang Zhao asked as he looked at the lively and well-built dogs at the head of the pack.

"That's right, it's them."

When the dogs neared and saw the unfamiliar faces of Fang Zhao and Zuo Yu, they started barking. However, Curly Hair gave a low growl and they all stopped.

"A while back, they were too lazy and had no vigilance at all. The professional dog trainers I hired were not effective. The trainers even said that these dogs had already been raised to waste away and no amount of training would improve them. However, ever since Curly Hair came, all of them have changed..." Su Hou was in high spirits and rambled on and on about the dogs to Fang Zhao.

Normally, when Su Hou called Fang Zhao, they mostly talked about the farm. He had also mentioned the situation with the dogs before, but he had not gone into much detail. Now, though, Su Hou finally had to chance to go into extensive detail with Fang Zhao about all this. This was also the place he was most proud of; he had flaunted it many times. Take a look! Even the dogs that the trainers gave up on are gradually improving on my farm!

These dogs had been really useless in the past. Why else had Su Hou needed to borrow Wu Yi's dogs? But now they were no longer as dispirited as before and were more vigilant. At the start, they had all followed after and learned from Curly Hair. When Curly Hair barked at strangers, they did the same. If they didn't do so, or they barked wrongly, Curly Hair reprimanded them. Slowly, as time went by, these dogs had begun to understand a few simple things. They now knew how to bark at strangers—when familiar people were with strangers, they should selectively growl. When they

didn't understand, they should bark first. Besides, if it was wrong, the owner would stop them.

"Although they were still far from Curly Hair's standard and still could not compare with the dogs on Wu Yi's farm, compared to the way they were before, it is already a big improvement. Now, they can do basic guard duty and are learning how to herd sheep. I don't have any hope of them taking part in competitions, but they are at least capable of simple guarding and are halfway there to being proper working dogs." Su Hou did not set very high bars for his dogs, so he was very satisfied with their current standard.

Actually, these dogs were all being trained by Curly Hair. Sleeping when it was time to run? Bite! Roaming around when you were supposed to be standing guard? Bite! Not following the rules during feeding time and messing up the bowls? Bite! Excitedly running over to suspicious characters? Vicious bite!

Hearing Su Hou say all this, Fang Zhao felt that Curly Hair was just treating these few dogs as younger brothers and teaching them, or maybe it was finding some fun.

"These few puppies are the ones I told you about. I went to buy them from other people and I'm intending to train them for competition use. There is championship blood running through their veins. I spent lots of hard-earned money to purchase them." Muzhou dogs were expensive, especially the descendants of champion dogs!

In other continents, youngsters from aristocratic families liked to buy cars with the money they had in hand and changed them often. Here in Muzhou, the aristocratic youngsters loved buying dogs. Even Su Feng, who did not take part in sheep-herding competitions, also bought dogs that he had good feelings toward.

The few pups on the farm, as well as other pups that Fang Zhao had placed orders for but had not arrived yet, had cost almost all of the money that Su Hou had put together. Money from advertisements, prize money from competitions, and red packets from other Su family members and others had all been used to exchanged for dogs. Luckily, he had Fang Zhao as an investor and the farm's constructions had never ceased.

"This year, there is no need for rat extermination. There are totally no rats or mice in the farm's area. I heard that there were some rabbits and other small wild animals in the surrounding area, but I have never seen any..." Su Hou had just thought about this and was airing his thoughts.

Fang Zhao shot a glance at Curly Hair, who was following beside his feet. Curly Hair raised his head, made eye contact, then drooped his ears and retracted his gaze.

Back when they were on Wu Yi's farm, Curly Hair had gone with Bingo and the other dogs to hunt field mice and had even eaten them. Fang Zhao suspected that all the field mice on that farm had all been eaten up. Perhaps the wild rabbits in the farm's vicinity might have had such a calamity befall them as well.

Su Hou led Fang Zhao to a newly constructed courtyard. This was the courtyard of the owner's house.

"This house has been specially prepared for Master Zhao. You don't have to worry about not having a place to stay whenever you come," Su Hou introduced.

Fang Zhao pointed at a room in the corner where a "No trespassing or unauthorized personnel" sign was hanging. "And what is that over there?"

"Oh, that is my own gaming room. Oh, right, my dad said he would send me a 10th-generation console. I should be receiving it some time today, if not tomorrow." Su Hou seemed pleased.

Su Hou's father had given a piece of farmland to one of his illegitimate sons. Su Hou had not just argued with his dad for wrongly accusing him of releasing a dog to bite his half-brothers but also because of this matter. Although it was a small farm and could not be compared to Dongshan Farm and the land he'd received for winning the championship, Su Hou still felt displeased.

After Su Hou had received the beating, with his face full of bruises, he had run to the cemetery and sat in front of Su Mu's grave, complaining. The next day, Muzhou's entertainment news had all been about the internal conflicts in Su Hou's family and how they expected to see a brilliant and excited aristocratic family feud.

But in no time, whether Su Hou's dad had clarified the truth of the dog-biting matter or if his conscience had acted up or if it was pressure from the family heads, he had given Su Hou a 10th-generation console, something Su Hou had been longing for. After that, Su Hou had went to get treatment for his bruises on his face and temporarily stopped butting heads with his dad.

In the eyes of Muzhou audiences, Su Hou was just an idiot—young, ignorant, and childish. His dad was of a higher level and settled the internal feud easily with just a

gaming console.

The majority of Muzhou people did not really pay much attention to video game consoles. Instead of buying the expensive-as-hell 10th-generation console, why not purchase the ninth generation, which was sufficient to play the latest games, and the money saved could be used to buy new breeds of seeds or dogs.

Among the 12 continents, Muzhou had the lowest standards of e-sports competition. It was not that the people were not capable of playing or had no time, but that instead, when compared to crops, soil, and dogs, gaming was not that important. It was just a pleasurable activity. Choosing between watching a gaming competition or a sheep-herding competition, most people from Muzhou would choose the latter.

The reason why everyone said that Su Hou was foolish was because, comparing a video game console to a farm, which of the two was more important? Giving up the feud over a farm for a video game console was totally not worth it!

Chapter 172

No Way of Explaining

Whether others saw it as worthwhile or not, at least Su Hou felt that his rage had simmered. After all, he did not count on his dad to follow his wishes. His argument with his dad had just been to make known his dissatisfied feelings and give his father a piece of his mind.

Su Hou now owned two plots of land. One was Dongshan Farm, which he currently co-invested in with Fang Zhao and was in the midst of becoming operable. Of course, in such a short time, profits were not yet in the pipeline, but because of the sheep-herding championships, the farm had at least some degree of reputation. Perhaps in a few years it would be profitable.

The other plot of land had been awarded for winning the sheep-herding championship. Su Hou had plans to construct a farm there, but currently, the plot of land was being held by an uncle of Su Hou's, Su Feng's father. He would hold the land till Su Hou had matured. It was not that his uncle coveted Su Hou's land—he was just worried about Su Hou's IQ and easily susceptible nature, it would be best to safeguard the land for a few years. After Su Hou matured and gained experience, he would then hand it back.

Su Hou approved of this. He also knew that he wasn't very bright. If not for the stroke of fortune he'd had running into Fang Zhao, he would have fallen flat on his face regarding the matter with Dongshan Farm.

The Su family as a whole was not as extremely chaotic as outsiders liked to think. Just like the Renaults of Leizhou, although there were occasionally trifling matters that tabloids loved to report on for days, when it came to important matters, there would be unity. Otherwise, they would not have endured for 500 years.

There were members of the Su family that disapproved of Su Hou, but there were also members that supported him. For example, Su Feng, Su Feng's dad, and his siblings, who would regularly poke fun of him but would stand firmly behind him when it came to crucial matters.

Fang Zhao noticed Curly Hair continuously glancing at the gaming room and so asked Su Hou, "Can I enter and take a look?"

"Err... Su-sure," Su Hou stammered.

Su Hou was a little embarrassed and afraid that Fang Zhao would laugh at him.

Inside the gaming studio, naturally, there were gaming consoles. As Su Hou was still underage, there were many popular titles that he was unable to access. He could only play games intended to relieve boredom for young children. The console he used most was a beginner's console meant for children. It could not match up to specialized game consoles, but it had accompanied Su Hou from kindergarten all the way through primary school and then secondary school. Even though his older siblings had given him other specialized models of gaming consoles, Su Hou still had the deepest sentiments with it. When he had moved to Dongshan Farm, he had brought it along.

Originally, Su Hou had intended to give everyone a tour of the room after the 10th-generation console had arrived, but Fang Zhao had asked first. Su Hou had hesitated a little before agreeing. There was nothing shameful, it was just a console that children used. Who had never used it before?

Su Hou fished out a set of keys to unlock the door. The room was not equipped with an electric lock. However, when the 10th-generation console arrived, Su Hou intended to change the locks.

Fang Zhao scanned the interior of the room after entering. All sorts of gaming equipment was inside. Minors used more helmet-type game consoles, and there were five gaming helmets in the room. Four of them had been left on a shelf and seemed like they had not been touched for quite some time. Only one of the helmets was placed on a chair in the centre. The helmet was adorned with a few cartoon pictures and was simpler and lighter compared to specialized gaming helmets.

The beginner's console was a supplementary gaming console used by kindergarten and primary school kids. It was said to aid in the development of the brain.

Generally, after primary five, very few people still used the beginner's console.

Su Hou noticed Fang Zhao studying the beginner console's helmet and was a little embarrassed. "They said I was too stupid and could continue using the beginner's console to develop my brain. Who knows, I might be able to increase my IQ."

Zuo Yu, who was standing guard outside: "... You even believed that? Seems like your IQ hasn't improved at all.

Generally speaking, beginner's consoles were only suitable for kids aged 10 and below. Anyone older would be ill-suited to use them. Su Hou was already in secondary school, and the use of the beginner's console would not have any results. He believed whatever others said, so it was little wonder he'd been defrauded.

Su Hou did not notice Zuo Yu's expression and relaxed when he did not see Fang Zhao laughing at him. "Actually, I no longer use it that often, only when I'm feeling bored."

"Can I try it out?" Fang Zhao asked.

"...Ah?" Su Hou stared blankly. He totally did not expect Fang Zhao, the 10th-generation-using world's No. 1, to say this. "Sure. But the beginner's console cannot compare to specialized game consoles, and it is even worse when compared to the 10th generation. Master Zhao, you might not be able to get used to it."

At this moment, Su Hou received an incoming call. It was from his younger sister. She said she would be arriving at the farm soon. Primary school holidays had started, and when she had heard someone would be sending over the 10th-generation console to Dongshan, she had decided to come along.

Su Hou grinned knowingly and told Fang Zhao, "Master Fang you stay here and have a look. I shall go fetch the machine."

"Go on."

After Su Hou left hurriedly, Zuo Yu wanted to enter and see how Fang Zhao would use the beginner's console. Turning his head, Fang Zhao had already closed the door and locked it.

Zuo Yu: "... Alright, Boss doesn't want anyone to see him using the beginner's console. Zuo Yu could understand that. He really couldn't tell that a grown man would actually be a child on the inside. Just like Su Hou, he had a beginner's console complex.

Inside the room.

Fang Zhao held on to the beginner's console's gaming helmet and turned on the monitor beside him. On it were many games suited for kids. Some trained the brain's

control, some trained the brain's reaction speed.

This was different from the virtual world effect that specialized game consoles created. The gaming helmet of the beginner's console only acted as a receiver for brainwaves and was used to remotely control the games, which were displayed on the monitor.

As Fang Zhao studied the beginner's console and the pre-installed games on it, Curly Hair crouched beside Fang Zhao and kept whining. When he whined, he would look at Fang Zhao then at the gaming helmet in Fang Zhao's hands.

Fang Zhao's gaze shifted away from the display screen to Curly Hair on the floor beside him. "You wanna play?"

"Woof!" Curly Hair wagged his tail vigorously.

"Try it." Fang Zhao placed the gaming helmet back on the chair, and Curly Hair leapt up and squeezed his head into the helmet. He even used the armrests to adjust the position of the helmet on his head.

At the side, Fang Zhao crouched there and silently watched the dog put on the gaming helmet. On the display screen, the cursor moved and selected a game to enter.

Such proficiency. This definitely wasn't his first time!

The game Curly Hair had chosen was whack-a-mole, a game that kids loved.

Middle difficulty, timer mode.

Fang Zhao watched as the points displayed on the right of the screen rose steadily. On the screen, Curly Hair did not make any mistakes or miss any!

After the one-minute time limit, the system gave an evaluation of 5 stars.

This was the best possible result.

Finishing the game, Curly Hair speedily deleted the record, exited the game, removed the helmet, and leapt down from the chair.

Fang Zhao could guess that this was Curly Hair's customary course of action. He

reckoned this fellow had taken advantage of Su Hou simple-minded nature and snuck in to play many times and even knew how to delete his records. Fang Zhao did not know whether to curse his audacity or praise him for being prudent.

Fang Zhao was silent, so Curly Hair's tail-wagging gradually slowed down, as if he was afraid that Fang Zhao was angry.

"One more time. There is no one around now, so you don't have to hold back."

Hearing this, Curly Hair's lackluster tail-wagging went up a notch. With a whoosh, he got on the chair, skillfully got the helmet on, and selected the same game. This time, he chose the highest difficulty.

In that minute, the image on screen seemed to be in fast forward. Every time a mole was hit, the dazzling effects that appeared when adding points were like a continuous stream of fireworks. If it was someone else with poorer eyesight, they would probably have been unable to catch the changes on the screen, but Fang Zhao saw it clearly. Just as before, there were no mistakes or leaks!

The displayed score at the side kept rising at an increased tempo.

After one minute, Curly Hair did not immediately quit the game. He just removed the helmet and looked at the displayed score on the screen before glancing at Fang Zhao while wagging his tail lightly, nervously waiting for Fang Zhao's evaluation.

However, before Fang Zhao said anything, Curly Hair's ears pricked up and he hastily jumped off the chair and crouched at Fang Zhao's feet, glancing at the doorway.

A few hurried knocks on the door.

Su Hou's elated voice rang out, "Master Zhao, my 10th-generation console is here!"

Fang Zhao gazed at the screen but still did not delete the record.

The door opened and Su Hou entered, beaming and ready to tell Fang Zhao all about his new game console. As his gaze fell on the display on the screen and saw the difficulty level, points, and evaluation stars, his eyes widened.

"I have never achieved more than 2 stars playing this game at the highest difficulty! Master Zhao is awesome! As expected of the world's No. 1 crazy point-sweeping

demon!

Fang Zhao: "...” There is no way to explain this

Chapter 173

Live Broadcast

Su Hou did not spend too much time staring at the score displayed on the screen. This score could only have been achieved by Fang Zhao. Furthermore, he had been the only person in the room. If it was not Fang Zhao, who else could it have been?

However, Su Hou's attention was only on the displayed score for around half a minute before he remembered the reason he had rushed over.

"Master Zhao, the 10th-generation console is here. Can I let them move it over?" Su Hou was itching to get on with it. He had long wanted to play on the 10th-generation console. Even if he could only play games for minors or some games for stimulating the brain, it was still the 10th generation! This was like a sudden level up!

The 10th-generation console was a limited edition. Only 100 machines had been released in the first batch and they were in the hands of big e-sports clubs and influential persons. As Muzhou's e-sports atmosphere could not be compared to other continents, and with the special status of the Su family, whether they used it or not, the Su family kept two or three consoles. The one that Su Hou's father had sent over had been bought from within the clan for nearly 100 million.

In ordinary circumstances, Su Hou's dad would definitely not spend so much money to purchase a video game console; it wasn't as if he had limitless funds, and for that amount of money, Su Hou's dad would rather buy an expensive car than a video game console. However, to placate Su Hou, who was going through a rebellious phase, and with pressure from within the family clan and from external media, Su Hou's dad had only been able to clench his teeth and buy it.

The price of the machine had been comparable to a small-sized farm in Muzhou. In the eyes of Muzhou people, the two could not be compared. A farm guaranteed a livelihood, but what about a game console? Who knew when a software bug might emerge, or maybe a new model would appear after a few years and completely replace it. Then it wouldn't be worth it.

But Su Hou was very happy. After all he already had a farm. Whatever outsiders said

about him being a willful child did not matter. Anyway, he felt that this transaction with his dad had been worth it.

Su Hou watched a few bodyguards bring a square-shaped metal case. As the pathway and door were not wide enough, bringing it in was a strenuous process.

"It hasn't been used before?" Fang Zhao inquired.

"I heard that a Su family elder had used his connections with Fiery Bird to purchase it but it has not been used. My dad sent it straight after purchasing it. The case has not been opened before, so it is definitely unused," Su Hou replied.

As he spoke, Su Hou scanned his identity details. The console had already been transferred to his name, so by verifying his identity, the case could be opened. Inside the metal case was another transparent case made of an unknown material. Within it was a white humanoid-shaped machine with black veins and a red Fiery Bird insignia, just like the one Fang Zhao owned.

"You still need a professional engineer. There should be someone from the nearest Fiery Bird branch to help you install and adjust it," Fang Zhao told Su Hou. Back when he had received his own console, he had received a call from an engineer to set a time for the installation.

"An engineer is needed? Can't I use it straight away?" Heading online to check, there was only one branch in Muzhou that had engineers for the 10th-generation console, and it was in Qingcheng. After contacting that side, the Qingcheng branch's reply was that all their engineers had been dispatched today and could only make it tomorrow.

Su Hou was dumbfounded. He had wanted to use it on the spot. That meant to say that he would be unable to use it today?

"Is it completely unusable without an engineer?" The smile on Su Hou's face had dissipated. Soon after, as if he'd thought of something, Su Hou looked toward Fang Zhao, full of anticipation. "Master Zhao, didn't you use the 10th generation? Could you help with the adjustments?"

"I only know some simple stuff, but I can try," Fang Zhao replied.

"Please try, Master Zhao! It doesn't matter if it's not successful," Su Hou replied.

"There should be no problems for simple usage, but for adjustments and calibration, it's better to get a professional engineer."

"No problem, Master Zhao. You try it first. I just want to use it as soon as possible and won't be playing any complicated games. I have scheduled an engineer, but he will be here tomorrow. The adjustments and calibrations can be all done tomorrow." Su Hou just wanted to experience the 10th-generation console as soon as possible.

When Fang Zhao's own 10th-generation console was being installed, he had been present and had witnessed the whole installation and calibration process. When Fang Zhao had helped take part in the tests during Fiery Bird's annual conference, he had understood a little. The chief engineer from the R&D department had even given him a detailed explanation of the 10th-generation console's functions. Fang Zhao might not be able to compare with a professional engineer, but he could at least let the machine run a few simple games without issue.

Fang Zhao opened up the internal case and took the machine out. He attached a few missing parts to the machine according to his memory and started the preliminary adjustments.

Fang Zhao did not need any help and could settle it alone. Su Hou sat aside watching, while Curly Hair crouched to the side and watched Fang Zhao and then looked at Su Hou, who was curiously studying the machine. After that, he leapt up to the sofa, shifting the beginner's console's helmet out of the way and lying down.

Midway through, Su Hou received a call from his two sisters. They said they were watching the lambs on the farm and would head to the hill behind the farm in a bit to enjoy the view.

Su Hou himself frequently went up the hill, so he agreed and instructed some bodyguards. "You guys follow them and get a farm employee to show the way, but don't wander off too far. Come back after a while."

In a bit, Fang Zhao had set up the console and tested it out. The console was usable, but compared to his own precisely calibrated 10th-generation console, there was still a big difference.

"It's done?" Su Hou drew closer.

"It's just lacking a little. Get the engineer to calibrate it accurately tomorrow and it will

be fine."

"That means there are no problems using it? Let me try!"

The console would automatically adjust to the user's body shape, but after Su Hou put on the 10th generation, he felt that... operating it was especially gruelling! It was much harder to use compared to the beginner's console!

Without professional equipment and procedures, Fang Zhao had no way of knowing Su Hou's adaptability when using the 10th generation, but watching Su Hou's strenuous manner, Fang Zhao knew the adaptability would not be very high.

"You can play some of the simple games inside to slowly adapt. When you familiarize yourself, it will be more relaxing," Fang Zhao told him. The situation with Su Hou was something that had been mentioned by Fiery Bird's R&D department's staff and wasn't a serious problem. After he used it more often, the adaptability value would naturally increase.

Su Hou had only played some of the simple adapting games that came pre-installed on the machine, and he was fully drenched with sweat.

"No good, it's too tiring!" Su Hou felt that after removing the 10th generation, not only was his body tired but his mind was exhausted as well. This was the result of jumping straight from the beginner machine to the latest model.

"You probably haven't gotten the knack for it yet. The 10th generation is different from the beginner's console. Your mind and body need to self-adjust..."

"Wait a minute!" Su Hou interjected. "Master Zhao, are you sharing your own experience?"

"Mmhm."

"Then, Master Zhao, can I do a live broadcast?" Su Hou asked.

After Su Hou had gained fame after the sheep-herding competition, he had picked up the hobby of live broadcasting once again, but what he broadcast were not adolescent rebellious events. Instead, he broadcast the reformation of the farm to tell others that he was really working hard and not goofing off. He did many things on the farm himself and at the same time let more people know the Dongshan Farm name and his own

transformation. He had made this decision after consulting his cousin Su Feng to maintain his image as an exemplary youth after the sheep-herding competition.

When Su Hou had started broadcasting, he had gained lots of viewership because he was a member of the Su family that the Muzhou media so loved to report on and also due to winning the sheep-herding competition.

However, Su Hou had just finished speaking when he realized his words might have been inappropriate. He was no longer that ignorant wimpy kid, and he knew that the reason Fang Zhao was willing to share with him was because of their friendly relationship as co-investors. But many professional athletes did not publicly share their own experiences. Furthermore, it was not like Fang Zhao had accepted him as a disciple or received any tuition fees. Why would Fang Zhao broadcast for free? Lots of people wished to know how the 10th generation operated and had never experienced it before. To think that he would ask Fang Zhao whether it was all right to broadcast. He had not even thought it through before asking the previous question.

"Cough, my bad, I shouldn't have asked this..."

"Sure."

Su Hou stared at Fang Zhao in shock. "What?"

"You can do a live broadcast," Fang Zhao replied.

"But Master Zhao, aren't you afraid others will learn from your experiences?"

Fang Zhao walked over to the 10th-generation console. "Not afraid. Go on and start it, I'm preparing to speak."

"Oh yeah! Right away!"

The moment Su Hou started the broadcast, his fans flooded in.

"Oh, Fatty Su is finally broadcasting! I heard you were beat up by your dad?"

"There are no marks on Fatty Su's face, so he probably received treatment."

"Fatty Su has a few rebellious days each month and will reject treatment. We are used to it."

Trivial matters within the Su family had become a table topic for the people of Muzhou. At the start, people had been too apprehensive to say anything given Su Hou's status, but gradually, after they had become clear on Su Hou's temperament, their words had become more brazen.

In the past, Su Hou's old fans who viewed his broadcasts called him Little Fatty Su. After he had taken part in the sheep-herding competition and exercised a lot while training, he had slimmed down. Once the sheep-herding competition ended, despite following experts and running around all the crop fields, the intensity of exercise was not as much as the sheep-herding training had been. When the amount of exercise had decreased, his weight had bounced back up.

During puberty, one would grow taller. Su Hou was growing, but he was also gaining weight. Now everyone no longer called him Little Fatty Su but had changed it to Fatty Su.

Some viewers had watched Su Hou grow up. At the start, Su Hou's penchants had been unbearable, but after some time, they had felt that this child was actually interesting. He lacked IQ and did not have much EQ either. Previously, he was always being duped, and he had also offended many people. Never had they expected that Su Hou would have a lucky break and things would change for the better. Although he still did foolish things, everyone would take it lightheartedly and wanted to see him improve. Not like when he had first started where they would call him names like "idiot" or "retard."

Two days ago, a photo of Su Hou after he had received a beating from his father had been revealed. Although everyone seemed to seek pleasure in it, they had inevitably been concerned. Furthermore, when Su Hou had not broadcast for a few days in a row, everyone had begun to worry. Now Su Hou had broadcast once more, and upon seeing that he was fine, everyone started to laugh and joke.

But very quickly, Su Hou's words caught the attention of everyone.

Su Hou had set up an automatic camera lens, which would follow and film Fang Zhao. Su Hou's voice said, "For everyone's benefit, Master Zhao is willing to share his 10th-generation console experience and impart some of his operation techniques for those that have never used a 10th generation before."

In the entire world, everyone knew that there were only 100 sets of 10th-generation consoles. The majority of gamers had no way of accessing the 10th generation, and

users of the 10th generation were unwilling to share their experiences and feelings. Now, upon hearing that Fang Zhao was going to share his experiences, gamers immediately informed all their friends in various chat groups. Gamers from other continents that did not pay attention to Su Hou or Dongshan Farm also rapidly joined the livestream.

"Master Zhao? Is Fatty Su talking about the world's No. 1 in "Battle of the Century," AliveAfter500Years, Fang Zhao?"

"What? My Zhao-god would actually broadcast his experience using the 10th generation? Finally, someone has answered our prayers and is willing to share!"

"It really is Fang Zhao! And a 10th-generation console!"

Over there, Fang Zhao had started to explain. As much as possible, he made it clear and easy to comprehend so Su Hou could remember and understand it.

Fang Zhao did not have the notion of concealing anything. He could even share his experience and feelings when composing, the same could be said about his thoughts on the game console.

And with Fang Zhao being the first 10th-generation user to reach an adaptability value of 99, even professional gamers from big e-sports clubs tuned in when they received the news. Whether or not it was beneficial, there was nothing to be lost by listening. Who knows, they might even be pleasantly surprised?

In no time, every entertainment media outlet also reported on this. Wayne, who had just returned back to Yanzhou and was at the company, also received the news and obtained Su Hou's live broadcast channel. When he saw the number of viewers in the stream, he broke into a victorious smile.

Hahaha. With Fang Zhao going to Muzhou, he had thought that there would surely not be many topics and he had been about to stir up some, but looking it at now, there was simply no need for him to step in. The viewership had come!

Wayne immediately contacted the company's staff in charge of live broadcasts. "What is the company's gaming channel broadcasting now? Just finished a gaming match and it's now airing commercials? Stop it right away!"

Wayne had the company's gaming channel alter their original program and apply for

a live relay.

After arranging this, Wayne contacted the operations department and discussed how to make use of this situation and stir it up further.

Over at Muzhou's Dongshan Farm, Fang Zhao did not care about how many people were watching the live broadcast and just continued with his explanations. After he had said quite a bit, he asked whether there was anything Su Hou did not understand or if he had doubts. Fang Zhao could use another method to explain it once more to Su Hou.

Because Fang Zhao had explained it very clearly, some people who did not play games were also listening with great interest.

As was Su Hou listening intently, a supervisor on the farm called, saying that a flying transport had requested to land and rest and would not be staying the night. They would rest for two hours before leaving.

When it got closer to Memorial Day, the number of flying transports and cars coming and going also increased. Medium- and large-scale farm's parking space would also have these sorts of requests to park and rest. Su Hou was in good spirits, so he did not take it seriously.

With his status of the farm's owner, Su Hou agreed to the other party's request to descend. "Permit them to stop. It's free of charge, since I'm in a good mood today."

Su Hou turned back to Fang Zhao and said, "Please continue, Master Zhao."

But Fang Zhao did not continue. He remained silent for two seconds. Suddenly, he yelled, "Get out of here!"

Curly Hair, who was lying on the chair, also started to bark.

Fang Zhao pulled Su Hou and ran toward the door. They had not made two steps when the earth below them shook violently, as if something had struck the ground forcefully.

An immense striking sound drew nearer, and the walls of the gaming room collapsed. The room, which had been constructed less than half a year ago, was reduced to ruins in a flash. There were no traces of Fang Zhao or Su Hou.

Online audiences: "..."

Wayne, who was currently formulating a plan with operations staff: "..."

Chapter 174

It Still Has This Sort of Function?

The camera managed to avoid the impact and was continuing to run, but the image was no longer clear. Everyone could still see the scene being captured by the camera even though there was a scratch on the lens and a layer of dust.

The gaming room that had only recently been fixed up had been completely demolished, and only ruins remained as dust scattered everywhere and the half of the room had caved in beneath the floorboards.

And to the side of the wreckage, the main culprit was there. The camera's image was limited, but viewers could see a part of it. Viewers with abundant experience could distinguish that it was the wing of a flying transport, but it had been deformed during the impact.

Due to the intense vibrations and airflow, the camera was not steady and shook violently. If not for the fact that the camera Su Hou had bought was sturdy, it would probably have been destroyed by the falling debris.

Although it wasn't clear in the short two seconds that the accident had occurred and nobody could deduce what the two people in the image were up to, upon seeing the scene, what everyone could confirm was that both Fang Zhao and Su Hou were in the room and had been buried.

Everything had happened too fast. Viewers that had been full of jest had become stunned. There was a moment of deathly silence in the live broadcast's comments section before it burst to life with activity.

"What... happened?"

"Don't tell me they were shooting a movie? That must be it!"

"Shooting a movie my *ss! How does this even look like one?"

"What the f*ck! We just witnessed an accident!"

"Are Zhao-god and Fatty Su alright? Holler if you are alive!"

"Holler my *ss! They can't hear your comments from there! Hurry up and call for emergency services! Call the police!"

"Which city and district is Dongshan Farm in? Hurry up and get someone over to rescue them!"

"Fatty Su received a landing request from a flying transport a while back. That's definitely the one that came crashing!"

"Murder! I guarantee you that this is surely a case of premeditated murder!"

"Does this mean that we witnessed a murder case?"

"It's probably fake, right? This whole situation is definitely fake! Wait for the truth!"

"It's not fake! Our farm is within the same district as Dongshan, and the police station is nearby. A police craft just rushed overhead!"

"Such a big mobilization? Not sending police cars but sending a police craft straightaway?"

"Look who has been involved in the accident!" One was a member of the Su family, whose online reputation was quite high. The other was someone who had created waves in the gaming circles recently and had a global reputation even higher than Su Hou's. All this had happened during a live broadcast, and the police station's hotlines were nearly jammed. Whether it was a false alarm or not, they would rush over before deciding.

Even Su Feng, who had left Dongshan Farm a while back and headed toward Four Elephants's farm, had hurriedly turned back without delay.

In Yanzhou. Wayne was pale, and his lips trembled. After giving a report to Duan Qianji, he had requested a flying transport, intending to rush over to Muzhou. The members of the virtual projects department had also wanted to follow but had been rejected by Wayne. The flying transport he had requested was a small one. As Memorial Day was approaching, the company's celebrities were busy rushing to all sorts of activities, and all the flying transports had already been dispatched. If not for the special circumstances, Wayne would not have even been able to get one. Duan Qianji had used

special means to get this flying transport promptly.

Dongshan Farm.

The sun was shining brightly on this cloudless and seemingly warm and peaceful day. However, the bodyguards and employees on Dongshan Farm were could feel an icy-cold chill running through them. The bodyguards had no time to be in a daze. They headed to the flying transport's energy core first, removing or shutting down anything that had the potential to explode. However, what had happened could not be undone. They could only carry out the rescue operation with haste.

Dongshan Farm had not been established for long. Previously, Su Hou had been busy with improving the quality of the soil and cultivating crops, so he had not improved the equipment or facilities in other aspects. Presently, the farm simply did not have the equipment to deal with this predicament, and the bodyguards could only head to nearby farms to borrow the needed equipment.

Some flying transports stopped nearby. The image wasn't sharp, but the camera was still operating normally and viewers could still see the situation through it.

"There are life signals inside!" One of Su Hou's bodyguards was reading the display on a piece of detection equipment. Some color returned to his pale face. "There are two life signals! One of them is the young master's!"

Viewers watching the broadcast could hear it as well. When they heard this line, everyone collectively let out a sigh of relief.

However, when they had just exhaled, they heard the bodyguard say. "And the other life signal is... a dog."

Viewers: "..."

Wayne's legs turned to jelly as he was boarding the flying transport and nearly fell.

Only two life signals had been detected. One was Su Hou's and the other was a dog's. What about Fang Zhao?

When Su Hou had first constructed the house, the material he had used was slightly special and prevented external signals from penetrating. Especially so for the game room, where the walls, floor, and ceiling all used that. Some sensor apparatuses that

were capable of scanning through walls could not be used normally, and only specialized equipment used by rescue teams were effective.

Dongshan Farm was a little far away, and the quickest rescue teams would also need 3 minutes to arrive. However, knowing that Su Hou was alive, the bodyguard's felt a little relieved. As Su Hou's bodyguards, Su Hou was naturally of utmost importance—everything else was secondary. They had also replayed the live broadcast and watched the scene. Managing to stay alive, their young master was really fortunate.

However, the rescue teams still needed to get here as soon as possible. Who knew exactly what the situation was like below all the debris, how bad Su Hou's injuries were, or whether there was enough oxygen?

A bodyguard shouted, "Young Master! Young Master, are you all right?"

There was no reply.

If not for the wreckage, the bodyguards would have rushed in immediately, but there was a limit to human strength. The bits of shattered walls, floorboards, and the ceiling were too heavy for them to move. If they were careless, it could result in more severe consequences. Even if they borrowed proper excavating equipment from nearby farms, they would still have to dig with their bare hands till a professional rescue team arrived, in order to ensure the buried Su Hou's safety.

Only a minute had passed since the incident. The circulation rate of the live broadcast was astonishing. News regarding the situation had already been spread, and the viewers joining the stream rose sharply. Whether these viewers played games or not, or whether they knew who Fang Zhao or Su Hou were, audiences around the world were glued to the video of this live broadcast. In the past minute, the number of viewers had jumped from eight figures to nine figures, and it was about to break the 10-figure mark.

A bodyguard who was in the midst of moving a piece of debris stopped in his tracks and pricked his ears up, listening attentively. "What is that sound?"

The viewers could hear the same sound through the camera's microphone.

"It sounds like a machine in operation."

"Flying transport? Are Fatty Su's bodyguards eating sh*t?! They didn't shut off or

remove the explosive materials in the flying transport that crashed?"

A viewer who maintained flying transports retorted, "No, I don't think it sounds like a flying transport. It sounds a little unfamiliar."

"Look! There is light!"

Beneath the ruins, something seemed to be flickering.

Crack crack—crack—

More sounds could be heard. At the same time, there was movement somewhere in the wreckage.

Rumble rumble—

Bits and pieces of small debris tumbled out of the way. A collapsed floorboard measuring about 6 square meters and 30 centimeters thick was slowly being moved out of the way.

Shifting a floorboard that big was something that was very difficult for an individual to accomplish. However, that scene was exactly what was happening right now!

That shattered floorboard that had collapsed was pushed out of the way and much of the junk that was on it tumbled to the side.

Following that floorboard being pushed away, a white arm appeared in front of everyone. More precisely, it was an arm that was wrapped in some sort of mechanical contraption.

10th-generation console arm section!

But it differed from the 10th-generation console that everyone was so familiar with. This time, the black veins on the 10th-generation console were giving off a bright white glow, as if the veins were a channel for transmitting energy.

Both online audiences and the bodyguards at the site of the wreckage were dumbfounded.

As the organism slowly rose from the wreckage, their lifeless expressions gradually

became looks of surprise and astonishment, as though they were seeing an alien.

The white organism had some dents on it from debris striking it. Although the organism did not seem that bright with all the marks and dust on it, in the eyes of everyone, it seemed to radiate a holy glow.

Seeing the organism dragging a person out, the bodyguards snapped out of their daze. Disbelief turned to delight as they strode forward.

Fang Zhao was operating the machine, one arm holding off the obstacles on top and in front of him, his other arm supporting Su Hou.

Su Hou had lost consciousness, but he did not seem to have any serious injuries. His life signals were also very strong, and there was no danger.

Behind Fang Zhao, Curly Hair followed behind, dragging what seemed to be the deformed helmet of the beginner's console in his mouth.

The bodyguard holding onto the vitality detection sensor looked at the two life signals displayed on the screen, looked at the white organism dragging Su Hou and the dog following behind them, and understood.

The vitality detection sensor was not faulty, it had just been unable to detect the interior of that white organism. That was why the screen only displayed two life signals.

Compared to Su Hou's bodyguards, who had just recovered from their daze, a huge wave had started to swirl on the internet.

An online viewer posted a comment equivalent to a shriek: "Someone tell me what! is! that! thing!"

"Zhao-god, this time, I really have to kneel!!"

New viewers that had been attracted over by the news were stupefied. "Is that a new model exoskeleton power mecha? Isn't it too weak, to actually have so many dents and scratches! Is it made from paper?!"

"Damn you and your mecha! Does the brother above me not play any games? Do you know Fiery Bird? This is Fiery Bird's 10th-generation console!"

"No, perhaps we should say that it is a mecha within a game console, or a game console cum fighting suit!" someone added on.

The eyeballs of all other users of the 10th-generation console from big e-sports clubs across the world were nearly popping out at that moment. The 10th-generation console... has such a function too?

At the same time, Fiery Bird's R&D department's chief engineer Cao Kan exclaimed, "Protection mode! I only briefly mentioned it to him once. Never did I expect that he would really use it! This little fellow has decent wits! It's him! Let's make preparations for him to be a spokesperson!" Wasn't it only a year of military service? They could wait! Negotiate the endorsement deal first!

Chapter 175

Rise in Value

The 10th-generation console came prebuilt with a protection mode, but it was still in an experimental phase and not everyone could use it. At most, it could protect the user's body, but controlling the machine was more difficult. It was not as easy as it was in-game. If one was to forcibly try to control it, there was a possibility of suffering brain damage.

Therefore, when the first batch of 10th-generation consoles had been released, engineers had only given users a brief explanation of the protection mode. Users had been told that in the event of emergency or danger, this mode could be activated and the machine would safeguard the user as much as possible. Also, upon activation, the machine would automatically cover the user's body in a flash.

Cao Kan kept replaying the video. During the split second when the accident had occurred, the camera had shaken too violently as dust and debris fell all around, affecting its line of sight. But from that short and blurry image and his understanding of the 10th generation, Cao Kan could deduce what had happened.

During that brief instant, Fang Zhao, who had originally been pulling Su Hou toward the door, had stopped abruptly, retraced his steps, and activated the 10th-generation console. Although the 10th generation was not equipped on either Fang Zhao or Su Hou, the one who activated it was Fang Zhao, as he was also closest to it. The 10th-generation console activated in protection mode and automatically wrapped itself around Fang Zhao who then shielded Su Hou from the impact as the ceilings and walls came crashing down.

As for that dog... Maybe it was just very lucky, crouching beside the beginner's console, which took the brunt of the impact.

Curly Hair caught Cao Kan's attention for a while before he rewound the video and analyzed it once more. Once Dongshan Farm had settled down, he decided that he would ask Fang Zhao for a detailed breakdown of his experience using it. This would help promote the 10th-generation console's system. The effectiveness of the 10th generation's protection mode left him very satisfied. From a manufacturing point of

view, this incident was a pretty good advertisement and had proven the feasibility of the 10th generation's protection mode. The company's publicity staff would definitely not let this opportunity slip by.

If only we could pull Fang Zhao into a laboratory to aid in our research and development, Cao Kan thought to himself regretfully. He could only feel sorry—given Fang Zhao's commercial value now, Silver Wing absolutely would not let him go.

Previously, there had been 10th-generation console users who wished to use it as an exoskeleton mecha to act cool, but they had found the machine too difficult to operate. Therefore, when the 10th-generation console had hit the market, some people had ridiculed it as being "just a toy."

This was also the reason everyone had only seen it as just a gaming console. But now, owners of the 10th-generation console felt like they were exam candidates and saw Fang Zhao as someone who had gotten hold of the examination answers. They all wanted to know what Fang Zhao had learned from using it, but right now, Fang Zhao had no time to bother with all this.

Once Su Hou was handed over to his bodyguards, Fang Zhao immediately headed back to the wreckage. Besides them, there were others still buried underneath.

Zuo Yu had been standing outside the gaming room when the accident had happened. The extent of the damage to that area was slightly better than the gaming room. When Fang Zhao had discovered Zuo Yu, Zuo Yi's body had not had any mortal injuries, he had just been knocked out cold. There were fractures in his arms and lower leg, but with current medical standards, these could be considered minor injuries.

After Zuo Yu, Fang Zhao pulled out from the wreckage two other bodyguards of Su Hou and a farm employee who had been cleaning the room. Other than one bodyguard who was seriously hurt, the other two had only received minor injuries and would be out of danger after some medical treatment. The flying transport had crashed into the gaming room; the other areas had not been that badly affected.

As Fang Zhao moved across the wreckage, he was also thinking about what had happened. Su Hou had used high-quality materials when constructing the house. If they were more normal materials, the entire house might have been flattened immediately when the flying transport had come crashing down.

When the rescue team arrived, Fang Zhao had just rescued the last person.

After the rescue team landed with all the excavating equipment, the rescue team captain pointed at the white organism that seemed to have electrical circuits running through it and was walking through the wreckage. The captain asked one of Su Hou's bodyguards, "What is that?"

They had watched the live broadcast on their own flying transport, but when seeing the situation for themselves, it still seemed inconceivable.

That bodyguard of Su Hou had a relaxed smile and replied, "That is Fang Zhao using the 10th-generation console. Oh, you guys might not know about the 10th generation..."

The bodyguard passionately explained to the rescue team.

The rescue team captain had a complicated expression on his face. It really is a game console?

"Since when were game consoles able to do this?"

Su Hou's bodyguard shrugged. He had no idea either. Watching Fang Zhao move away the large floorboard a while ago, it seemed like the 10th-generation console had some special characteristics of a power exoskeleton suit other than just being looking similar.

As Fang Zhao walked over from the wreckage, Su Hou's bodyguards hurriedly handed him some water and helped Fang Zhao peel off the 10th-generation console that was full of scratches and dents.

"The energy has been depleted, and the body frame has suffered more than 40% damage. It needs repairing," Fang Zhao said.

Su Hou's bodyguard immediately replied, "That's not a problem!" To him, Su Hou's safety was the first priority. As for sending the console in for repairs, even if it meant spending a lot of money, it would be no issue.

Over at the other side, Su Hou had woken up, and he heard a bodyguard recount the situation.

His game console that had been just delivered and had not been used for more than an hour had been damaged to that extent. Su Hou felt a little heartache, but he also felt that it was especially worth it!

Comparing a machine to human life, the latter was definitely more important. Furthermore, this machine had not only saved one person. If it had not been delivered today, the consequences could have been disastrous, and even his own life may have been forfeit.

As a Su family member and a minor who had an especially high exposure in the limelight, since he was young, Su Hou had encountered many kidnapping and assassination attempts. Luckily for him, there had always been a timely intervention. Later on, perhaps because Su Hou was rather useless and did not have much influence in the Su family, the rate of such incidents had decreased. But after the sheep-herding competition, with his status in the Su family on the rise and his even more frequent appearances in the public eye, all these troublesome matters had started returning.

If he hid away in a remote region and kept a low profile, no one would think about Su Hou, but Su Hou was someone who could not do so. Just watching the news for the past few days, anyone would know Su Hou was not someone to stay out of sight.

This matter was out of hand and had a wide impact. Su Hou did not need to request for help, for the Su family would step in with full force with regard to this matter. This affair did not just target Su Hou, it was a public provocation of the Su family's status in Muzhou!

Fang Zhao looked at Su Hou, who was sitting down with a blank look, and asked, "You all right?" This kid would have suffered a concussion and become even more dumb, wouldn't he? He was already quite foolish; if Su Hou became any more dumb, he might really become retarded.

Suu Hou snapped out of it and flashed a smile. "I'm all right. I really have to thank Master Zhao this time around!"

"Credit goes to your 10th-generation console. When this is over, I will give you a detailed explanation on how to use the 10th generation's protection mode. I didn't get the chance to teach you just now." Fang Zhao then continued, "Does this happen a lot?"

"I'm used to it." Su Hou might have said this, but this time had really been a huge scare

for him.

Although Fang Zhao had used the 10th generation to protect Su Hou and he had only received minor injuries, before he had lost consciousness, buried beneath the rubble, the fear of being unable to breath in the darkness had been etched into his mind. At this point, Su Hou suddenly felt some regret. Had he been wrong to purchase such a remote farm? He had not thought too much when purchasing the farm. If only he had been a person who considered carefully, he wouldn't have been cheated.

He used to think that the place was remote, so no one would find him and give him trouble. The farmland was cheap at that price, too. Never had he expected that these disturbances would follow him despite him being out of the way.

As they were speaking, Curly Hair dragged the deformed helmet of the beginner's console over. When Su Hou saw it, his gloomy outlook somewhat dissipated. He was touched.

"Curly Hair, thanks! Thank you for bringing it out! Master Zhao, look, Curly Hair is deserving of being a champion dog. He is too considerate. He knew how important the beginner's console was to me; that's why he brought it out." Su Hou took a few steps forward and squatted down to receive the the beginner's console that had accompanied him for so many years from Curly Hair's mouth.

He pulled once, but it didn't budge.

He pulled once more, but the dog still bit onto it tightly.

Fang Zhao gave a low cough. "Cough!"

The dog loosened it's jaw.

Su Hou's slight doubts returned to being moved as he took the deformed console and hugged Curly Hair as his eyes became clouded with tears. He only let go when he received a call from Su Feng.

Watching Su Hou's back as he walked away, Curly Hair stood in the same spot. His tail drooped, his nostrils flared, and he let out some whimpers.

"I'll get one for you when we return," Fang Zhao muttered.

Curly Head immediately stopped whimpering, and his tail shot up and started wagging vigorously. He even enthusiastically went to the wreckage to see if anything else required his help and conveniently led the dogs to patrol the farm.

Su Feng's flying transport arrived shortly after. When he saw that the state of Su Hou and the farm were not as bad as he expected, only then did he let out a sigh of relief.

"Su Hou, you didn't go online?" Su Feng asked.

"No." Su Hou was still hugging the beginner's console. When had he even had the time to go online to read the news?

Su Feng's eyes widened slightly. "Your console's price has risen—no, it has straight up doubled in value!" On his way to Dongshan Farm, the price of a 10th-generation console had already been stirred up to 160 million. Right now, it was already 200 million!

For many people, 200 million was indeed extremely expensive. This sort of money could buy a decent farm in Muzhou or allow someone to live comfortably. However, now, a game console with some special features would cost that much.

These people were downright crazy!

When Fiery Bird had previously publicly showcased Fang Zhao's adaptability of 99 when using the 10th-generation console, its impact had not had the same intensity and scope compared to now. This unexpected accident had caused an uproar in the market for the 10th-generation consoles, and many people were in a frenzy to try and snap one of them up. There were only 100 such consoles in the world, though; how could the prices not be jacked up so much?

An exoskeleton power suit was something the masses had no way of coming into contact with. Even with all the money in the world, one might not necessarily get to use an exoskeleton power suit. Since that was the case, why not use a game console to satisfy their cravings? This was more exciting than speeding in an expensive car! This was a new generation of pretentious items! Furthermore, it could even save lives!

"Su Hou, someone within the family wants to buy that 10th-generation console," Su Feng said. "But given the friendship between us, if you do decide to resell it, why not pass it to me."

"Resell?" Su Hou stared at the bruised and battered 10th-generation console and told Su Feng, "Master Zhao says it can no longer be used normally and requires repairs."

"No problem. If you sell it to me, I will take care of such matters. You won't have to fork out a single cent for repairs," Su Feng replied promptly.

Su Hou's father had read the latest reports online, and he felt a sense of regret. From a businessman's point of view, if the price continued going up, the value of the machine would continue rising. Who wouldn't want that?

Su Hou felt that the 10th-generation console had saved him and the others. In the future, should any such incidents happen when Fang Zhao were not around, he could still use the method Fang Zhao would teach him and use the 10th generation for protection.

While Su Hou and Su Feng were talking, Fang Zhao received a text message from Cao Kan.

"Fiery Bird's chief R&D engineer, Cao Kan, says your 10th-generation console will be repaired for free," Fang Zhao told Su Hou.

"Really? Can it be returned to its original state?" Su Hou asked.

"According to Cao Kan, yes."

"That's great. I'm not selling the 10th-generation console!" As he said that, Su Hou logged on to his social platform and posted a new status—

"So thankful for it saving my life, I'm not selling!"

The accompanying picture was of the battered and dusty 10th-generation console placed in front of the wreckage.

After that, the rescue team took over. There was no longer anyone that needed saving, but buried beneath the wreckage were seeds and fertilizer that were being stored. To the people of Muzhou, these were all important items.

The Su family had already dispatched someone over to investigate the matter. The statement he released was that the flying transport that had requested clearance to land had suffered a system malfunction, but how many people actually believed that

was another matter.

By the time Wayne arrived, the accident scene had already been cleared and the wreckage no longer remained. The specialized equipment the rescue team brought was indeed efficient.

Confirming that Fang Zhao was fine and Zuo Yu was no longer in any danger, Wayne urged Fang Zhao to return to Yanzhou.

I feel that it's best if you return with me. You have seen the farm and fetched your dog; it's time for us to go. I have brought along a medical team. They say that after Zuo Yu's wound is treated, he can be transferred back without any issues. Besides, whether this matter was a terrorist act or a personal grudge, the Su family will handle it, so there is no need for you to stay here. Let's head back to discuss how to handle the news conference. Now that this has happened, the media are sure to ask."

Fang Zhao mulled it over for a bit and agreed to Wayne's suggestion.

Su Hou and Su Feng wanted to thank Fang Zhao with at least a meal, but Wayne could not wait to get Fang Zhao out of this place where inconveniences were rife. As long as they left this place, Fang Zhao would not encounter these sorts of situations.

He had hoped that Fang Zhao would make his presence felt, but if it was this sort, Wayne did not want it. His heart could not bear the stress.

Thus, even without getting dinner, Wayne led Fang Zhao along into the flying transport and headed back for Yanzhou.

On the journey back to Yanzhou, Fiery Bird's deputy director Tang Can personally contacted Fang Zhao and requested Fang Zhao endorse the 10th-generation console. Not right now, of course. After all, it had not yet started mass production, but their plan was to book him in advance.

Wayne was listening intently beside Fang Zhao, and he felt all sorts of complicated feelings in his heart. The company's professional teams had not even started their publicity campaigns before Memorial Day and had spent over 10 hours in a meeting coming up with a programs that took up 10 pages worth of files, yet before anything had started, Fang Zhao had already received the endorsement role that every single big e-sports club was eyeing?

Chapter 176

Sir, Could I Trouble You for an Autograph?

The first thing Fang Zhao did after returning to Yanzhou was buy a beginner's console online. It was as if Curly Hair had discovered a brand new world. He became addicted to the world of gaming. There was no end in sight. When he had been in Muzhou, he'd had to restrain himself, only sneaking into the gaming room to get his fix whenever he had the chance, but now that he was back in Yanzhou and he was all alone, Curly Hair could go all out.

But Fang Zhao only let him play single-console games. He wasn't allowed to go online.

Even though the internet was a simulated version of the real world, more often than not, you never knew whether an actual person or not was on the other end. Since using a 10th-generation console and becoming aware of the data collection Fiery Bird was conducting, Fang Zhao knew that there were no secrets in this virtual world, especially when it came to machines controlled by your brain. Folks of average ability could get by—no one would notice you—but if you stood out, people would investigate, and there were no secrets. Brain waves could be identified by certain markers. Fang Zhao didn't want to risk Curly Hair being singled out. Thankfully, for now Curly Hair was simply addicted to single-console games and knew he couldn't get online and go all out.

Fang Zhao had learned of some of the conclusions from the investigation into the Dongshan Farm flying transport crash while chatting with Su Hou after returning to Yanzhou. The pilot of the transport had committed suicide. The other passengers were students from other continents holidaying in Muzhou. The pilot was a local Muzhou resident who had been recommended to them. Who could have known something like this would go down? The students had been heavily injured and even more traumatized than Su Hou, probably with lingering effects.

"There are two possibilities—either it's a sociopath or an enemy of the Su family." Su Hou had calmed down. In any case, threats like this had become routine.

Su Hou's father's other bastard sons wouldn't be so stupid as to target him like that. Typically, the elders didn't get involved in feuds between youngsters in the family; they

tended to turn a blind eye. Adversity was the breeding ground for true leaders, after all, but the flying transport attack was the equivalent of throwing down the gauntlet to the Su family.

There was a limit to what Su Hou could say. He also wasn't privy to too many details. He was just a kid who wasn't particularly smart, so the elders wouldn't let him in on core matters before he raised his IQ.

"Seems that our community isn't entirely crime-free," Fang Zhao said.

"Indeed. There are many things that go down in the dark that are kept secret from the public, but most of these potential disasters are pre-empted. Today, they arrested two attempted bombers in the martyrs' cemetery. Events like these are never reported. Even folks who paid their respects today won't have noticed."

Memorial Day was when the martyrs' cemeteries saw their traffic peak. Apart from the cemetery guards assigned to the core area, the government typically deployed additional guards to ensure that worship activities could proceed uninterrupted.

Fang Zhao wasn't planning on joining the ruckus this year. His status was different compared to last year. He was a public figure with quite a few fans, so he planned on visiting the martyrs' cemeteries in various continents after Memorial Day, when there were fewer visitors.

With the Su family stepping in to contain the fallout over the Dongshan Farm plane crash, online discussion of the incident had tapered off significantly over the past three days. Regardless of how folks spun the event, whether it was a brilliantly executed marketing ploy or some earth-shattering conspiracy, the level of attention was declining with the approach of Memorial Day.

On Jan. 20, Silver Wing's virtual projects and gaming departments held a joint press conference. The company officially announced that Jinro was taking over as captain of their gaming team and that Dorrian would serve as his deputy. Fang Zhao was scheduled to start his military service in April and would go on temporary leave. The departure of Fang Zhao didn't necessarily deal a blow to the team's prospects, though. Jinro had been personally trained by Fang Zhao. On paper, Fang Zhao was much younger than Jinro, but between Jinro himself or Silver Wing fans, no one considered it a problem. Fang Zhao's gaming prowess was a well-established fact.

Wayne also announced that the team would be adding new members in the near future, but their identities would be kept secret for now.

Silver Wing's performance the past few months had prompted quite a few pro gamers to consider jumping ship. This time, it was Wayne's turn to play hard to get. In the past, he'd had to make the rounds, begging people to join. Now he was the one being sought out. It was sweet vindication.

As the focus of the press attention, Fang Zhao was inundated with questions. Some journalists also asked him about the Dongshan Farm crash. Fang Zhao just waved it off as an accident without elaborating. Silver Wing's PR staff would follow up with journalists.

In other news, Fang Zhao also revealed during the press conference that Fiery Bird would soon be making an announcement about their 10th-generation console's protection mode, but that it recommended customers not try it out before then.

In fact, Fang Zhao hadn't been able to control the console on demand right away. He'd only went out on a limb because Su Hou had been in a bad spot, buried in rubble and struggling to breathe.

The other focus of the entertainment journalists was Fang Zhao's imminent military service. Celebrities entering the military always got the media excited. Reporters were always trying to find a point of controversy, like a certain star parlaying connections into an easy assignment, a star lying about working as a miner on a faraway planet while in actuality vacationing on a newly colonized planet, or someone faking their service records.

Many people wanted to use their connections to secure an easy posting. The thing was, only a few could manage to do so. Others could only watch with envy and vent their frustrations online, posting spiels about special treatment. Public figures like celebrities were a regular target.

If Fang Zhao received a relaxed posting, the pundits would show no mercy.

But Fang Zhao didn't announce any details about his assignment. Even Wayne didn't know. Duan Qianji asked Fang Zhao several times, but all he said was that he would decide after visiting his great-grandfather in Yanbei on Memorial Day.

On Jan. 26, Fang Zhao rented a flying car and drove from Qi'an to Yanbei himself with

Curly Hair in tow.

Security was especially tight during the Memorial Day period, and the amount of vehicle traffic increased the closer to Memorial Day one got. Fang Zhao had to clear a security checkpoint before entering Yanbei's city limits.

There was tons of traffic and a long queue leading to the checkpoint. The good thing was that the security checks were quite swift. What seemed to be a long queue could in fact be processed quite quickly.

After lining up for about 10 minutes, Fang Zhao drove his car into the security checkpoint. Besides his car undergoing a scan for dangerous items, the driver's personal information also came up automatically on the screen of the inspector.

When he noticed Fang Zhao's personal details on the screen, the inspector's expression went from serious to surprised, but he regained his composure quickly. He walked out of his booth, approached Fang Zhao's car, and signaled Fang Zhao to lower his car window.

It was common for inspectors to randomly screen drivers and passengers in person, so the inspector's appearance didn't strike the drivers lined up behind Fang Zhao as odd.

The stern-faced inspector walked up to Fang Zhao's car. After Fang Zhao lowered his window, the inspector pulled out a paper notebook and pen from his pocket and handed them to Fang Zhao. "Sir, could I trouble you for an autograph?"

Fang Zhao eyed the inspector's tense expression and smiled. "Sure thing."

He took the pen and notebook, flipped to a blank page, signed his name, and then handed the pen and notebook back.

"Thank you." The inspector struggled to suppress his smile as he held off on taking his pen and notebook. Resuming his solemn expression as if he were conducting official business, he handed over a stamp pad. "Could I trouble your passenger in the back to sign as well?"

Fang Zhao glanced at Curly Hair, who was kneeling on the back seat. He waved him over, grabbed one of his paws, placed it on the stamp pad, and then pressed it onto the inspector's notebook.

The inspector took his pen and notebook and tucked them away carefully. His face was still tense as he took a step back and bowed slightly. "Thank you! Happy Memorial Day! Welcome back to Yanbei. I wish you and your family good health and I wish you swift sailing."

"Happy Memorial Day!"

Fang Zhao closed his car window and drove away.

Chapter 177

Selecting the Most Difficult Applications

Although the security personnel was delighted, he did not brag to his friends about receiving the signatures right away. After all, Fang Zhao had chosen to use a plain car, which meant that Fang Zhao did not want to be recognized, so he decided to only share it after Memorial Day.

Fang Zhao headed straight to his destination after entering Yanbei City. He had bought a place in Yanbei last year. It was still winter, and many people wore scarves. Fang Zhao had a scarf and cap on, so it was not easy for him to be recognized.

As for Curly Hair, Fang Zhao placed the dog in his bag and carried him.

Fang Zhao spent the night in his apartment, and on the 27th, he brought Curly Hair along to his second uncle's place to visit his two elders. Last November, his second uncle and aunt had asked Fang Zhao whether he would be returning for Memorial Day.

Second Uncle's oldest son, Fang Yu, had gone to serve the military and would not be back to celebrate Memorial Day. This time, only Fang Qi and their daughter Fang Ling would be home.

Fang Zhao drove the inconspicuous rental car over to Second Uncle Fang's place for a meal with the four members of that family and agreed to their warm invitation to stay the night.

Upon seeing Fang Zhao once more, Second Uncle and Second Aunt Fang were slightly more uncomfortable. They behaved like they were guest rather than hosts. Last year, Fang Zhao was only "promising," but this year was too alarming. Every day, they would find out more about Fang Zhao in the entertainment news. Sometimes Fang Zhao even appeared in the headlines. Of course, they felt gratified. After all, Fang Zhao was their nephew.

The next morning, which was also Memorial Day, Fang Zhao drove the rental car and brought the other four to the retirement center.

On the journey to the retirement home, Second Uncle and Second Aunt Fang filled Fang Zhao in on the happenings of the past year. Fang Yu's military service was going smoothly, and every once in a while, he reported that he was fine. He would be completing his service this year and returning home. Both Second Uncle and Second Aunt Fang were extremely glad and were counting down the days.

Besides Fang Yu, they also talked about Great-Grandfather Fang. In the past year, Second Uncle and Second Aunt Fang had visited Great-Grandfather Fang on some small occasions, as always, but unlike past years, Great-Grandfather Fang had contacted them more often and had voluntarily showed an interest in their family. For example, Fang Yu's military service developments and others. This had made Second Uncle and Second Aunt Fang overwhelmed by favor. Great-Grandfather Fang had also asked about Fang Zhao, but when he'd talked about Fang Zhao, his facial expressions had been way more obvious.

While Second Uncle Fang recounted all of this to Fang Zhao, Second Aunt Fang, Fang Qi, and Fang Ling were all seated in the back row of the car along with a not-too-large curly-haired dog.

Fang Qi and Fang Ling were using a comb to brush Curly Hair's fur as Second Aunt Fang sat beside them, watching and worrying that her two children would pull on its fur too hard.

When she had seen the dog yesterday, she'd had no idea what to feed it and had been afraid that the food she prepared might not be suitable for it. Luckily, Fang Zhao had brought along dog food.

Watching for a while, Second Aunt Fang had not been able to help but reach out and pet it. They all knew the value of this dog, and her hands had trembled as she'd touched the fur.

Memorial Day was the liveliest part of the year at the retirement center, and there were lots of people coming and going, just like previous years.

Today, Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother Fang had woken up early, changed into a brand new set of festive clothes, and sat at the door waiting for the younger generations to come.

One hour, two hours...

The visitors kept streaming in nonstop. There were also favorable younger generations that came to visit, and the two elders counseled them and gave out red packets. It seemed just the same as previous years. However, today, the two elders kept looking out the window and kept checking for incoming messages, more than 10 times within an hour.

Everyone who noticed the two elders doing this gave a pained expression.

Who were they waiting for?

Who else could it be!

The two elders were basically only pleasant to the youngest generations. In the past, they had treated their grandkids' generation well, but now that they had a generation of great-grandchildren, they treated this batch better. And among their great-grandchildren, Fang Zhao was the one with the best achievements.

Ding!

A notification of a text message.

Great-Grandfather Fang's eyebrows rose and he rapidly checked it and replied.

Fang Zhao had arrived at the retirement center and parted ways with Second Uncle Fang's family. After parking the car, he entered through another way.

Fang Zhao had sent the two elders a text message when he'd arrived, as this arrangement had been requested by the two elders. Fang Zhao was no longer the same as before—he was a rather famous celebrity now. There were many youngsters visiting the retirement center today, and if he were recognized, it could have an undesirable effect on the retirement center. Great-Grandfather Fang had told him to head straight to their residence first and rest if there were no pressing matters. After the two elders were done here, they would head back to have a chat with Fang Zhao.

After parking the car and walking over to the two elders' residence, he passed by a family that were also here to visit their elders. The father was teaching his secondary school son how to win the favor of their elders. He noticed his son's mind wandering and was a little angry. "What are you looking at? Did you hear what I just said?!"

The teenager pointed at the figure that was passing by them. "That man seems kinda

familiar..."

"There are so many people every year, there are bound to be some familiar faces."

"He looks like my idol!"

The father heard what was said and slapped his son across the back of his head. "Of all the things to learn, you learned how to chase after celebrities!"

Fang Zhao headed to the house number Great-Grandfather Fang had given him and found the two elders' residence. The door had already been remotely unlocked. Fang Zhao sat in the living room and waited. He did not check out the other rooms.

Around four in the afternoon, the two elders returned, and they even brought Fang Zhao a big portion of dinner.

"Have you decided on where to go for your military service?" said Great-Grandfather Fang when he entered and sat down.

The two elders had found out from Second Uncle Fang that Fang Zhao had a military posting that he could use to go wherever he wanted to go, but now, Fang Zhao had a wide reputation and the media was all over him. Great-Grandfather Fang was afraid that Fang Zhao was too young and not clear-headed enough. A wrong choice at this juncture could be his downfall. If Fang Zhao brazenly went and received special treatment, he would surely be condemned by the media.

"I wish to serve on a warship." Fang Zhao replied.

"Warship?" Great-Grandfather Fang's brows scrunched up and his smiling expression vanished. "Above or below?"

Above meant a space warship; below meant a battleship within the planet. The difficulty levels for serving on these two ships were very far apart. One was arduous and dangerous, the other relatively relaxed.

"Above," Fang Zhao said firmly.

Great-Grandfather Fang went blank. He had never expected Fang Zhao to actually make such a choice. "Why?"

"I just wish to."

This time, Great-Grandfather Fang knitted his eyebrows and was deep in thought for quite a while.

If Fang Zhao had chosen a military service program that was too easy, Great-Grandfather Fang had originally intended to recommend a military service program that he had spent months picking for Fang Zhao. The place was not considered too far away from Earth—the further away one was from the home planet, the harder the military service was—but it was also not so near as to draw the ire of cynics.

In terms of ranking, the most demanding military service vocations were on exploratory spaceships. The tasks were arduous and filled with uncertainty. The unknown was almost the scariest.

"Don't be impulsive," Great-Grandfather Fang reminded him. He thought that Fang Zhao had been swayed by public opinion.

"I'm not impulsive. I have been planning this since last year."

Fang Zhao's choice came as a surprise to Great-Grandfather Fang, yet he also felt gratified. Finally, there was a younger generation who took the initiative to select a spaceship for their military service.

"If I remember correctly, there are currently two explorer-class spaceships in active service: Acturus and Formalhaut. I heard that the original plan was for four spaceships to undergo exploratory missions, but at the end-of-year conference, it was decided that the pace of outer space explorations should be tightened and focus more on understanding the areas that have already been explored. The military funding saved would also be used for development and construction on known planets. However these policies might be changed at any time. You can check out their latest developments first. On the military service application homepage, you can choose to view the positions according to difficulty. The two most difficult positions are probably the vocations on spaceships, and there will be some introductions and explanations there."

That meant to say that when Fang Zhao was applying for military service, all he needed to do was select the most difficult applications.

Generally speaking, these difficult military positions could be voluntarily applied for,

but every year, there were very little people who did so.

Great-Grandmother Fang shot a disapproving look at her husband. "Eat first! Little Zhao hasn't touched his food since he came!"

Great-Grandfather Fang returned a recalcitrant look. This old lady had clearly been even more anxious than him yesterday, but now that they had gotten their answer, she wanted to act like the good guy!

Fang Zhao's choice pleased the two elders, but at the same time, it worried them. The degree of difficulty and danger was higher than most. In their eyes, Fang Zhao was a talent in the entertainment scene, a man of art and literature. They were afraid that Fang Zhao was still an inexperienced and young man. After all, reality was different from a game, and people who were different from their in-game persona were commonly seen.

Fang Zhao wanted to leave at night but was stopped by the two elders.

"Just stay here and go back after you have sorted out your military service. We can give you counsel, and whatever reply you get, I am able to help you ask around," Great-Grandfather Fang said.

The sky was gradually getting dark and visitors to the retirement centre had slowed. Many elderly were sitting together and chatting about the younger generations in their own family.

Great-Grandfather Fang brought the dog out, looking especially pretentious.

"Hey, this dog looks familiar," a retired elder said.

"Isn't this the Muzhou championship-winning dog that trended in the news a while back?"

"It's that dog that is worth 100 million?"

Great-Grandfather Fang was pleased. "Yes, yes, yes, it's that dog! But your memories aren't so good. This dog isn't from Muzhou. It was brought over to Muzhou by my great-grandson to compete, and now he has brought it back. Come, Curly Hair, say hello to this bunch of old fellows."

Curly Hair showed due respect and barked, "Woof!"

Great-Grandfather Fang often bragged about Fang Zhao. Among his great-grandchildren, the most famous was Fang Zhao. Furthermore, Fang Zhao's exposure rate in the news had indeed been very high the past couple of weeks, so many people in the retirement center knew that Fang Zhao was Old Man Fang's great-grandson.

"Your great-grandson is here?"

"Why, Old Fang, are you trying to get some preferential treatment for your great-grandson?" someone joked.

"Tsk! Do I look like that sort of person?! He is voluntarily applying for his military service position. Tomorrow, when the application system opens, I will let him submit his application," said Great-Grandfather Fang with a righteous look on his face.

There were only a few positions that could be applied for voluntarily. These were the ones that the majority did not wish to get posted to.

A few old folks at the retirement center stared at Old Man Fang in astonishment. "Are you talking big? Can you bear to see your celebrity great-grandson head to that sort of places?"

"Who says I can't bear to? Youngsters can always use some training and build character. I don't hope that he fights for military accomplishments—after all, that's not the path he is taking. I'm just letting him head to the most arduous places to gain experience and improve himself. This way, he can go much farther in the future."

"...Hehe." The old folks at the retirement center who know Old Man Fang's temperament well only chuckled but did not say anything. If they really believed his words, the hundred-plus years they had lived would have been in vain!

But regardless of what anybody else thought, the next morning, Fang Zhao accessed the military service application system and followed Great-Grandfather Fang's suggestion, arranging the vocations from difficult to easy.

Just as Great-Grandfather Fang had said, the vocations of the highest difficulty were on the Arcturus and Formalhaut. Great-Grandfather Fang had recommended he apply to serve on the Arcturus. The spaceship Arcturus had been in active service for a longer time, and most of the crew onboard were experienced and would not panic

when they came across situations.

Fang Zhao filled in his personal information and submitted the application.

As not many people applied for these military service programs with high difficulty, the audit was quick, and Fang Zhao received a reply in the afternoon:

"Rejected!"

On the next page, the reason: Background check failed. Not suitable for military service on a spaceship.

Fang Zhao stared at the three words "Background check failed" and could not understand why this reason had caused him to be rejected. His files had no criminal records and his life on the black street was unlikely to result in this. Many people had history in the black streets, and even some military officials also came from the black streets

Mulling it over for a bit, Fang Zhao then submitted an application for the Formalhaut.

Early the next morning, Fang Zhao received a reply:

"Rejected!"

Reason: Background check failed. Not suitable for military service on a spaceship.

Fang Zhao: "..."

Chapter 178

Choice

Not just Fang Zhao, even the two old Fangs, with their wealth of experience, were puzzled at this reply.

Background check failed?

He had never broken the law, been a danger to society, or even received demerits while schooling. Why had he failed the background check?

Great-Grandfather Fang was seething with anger. He sought out an old comrade to ask around. His old comrade sent someone to check it out before replying to Great-Grandfather Fang.

The other party said, "I don't know whether or not it is true, but I heard that they don't accept celebrities."

"Don't accept celebrities? There is a new policy now?" Great-Grandfather Fang just could not understand this. Voluntarily applying for the most difficult place would actually be met with a merciless rejection on the grounds of a background check? What did being a celebrity have to do with being suitable for military service on a spaceship? Besides, he had paid attention to the relevant decrees and had not seen any clear-cut rules that stated celebrities were unable to serve onboard.

The audit personnel would indeed get to see information not displayed in the files—for example, for certain reasons, they might feel that a particular applicant was not suitable for work on a spaceship. Right now, celebrities were what they did not want.

Great-Grandfather Fang used a few means to ask around. A lot of information on space ships was highly classified and could not be released to the public, and the people were bound by confidentiality agreements that had not expired. However, Great-Grandfather Fang asked many old comrades and still managed to get a little information.

Compiling the information, the general idea was this: celebrities and the like only

showed off on spaceships. They couldn't do anything thing properly and had lots of trifling matters. Just a bunch of trouble! We don't want them! Whoever wants them can have them!

Ending the call, Great-Grandfather Fang fell silent. He had been retired for too long and had already forgotten that celebrities were discriminated against in many places.

Fang Zhao's records were indeed clean, but he was still considered a celebrity, and the two spaceships were unwilling to accept his application.

Great-Grandfather Fang sat in silence for awhile then suggested to Fang Zhao, "How about applying one more time?"

Fang Zhao felt a sense of regret that he was unable to get on the Arcturus or Formalhaut, but since their internal department had such unwritten rules, he would also not try and force his way in. Thus, Fang Zhao decided to select somewhere else. "No need, I will just apply for the third most difficult military service program."

The two old Fangs gathered around the screen. "You have decided to pick the third-ranked one? What is it?"

"Mining," Fang Zhao replied.

"Mining? That's no good. It's too remote, and the environment and climate are both horrendous. If you pick mining, why not let the military automatically assign you? Odds are you will be assigned to a planet for mining or to construction for a planet's base. That is more likely." Great-Grandfather Fang felt that this was not suitable. According to him, since Fang Zhao could not enter the two military service programs he had hoped for, all other programs were not very different. In any case, if it was not mining, it would be expanding and constructing bases for the future of humanity. Whether it was near or far from Earth was no different, so rather than heading to a far and remote place to mine, settling for the automatic assignment would be better.

But Fang Zhao's thinking was different. He had chosen that program not because it was ranked third for difficulty but because, among all the planets that had started development, this was the furthest one from Earth.

Fang Zhao wanted to see for himself how far humanity had progressed in these 500 years. Not counting space travel, only places where they had genuinely taken root, began construction, and stepped foot on.

Without hesitation, Fang Zhao submitted an application for this military service program. Unlike the previous two, this application received a reply very quickly, and the reply this time was not "rejected," but "approved."

However, "approved" did not mean that Fang Zhao had gotten in. He still needed to submit the results of a physical examination. Fang Zhao would need to head to an appointed hospital for a medical.

This medical was not the commonly seen kind. Rather, it was an examination to check whether the applicant's constitution could withstand long-haul space travel. The appointed hospital was in Qi'an City's military district.

Over at the hospital, those in charge of the medicals were gathered together and gossiping about the latest entertainment news.

Normally, the place was quite empty, so those on duty were not old doctors. Experienced old doctors were always very busy. Those that remained here were some interns from medical college or a few youngsters that had just started the job. In any case, most people that came here for a medical were applicants for military service programs or were about to serve. All they needed to do here was operate the machines and run tests on the applications.

As these few people were talking animatedly, they received a notification.

"Someone actually voluntarily applied. The preliminary application has gone through, and the person should be coming for a medical during these next two days. Oh, it is planet Baiji. He probably did not think things through!"

"I reckon it's another idiot who applied in the spur of the moment."

The youngster closest to the door stared ahead blankly and lifted his arm to tap at his colleagues who were still talking. "...The idiot you guys were talking about has arrived."

Fang Zhao walked in wearing a cap that was pushed low. When he got here, there were no other idle people around, so he took off his cap.

Fang Zhao looked at the door number while asking, "Is this the medical center for military service personnel?"

"Yes... yes, yes! This is the place!"

"Are you Fang... Fang... Fang Zhao?"

"You are the one who applied for planet Baiji?"

Fang Zhao nodded his head. "That's me."

"...This way, please."

The few youngsters led Fang Zhao in and began operating the machines and examining Fang Zhao. At the same time, their hearts were screaming violently: Why is it Fang Zhao?! Baiji Planet! So far away and the conditions are bad, why go all the way there to suffer? Has your brain gone stupid from playing all those games?

Five minutes later, he received an evaluation of "excellent" for his physical examination. Once the medical results were released, they were uploaded to the military service application web page. In no time, Fang Zhao's application status changed from "application received" to "application approved." Fang Zhao was to report for duty on March 1st in Yanzhou's military district. When the time came, he would undergo a month of military training, and in April, he would be sent to planet Baiji.

Wayne's jaw dropped when he found out that Fang Zhao had applied for Baiji.

"Why didn't you think things through? Why did you choose this?" Wayne just could not comprehend why Fang Zhao had prepared for so long and yet picked this option!

Helpless, Wayne contacted Duan Qianji, hoping that she could persuade Fang Zhao. Even though Fang Zhao had already submitted his application, before he officially started his military service, this could still be manipulated.

However, Wayne did not hear the answer he wanted from Duan Qianji. Duan Qianji told Wayne to stay calm and not be impatient. A new policy might be officially launched this year, and Fang Zhao's choice might not necessarily be a bad one.

The next day, Silver Wing announced Fang Zhao's choice—Military Service at planet Baiji.

This choice surprised many. Lot's of people thought that Fang Zhao had gone mad and

guessed that he probably had an ulterior motive. However, the approval letter had already been screenshotted. It could not have been faked.

Compared to Fang Zhao's fans, those from other e-sports clubs and entertainment companies collectively relaxed their weary hearts. Once Fang Zhao was gone, at least within the next year, there would not be any hot topics regarding him. Silver Wing's influence in the gaming circles would definitely drop as well.

Chapter 179

Chapter

Fang Zhao voluntarily applying for military service on planet Baiji and getting approved caused a huge stir in Yanzhou's entertainment circles.

This was the first time a celebrity had voluntarily applied for a military service program with a high difficulty. Even though Fang Zhao's status in the industry was not very high yet, his popularity over the last two weeks had soared.

This was not just because of Fiery Bird's annual gala. Experienced members within the entertainment circles could tell right away that there was a team behind them hyping it up, but all they thought was that Silver Wing was stirring up the news to make Fang Zhao's presence felt one last time before he left.

They just had to wait and watch. After one month's time, after Fang Zhao started his training in the military district, all news of him would be sealed off; nobody would remember him. Silver Wing was just trying to squeeze out every last bit of Fang Zhao's value before he enlisted for military service.

Regardless of what outsiders thought, after Fang Zhao's application was approved, he bade his goodbyes to the two Fang elders, left Yanbei City, and returned to Qi'an City. After that, he requested a flying transport from the company and brought Curly Hair to Muzhou.

Fang Zhao was on the verge of enlisting and would only be able to return after a year. In that year, leaving Curly Hair in Muzhou was the most appropriate. Although it would be slightly inconvenient, at least he would have lots of freedom in Muzhou and sufficient fields to run around in. The attitude of the people of Muzhou toward dogs was the best among the 12 continents. Furthermore, Su Hou's batch of puppies had not grown up yet, and he planned for Curly Hair to lead his team in the next cycle of sheep-herding competitions. The new kennel had already been constructed and Su Hou was just waiting for Fang Zhao to deliver the dog.

Any traces of the "accident" that had destroyed the house at Dongshan Farm could no longer be seen. A new residence had already been constructed in the same area, and

it was double the size of the previous one. Also, the parking area had been shifted away from the residence by 200 meters.

Su Hou had shared with Fang Zhao all his plans for the year. After all, Fang Zhao was also an investor in Dongshan Farm. Even if Fang Zhao would be away the entire year, he should still know the plan.

After Fang Zhao left Muzhou, he visited each continent's Cemetery of Martyrs in succession. When he was done, it was mid-February, about two weeks before he was to report for training in Yanzhou's military district.

Nowadays, Fang Zhao rarely went to the company. On this day, he dropped by Xue Jing's place and went to the hospital to visit Ming Cang's son, Ming Ye, who was still receiving treatment. On his way home at night, a piece of news popped up.

"According to the latest news from Huangzhou, "Project Starlight," which has been shelved for 50 years, might be rebooted!"

Every year, after Memorial Day, military leaders from all 12 continents would convene in Huangzhou to discuss some crucial development issues or determine some significant policies.

Many youngsters might not know what "Project Starlight" was, nor would some older people that did not pay attention to entertainment news.

The "Star" in Project Starlight referred to celebrities. Whether they were sports stars, e-sports stars, actors, or singers, they all belonged to the same category.

"Project Starlight" had first been proposed by the Ministry of Education with the aim of letting celebrities set a good example and guide even more youths to realize their value and potential in human society. However, in the end, this plan had not been successfully implemented. The reason why this project hadn't truly been able to take off was because there had been too many pretentious stars in the trial stages. Not only had they plotted against one another, they had competed with each other for resources, which had caused the market to be really chaotic, hence there having been no other choice but to halt it. With that, many people had started pondering: just how many years would it take for the Ministry of Education to reboot this project?

Unexpectedly, before the Ministries of Education decided, the project was proposed by military district leaders!

Due to the proposal to reboot the project, there would still have to be a trial stage. The only concern was that the trial representatives had to be selected carefully. Thus, the 12 military district leaders would select candidates. Yanzhou's side had recommended three people, and one of them was Fang Zhao.

Before the news of Project Starlight had been released, Duan Qianji had inquired with Fang Zhao about his opinion and asked whether he was willing to continue shining and burning brightly in a different place. If Fang Zhao had not approved, then he would have been eliminated as a candidate early on.

Fang Zhao had agreed. If he were really selected, he would be part of the project, but he would not be allowed to change his military service application and would still be sent to Baiji.

Two days later, the results of the military district leaders came out. From the list of 30 over names, the final five had been selected. Fang Zhao was among the five and was the only one not to have undergone military service.

Among the five stars, Fang Zhao's status in the entertainment circles was the lowest. He was also the youngest.

Fang Zhao had been selected for Project Starlight's first batch. As for why he had been selected? Not just because he had been popular recently, but also because Fang Zhao had voluntarily applied.

It was rumored that when the leaders of each continent's military districts had been coming to a decision on the final name list, an old general had seen that Fang Zhao had voluntarily applied for military service on Baiji and had praised him: "This young fellow is really sensible! He deserves to be commended!"

There was still a very huge difference between people voluntarily applying and being automatically assigned their vocations.

This was what Duan Qianji had meant by "staying calm and not being impatient!" This policy was assistance from the heavens!

When Project Starlight's five chosen representative were announced, the news dominated the headlines for three days straight. Silver Wing once again started to stir up the news, and the companies behind the others did the same as well.

Some of Silver Wing's competitors had relaxed, thinking that once Fang Zhao left for a year, he would vanish really quickly. Never had they expected that he would reappear with Project Starlight!

However, people not from the industry had different views.

Some felt that Fang Zhao was going to be pretentious, just like those stars in the past.

There were also some who felt that his spirit was laudable and other people who had not yet done their military service should learn from him.

But there were some people who focused their attention on something different.

Dancers and actors could perform, singers could sing, but Fang Zhao? Was he going over to lead the people on planet Baiji in playing games? Or was he going to compose songs for them to listen to?

"Fang Zhao, you must set a good example. Whether the project can be successfully implemented all depends on your performance," Wayne said.

The government hoped that this popular star could shine and burn brightly on another remote and frigid place. But Fang Zhao wasn't really too sure how to shine.

"What do I have to do?" Fang Zhao asked.

"You are in charge of delivering warmth."

Chapter 180

Service with Funding

Wayne told Fang Zhao that the company would take care of everything. Fang Zhao didn't have to worry.

The next day, Silver Wing put out an official statement saying that Fang Zhao was about to perform his military service and that, in line with government policy, the company was launching a donation drive to fund development of Baiji Planet, the emphasis being that Baiji was where Fang Zhao would be serving.

The day after the project launched, it received online donations from all over Yanzhou—among the donors were gamers and music academy students. They all donated in accordance with their personal wealth. Jinro, Zu Wen, and company also donated a good chunk under their own names.

Now that Jinro was back in the gaming world, a battleground he was so familiar with, his name recognition was on the rise, even rivaling his level of fame when he'd retired. The other members of the Silver Wing team also made substantial donations. Zu Wen and company had achieved their success under Fang Zhao's leadership. You could say that they wouldn't be where they were without Fang Zhao, so they didn't skimp on their donations.

Silver Wing staffers, from gophers to senior management, also chipped in. They weren't close with Fang Zhao, but the project was clearly a company priority, so they would naturally show their support.

Of the five celebrities that were picked, Fang Zhao was the only one from Yanzhou. Silver Wing milked the attention for all it was worth, much to the envy of the other entertainment companies.

"Fang Zhao is a bit too lucky, no?"

"Indeed! Why can't he share the wealth? I had to take wild guesses on all the multiple-choice questions in my recent exam that I couldn't answer, and I got them all wrong."

"Who would have thought that they would relaunch Project Starlight now? With this laurel under his belt, Fang Zhao's career will probably progress even more smoothly."

"Fang Zhao probably never thought things would develop this way when he applied for military service, no?"

Silver Wing kept detailed records of the comings and goings of every cent that cleared its donation drive. They were taking after Fiery Bird, which was channeling all its donations to the venue of Fang Zhao's military service.

Many folks marveled at Fang Zhao's streak of good luck. Even Wayne said he had lucked out big time.

Fang Zhao simply laughed off comments like that.

Good luck?

It was probably making up for all the bad luck he had suffered in his previous life.

Soon, donations were no longer confined to Yanzhou—folks from other continents started to chip in. Besides making cash contributions, people also donated supplies that Fang Zhao could take to Baiji. Both types of donations were on the rise.

It wasn't just Silver Wing. The entertainment companies that managed the four other stars also launched similar donation drives.

What the military cared about wasn't their skill set but rather their popularity. Just take a look at how much a single donation drive raised. By that measure, the relaunch of Project Starlight was a success, but genuine success would need to survive the test of time.

But the main objective of the program was to generate sufficient public attention and funding.

On one of the spacecraft responsible for transporting servicemen and servicewomen to Baiji, the captain was near tears. He was in charge of shipping newbies to their service locations every April and October. In the past, supplies had been tight. They'd had to be frugal during the journeys to the service locations. Apart from the family members of the newbies, no one had cared about their well being.

But this year was different. Military HQ had relaunched Project Starlight, bringing major perks to folks like him who were in charge of developing faraway planets under tough conditions yet were inept at securing funding.

Fang Zhao's application had been personally vetted by Lieutenant General Shanta, the highest-ranked officer on the Baiji military base. When he had reviewed the application list, he'd noticed there was only one applicant who had volunteered. Even though he didn't like celebrities on his base, volunteers were rare. Under normal circumstances, service applications didn't involve officers as senior as him, but Shanta had personally requested the applications be passed on to him.

Rarely did they come by a volunteer for Baiji. So be it if he was a celebrity. After some hesitation, Shanta had still signed off on the application. Little had he known that he would be the one who benefited from the assignment.

But while the officers on Baiji rejoiced, the soldiers who staffed the spaceships Arcturus and Formalhaut were in mourning.

Why had the top brass decided to scale down exploratory missions?

Because manpower, supplies, and funding were limited.

In addition, these years, there were too many colonizable planets that had been discovered. Every military base had to fight for their funding. As a result, the speed of development and construction on each planet varied. Planets that had sufficient funding and manpower naturally developed much more rapidly than planets that hadn't secured any funding or subsidies, even though some of these were planets that had been discovered earlier and started construction earlier.

In fact, the top brass had planned on reducing its exploratory fleet to one ship, but they had ultimately decided on two. And yet, even though two ships had been kept, funding hadn't been beefed up that much, so finances were tight, and exploratory spaceships didn't receive as much attention as they had in the days of the Sirius. Conditions on the two exploratory vessels were also tough.

It's just a matter of tolerating a celebrity. As long as he brings sufficient funding, investments, and public attention, and as long as Fang Zhao doesn't do anything outrageous during his service period after arriving on Baiji, we can put up with him, thought Baiji's top military official to himself.

In late February, Fang Zhao boarded the flying transport arranged by Duan Qianji. Apart from the pilot, there was another passenger who was a stranger. He wore a First Frontline insignia.

First Frontline was a longstanding electronic publication founded during the early days of the New Era. With the discovery of new energy sources and mineral deposits as mankind had relaunched space missions in the beginning of the New Era, First Frontline had become the most popular electronic magazine in the world.

But these days, First Frontline registered few bells, even among elderly folks more than 150 years old. They might not recall the name without doing some research.

This time, First Frontline had assigned five reporters to cover Project Starlight. Every celebrity had been assigned a reporter. The stranger Fang Zhao met in his flying transport was the First Frontline journalist assigned to shadow him. He would follow Fang Zhao to training camp and then to his service location.

The reporter gave him the cold shoulder. Perhaps he was from a prominent family or was unhappy with his job, but all he did when he saw Fang Zhao was give a cursory glance. He didn't utter a single word.

Meanwhile, Baiji's senior officer was having a discussion with a few of his deputies.

"We can't expect these artsy celebrity types to do too much. Even though conditions on our planet are tough, I'm still willing to give minor celebrities who bring in funding a bit of special treatment," said Shanta.

"What can these minor celebrities do with their scrawny limbs? Let's just make sure we spoil them," said one of Shanta's deputies as he shook his head, as if recalling some of the less popular celebrity soldiers from the past.

For them, Fang Zhao, who brought with him extra funding, was a shimmering gold mine. All they had to do was pamper him like a mascot.

Chapter 181

Worst Luck

Yanzhou military district.

A civilian flying transport gradually drew closer. After identity verification, the transport landed on the parking ground.

People in the military district took one look at the flying transport and knew who it was. Generally, other than military flying transports and those with special labels, ordinary civilian flying transports were not permitted in the area. But with the buzz all over the news about Project Starlight, everyone in Yanzhou's military district knew, even those that did not pay attention to entertainment news.

However, the military district was different from Yanzhou's other cities. Even if the people there were curious about the youngest star in Project Starlight, they wouldn't be like people outside the district and engage in random discussion. Neither would they stare endlessly at the flying transport. The people here went about their jobs and posts as per usual.

Disembarking from the flying transport, right away, Fang Zhao could feel the contrasting atmosphere here compared to outside. It was way more solemn. If it were any other youngster that had not experienced this sort of setting, they would probably feel unease.

In the military district, Duan Qianji's husband, Hong Lou, had been making arrangements. A quick-witted junior officer had been assigned to fetch Fang Zhao.

As Fang Zhao would be undergoing his military service this time around, Zuo Yu would not be following. However, nobody here made things difficult for Fang Zhao. Naturally, they wouldn't, given Duan Qianji and Hong Lou's backing, as well as the influence of Project Starlight.

It was reasonable to say that many people in the military district, especially high ranking officers, did not think highly of celebrities from the entertainment industry. However, due to the amount of funding coming in thanks to Fang Zhao, these people

were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

The military district was still lacking funding, let alone those far-off and remote planets that were still developing.

There were donation drives in society from time to time, and the amounts were huge, but military constructions had high even higher expenditures. Furthermore, as the distribution of funds was uneven, this resulted in a number of planets not having enough investments to keep up with the development plans. Poorer places stayed poor as the military expenditures were unable to be distributed there.

This was also the reason why there were many hidden details and monetary transactions in the military. Everyone wished to find more funding via all sorts of method. Securing funding for accelerating construction would count as a merit and help toward speedy promotions.

One example was having an instantaneous communication network between planets. Having a formidable communications network and safeguarding it required a lot of expenditure. Each communications installation for accessing this network was also extremely expensive, and the ordinary population absolutely had no chance to use it. Currently, only important military branches and an extremely small number of large-scale enterprises could use it.

Some remote planets in the preliminary stages of development only had one such communications installation on the planet.

This time, planet Baiji's high-ranking officers were delighted. Given that Fang Zhao was one of the five stars for Project Starlight, as long as he had the ability, he could garner support and donations from fans and Baiji would have a second communications installation. This was no longer a pipe dream!

With an upgraded communications network, problem-solving would get more efficient and construction could be sped up!

In line with this thinking, how could they not accommodate this person that was bringing in funding while undergoing military service? Furthermore, this was a plan pushed forward by the top brass. How could they not support it!

Therefore, Baiji's highest ranked officer, Shanta, had specifically contact a few old friends at Yanzhou's military district to help look after Fang Zhao. Fang Zhao was an

artistic youth who dabbled in music and games and was not very tough. If they did not know how best to treat him, then just pamper him like a mascot. After all, after a month, he would leave for Baiji.

Those over at Yanzhou's side thought in their hearts: That goes without saying.

After all, Fang Zhao was a Yanzhou citizen. Although his military service would not be in Yanzhou, as long as Project Starlight obtained results, Yanzhou's military district would also reap the benefits.

Instructions from the top brass were for Fang Zhao to be assigned to the specialized group for military training.

The so-called specialized group were people who had technical expertise in certain areas, such as medicine or engineering, and who were headed to the same location.

These people with technical expertise had all completed their military service, but at their current jobs, to get promoted, they required more experience and contributions. Following the military service group to a remote planet to participate in construction was a way to gain experience. Though arduous and rather dangerous, the rewards were great, and it was worth the risk.

Among the batch about to head for Baiji, of all these technical experts, the youngest was also over 40, while the oldest had just passed 100. However, human lives in the New Era were longer, and 100 years old was still considered middle-aged.

First Frontline's assigned reporter, Kevin Lin, needed to report Fang Zhao's daily life to his superiors. He would also be required to take part in military training, but this sort of training for military service was not a problem for him.

"The people of the military district are clearly looking out for you. That is why you were assigned to the 'specialized group'." Kevin Lin rarely took the initiative to speak to Fang Zhao. He even placed emphasis on the words "specialized group" in a bid to provoke Fang Zhao's ego. "If you wish to participate in normal military training, I can..."

Before Kevin Lin even finished, Fang Zhao had started walking over to the specialized group.

Kevin Lin stood there with his mouth agape. He had originally planned to advise Fang

Zhao to participate in normal military training. This way, he would be able to write a draft praising Fang Zhao's commendable spirit to his superiors, but who had expected that Fang Zhao would actually decide to train with the specialized group! How would he have the nerve to praise Fang Zhao?! Wasn't it said nowadays that youths in their teens to 20s were unable to bear hardship? Totally useless!

Kevin Lin went online to check on his other four colleagues who were also following celebrities. They had begun to write at a tremendous pace. In Project Starlight's first batch of five stars, besides Fang Zhao, the other four had applied for normal military training!

Kelvin Lin did not even need to go online to guess how the internet would evaluate Fang Zhao.

For Project Starlight's first batch of five stars, the other four were: Mazhou's Andre, a film star famous for his thrilling and hot-blooded action films; Fritz from Huangzhou, a reputed singer; Woo Tianhao, a professional race driver who was one of the younger generations of Woos, the aristocratic family in Tongzhou, and lastly, Lee Xiaoxiao from AjiNazhou (Azhou) a celebrated show host known for his lively and comical expressions that could draw laughter.

As a specially dispatched reporter, Kelvin Lin hoped that Fang Zhao would do something more compelling during the military training's free time, but when military training started, Kelvin Lin was disappointed once more.

The group had just finished running. Fang Zhao was not even sweating as he sat over on the side, chatting amiably with some older technical staff.

Kelvin Lin retracted his gaze and let out a long sigh.

His colleagues' stars were either singing or dancing, sparring with military district soldiers or amusing others with jokes and stories. When those actions were filmed, they could attract the views of many more fans.

Looking over at Fang Zhao's side, oh, today he is discussing construction theories with an engineer.

Kelvin Lin was some distance behind Fang Zhao and looked as if his soul had left his body, like he wasn't himself. How he wanted for something interesting to write about, but over here, it was only "construction theories," "species evolution,"

"communications network," and other boring topics.

At the end of every day, when Kevin Lin submitted his draft to Frontline First's chief editor, he could only put on a bitter face. What can I do? I am despairing too!

He just knew that he'd had the worst luck getting assigned here.

Chapter 182

The Middle-Aged/Senior Demographic

First Fronline had set up a dedicated segment for Project Starlight, codenamed S. There were a total of five channels, ranging from S1 to S5, with each celebrity assigned a codename based on age.

Channel S1 was assigned to the oldest among the five celebrities—the 67-year-old Li Xiaoxiao. A professional host of light variety shows, Li Xiaoxiao could draw viewers based on his comical expressions alone, but this fella was also a great storyteller. He could draw laughs by spinning tales at will.

S2 was the 61-year-old bona fide singer and actor Fritz. Sixty-one was considered one's prime in the New Era. Fritz's good looks and polite, eloquent speech evoked gentlemen from the Old Era, drawing quite a few female fans.

S3 was Andre, who enjoyed mass appeal because of the movies he starred in. He had quite a few fans, especially after having applied to undergo training with the other fresh recruits after arriving at his military base. His excellent training results also won praise from many fans.

S4 needed no introduction. Woo Tianhao was already on a pedestal because he hailed from Tongzhou aristocracy. He was also quite competent on his own merits, having made a name for himself in the racing world, but what struck fans was his ability to act pretentious. He spared no moment in proving that he was a style icon. Even when he was taking a sip of water, he acted as if he was starring in a blockbuster, with the precise angle of every single hair factored into consideration. He left no stone unturned in trying to project the maximum aura of a star.

As for S5...

The gaming supergod...

In a setting like this, you could neither game nor commentate on gaming. How would you stir interest? Compared to the other four celebrities, Fang Zhao was at a disadvantage.

Kevin Lin blotted his pen on his paper notebook. He had been at the military base for two weeks, and his viewership numbers were dropping gradually. Kevin Lin was panicked, and he was further depressed by the fact that Fang Zhao didn't seem to notice that anything was wrong.

It wasn't that he hadn't discussed the issue with Fang Zhao. As early as his third day at the base, he had approached Fang Zhao during a break. He had even showed Fang Zhao the data he had on hand. Viewership statistics showed that, out of the five Project Starlight channels, their numbers were the worst, and their online audience size was declining with every episode.

Kevin Lin had made his case to Fang Zhao. "Look at what the others are doing and look at yourself. Yes, you can't game in a military base, but the other celebrities sing. You could give it a try too. They tell stories. If you can't, you could try to crack a few jokes. Don't spend all your time talking shop with all these technical types. We are going for mass appeal here. We have to be lowbrow."

Yet in response to Kevin Lin's outburst, Fang Zhao had neither acted on his suggestions nor been angry.

Kevin Lin had even applied for a transfer to cover another celebrity while briefing his editor-in-chief on his assignment, but he had been rejected. The other four journalists weren't stupid. They had no intention of swapping spots with Kevin Lin.

Kevin Lin had to broadcast live at least five hours a day. After looking at the time, he sent Fang Zhao a message. The day's broadcast was about to begin.

On the track, Fang Zhao was carrying an engineer more than 100 years old on his back. As one of the highly-valued personnel sent to Baiji, the technical experts didn't have to endure the same amount of training as those performing their military service, but they had to meet certain minimum requirements. One of the regular tasks was completing 10 laps around the track. Each lap was 500 meters long. Ten laps made for 5,000 meters. The good thing was that there was no time limit. They would pass as long as they completed the full distance.

One of the older engineers had a chronic leg problem. His jog would slow down to a walk after two laps, and then he would get tired after walking two more laps. Fang Zhao had carried this fellow on his back to the finish during previous training sessions. Today was no exception.

The camera focused on Fang Zhao while the engineer's crisp voice was picked up by the microphone. "Different geological environments require different architectural approaches. Take Baiji, for example..."

Kevin Lin wore a facial expression that suggested he was having an out-of-body experience. He gazed at the sky aimlessly as he brainstormed a solution.

S5 had actually started out with a sizable audience, but their webcast had lost its novelty quickly, and their viewers had soon defected to the other four channels.

Tuning into the live webcasts were mostly youngsters. They had no time for an old geezer reminiscing about the good ol' days.

Because S5 was dominated by footage of technical experts telling stories from the past, it was nicknamed "story time" on the web, and viewership data revealed that folks who stuck with S5 were mostly the elderly, especially retired government officials, who loved the nostalgic tone of the webcast. Thus, S5 had also been dubbed "the retired officials' channel."

Kevin Lin had no insight into Fang Zhao's interests. He longed to grab Fang Zhao by the collar and ask, "You're a young man in your 20s, not a middle-aged man in his 120s! Why are you interested in this arcane sh*t?"

But regardless of how tormented Kevin Lin was, the technical experts who spent time with Fang Zhao loved the young fella. It was a rare for a kid like him to express interest in infrastructure milestones ranging back to the beginning of the New Era.

The experts had gotten approval from their superiors to ignore certain confidentiality requirements, so they could let viewers understand the challenge of colonizing foreign planets and all that had been achieved over the years.

"Never rest on your laurels and always prepare for the worst" had been the instructions of the New Era's founding fathers when they had decided to launch their exploratory missions.

Like on previous days, the elderly technician Fang Zhao was carrying got the conversation started, and then other nearby experts joined in, sharing their personal experiences or some stories they had heard.

Kevin Lee opened his viewership analysis app and gloomily checked in on today's

numbers. He had low expectations these days. He just wanted their figures to stop falling and stabilize.

But Kevin Lin raised his eyebrows when he saw today's numbers, as if in disbelief. He refreshed his app and took a closer look.

Indeed, there were more viewers online today than yesterday.

Was this the plateau they had been waiting for?

Kevin Lin's mood improved, but it would take another few days to see if their numbers had truly stabilized.

Five days later, Kevin Lin compiled the viewership data from the past week and read the detailed breakdowns. The number of viewers under 80 were still dropping, but they were making major gains in the over-100 demographic.

So was the key catering to the middle-aged and seniors market?

Kevin Lin stared at the numbers briefly and had a eureka moment. So that was it! And he had been thinking that that kid Fang Zhao had no moves whatsoever. Fang Zhao had been plotting all along!

Slick!

Old folks didn't enjoy the songs youngsters liked, nor did they get the punchlines in the humorous monologues, but they loved to hear those experienced technicians tell their stories. Not only did it expand their knowledge, it satisfied their deep curiosity—and it helped them fall asleep.

The retired government officials were especially big fans. Word was that they were avid listeners. Even though they had retired, they still wielded considerable influence.

Kevin Lin rubbed his chin and wondered if Fang Zhao was kissing up to the retired officials. How cunning. He knows that he can't compete in other areas, so he targets the middle-aged and senior demographic instead.

Chapter 183

Flying to the Heavens

Yanzhou. Yanbei Retirement Facility.

The moment Great-Grandfather Fang heard the broadcast notification, he hurriedly contacted his old comrades. "Today's broadcast has started!"

Some old folk asked, "Is it? What is today's broadcast about?"

Another old fellow replied, "I think it's about some projects at a certain base a couple of decades ago."

Generally, most old folks in the retirement facility would drop whatever they were doing, head online to the saved channel, and watch the broadcast they anticipated daily.

At first, they had indeed watched it to give face to Great-Grandfather Fang. After all, many people in the retirement facility knew that Old Fang's great-grandson Fang Zhao was a member of Project Starlight's first batch. But as they had watched on, they'd felt that this live broadcast program was rather meaningful. Some of the stuff the engineers and scientists spoke about in the program were things they had personally experienced back when they had still been in the military.

For example, during the previous day's S5 broadcast, a biological research institute talked about invasive species and experimental breeds leaking and how they affected the environment. This really struck a chord with the people of Muzhou. In the past, Muzhou had experienced this when foreigners had brought in experimental breeds, and it had nearly resulted an area's ecology being damaged.

During the live broadcast, a Muzhou farm owner posted in the comments section, saying, "In the past, I used to wonder why seeds of modified crops had to be held for so long before being released. So it turns out there was a reason for doing so!"

After that, other Muzhou farm owners also chimed in. "Yes! Those people who steal experimental seeds deserve to be punished severely!"

Seeds still in the experimental phase had to be held to confirm their volatility and whether they had any long-term effects on the body or posed any threats to the ecology. Space laboratories absolutely prohibited such seeds being released until they were cleared. Stealing these seeds illegally and peddling them was a very serious offence.

The previous day's broadcast resonated with many people from Muzhou.

As for today, once the broadcast started, quick-witted people thought of a certain unspeakable project from a few decades ago. Back then, active personnel had not dared to mention this topic at all and had felt that no one would mention it in the next few decades. Never had they expected that it would actually appear on a live broadcast! It was clear that the top brass no longer intended to hide it and were using this broadcast as an opportunity to reveal more information.

This was the reason why these old veterans were especially fond of this live broadcast. They may have already retired, but they still kept up with events and had keen senses when it came to politics. They had children and grandchildren that held jobs with power, so these old folks with keen senses could use the information divulged by the live broadcast to advise and talk to the younger generations in their family.

"I said it all those years ago, that the project should not have been carried out! There was just too much malpractice, but nobody believed me! Now the truth has been revealed, and I was right all along! All that manpower and money invested into this project, what a waste!" A bearded old man with winter white hair lamented bitterly, but he felt pleased inside. See, wasn't what I said right? Too bad the bunch of idiots just wouldn't listen!

"I heard channel one mentioning this matter yesterday, although it was just a passing remark and nothing much," another old person added in.

"Hey, stop watching channel 1, switch to channel 5! Channels 1 through 4 are for youngsters. We aren't used to watching those. Channel 5 has the most information!"

"Really? Let me change the channel."

In other continents, there were similar occurrences like the one at Yanbei Retirement Facility. For these older folks, what they wanted to watch most was all this previously classified information that had not been released as news. Then, they would speculate

the intentions of the authorities regarding these matters.

If the live broadcast suddenly broke into song or gossip topics, for these old folks, it was like a long and annoying advertisement that came on as they were engrossed in the program. As for channel S5, Fang Zhao would neither sing nor raise other topics, and most of the time on the program was given to these technical experts to talk about their issues. Fang Zhao would occasionally make a few comments or guide the topic along to achieve the knowledge he himself wanted to know.

Youngsters might find the contents of S5 too boring, but for these old folks that used to hold key appointments or had had roles with some authoritative power, this channel's live broadcast seemed tailor-made just for them.

Forget about politics, just treating it as a leisure topic was good enough. These old folks who spent every day idling at home no longer needed to think of discussion topics every day. Channel S5 provided them with unlimited inspiration.

In the third week after Fang Zhao arrived in the military district, a leader in the top brass specifically mentioned channel S5, as his father was watching the broadcasts every day.

Kevin Lin had assumed that Fang Zhao had planned it all along, and he had decided to go along with the angle that favored old veterans, but Fang Zhao's reason for following the specialized group and getting them to speak up on some of their past experiences was because he truly wanted to know more.

In the third week, when military training was about to be completed, the enlistees had to undergo an outdoor training activity.

However...

Only active, full-time soldiers had standard training. Those military enlistees' training was of a lower intensity. As for the specialized group, that was not called training; it was just games.

Some people saw Fang Zhao following the specialized group as usual and were dissatisfied.

Nobody would say anything about those engineers and technicians, as they had completed their military service more than 20 years ago and their statuses were

different. They were not here as military enlistees, so nobody had any qualms about them being more relaxed.

But what about you, Fang Zhao? Why are you follow the specialized group every day and goofing off?

You might be carrying people on your back everyday, but seeing how easy it appears to be for you, who knows whether or not it is faked. If you don't increase your training intensity, and improve your constitution, when you get to the location, you will get it! Even if you are a star with preferential treatment, when you reach the destination, you will also suffer nonetheless!

But regardless of how online viewers of the broadcast evaluated Fang Zhao, channel S5's viewer count continued to increase at a slow but steady rate. Audiences over 100 years of age nearly accounted for half of the channel's viewers.

In the fourth week, military training finally ended, and there was some rest and reorganization. Everyone was preparing to ride a special shuttle headed to a space station.

Anyone who had completed their military service would know that these special shuttles were every newcomer's nightmare. These enlistees would feel as though they were getting clobbered by a rod. What the ride meant for these newcomers was that, from now on, their life of military hardship was starting.

Deep down, Kevin Lin was in a slightly jubilant mood. Luckily, Fang Zhao had followed the specialized group once more. These engineers and scientists would be seated at the most stable part of the cabin, where they would not experience as much g-force and shaking.

Among the specially dispatched reporters from Frontline First, the other four that were following stars were discussing when to take the medicine or accept an injection. They really did not wish to experience the painful feeling of "flying to the heavens." Therefore, they had decided to take some medical aid to help numb the pain.

Kevin Lin, who was currently taking delight in his colleagues' misfortune, watched as Fang Zhao headed towards the enlistees' cabin.

Kevin Lin hurriedly called out, "Wait a minute, Fang Zhao. Aren't you heading the wrong way?"

Fang Zhao retorted, "No. Didn't you want me to follow the enlistees?"

Kevin Lin: "...I didn't bring any medicine." Kevin Lin had thought that Fang Zhao would continue following those technical experts, so he simply had not made any preparations. Whether oral medicine or injections, he had none!

As a specially dispatched reporter, Kevin Lin had no margin for choice. All he could do was follow Fang Zhao wherever he went. Now that Fang Zhao had chosen the normal cabins, even if Kevin Lin did not want to and was complaining in his heart, all he could do was force himself to follow.

Fang Zhao followed the pre-installed instructions on his seat. He adjusted his back rest and put on the safety belt and was still in the mood to take a look at some of the supplementary technical manuals on the seat.

Beside him, Kevin Lin was in bad shape. His face was deathly pale. Although his memory of the frightful experience 20 years ago was fuzzy, that terrible gut-wrenching feeling that made him feel like dying remained etched in his mind. Even now when he thought about it, he could not help but feel afraid.

The officer in charge of sending staff up announced something over the intercom, but Kevin Lin was in no mood to listen. When he calmed down, the announcement was already over. He inclined his head toward Fang Zhao and asked. "What..... did he just say?"

Fang Zhao calmly replied, "He said that we would be flying to the heavens soon and told us to enjoy the out-of-body experience."

Kevin Lin: "..."

Chapter 184

Unique Treasure

When the shuttle first lifted off, the apprehensive enlistees collectively breathed a sigh of relief and thought to themselves, It's just like the taking off and descending in a flying car.

But in no time, the enlistees knew that they had been too naive!

As the shuttle rapidly shot up into the sky, Kevin Lin's face became paler by the minute.

Rumble rumble—

An immense rumbling could be heard from the outside as the view from the windows grew tinged with red. The cabin they were in trembled violently as though the shuttle had encountered a malfunction. A compelling resonance could be felt by their insides, and it gradually got stronger, making everyone feel extremely uncomfortable. Some cried out in pain, cursing and swearing. Others did not howl that violently, but they were definitely in no better shape than the former.

At this moment, all these young enlistees were feeling the out-of-body experience that had been mentioned by the officer prior to take off. The feeling of internal organs being smashed up made one feel as if he were dying, and no amount of useless struggling could alleviate the battering the brain suffered. Everyone who experienced this felt despair as if their lives were ending right here.

Nearby, in the other cabin where the scientists and engineers of the specialized group were, everything was smooth, and the scene inside was like a world apart.

The cabin's soundproofing was great, but they could guess what was happening on the other side. This was something every one of them had experienced, and some looked toward the other side, their eyes brimming with past memories. They were a little glad and felt lucky that they did not need to experience that dreadful process again.

A scientist sighed. "Poor things!" No one knew whether he was feeling sorry for the

young enlistees who were suffering a physical and mental battering or lamenting his own past experience.

"Kevin Lin is even more pitiful," said a mining engineer.

Among this batch heading toward planet Baiji, only Kevin Lin had to suffer a second round of torture.

A 100-plus-year-old engineer said, "Speaking of which, this is young Fang's first experience. I wonder how is he now."

These bunch of people had all received help from Fang Zhao, especially those older scientists and engineers. Their expressions were full of worry, and they hoped that Fang Zhao would not be mentally scarred from this.

What was happening in the enlistees' cabin was just a simulation. It simulated the early days when humanity had started their space exploration and the suffering brought about due to technology not being advanced enough.

This was not aimed at Fang Zhao or anybody else. It was an unwritten rule in the military service system. The first reason was to let newbies experience a little of what their former generations had gone through and allow them to understand the pain and suffering of the pioneers that had contributed so much to humanity. This was a mark of respect to those pioneers.

The second reason was to temper the mentalities of these youths who had just reached adulthood. First, toss them all around and shake them up. Regardless of how wild they behave back home, they better be well behaved and retract their claws, or they will be in for a world of pain!

This was the first hurdle that military service enlistees faced. An unavoidable and life-changing hurdle.

Even if some enlistees had some form of understanding through online information or perhaps their friends' and relatives' recountings, when they experienced it for themselves, the feeling of pain and suffering was beyond words.

Luckily, this experience would only last half a minute. After 30 seconds were up, the cabin would slowly settle down.

Just half a minute, only 30 seconds, but within that extremely painful situation, every single second was pure torture!

The young military enlistees enduring these 30 seconds felt as if they had died and been reborn. When the cabin finally became calm, these enlistees' brains were so fuzzy they could not even determine the date.

This sort of situation reflected the difference in constitutions. Those with a stronger constitution appeared way better than those with a weaker one. Some enlistees had already fainted. The stronger ones might not have fainted, but blood was dripping from their nostrils and mouth, and their eyes were bloodshot as they sat stiffly.

A month of military training would not result in wholesale changes among the enlistees, but their constitutions would undoubtedly get a little stronger. If the enlistees had not undergone the training, the number of them collapsing would have been even greater.

The paramedic team calmly strode into the cabin and applied medical treatment to the enlistees. Through the monitoring equipment on the chairs, they could view the status of the enlistees and thus knew that there were no life-threatening situations. The paramedics were used to this scene that happened every April and October.

Kevin Lin was ashen faced, as if he had just witnessed a life-changing ordeal, but at least he was in a better shape than those with weaker constitutions.

Fang Zhao handed a bottle of water over. "Drink some?"

Kevin Lin's head was still spinning from shock when he heard Fang Zhao. "Thanks." Accepting the bottle from Fang Zhao, he rapidly gulped down a few mouthfuls and then suddenly froze. Turning his head violently toward Fang Zhao, he started scanning Fang Zhao from head to toe, as if this person was an alien.

Fang Zhao's face was not flushed or pale, no different from how he was normally was. He was totally unlike somebody who had just gone through a horrible ordeal.

Kevin Lin stuttered, "You... were sitting there the whole time?"

Fang Zhao nodded. "Mhm."

Kevin Lin's jaw dropped as a lot of doubt appeared in his heart. Finally, he asked, "How

are you feeling now?"

Fang Zhao pondered seriously and replied, "A novel experience."

Kevin Lin: "...". He had never heard anyone describe this painful experience as something refreshing.

As Fang Zhao did not seem to be pretending, Kevin Lin muttered, "Your constitution is that strong?" However, when he thought about Fang Zhao carrying all those aged technicians on his back so easily, Kevin Lin felt relieved. It seemed like Fang Zhao's physical condition was decent.

Kevin Lin once again lamented his wise decision. Luckily, he had made plans beforehand not to document the process of "flying to the heavens" as a live broadcast. Otherwise, he would have lost face! Even without watching the cabin's surveillance video, he knew what he looked like. Even before taking off, he had been scared sh*tless beyond words.

In the shuttle's control module, two officers in charge of sending enlistees were standing in front of a screen. They had watched the situation in the enlistees' cabin through the monitoring system.

A lieutenant colonel was satisfied. "This batch isn't too bad." He was the one who had told the enlistees to "enjoy the out-of-body experience while flying to the heavens."

Among these batch of enlistees, although there were some whose bodies had been unable to bear the 30 seconds and some who were not mentally strong enough and had fainted, the majority had still been able to endure it and could be considered decent. Of course, the instructor at Yanzhou's military district would credit that as a result of his own "teaching methods."

Beside him was a colonel who remained quite expressionless. "Not bad." He was staring with raised eyebrows at Fang Zhao on the screen. Pointing at the screen, he said, "Is this fellow really one of the five stars in Project Starlight?"

"There's no doubt. It is him. I thought he was just a lucky celebrity, but I never expected that he would have some ability."

They all knew that Fang Zhao's prior month of military training had been with the scientists and engineers. The intensity of that training could not compare with the

other enlistees. It was reasonable to say that the results of his one month's training were definitely not enough to improve his constitution compared to the training of the other enlistees. But now, to be able to endure those 30 seconds of torture, his physical condition was way better than the rest.

"Actually, it is understandable. After all, the results of his physical examination were excellent."

"That's true. I just hope that he performs well later on and doesn't disgrace Yanzhou."

The two officers did not spend too long discussing this matter. They were only responsible for sending this batch from Yanzhou to the space station. After the assignment was complete, they could return back to Earth straightaway.

As for Fang Zhao's future performances, they did have high demands. Among the five stars of Project Starlight, Fang Zhao was the most disadvantaged. Although he might have attracted a wave of middle-aged and senior audiences, who knew what further developments there would be?

Generally speaking, getting the more rational middle-aged and senior audiences to part with their money was more difficult than coaxing easily excitable youngsters to donate.

So what if you had a large audience? If the donations were not sufficient, military expenditure could not be raised. Wasn't that still incomparable to others?

However, for their expectations, as long as Fang Zhao was not left too far behind by the other four, that would be good enough. After all, comparing Fang Zhao's age, status, and his lack of ability to coax fans, it was best not have high expectations.

In the enlistees' cabin.

Those pale-faced enlistees had received treatment from the paramedic team and were now feeling better.

A youngster asked, "Are we out yet?"

"Yes."

Someone in the cabin weakly said, "We can see Earth from the windows."

These people had seen the planet so many times, whether it was from interspace travel or other modes of transportation, it no longer had the novelty factor. Even people seeing this sight for the first time only found it a fresh experience momentarily; they would not be in the mood for long. Nowadays, this sight was very common.

They were starting to miss home, and not just their own homes or their homeland. The planet they had grown up on, regardless of whether it was their own continent or a foreign one, would always be their home planet. The soil they had stepped on was truly theirs. Any time they wished to go home, home was but a flight ticket away.

But starting now, they were going to be far away from the planet that everyone was so family with. There was a feeling of suspense. After all, these enlistees were still young, and this was the first time they would be so far away from home. When thinking about the arduous life awaiting them in the next year, anyone would feel a sense of sentimentalism, and the entire cabin became silent and slightly stifling.

During this period of silence, Fang Zhao walked over to the window and gazed out.

Kevin Lin had been about to say something when he noticed Fang Zhao looking out of the window with a sense of gentleness, as if he was watching a unique treasure.

Fang Zhao stood there, staring out the transparent window, feeling strongly attached yet shocked.

This azure blue planet was just an insignificant speck in the boundless cosmos, yet it carried so many sentiments and memories.

With his own two eyes, Fang Zhao gazed intently at the clear image separated by just a thin window. The planet he had been born on, had grown up, and had fought, struggled, and resisted on. The planet occupied his field of vision, seemingly close enough for him to reach out and touch it.

This was the planet 500 years after his death, familiar yet strange.

It had recovered, although slightly different from the Old Era, but at least it now had a healthy color.

The sudden outburst of complex emotions made Fang Zhao misty-eyed

Below him was the azure blue planet; above him were the endless heavens.

Countless notes started bouncing around in his mind, like dazzling fireworks exploding in the night sky, seemingly like countless stars twinkling in the boundless universe.

Chapter 185

Healthy Appetite

Kevin Lin watched as Fang Zhao gazed out the window and drummed his fingers. He couldn't figure out a pattern.

"Homesick?" Kevin Lin asked. From his perspective, Fang Zhao was in his 20s. He was too young, probably unnerved by the experience of leaving home for the first time like the others.

Fang Zhao didn't answer directly. His gaze shifted toward Kevin Lin. "How long until we reach Baiji?"

"We have to meet up with the folks from the other continents assigned to Baiji at the space station first, then we'll head out together. It shouldn't take long. Just head to bed when we board the spacecraft and we'll be there when you get up," Kevin Lin said.

Fang Zhao nodded and pulled out a small paper notebook from his pocket. The notebook had been screened twice when he boarded the flying transport. He had just bought it before leaving for the military base, so it was empty.

Kevin Lin peeked over Fang Zhao's shoulder upon seeing that he was scribbling and didn't seem to mind an audience.

It was indecipherable.

"What are you jotting down?" Kevin Lin asked in a probing tone. "Whatever you put down will have to be vetted by security."

"It's just a musical score. Nothing to hide," Fang Zhao responded.

"A score?" It was an answer that Kevin Lin hadn't expected. He had thought Fang Zhao was writing a diary entry.

All written communications during military service were heavily screened. Diaries were allowed, but they had to be vetted by security, the same with musical

compositions. But as long as the content didn't involve any confidential information, there wouldn't be an issue.

"Oh, that's right. I almost forgot you're a composer." Kevin Lin's curiosity was piqued yet again. "That is to say you've found inspiration for a new piece? Are you going to compose the whole thing? You can play it for me."

"I don't have the equipment. I'm just going to jot it down for now and record it after the end of my military service," Fang Zhao responded.

There were no professional musicians or recording equipment on hand. All Fang Zhao could do was record his ideas in his notebook.

"I see." Kevin Lin was very disappointed. He had hoped that Fang Zhao's composing could serve as a gimmick that would attract more viewers. Now that Fang Zhao had vetoed the idea, he could only give up on it too.

Others in the cabin had recovered as well. Now that they were feeling better physically and mentally, they approached Fang Zhao for autographs. Quite a few of them were avid gamers, so of course they knew of Fang Zhao.

One young conscript said he and his cohorts had been very depressed when they'd found out they had been assigned to Baiji, but after Project Starlight had been announced and they'd found out they would be serving in the same location as Fang Zhao, the band of youngsters' spirits had lifted again.

Regardless of whether or not they were fans of Fang Zhao, just the notion that Fang Zhao would be with them made them think that serving on Baiji wouldn't be so bad.

But they didn't have much time to shoot the breeze with Fang Zhao. Their flying transport arrived at the space station shortly after. The captain of their ride to Baiji was already waiting. This batch of soldiers would board the spacecraft soon, along with conscripts from other continents, after a short break.

Fang Zhao was grouped with the highly valued personnel for more comfortable group dynamics. Lab technicians and engineers had no time to follow gaming news. They only had a vague sense of who Fang Zhao was—or thought that he was a total stranger. They wouldn't be as fangirly as the fresh conscripts.

Just as Kevin Lin had said, to save energy, passengers of the spaceship rested in

sleeping pods that put them in an unconscious state. By the time they woke up, the ship had arrived at Baiji base.

Fang Zhao had long been awake. The sleeping pod hadn't had much effect on him, but he'd feigned sleep to avoid sticking out. He'd passed time by thinking through some things and composing.

Kevin Lin climbed out of his pod with a yawn. "We're finally there!" He shook his head hard and paused to think. He finally remembered what he had wanted to say to Fang Zhao. "After we settle down, we'll be summoned for mealtime in the cafeteria. This will be broadcast live. It will be quite the scene. I've already gotten approval from the senior officer in Baiji. He said he would make the necessary arrangements, so we don't have worry about their end. What I want to discuss is our end."

Kevin Lin turned serious and continued, "Since this will be a documentary-style show, naturally, we want to cover the raw side of you. Put on a good show in the cafeteria. Conditions are rough on Baiji. The food will definitely pale in comparison to what you have had in Qi'an, but no matter how disgusting the food is, you cannot show any sign of disgust. It's normal to take time to get used to the new diet, so you don't have to finish your entire meal. Just eat one-third. But do whatever it takes to finish that one-third, then you can stop. I'll shift the camera to somewhere else."

Kevin Lin was thinking that he himself couldn't get used to the food on Baiji right away, let alone Fang Zhao. It would be impossible for Fang Zhao to finish his entire portion. He just had to pretend to eat.

This wasn't a big deal for Kevin Lin, but he was worried that Fang Zhao was too young and would have a lower tolerance than the professional actors among the five celebrities. It would turn viewers off if he showed resentment toward the diet here.

Even though Kevin Lin didn't like Fang Zhao and was a bit p*ssed off and was even looking down on him a bit because he was the least famous of the five celebrities taking part in Project Starlight, Kevin Lin wouldn't go so far as screwing Fang Zhao over. What would he gain from it? They were in the same boat.

The conscripts headed to their assigned rooms, tidied up, and then were summoned for food in the cafeteria.

Punctuality was a major requirement of military life. Even the lazy bones among the

conscripts knew they couldn't screw up this one. Regardless of whether or not they were done unpacking, the new arrivals dropped what they were doing, got dressed, and headed to the cafeteria.

Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin also headed over.

In this instance, Fang Zhao wasn't grouped with the highly valued personnel. He resumed his role as a regular conscript, heading to the section in the base cafeteria allocated for conscripts' use.

Kevin Lin followed the crowd as he gave Fang Zhao the quick lowdown on the Baiji base.

"You don't have to worry about anything else here. The base is very secure. As a regular conscript, what you need to remember is that there are two types of digestive tolerance you must develop." Kevin Lin had done quite a bit of homework to earn his assignment. He shared this background information with Fang Zhao as well. "The first is cultivating a strong stomach. You need to be able to process whatever the base feeds you without developing allergic reactions or puking it up. The second type of tolerance is being able to eat anything. You must be able to ingest all edible organisms on the planet, regardless of what they look like, what kind of texture they have, or what they taste like. In other words, not only do you need a strong stomach, you must develop a wide-ranging appetite."

Most undeveloped planets suffered from a rough geological landscape. The variety of plant species was limited, and yet the bases grew larger despite being allocated limited resources. It made sense to go exploring for new food sources to meet daily needs. Anything that wasn't poisonous and could be digested by humans could be turned into food. Anything could appear on the dining table.

After entering the cafeteria, Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin found their seats under many watchful gazes.

Mealtimes weren't tied to people, but to specific times. When it was time for a meal, regardless of what you were doing, regardless of whether your delay was justified, latecomers wouldn't be allowed to set foot in the cafeteria.

Kevin Lin launched into a detailed analysis. "The base won't treat us too poorly. So many people are tuning in to the live webcast, and there are many former government

officials watching. Folks at the Baiji base will probably want to save face. I'm sure the food will be horrible, but it won't be as bad as the standard fare here. It's gotta be a little better."

But not long after Kevin Lin uttered these words, he was immediately contradicted.

After setting up the camera angle, Kevin Lin was about to duck out of sight to enjoy his last few moments of freedom when the bell in the cafeteria rang. The bustling cafeteria died down, and the robot servers delivered plates of weird-looking meals to their places.

"Are those... plates of bugs?"

The discussion forum for S5 had already lit up.

"F*ck! What is that?"

"Bugs! They're actually having bugs!"

"They... they don't seem well-cooked."

"So disgusting. Couldn't they process the bugs first?"

"You're so ignorant. It was the same deal when I served. The species was different, but we had bugs all right. As for whether they should be processed, nonsense. Who has the manpower and energy to process food? You might as well save the energy to do some more mining and research."

Kevin Lin remembered he was on camera, so he suppressed his disgust and tried hard to appear calm. When he'd served in the military, his assigned location hadn't been that far flung. He came from a well-to-do family. His parents had worked their connections and greased the wheels. Even though conditions had been tough, he'd had it easy compared to his fellow conscripts. Little had he expected that he would be punished this time around, but as a journalist with professional ethics, Kevin Lin still kept his disgust tightly under wraps.

He remembered that Fang Zhao was next to him, and he glanced over worriedly.

There was no sign of disgust, rejection, or anger on Fang Zhao's face. Instead, he was oozing curiosity.

When he saw Fang Zhao's reaction, Kevin Lin secretly breathed a sigh of relief and gave him a mental thumbs up. Impressive, kid! Such great acting! Impeccable. The curiosity is a nice touch.

Fang Zhao didn't know what was going on inside Kevin Lin's head. He calmed down after his curiosity and surprise at this novel course—a plate of roasted bugs—tapered off.

Fang Zhao was someone who had endured genuine hardship in his past life. Something trifling like this wouldn't bother him. He raised his fork unceremoniously, poked at one of the bugs, and studied it carefully. He recalled the biology knowledge a lab technician had passed on when he'd served in the Yanzhou military district: "Invertebrate, arthropod, diploboda."

Kevin Lin: "..."

The online audience: "..."

You're actually composed enough to classify the f*cker!

Chapter 186

Adapting Well

Fang Zhao did not understand too much about the classifications of these bugs. He only had the knowledge he'd obtained from previously discussing such matters with those scientists. Making a rough judgement was still fine, but determining its exact classification and type was out of the question. It was only when he'd seen the food on the plates that he was reminded about the assignment one of the scientist's had had, which was classifying the species on the planet, and thus he'd said that line. After speaking, he noticed Kevin Lin staring at him weirdly.

"What?" Fang Zhao asked.

Kevin Lin shook his head. He remembered they were still broadcasting live and time was limited. Due to having limited funds and resources on the base, the top brass had stipulated that the daily broadcast limit of at least five hours a day be cut down to at most one hour a day. Kevin Lin did not want to waste precious time on classifying insects.

Not slowing down, Kevin Lin forced on his most natural smile and spoke. "These are all organisms from plant Baiji. It is best to let an expert explain how to eat them.

Kevin Lin was different from Fang Zhao. Before he understood how to consume the food, he would not make a move, so as to avoid becoming a laughing stock. Thus, he would let someone demonstrate first to get an idea. If the method of consuming it was too offensive, he would not let the camera lens face himself.

The eyes of a youngster standing beside them lit up as a grin stretched across his face from ear to ear.

Every year, there were two batches of conscripts, one batch in April and the other in October. The previous April batch had already left before Fang Zhao and the current batch had arrived. As for the October batch, they would need to wait till October before returning. This youngster had already been on Baiji for half a year and was the leader of a small mining team. His name was Tan Ge, and he was 21 years old and had deferred his third year of university for his year of military service. He was quick-

witted and performed decently. After numerous applications, base command had given the opportunity to appear on stream to him.

During military service, chances for conscripts to call home were not a lot. In places with better conditions, conscripts could contact family members once per week, but in worse conditions, it was probably once a month and there would be time constraints each time. Most of the time, it followed the government's guideline: one minute. That time was just to report that all was well, as there was no time to say anything else. It could not be helped, as they were poor.

But now, a chance was here. Planet Baiji was having a change in fortune!

As part of the experimental phase for Project Starlight, there would be real-time broadcasts every day. The extravagant costs were not being shouldered by Baiji planet's base, so people here could test their luck. Perhaps they could appear on-screen for a bit. As long as they had family members watching the broadcast, their families could catch them!

Given the chance to appear on-screen, Tan Ge was visibly excited. When he heard what Kevin Lin had said, he hurried over, cleared his throat, and took the spotlight. "These bugs are a species more commonly seen on Baiji. These are high in calories and are what we normally have the most of. Actually, if these things were cooked with care, they would surely taste good, but as you know, there is a limited amount of power that we can use in order to operate the base normally. Whatever ores we mine, besides for our own usage, there is a need to transport them to other planets. We also have insufficient manpower, so the dedication we can spend on food is not much..."

Fang Zhao looked up at Tan Ge speaking animatedly. This fellow had spoken a lot, but he had actually been emphasizing one point—the base was very poor!

Tan Ge was conveying the Baiji's base command's opinion, and this was totally different from what Kevin Lin had expected. Kevin Lin had expected base command to save some face and bring out a more presentable dinner. He had not foreseen base command choosing to use this "dirt poor" strategy.

Kevin Lin's line of thought was still stuck back on earth, but here, the environment was different, if there were leaders of similar posts here, their choices would also be different.

This was also the reason why, on the first day that Fang Zhao's party arrived, this sort of dinner was served.

Base command's reasoning was this: Since we are already poor, let even more people know that the conditions here are tough and poor. Earn more sympathy so that we can get even more benefits from the government, receive a larger share of military expenditures, and garner more donations from the common folk.

Tan Ge glanced at the neighboring table while speaking. Obtaining nods of approval from that side, his heart felt more steadfast knowing he had not spoken wrongly. Raising his spirits, he continued, "Generally we use the most energy-efficient method of disinfecting, and when processed in the sterilizing stove till it's medium rare, it is just enough to kill off hard-to-see parasites, bacteria, and viruses. By saving energy and disinfecting it properly, we don't have to worry about feeling unwell when eating." Given Baiji planet's poor conditions, quality was secondary; if the food did not kill you, it was good enough.

The group of newcomers that were listening attentively: "... P-Parasites?"

Online audiences: "... We are already starting to feel unwell."

The "feeling unwell" that Tan Ge spoke about was when parasites, bacteria, or other harmful organisms made one fall ill, but the words he'd spoken produced a psychological bashing to online viewers. Sometimes, a psychological assault was even more unbearable than a physical one.

Tan Ge noticed Kevin Lin's rigid face as he spoke, and he snickered internally. One look and I can tell you have never experienced hardship! I wonder which comfortable environment these people completed their military service in. Everyone is indeed different!

As he gazed swept over to Fang Zhao's side, Tan Ge paused.

Tan Ge was not from Yanzhou, and he had already served for half a year. Although he used to play games, when he had enlisted, it was October, and he had begun training in the military district during September and had totally had no access to entertainment news. He did not understand anything to do with "Battle of the Century." Normally, when he called home, there was also not enough time, so he wouldn't ask about matters in the entertainment circles. It was only because of Project

Starlight this time around, where the base introduced this small celebrity Fang Zhao, that they know that he was a rookie from the gaming circle.

Before they arrived, base command had exhorted repeatedly to look after the little celebrity's mood. The moment this little celebrity displayed any signs that he was unable to bear with it, they would use a more subdued approach to express themselves.

Tan Ge had originally thought that this little celebrity Fang Zhao would normally lead an extravagant lifestyle, and as it was his first time undergoing military service, he would definitely have a lot that he would find hard to get used to, but Tan Ge had not expect that this little celebrity would be even more calm than the specially assigned reporter Kevin Lin who had already completed his military service.

Fang Zhao listened to Tan Ge's explanation. From base command's point of view, he could understand their choice. This was not putting on an act, nor was it scaring newcomers. Just observing the reactions of the people who had already served for half a year was enough to know this was their normal lifestyle. These sorts of living conditions did not make Fang Zhao feel indisposed at all.

As for psychological impact? Absolutely not. Anybody who had survived the Period of Destruction would not be affected by these small matters.

Tan Ge's gaze only lingered on Fang Zhao for a moment before he looked elsewhere and continued speaking. He still remembered his task and purpose for today.

Tan Ge turned his head back to face the floating camera and smiled before proceeding to pick a bug from his plate. "It has many legs, which are really hard to bite through and there isn't much meat inside. However, we can use their legs as utensils, just like this..."

Being extremely busy normally, Tan Ge had no time to keep his fingernails tidy. In the base, regardless of whether or not one started off being bothered about cleanliness, after a while, everyone no longer bothered. Personal cleanliness? How could that insignificant notion exist in this sort of place?

However, since Tan Ge would appear on the live broadcast, he had specifically washed his hands a few times and was much cleaner than he normally was.

Fang Zhao watched Tan Ge's demonstration. He also noticed that only those

newcomers to the base had forks. The majority of those that had been here for half a year did not have forks, and even if there were forks in front of them, those people did not use them.

The conditions on the base were not so bad that they could not bear to distribute forks. These people who had served for half a year did not seem discontented, and the reason forks were not used was because they were not required at all. Just like Tan Ge was demonstrating, the parts on their food could be disassembled and used as utensils.

On earth, there were also delicacies from foreign planets. Well-to-do families would also select some of these extraterrestrial foodstuffs at restaurants for a novel experience, but those foodstuffs were meticulously prepared and went through the skills of an excellent chef. When decorated nicely on a plate, it would naturally whet people's appetites and taste good. But now, what was in front of them was totally different, plus what Tan Ge had said beforehand...

Those watching the broadcast no longer had any appetites. Well-to-do families even felt that it would be a long time before they visited those restaurants that served extraterrestrial delicacies!

"The side glands contain poison, but they have all been removed. As long as the glands are cleanly removed, although it is might not be that appetizing, at least it settles our nutrition problem. However, if you eat anything outside the base that has not been treated, remember to rush back right away for detoxification and a vaccination shot, or else your life might be in danger."

As Tan Ge spoke, he was mindful of Kevin Lin and Fang Zhao's reactions. The specially dispatch reporter's face was twitching already, but the little celebrity seemed rather calm and was learning quite...

Tan Ge paused and watched. Fang Zhao's hands were following his motions to prepare the food and left him flabbergasted. Not only did this little celebrity adapt well, his practical skill was impressive too.

A few high-ranking officers of Baiji were in the command post, watching through the monitoring system and nodding their heads repeatedly.

The base's highest ranking officer, Shanta, was very satisfied with this little celebrity that had come to planet Baiji for his military service. Turning to his deputy, he said,

"This fellow fits in really well! He doesn't seem like he will give us any trouble."

The deputy approved as well. "Indeed."

As long as this little celebrity did not cause any problems, they were willing to use whatever base resources to support him as long as he appealed to fans to assist and support planet Baiji's cause and donate freely.

Over at Baiji, they were in urgent need of assistance! Another planet that had developed even later than Baiji had already begun preparations for a second base, as they had sufficient funding and manpower. At Baiji, maintaining one base was hard enough, and who knew how many months or years it would take for a second base on Baiji.

All they could do was pin their hopes on Fang Zhao.

Chapter 187

Only He Can Eat It

After Tan Ge demonstrated the method of deshelling the bugs to the newcomers, Kevin Lin had no more plans to continue broadcasting. Although this was in line with the original plan, the live dinner broadcast should have lasted 15 to 20 minutes, but since the broadcast had started, only 10 minutes had passed, and it was shorter than predicted.

Kevin Lin was helpless; if the broadcast continued, there might be detrimental scenes, so he decided to pause it.

"All right, many thanks to our young comrade for his explanation." Kevin Lin acknowledged Tan Ge as he once again put on a forced smile and faced the camera lens. "Following this, we will be having our meal. As time is precious, we will pause the broadcast here. We will see everyone later."

Kevin Lin waved at the camera lens and ended the broadcast. The weak smile on his face disappeared, and when he looked at the few half-cooked bugs on the plates, his complexion became even worse.

Around him, the new batch of conscripts that were all tensed up finally relaxed after the broadcast ended. They did not want to lose face in the middle of the broadcast and so had endured their urge to throw up.

A new conscript muttered to his comrade beside him, "Has the live broadcast ended?"

"It got cut already. Didn't you see that reporters face turning green? I reckon he feels horrible."

"Huuu. No longer broadcasting is good, it was so stifling. When that guy was explaining, I could feel my gut twisting."

"I wonder whether the camera filmed us just now. From where we are sitting, we should have been captured, right?"

While the newcomers discussed in muted voices, there were some who curiously studied the food on their plates. Not everyone was unable to accept this. There were people that had outstanding adaptability, but they were a very small minority.

Kevin Lin watched as Fang Zhao placed the edible portion of the deshelled bug into his mouth and could not help but exclaim, "The broadcast has been cut, we are no longer filming." There was no longer any need to continue pretending.

Kevin Lin did not finish speaking as he noticed that Fang Zhao did not seem to have an adverse reaction. Fang Zhao only knitted his brows slightly as he chewed on it but did not spit it out.

Kevin Lin could not help but ask, "How is it?"

"Not too bad. It has a rather strong, earthy flavor," Fang Zhao replied as he proceeded to work on a second bug on his plate.

This time, Kevin Lin carefully observed Fang Zhao's reaction, and he noticed that this young fellow was neither lying nor pretending.

A great distance away, in First Frontline's chief editor's office, the chief editor in charge of Project Starlight, Bacary, was reading the reports he had received from his five subordinates.

A while ago, Kevin Lin, the last to reach his respective destination, had sent news from planet Baiji. Now in his hands were real-time situation reports about the five stars.

After First Frontline had announced a collaboration with Project Starlight, they had done a survey online, and online audiences' first desire had been to see the types of meals at each military service venue.

Clothing, food, housing, and transportation were the focal points of everyone's attention. Food had ranked first, so Bacary had given his five subordinates an assignment to get information on the food situation at each location as soon as possible, as well as how the celebrities were adapting to the new environment.

The five incorporated planets for Project Starlight's experimental phase had all chosen to portray themselves as being really poor. This was what Bacary had expected. The five planet's conditions were all somewhat similar. But upon reading his subordinate's reports, Bacary's eyebrows flew upwards in surprise.

Bacary had watched all five channels' live broadcasts and was aware of the situations, but what was shown on-screen was not necessarily the truth. These celebrities might keep their expressions in check and show that they were adapting fine and not appear high and mighty or in any way that might cause audiences to react, but based on his own experiences, Bacary could guess whether these people were acting or not. He did not believe the image shown on-screen. He only believed his own subordinates' reports.

Bacary believed that whatever he saw on-screen was fake, so as he read through his subordinate's reports, he was astonished.

The summarized reports in his hands were as follows:

Channel S1's Lee Xiaoxiao, slightly uncomfortable

Channel S2's Fritz, not adapting well.

Channel S3's Andre, slightly uncomfortable.

Channel S4's Woo Tianhao, slightly uncomfortable.

Channel S5's Fang Zhao, adapting well.

Bacary stared at the words "adapting well" for over 10 seconds. He had been in this line for many years and knew that these results were surely embellished. "Slightly uncomfortable" was obviously excluding some stuff, whereas "not adapting well" meant that the person was suffering and felt extremely uncomfortable.

But what about "adapting well"? How much of that was an overstatement?

Thinking about the the tasks that the top brass had arranged, Bacary did not hesitate to use up precious time for instantaneous communication. He contacted Kevin Lin on planet Baiji.

Bacary did not waste any time talking nonsense. He got straight to the point. "Kevin, this 'adapting well,' was it exaggerated?"

Over on the other side, Kevin Lin was already in a single lounge outside the dining hall and did not have to worry about others listening in. Bacary having his suspicions was within Kevin Lin's expectations.

Kevin Lin sighed and replied, "My description is indeed slightly off. In truth, he is adapting too f*cking well! Do you know how many plates he had? Plates the size of..."

Kevin Lin brought his hands in front of him to simulate plates that could fit at least two of his own heads. "Five plates! He has already had five plates! Those medium-rare bugs that are coarse and disgusting, he had five plates of! Among all those here on their first day, he ate the most! I only ate one piece and could not bring myself to go on. The rest were all settled by him. Right now, he is still over there consuming more!"

Upon hearing this, Bacary fell silent for a bit. Squinting and rubbing his beard, he asked, "How are his table manners?"

"They cannot be considered graceful, but they are not coarse either. He just eats a little too quickly. I had not finished my first piece yet he had already gone through a whole plate." Kevin Lin felt that it was still unimaginable. He had been assigned to follow Fang Zhao for quite some time already, but it seemed like this was the first time he had gotten to know Fang Zhao.

"That doesn't matter. Do a live broadcast in the dining hall the next time you are there for a meal," Bacary said.

Kevin Lin was apprehensive. "You r-really want to broadcast this? Will it lead to a negative reaction from the audience?"

"No choice, these are instructions from the top. The other four still haven't adapted enough yet; only the one you are following is able to stomach their cuisine. If we don't have anything to broadcast, people will question this project and compare it to low-end entertainment programs of the past, where what you saw was not what you got."

Now the top brass had a clear idea. Shooting many films and movies could not be compared to an instantaneous live broadcast where everyone could see for themselves the hardship in such a place, raising awareness and letting them feel grateful for what they had.

At this point, the stars of the other four channels had not adapted yet. Only S5 was a special case. Surely this opportunity to show a fine example could not be wasted!

Kevin Lin was still unwilling. "But won't we lose fans if we broadcast this? Our S5 channel already has the lowest viewership. If we broadcast such disturbing scenes, we will lose more viewers."

"Of course we have considered what you are worrying about. How about this, if you do a live broadcast of your mealtime, I ask the higher-ups to increase your broadcast time by 5 minutes!"

Five minutes alone was short, but in terms of a real-time live broadcast from so far away, even a minute was hard to come by. Five minutes was also the most Bacary could fight for.

"Kevin." Bacary lowered his voice as if he was about to reveal a big secret. "Project Starlight is progressing smoothly, and the top brass is very satisfied. Nowadays, there are people from all walks of life donating quite a bit. The Ministry of Education even publicly announced that Project Starlight has a groundbreaking educational value, and one such program has a greater impact than 10 movies. Since Project Starlight implemented its five channels, four channels are reaping in profits, and only one channel is only breaking even."

"Our channel." Kevin Lin sounded dejected. He had been following the amount of money donated—how could he not know? This was something that he kept worrying about. The viewers on channel S5 were not people who would just fork out large sums of money for donations. Even if those old and retired servicemen wished to donate large sums, would they dare to do it openly? Wouldn't they be worried about online audiences accusing them of corruption?

Kevin Lin had to admit that Fang Zhao had already done well getting their channel to break even. Before the project had started, people had already said that if the losses were not too great, Fang Zhao just needed to continue to serve as encouragement for younger people.

But the other four channels just had to make a profits. As the only channel breaking even, comparing it to the other four, channel S5 seemed especially useless.

Worrying.

Unresigned.

Recently, Kevin Lin had been thinking of ways to increase viewership and attract more audiences, but it just so happened that the chief editor wanted him to broadcast content that might not go over well with the audiences.

Bacary could tell what Kevin Lin was thinking. He waved his hands dismissively and

laughed. "It's different from what you are thinking. Although your channel is only breaking even among the five, but you know the type of audiences that your channel attracts. There isn't any need for me to go into details, right? Don't worry about it just breaking even. Even if it were making a loss, it might even continue as per normal! This is also an important program!"

Bacary's last sentence was significant. He was telling Kevin Lin that the audience of S5 might not take out money, but what they had was power! News firms had already decided on the characteristics of the five channels. The other four channels were in charge of profits, while S5 was to cater to the top officials and leaders. In any case, this program was a collaborative effort by the military and commercial sectors. Other than profits, the program had to satisfy certain parties. Originally, satisfying both parties would have been thought to be difficult, but progress was decent, and for the time being, Project Starlight seemed to be developing smoothly. Nothing troublesome had occurred yet.

Kevin Lin understood. His line of thinking was similar to the company's. He was only acting miserable in front of his chief editor. Since he could not go against their plans, getting more air time as well as the attention of the leadership was quite a worthwhile business transaction.

"Fine, I will try it tomorrow."

Every second of instantaneous communications was money burnt. Having received Kevin Lin's guarantee, Bacary was satisfied and ended the call.

After ending the call, Kevin Lin suddenly recalled something. Previously, the person in charge had mentioned that he would be showing them around other places near the dining hall after dinner and allow some logistics personnel to appear in the live broadcast. Kevin Lin had forgotten to ask Bacary for instructions. If there were any disputable scenes that might affect audiences, was he going to censor it?

Given the old guidelines for a news firm, whenever there was content that might cause unease among audiences, they should use a mosaic to censor it, but after his talk with the chief editor, didn't he mean to have a realistic broadcast?

Forget it, they could do without the censors.

Chapter 188

The More You Eat, the Less Scary They Become

Fang Zhao ate till he was full. Under the astonished gazes of those around him, he finished plate after plate.

The people surrounding him, including Kevin Lin, had no appetite. Some of them threw up after one bite. There was too much remaining on the plates, and Fang Zhao helped those around him clear theirs.

"You... don't have to force yourself," someone beside him advised.

"I'm not," Fang Zhao replied.

Fang Zhao himself knew how much he could eat. Earlier on, he had asked for advice on military service matters and so knew that he would be using up a lot of energy even on normal days. All along, he'd eaten more than others, so letting himself eat freely on the first day was to remind others that "I consume more food," so in the future, even if he ate more after a hard day's work, other people would not be overly shocked.

As for why he could eat so much today...

He had no choice; he was hungry. On the spacecraft to Baiji, others had been in hibernation, but Fang Zhao had played many symphonies in his head till he'd lost track. Using one's brain's also consumed energy.

The other newcomers in this batch viewed him in a respectful light. He is worthy of being an idol. He can eat so much of these half-cooked and unclean bugs, what an extraordinary person.

As for the previous batch that had arrived in October, they were all dumbstruck. How could it be that this little celebrity could eat so much more than them who had already been on this base for half a year?

After Kevin Lin had ended the long distance communications with headquarters, he contemplated in the lounge for a bit before returning to the dining hall. Fang Zhao had

already finished eating and was sitting there chatting with some of the base's military service personnel.

Kevin Lin's face twitched as he scanned the pile of empty plates in front of Fang Zhao.

Kevin Lin called Fang Zhao to the side. "Fang Zhao, let's discuss the live broadcast later. From today onward, we will not censor anything during the live broadcasts in the base. Instructions from the top. There will be less margin for error, so during live broadcasts, we need to be even more cautious."

Fang Zhao understood and nodded his head.

"Later on, we will be visiting the base's kitchen. There will be even more unappealing sights. Although it seems like you are adapting just fine, we still have to be prudent and remember that your words and actions at all times will be captured by the camera and transmitted to more people. Sometimes, even if you are afraid, you still have to act calm and not make a big fuss. Actions like that might turn off viewers."

Kevin Lin told Fang Zhao a lot. There were many past incidents on live broadcasts of variety programs where celebrities had not portrayed themselves well. Kevin Lin remembered a male celebrity who had portrayed himself to be brave. In the end, when he had appeared on a variety show, he had been frightened by a snake and screamed. The image that his managing company had so painstakingly crafted for him had been demolished in an instant. Since then, Kevin Lin had rarely seen that celebrity on-screen anymore.

Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin were led to the kitchen. The moment the doors opened, a noxious odor assaulted their nostrils. Kevin Lin nearly fainted from the smell.

Before coming over, they had watched a recording of the kitchen and had an approximate understanding of the situation inside. If they were to enter without knowing anything beforehand, even base command would feel uneasy. If this really scared them, it would be a problem. How were they going to appeal to the masses and gain support then?

Without even getting to see the kitchen yet, Fang Zhao stood outside, differentiating the different smells as he thought back to the recording of the kitchen.

The kitchen's supervisor handed over masks that he had prepared earlier. "You guys will definitely not get used to the smell on your first time here. This is a mask that can

filter out some odors and make it more bearable."

Kevin Lin hurriedly put on the mask. Afterward, he felt he could breathe normally. He glanced at Fang Zhao beside him who did not seem to have much reaction. Is this fellow's sense of smell impaired?

Fang Zhao did not feel that this stench necessitated wearing a mask, but on the surface, he did not want to seem too special, so he accepted the mask from the supervisor and put it on.

"Are you ready?" Kevin Lin looked towards Fang Zhao. Getting a nod from Fang Zhao, he proceeded to adjust the camera and switched on live-broadcasting mode.

Kevin Lin's expression changed as he faced the camera. "Greetings, everyone, we have already finished dinner and are about to enter the base's kitchen, which is what many of our online viewers requested to know more about in the comments. However, entering for the first time, we haven't gotten used to the smell, so we are using masks..."

The internet was so well developed, and many online users had high IQs. They knew that the food displayed on the tables in the dining hall had not necessarily been what these people in the military had for meals. Thus, they wished to see the dining hall's kitchen and head inside to understand the kind of food served at the base. This was the assignment all five channels had received.

As they walked through, the supervisor explained more. The base's kitchen was different from most general restaurants. Here there were stringent tests, and every container loaded with food was made from special materials.

Fang Zhao observed his surroundings along the way. It was still considered clean, probably because the base had specially tidied it up for the live broadcast. Even if they were depicting a poor and bleak picture, they still could not disgust the audiences. Traces of cleaning were not that obvious—the base's higher ups were still rather meticulous in their planning.

Although it was already after dinner, there were still people in the kitchen who were busy. They were not acting; this was normal.

"Those deployed outside will return later. Our base also provides a supper time slot to cater to those soldiers that are out for assignments and return later. This batch of

kitchen staff who work in the afternoon still have to continue working at night," explained the kitchen supervisor, transmitting a message: Our job ain't easy. Overtime every day!

There were some large transparent vats nearby that were close to two stories tall. Some were empty, while others were still full.

The supervisor pointed at one of the empty vats as he explained, "That was what you had for dinner."

One of the vats in the middle still had many bugs. Inside, bugs as thick as an adult's arm were biting and gnawing on each other.

The supervisor continued, "These bugs are greedy, violent, and carnivorous. Generally, we don't keep them for too long. We will finish these tonight."

The camera moved closer to better film the bugs biting each other behind the transparent wall. One bug that was gnawing on its fellow bugs seemed to have noticed the camera nearing, and it violently opened its jaws and tried to bite the camera, smashing into the transparent wall with a loud "bang." Rows of razor sharp teeth could be seen in the close-up of its ferocious jaws.

The camera would not be scared by the sudden charge, but the same could not be said for the online audience.

"The f*ck! That was so scary I dropped my cigarette!"

"It's late at night over at our continent! I just screamed and woke my dormmates."

"Was... was that the thing they ate just now?"

"Ssss—watching it up close, I feel all squeamish. I've got goose bumps."

The camera backed off of the vat walls and the bugs inside immediately lost interest and continued chewing on each other.

The camera continued on and filmed the vat beside the previous one, filled to the brim with another sort of organism that had been delivered this afternoon. It was an organism that was abundant on this planet. This nonthreatening invertebrate lived in the ocean and liked to attached itself to reefs. Today, the team that had gone out to

survey the ocean had brought these back.

These disk-shaped creatures the size of a palm had a dazzling shimmer on their edges. When stuck to the transparent vat wall, they seemed like numerous densely packed large round eyes.

In the other surrounding vats, the contents were not as aesthetically pleasing, and some audiences could not stand it.

"Aargh—I have trypophobia! 1 Change the channel! Hurry and change it!

"What are those things in the box in the back, so disgusting. I'm not watching any longer!"

"Imagine these things not being washed properly then cut up and served. A hygiene freak like me cannot stand it."

"What a troublesome scene! There are many minors among the online audience. Minors could be mentally scarred by all this!"

"Channel S5, are you not afraid of losing fans by broadcasting this?! As least censor it!"

However, there were also audiences that expressed that they could accept it.

"Ahh, those comments above me are surely young friends who have not yet undergone military service or who were lucky enough to be posted to a well-off planet. To be honest, for people like us who were posted to a planet with bad conditions, this isn't something we have never experienced before."

"It is said that the earlier days of military service were just like this. Since when was it ever comfortable like some people claim?"

"That's right! You can't say that you have done your military service if you have never eaten raw alien bugs!"

But no matter how much the online audiences argued, over at this side, filming went on as planned.

In the kitchen, there were workers currently handling the food. These were also mainly conscripts.

A robust and tall youngster came over when the supervisor indicated. He pulled down his mask and explained to Fang Zhao and the rest about how the foodstuff here was handled and treated. He also talked about response measures to take when encountering these bugs outside the base. His words were no-nonsense, clear, and concise, and he did not deliberately drag out his screen time. If he did so, would he ever get another chance to show his face again?

"Our leaders say that those out hunting or transporting food might not be attentive enough and not have enough energy to filter the organisms out. Our kitchen needs to spend some effort to sort out the smaller ones before processing. When the time comes, those food transporters bring them out and release them. That's because, in the document sent by the top, developments on foreign planets have to adopt a sustainable strategy. We are tested on this every month."

This youngster was dark skinned, but whether it was tanned or natural, no one knew. He looked especially simple and honest, and when he spoke, he seemed very sincere. The youngster pointed at an ecology balance chart displayed on the screen in the kitchen.

"Look, our planet's ecosystem is currently very stable, and its development is considered healthy. A while back, our base received a complaint saying that we had damaged the ecology balance and our data was fake. The Ministry of Supervision even sent someone over to carry out an inspection. The hunting team, the delivery squad, and us in the kitchen, every division was thoroughly inspected, and there were no problems. Our data was all reliable. On that day, to facilitate the inspection, nobody ate and we nearly fainted from hunger."

The youngster closed his fingers on his two hands and waved vigorously at the camera. "If we get another complaint without evidence, I will cry for you guys! This is no joking matter. It concerns our military service evaluation!"

There were grades for military service. The entire year's comprehensive evaluation would ultimately be recorded in a file that would follow a person for the rest of their life.

As for the ecology balance chart and sustainable strategy, these had not been mentioned randomly by the youngster.

After the Founding Era, when humanity first discovered a hospitable planet and

proposed an immigration or colonization plan, ecologists would mention one word: acclimatization.

They did not want to mercilessly eradicate every last one of the newly discovered planet's life forms, nor did they want to destroy the ecosystem. Hence, they could only employ acclimatization tactics.

They did not want to forcefully change the original ecology of the planet, but rather, by using acclimatization tactics, humans could slowly permeate into an ecosystem devoid of humans and slowly allow the ecosystem to adapt and let humans become part of it.

All of these base constructions on foreign planets had met with quite a lot of opposing views. The military wished to take the opportunity of these live broadcast program to tell the masses: We do not forcefully conquer. Rather, we have plans for gentle development.

"The soil on this plot of land has already undergone treatment, and our leaders have already said that crops can be grown here. There are scientists among the batch of people that came with you guys. They will be in charge of introducing a new variety of crops and monitoring the ecology balance. Our leaders mentioned that the process of introducing a new variety of crops is very important. We can't just grab a handful of seeds and sprinkle them and then expect abundant harvests and full stomachs. If this damages the planet's ecology and causes the ecosystem to change, we might possibly spend even more time trying to fix it. A place without a healthy ecosystem is not suitable for immigration or colonization."

He mentioned "our leaders said" many times. There were too many important names of leaders, and missing out any would not be good. If he got nervous and left out any important people and caused a grudge, there would be trouble. Thus, he simply did not mention any names.

Although this youngster looked honest and simple, he had a really strong spirit. Otherwise, he would not have managed to land this opportunity to show his face on the live broadcast.

As for people with a keen nose for politics, they could learn lots of things just from this broadcast. There were a number of social factors behind this political agenda.

For Fang Zhao, who used to be a leader himself, he could naturally catch the hidden agendas behind all these words. However, now that he was only a little celebrity, he would act ignorant on certain issues.

Having said what he had been instructed to say, as well as a fair share of bootlicking, the youngster grabbed from the box beside him a bug that had already been slaughtered. He proficiently removed its head and its poisonous side glands before slicing it up into portions and placing it on a conveyor belt. These would be sent into the stove ahead to be sterilized.

Fang Zhao and his group also went to the other areas in the kitchen and filmed the sterilizing equipment. Kevin Lin had expressed that this was an important part. Other basic machinery or equipment in the kitchen could be sloppily filmed, but the sterilizing equipment had to be filmed with care.

After the kitchen, equipment, and foodstuffs had all been filmed, all the kitchen staff had already gathered and were eating. Their dinner time was slightly later than the others, and when they were done with dinner, they still had to continue working overtime.

The tanned youngster who had been explaining held a plate of roasted bugs and raised it over to Fang Zhao and the others. "Want some more? These are fresh from the oven, still hot."

Kevin Lin looked at the pieces of bug meat that were not fully cooked and felt his gut flipping.

"It's all right, I had a lot back in the dining hall just now," Fang Zhao replied.

The other party laughed and lowered the plate, thinking that Fang Zhao was still not used to these. Trying to console the newcomers, he said, "These type of bugs with many segments and many legs live in the ground. You will see a lot of them at the constructions sites. At the start, we were all really scared of them, but as we ate and ate more, we were no longer scared. When I first got here, a senior told me that these things might look scary, but the more you eat, the less scary they become. You can try it. After all, you guys still have to survive another year here."

Survive another year here...

A full year...

Kevin Lin felt his heart aching.

Chapter 189

S5 Is Real Special

There was still quite a bit of time left after Fang Zhao and company filmed in the kitchen. Kevin Lin saved it for filming folks returning from trips beyond the base.

The soldiers returning in the evening were mostly career soldiers stationed on Baiji, not regular conscripts. Most of the more challenging tasks like hunting, scouting, and so on, were left for career soldiers.

It wasn't just the conscripts who wanted to get on camera, the career soldiers did too. They were often away for years at a time and missed their families.

But only soldiers who weren't assigned to classified missions could be shown on air.

The group that returned in the evening also brought back food supplies, including both plants and dead animals. There were quite a few things that turned Kevin Lin off. He remained at a distance during filming, simply zooming in on Fang Zhao, who had to help the career soldiers unload their cargo. He would also be having a late-night snack with the soldiers.

Unlike the afternoon broadcast from the cafeteria, the late-night meal was aired live in high definition, uncensored.

After setting up the camera, Kevin Lin found an excuse to bolt. He didn't bother appearing on camera.

The first-day live broadcasts for the other channels were a completely different story.

On the first day of his arrival, famed TV host Li Xiaoxiao, the subject of S1, visited career soldiers and young conscripts already serving on the foreign planet he was assigned to, with gifts in tow. The gifts had been donated by himself, fans, and his sponsors.

Many of the career soldiers and many of the youngsters who had been serving there for half a year had grown up watching Li Xiaoxiao's shows. They were quite familiar

with the star, so they were quite emotional when they came into close contact with him and shook his hand.

Li Xiaoxiao's humorous comments and moves livened up the base, which enjoyed a rare respite from its typically dour atmosphere.

The decor in the cafeteria wasn't exactly appealing, and many scenes in the kitchen were likewise off-putting, but these eyesores were alleviated by avoiding the most grotesque items and with subtle camera angles and blurring effects. Coupled with Li Xiaoxiao's sense of humor and ability to lighten the mood, quite a few touching scenes emerged, conveying to viewers that, despite the hardships the soldiers and conscripts endured, there were funny moments too.

You had to admit that talent was talent. As the oldest of the five celebrities and the most experienced, Li Xiaoxiao was great at taking charge of the situation.

Li Xiaoxiao's fans and online viewers were also moved by the jovial mood. Donations of cash and supplies poured in. Financiers also expressed interest in investing in the base.

S1's live broadcast was an indisputable success.

On S2, the handsome, elegant Old-Era aristocrat Fritz charted an artsier course. He used soulful expressions and controlled embellishment to turn every moment into a tearjerker.

Fritz even played host. Apart from having heart-to-hearts with some of the conscripts, he also interviewed career soldiers with interesting backgrounds.

A veteran singer and actor, Fritz knew how to draw out emotion and even put himself in the shoes of his interview subjects, displaying genuine emotion. Every time those haunting eyes faced the camera, countless fans were shaken.

Fans: It's just cash. We're shelling it out.

Judging from the audience response and viewership data, S2 was likewise a great success.

On S3, as an actor in mainstream commercial films, Andre likewise enjoyed a huge fan base, but while he had sparred with some of the young instructors during training

camp, on account of his limited martial arts training, he held back.

The career soldiers stationed here were different from the young instructors back in training camp. The former were battle-hardened, even projecting a different aura. Andre had no intention of getting a beatdown on live television.

Instead, he shared life stories with the young conscripts and sang military songs with the career soldiers.

You never would have guessed that this A-list actor had a decent voice. He made for a decent singer, which served as a pleasant surprise to his fans.

Even though S3's viewership data lagged the numbers posted by S1 and S2, it still turned a profit. By that measure, it was also a success.

On S4, Tianhao, who hailed from the Woo family of Tongzhou aristocracy, had been born on a pedestal, and his ability to act pretentious was unscathed. After his arrival, he challenged several of the standout soldiers to kung-fu duels.

Anyone who lived in the New Era knew that founding father General Woo Tong had been an accomplished martial artist. His descendants were all competent fighters, not simply posers. The well-trained core family members in particular were combat-tested. Even though Tianhao was a poser, he backed it up with real skill.

Tianhao challenged three of the top soldiers in a row. The young conscripts rooted for Tianhao, while the career soldiers backed their brethren. The online audience was thoroughly electrified, hooting and applauding without pause and bestowing round after round of cash rewards.

The face-offs spiced up the atmosphere and were embraced by the conscripts and career soldiers alike and drew a big audience. Tianhao had achieved his goal of coolness.

After the duels, senior officers at the base staged a welcome banquet for Tianhao. Soldiers who weren't assigned to missions the next day were granted special exemption to drink a bit. Tianhao had brought the alcohol from home. Quite a few heavy drinkers got their fix.

One officer even slapped Tianhao on the back, saying he would show Tianhao how to drive the base jeeps reserved for career soldiers.

S4's numbers rivaled the performance of S1 and S2. Not to mention that Tianhao had the full backing of the Woo family back in Tongzhou.

By contrast, the S5 production team stood out by adopting an unvarnished documentary style. The footage was more befitting an actual documentary film than entertainment programming. The other four channels all used subtle camera angles or blurred out graphic content. Only S5 was in high definition and completely uncensored.

Viewers who were looking for light entertainment would not stick with S5, but apart from members of the establishment, a group of parents also started tuning in.

Indeed, S5 was far less entertaining than the other four channels, but it was the real thing.

What was of more pressing concern to the parents whose children were serving was what their kids' actual routines were like. Even though they had served as well, those had been different times. Who knew how much these military outposts had changed over the years?

Even parents with kids serving on other planets couldn't help tuning in to S5, because you could see what the bases on planets with tough conditions were really like. There was no fudging or fakery. It was as if you were standing on the planet yourself.

On the first four channels, regardless of the topic at hand, regardless of who was being interviewed, the center of attention was the four celebrities. The celebrities anchored the live webcasts. But on S5, Fang Zhao was less of a presence. Instead, the camera focused on the conscripts and the career soldiers.

The only thing was that the uncensored footage was too much for some viewers.

S5 got plenty of rave reviews, but it also drew many complaints.

Many viewers complained that some of S5's footage was ill-suited for teenagers and was detrimental to their development.

Indeed, footage of raw materials being prepared in the kitchen and of mealtime turned quite a few adults off, let alone teenagers. If similar scenes were in the pipeline and were broadcast uncensored, there would be no end to the complaints.

To get ahead of the issue, the senior management of Project Starlight held a conference call. Shutting down S5 was not an option. They also wouldn't censor it. They wanted Kevin Lin and Fang Zhao to shoot more raw footage in the same vein, even record some violent or bloody incidents. As long they could show the true nature of the work in the Baiji base, as long as some folks could get an actual sense of the base's growth, Project Starlight would have fulfilled its mission.

The conservatives who had slashed funding for exploratory missions and diverted funds to building up existing bases didn't do so to provide entertainment. They wanted to deliver a clear message to the people. Look at how tough it is to develop the existing bases. Why the hell should we keep exploring? So what if we discover more planets with livable conditions. Can we build bases on them and immigrate right away? Folks who keep dreaming about discovering new minerals that can be used as new energy sources should wake up and get back in touch with reality. Are new minerals that easy to find?

The conservatives wanted to shore up popular support—and Project Starlight was the means to their end.

To protect S5, the senior management of Project Starlight decided after their conference call to implement a ratings system on the five channels.

But curious viewers didn't care what the senior executives were thinking. Eager fans who followed Project Starlight's five channels summarized the tone of each channel with these quips after the five channels completed their first day of live programming.

S1: How are you, comrades? Well done! Good job!

S2: Blood, sweat, and tears.

S3: There's nothing a little love and tenderness can't conquer.

S4: Drinking games.

S5: Danger ahead! Noncombat personnel evacuate!

Chapter 190

Ratings System

Three hours after S5 ended its first day's live broadcast, the senior managers at Project Starlight announced they were going to implement a ratings system.

Many viewers supported the move, thinking it was right thing to do. So be it if they missed out on all the gory stuff on S5. Watching S5's live broadcast made you realize that a ratings system was the best solution.

But some viewers thought the move was unnecessary. A debate quickly sprung up online.

"You will have to serve sooner or later. It's best you know the ugly side and be psychologically ready. At least it's better than finding out when you actually serve."

"That isn't a fair argument. Many kids are tuning in to the live webcasts. They've had limited exposure to this kind of material. They will be scarred if they see stuff like this too early. A ratings system is necessary. Not to mention that not everyone will be assigned to serve in places like that."

"That's true."

Families who were well off could always manage to land their kids easier assignments. This was an open secret. Such was the state of the conscription system. For now, that was the way things were. Folks who were upset with the system could only b*tch about it.

Folks without connections could only hope that service locations currently suffering from tough conditions would get more funding and investments so infrastructure could be improved. That way, the experience wouldn't be so rough by the time they served.

By that line of thinking, live broadcasts like this were really worth supporting. If average citizens like themselves couldn't change things, then they would leave it to the celebrities.

Five hours after S5 ended its first broadcast, Project Starlight's senior management announced the provisional age restrictions for its five channels:

S1 through S4: 7+

S5: 15+

In other words, the four channels S1 to S4 were suitable for viewers 7 and above, while S5 would be limited to viewers 15 or older.

"Was the age limit for S5 set too high?" Some parents were upset, arguing that even though the content was a bit disturbing, a teenager was quite mature and could handle the fallout.

Folks who grew up in the New Era had access to the internet at a young age. They matured earlier compared to children in the Old Era. Many 14- or 15-year-old kids in the New Era were spouting similar views to adults'.

"The Project Starlight managers have their reasons for restricting the channel to 15-plus." Even if a young teenager knows about a lot of stuff, he or she isn't quite an adult yet. Be it mental strength or problem-solving, they still lag behind grown adults slightly.

"15-plus is OK. For viewers who are 15 years old, they have another five years before they need to serve. If they want to find out about this kind of stuff, five years is a sufficient buffer. In any case, their parents are watching the footage anyway."

Parents who were opposed to the 15-plus limit changed their minds after hearing the argument online and pondering the matter. True, the senior managers at Project Starlight must have had their reasons for setting the age limit so high. Even though our kids are too young to watch the show, it's all the same when we as parents get the lowdown and relay the information to them.

At this point, some of the Muzhou viewers got a bit cocky.

"Not to brag, but we Muzhouers are more adaptable than you guys. I don't know if you noticed, but regardless of the planet, eight out of the 10 folks working in the kitchen are from Muzhou. Only us Muzhouers can handle coming into close contact with foreign planet food sources every day. Folks from other planets are too chickenshit to do the job. They're also not meticulous enough."

This comment won a lot of praise from fellow Muzhouers.

"That's spot on. Just take a look at the live broadcast on S5—out of all the people who appeared on camera in the kitchen, half were Muzhouers. The heavily tanned kid who spoke the most during the broadcast is the son of the owner of a small ranch in Muzhou. During the broadcast, the ranch owner was handing out red packets stuffed with cash left and right in honor of his son."

Folks who had served in Muzhou also confirmed this was the case. In terms of getting used to the new diet during military service, Muzhouers were the best. But what they didn't say was how they'd puked their guts out when they'd entered the kitchen for the first time after arriving on base. All they talked about was how they were the most adaptable. None of them had been able to adjust right away.

Soon, the "us Muzhouers" spiels in the discussion forum started to piss off folks from other continents.

"Hey, brother upstairs, this is discrimination against folks from other continents!"

"It's just being able to down a bug. Big deal!"

"Speaking of which, don't you Muzhouers have the tradition of insect banquets?"

"Right, right. I heard about Muzhouers eating insects a long time ago. Word has it that it's a festival that was started when the New Era was founded."

When the Period of Destruction had ended, at the beginning of the New Era, Muzhou had been the world's leading food producer, with the largest plots of arable land. Yet Muzhou's first farmers had encountered many natural disasters. Back then, the level of technological development had been quite crude, and anti-pest measures hadn't been very effective. To produce large yields, the farmers had paid a heavy price.

The farmers hadn't gotten to enjoy life until farm equipment had been upgraded and the Academy of Agricultural Science had come up with effective pest controls. To remember the forefathers who had cultivated Muzhou's first plots, to honor their efforts in defeating the different types of insects that had infested their crops, certain regions of Muzhou held commemorative festivals. That was when the insect banquets were held.

Visitors to Muzhou had long tried to avoid these festivals. If they encountered one,

they would steer clear of it or approach for a quick selfie they could show off on their social media feeds and then bolt immediately.

Now that the topic had been broached, people started wondering why Muzhouers could adjust so quickly when they saw such disgusting food.

"Is it because they started eating insects very early on?"

"I'm reminded of the comment during the S5 broadcast: 'The more you eat, the less afraid you are'."

"The more I think about it, the more plausible this theory is. In this regard, Muzhouers have an innate advantage."

"My kid is only 14. I wanted him to tune into S5, but now I can only let him watch the other channels. Still, I want to order insect meals online. Are they still available in Muzhou? Are they available in easy packaging, like a small box or a small pouch?"

"They are, but at this time of the year, the selection is limited and the insects aren't that fresh. If you're interested, I'll suggest a few brands."

Once the subject of insect banquets came up, Muzhouers who practiced the tradition started firing off recommendations, suggesting brands for variety, taste, and food safety standards. They also pointed out companies whose sourcing was questionable.

Folks from other continents set aside their differences and scrambled to jot down all these details.

The many parents who were worried sick about their kids and following the discussion forum on S5 felt it was divine intervention. Here was a way to prepare their kids for the hardship!

The few small factories that supplied insect-related food products in Muzhou saw their online orders grow exponentially, so much so that their owners thought it was a computer glitch.

Meanwhile, existing inventory had long been snatched up.

The bosses checked the date. It was still well before their peak season of July. Why the sudden deluge of orders?

The owners of Muzhou farms, both small and large, smelled a business opportunity and acted swiftly as well.

Meanwhile, kids from the 11 continents other than Muzhou had no idea what was awaiting them. Some of them were filled with anticipation when they heard their parents had ordered them presents, but when the gifts arrived, they were so shocked they wanted to cry. Even years later, they would remember the fear of being force-fed insect meals.

Fang Zhao had no idea what was going on on his home planet. His first day on base was very busy. After helping unload the cargo from the off-base missions and having a late-night snack, he retired to his assigned dorm room.

Many new arrivals at the Baiji base struggled to fall asleep their first night because of their conflicting emotions or because they had slept so much on their inbound journeys, but Fang Zhao had no such problems. He slept well his first night.

When they woke up, Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin got word of their 15-plus rating.

"15-plus?" Kevin Lin wondered if the age limit had been set too high, but he realized it made sense after pondering the matter.

Their bosses wanted to send them a message: Bring it on! Give us everything raw. No need to worry about scaring kids anymore.

Kevin Lin had a knack for unraveling the thinking of senior management.

Indeed, he soon received a message from headquarters that confirmed his suspicions. It instructed him to not hold back and to not worry about any potential complaints.

Now that he had his marching orders, all Kevin Lin had to do was execute them.

The breakfast selection at the cafeteria was limited. Kevin Lin ordered some porridge-like mess whose ingredients he couldn't identify. He didn't bother asking in case the answer would spook him away from eating the meal.

After glancing at Fang Zhao, who was sitting across from him and seemed to have a healthy appetite, Kevin Lin pursed his lips, pinched his nose, and had a few sips of the porridge. It didn't taste great. Luckily, he'd snuck a few bites of his private food stash before heading to breakfast.

Everyone's personal items had been searched after they had arrived at the base. There were strict rules about personal belongings, but Kevin Lin wasn't a conscript and he had a job to do, so base personnel had turned a blind eye.

"You're going to officially start your service today. According to your assignment, you'll be part of a mining team," Kevin Lin said to Fang Zhao. "As you know, as the first five celebrities of Project Starlight, you won't be treated like the regular conscripts. The senior leadership at the base made special arrangements a while back. We'll just play it by ear."

Fang Zhao nodded. He knew how things were evolving. He wouldn't fight the flow.

After breakfast, the regular conscripts who had arrived with them were divided into teams and led to different work locations to start their transition. Their team leaders would lecture them on the necessary know-how.

Meanwhile, Fang Zhao was escorted to his work location by a colonel-level officer.

He had long been informed of his assignment, mining, which was one of the most common jobs during military service.

Chapter 191

Mining Is a Technical Job

The person in charge of bringing Fang Zhao to the service grounds was Colonel Edmund. He was a solemn-looking middle-aged man who did not talk or laugh much. Edmund was the direct deputy of the highest-ranking officer in the Baiji base, Lieutenant General Shanta.

Edmund was over 80 years of age, but that was only considered middle age in the New Era. However, in his heart, Edmund knew that it would be hard for him to get promoted any further. Even if the base was extended and developed well, he might not necessarily make a push for promotion.

There was an internal saying: After passing 80 years of age, there are basically no more chances to get promoted. Furthermore, Edmund did not have much of a strong family background. If not because he had followed Shanta closely, he might not have even been where he was today.

Knowing that he had reached the age where he could no longer climb, Edmund had been considering. After this year was over, he would transfer to civilian work. Like many of his comrades, he would return home, spending the later half of his life in a governmental institution. Maybe there would even be a chance for him to climb there.

Shanta knew about Edmund's plans. With such a competent subordinate leaving, Shanta had given him this chance to appear on-screen more. Perhaps this would benefit him later on when he changed his profession.

Therefore, Edmund regarded this opportunity with high importance. Even if he used to despise celebrities, in front of Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin, there were rare smiles on his usually grave face, and the pressure people felt in his presence was much fainter.

A motorcade left the base. Inside a car in the middle of the motorcade, Edmund was explaining the mining area to Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin.

"Currently, we have three mining sites: two basic mines and one power-source mine. The materials from the basic mines are used mainly for construction. The ores from

the power-source mines provide energy. For the basic mining site, we can adopt an automated system that doesn't require much manpower. As for the power-source mining site, automated systems are of no use. Apparatuses might suffer interference, and excavating machinery might result in some large damages. Therefore, in mining sites where we are unable to use machinery or equipment, we have to make use of manpower. That is where conscripts come in. Now, we are heading to the power-source mine."

On-screen, Edmund did not show any signs of nervousness, but Fang Zhao could feel that Edmund was tensed—he just wasn't showing it. Fang Zhao could also guess Edmund's thoughts. Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother Fang had talked a lot about the military, and given Fang Zhao's own previous history, it was not hard for him to guess.

This was also the reason Fang Zhao was willing to coordinate and act, giving Edmund more chances to show off and help Baiji's mining value become more well known and attract more investors to help shoulder the pressure. Baiji's leaders were happy to shower these people bearing responsibilities with even more benefits.

Edmund told them that over at the basic mines, each time the truck team made a trip, they would transport several kilotons of ore and raw materials. These were used for the base's construction.

Transporting several kilotons per trip might have sounded like a lot, but when compared to bases with abundant manpower and resources, this was totally pitiful and unsightly. In those bases, the volume of freight transported by those trucks was in the tens of kilotons per trip.

With low freight volumes and a lack of manpower, the base and the outposts developed at a much slower rate.

The motorcade traveled on the most commonly used road and did not encounter any aggressive life-forms. The journey was smooth, and after 40 minutes, they arrived at the power-source mine.

At the mining site, there was a garrison stationed to maintain the safety of the place.

Kevin Lin once again turned on the camera, and he intended to fly it over the mining site for an overhead view, but that was rejected. The deployment of the mining site

was classified military information, so Kevin Lin could only film the surroundings.

Edmund brought them to a mine entrance. Excavation had been underway for a few days already. Fang Zhao could hear the humming of machinery coming from inside. There were two mechanical conveyor belts transporting rocks and stones out. One belt transported waste rock, while the other transported power ore.

Edmund's hand randomly went to the conveyor belt and picked up a piece of power ore and handed it over to Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin. Within the dark brown piece of rock, there was a piece of near transparent stone.

"Grade A high quality ore. To be exact, this is grade A-." For classification of ores, grade A was divided into three ranks: A+, A, and A-. Comparing a piece of similarly sized power ore, grade A+ would provide much more energy than grade A- one.

However, these pieces of power ore being grade A was not too bad. The reason why planet Baiji had been able to construct a base was not just because there were life-forms and it was habitable, it was also due to the rich mineral resources available. Solely relying on solar energy was not enough to meet the high energy demands of maintaining the base's development rate—power ore was the most important. After preliminary surveys, planet Baiji contained quite a lot of grade A power ore, which was sufficient to maintain the base's development and future extensions.

Edmund sighed. "A pity. They were careless when excavating and broke it. For an ore this size, the quality will definitely drop. However, these kids have only been mining for half a year. Hitting this sort of standard is already not too bad."

Edmund spoke a few praises of the current batch of youngsters undergoing military service on Baiji. There were many online audiences, so too much criticism in the face of these audiences would lead to them having poor opinions.

A whole piece of power ore would surely be better than a few smaller pieces of power ore. Its commercial value would also be even higher. But these miners did not have sufficient experience, or perhaps they were distracted. In a moment of carelessness or during a loss of concentration, the large whole piece of power ore would be chipped and broken down into pieces. This resulted in a drop in grade and quality and was what many people knew as "ore dilution."

If the military service duration was two years, perhaps these situations would be

slightly better. It took a year of mining experience to become proficient, but by then it was time to be decommissioned and the next batch of new conscripts would arrived. Thus, ore dilution would always be a problem.

"Ore dilution cannot be prevented. Even if we were to use machinery to mine, it would still occur." Edmund was speaking the truth, but he was speaking to exonerate those young conscripts that did not have much experience. He knew that many parents were watching the broadcast, and they did not wish to hear base officers speaking poorly of their kids.

For Edmund to make it to the level he was at, he had decent EQ. Even if he could not make the audiences adore him, he could at least make himself less deplorable.

"Mining is a technical job. Other than old miners with many years of experience, everyone else will find it hard to avoid such situations." As Edmund was speaking, a person clad in full work attire ran out from the mining tunnel. Removing his helmet, his youthful face flashed a grin.

"You guys are here!" Excitement was written on his face as he turned to look at Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin beside Edmund. Scanning further at the camera floating in the air, his smile's intensity doubled. He showed some restraint and raised his hand to adjust his helmet hair, trying to make it look better.

Edmund could understand where he was coming from and did not say anything. Edmund turned toward Fang Zhao to make introductions. "Hayden arrived last October and is the leader of this mining team." After that, he turned to Hayden and pointed at Fang Zhao. "This here is..."

"I know, I know, Fang Zhao! It's an honor to meet you at last! I really love the style of your tunes!" Hayden wanted to say more, but he caught a glimpse of Edmund's expression and immediately swallowed the remainder of his words. He reluctantly put on his helmet once again and said, "Shall I lead the way into the mine?"

Two soldiers brought over two sets of special work clothes that conscripts wore and helped Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin put them on.

"Let's enter." Edmund nodded, indicating for Hayden to lead the way.

"Yeah, all right!" Hayden happily exclaimed. Through his clear visor, he flashed a "Don't worry" expression toward Edmund. Everything had already been planned, and there

would be absolutely no embarrassing situations.

Edmund felt a little at ease. Hayden was capable. In this team of miners, Hayden's evaluation was the best, and he had some experience with mining. Otherwise, he would not have become the leader of this team.

There were lights in the mining tunnel so it wasn't very dusky. As they walked in, some conscripts were using equipment to mine.

Noticing the indicator lights of the live broadcast, the conscripts hurriedly struck a pose, falling over each other trying to give a greeting and, as best as they could, let their voices appear on the live broadcast or show their faces. Although the masks covered half their faces, perhaps friends or families might recognize their eyes or their voices?

Hayden indicated for Fang Zhao and the group to stop. There was a case filled with tools, with a number of them seemingly like pickaxes.

Hayden fished one out from inside and handed it over to Fang Zhao. "Wanna try?"

Fang Zhao accepted the tool. Holding it, he realized these excavating tools were not as simple as they looked. Inside was some precise propulsion device, and it was made of special materials. These tools were not specially prepared for Fang Zhao; all military service personnel used these. With these tools, they did not need to use a lot of strength to chisel bits off the hard rock wall.

However, to excavate better quality ores and minimize ore damage still required accumulated experience.

"Our mining site has lots of ore. You don't have to pick a place, here will do." Hayden randomly pointed to a certain spot on the cave wall.

Kevin Lin felt this was funny. What lousy tricks. Even I won't fall for it, let alone those shrewd merchants.

To attract more investors, Baiji's base command wanted to spoon-feed Fang Zhao like a child.

Then tell the audience, "Look, this little celebrity's first time mining, and at a randomly picked spot at that, and he excavated ore on his first try. Our mineral resources are

plentiful. Although the ore quality is not especially high, we have quantity! Interested investors, hurry and join the party!"

Kevin Lin stifled a laugh and asked Fang Zhao, who was staring at the cave wall, "What are your thoughts?"

"Thoughts? I think there is something behind this spot," Fang Zhao replied.

Edmund raised his eyebrows as his smile widened. That's right! Hurry and dig, let the online audiences know how concentrated planet Baiji's mineral deposits are!

Kevin Lin gestured at Fang Zhao with his hands, indicating that the camera was in place and he could begin to dig.

Fang Zhao brandished the propulsion pickaxe in his hand and heaved it over to strike the wall.

Thud—

A piece of rock on the cave wall became loose. Fang Zhao adjusted the handle and the loose piece fell. He had used quite a bit of power, so the piece that fell was rather large.

Hayden looked at the piece of rock that fell, and the smile on his face became somewhat forced. This was undoubtedly a high-grade ore-rich site, and he had gotten many experienced old miners to take a look, so why was it that inside the rock that was pried off were only scattered fragments of power ore?

But what attracted the most attention was not the piece of rock that had fallen but rather the life-form that appeared in the hole in the cave wall where the rock used to be.

A sinister-looking bug about the size of two palms appeared. These kind of bugs were commonly found inside mineral veins and looked especially devilish, but people familiar with this mining site knew that these sorts of bug only looked scary. They had high defensive capabilities, but they were actually very stupid.

Colonel Edmund stiffly instructed a soldier to the side. "Drag it out and roast it."

Hayden trembled. He felt like those words were meant for him. After all, he was the one handling matters here and had met with unfavorable circumstances. Hayden

hurriedly flashed Edmund a "Don't be impatient" look. This time, they had been really unlucky. Fang Zhao would surely excavate one the next time. Hayden had picked out a few reserves.

Chapter 192

It's Really Not Deliberate!

When Kevin Lin had seen Edmund and Hayden's confident manner, he had thought that it was a surefire plan and had specifically adjusted the camera to focus on the spot on the cave wall where Fang Zhao would chip away. In his heart, he had been slightly excited to "witness it for the first time in history," and his head had been spinning with anticipation that it would "make the headlines."

Kevin Lin had never done mining during his military service, as his family had managed to pull some strings. Therefore, mining was fresh for him, but he had never expected to encounter such an awkward situation.

It wasn't just Kevin Lin who had been eagerly anticipating it. Online audiences watching channel S5 also stared blankly at the situation that unfolded. Many people had all been waiting to see what sort of ore Fang Zhao would mine on his first try. Although people with a good eye could tell that the spot had already been planned beforehand by planet Baiji, it was a common occurrence for entertainment programs, so they didn't mind.

People had fixated on their screens so attentively, and some hadn't even blinked. In the end, what had appeared on-screen was a sinister-looking bug, and a close-up of it at that. Timid people were scared out of their seats.

"So scary!"

"I was too engrossed staring at the screen! What sort of bug is that? It looks really savage."

"It should be edible? I heard that colonel say to roast it?"

"That means to say that Fang Zhao's first time mining, he excavated a bug?"

"Hahahaha, seems like it!"

Although many people had been scared by the close-up shot, when they regained their

senses, they felt this was funny. They would have a topic to laugh about for the next few days.

The people inside Baiji's mining cave could not see the reactions of the online audience, but they could guess.

Hayden coughed lightly and explained to Fang Zhao. "Generally speaking, in areas with high power-ore deposits, this species of bugs is rarely seen. The more bugs there are, the less ore. That's why we don't have to continue digging here. Surely there won't be too much high-quality ore behind this rock wall. Normally, when we excavate till bugs appear, we change locations."

As he spoke, Hayden still unresignedly looked at the piece of stone that Fang Zhao had dug out. There was very little power ore, and it was fragmented. It indeed did not have much value.

"Let's change to another spot and try again. This spot has probably been excavated dry." Hayden took a marker and drew an indicator on the cave wall, telling other miners that there were bugs and there was probably a bug's nest behind. There was no need to waste effort by continuing to excavate here.

The group continued inward, and Hayden brought Fang Zhao to another spot. "Let's try over here." There were more high-grade ores here.

A large piece of ore had just been mined yesterday from the spot Hayden was pointing at, and looking at the rock wall, there were probably even more large pieces of ore that had yet to be mined. Hayden had specially exhorted the team not to touch this area and to leave it for Fang Zhao to shine on Project Starlight.

Edmund also felt that this time would surely be a success. Although he was not in charge of mining, over the years, he had seen a lot of mining and at least had some experience in this area. This rock wall indeed looked like it contained an abundance of ore.

Edmund sighed in his heart. We should have started digging here first. If they had not been worried that audiences would find it too staged, they would have arranged for Fang Zhao to mine for large pieces of ore here.

"Go ahead," Edmund said.

Fang Zhao stared at where Hayden was pointing, thinking. He had a hunch that what laid behind the wall was probably not what Hayden and Edmund were expecting...

However, seeing Hayden and Edmund's self-confident manner, Fang Zhao did not say much as he gripped the pickaxe and knocked it against the rock wall. Having gained some experience from the previous time, this time around, Fang Zhao controlled the propulsion rather well. The piece of rock he pried off was appropriate.

The camera once again was focused on the cave wall, and online audiences leaned forward as they stared at their screens.

Everyone watched as the piece of rock fell from the cave wall. Inside, two or three peanut-sized power ores could be seen.

These peanut-sized ores were slightly better than the previous round. At least it wasn't bugs.

Edmund: "..."

Kevin Lin, who had been wholeheartedly anticipating: "..."

Behind Hayden's helmet, his face had turned red. He no longer dared to look at Edmund. He wished to find a place to hide.

No bugs had been excavated from this area, and there were no bug holes nearby. The characteristics of the stone wall also looked as though it had an abundance of high-grade ore. How could it be that Fang Zhao had only managed to mine just a bit?! Hayden was utterly confused.

Edmund's facial muscles were twitching, as though he was enduring some pain. The original plan had been a step-by-step arrangement for Fang Zhao to slowly mine a large ore, as that would have appeared even more natural. But now, two times! Let alone a large ore, he had not even managed to mine an acceptable one!

"How about... we... go further inside." After all, Hayden was a young guy and had just encountered two successive setbacks. Faced with a lot of mental pressure, he could not remain calm and started to stammer. He did not dare to look Edmund in the face, but he could feel the pressurizing aura emanating from Edmund. He shivered from fear as his mind constantly replayed the way Edmund had ordered the soldier to "drag the bug outside and roast it" a while back.

Continuing in, at the furthest point in the cave, Hayden pointed at a spot where he and other old miners were absolutely sure there were power-ore deposits. Not just them, anyone slightly experienced could see the rock wall's characteristics through the live broadcast. Those with sharp eyes could see a portion of power ore jutting out.

Potential ore investors watching this scene online pursed their lips. Power ore could be mined out from this spot even when blindfolded. It seemed like the people of planet Baiji had no other option. They would have nothing to show if they did not do this.

Sure enough, this time, when the pickaxe was swung, a piece of power ore fell, but this power ore was not as big as everyone had expected. It was just around the size of an average human's fist.

Edmund looked at the other ores mined by the conscripts on the conveyor belt beside them, then looked at the piece Fang Zhao had taken three attempts to mine. It seemed a little irksome.

This time, Hayden really wished he could hide himself under a rock. He had really tried his best!

Kevin Lin switched from live broadcast mode to filming mode. There were time constraints when it came to live broadcasting. When they did not manage to mine anything satisfactory, it would be better to switch the live broadcast mode to a film mode and turn it back when they successfully mined something. He had been too trusting of Baiji's people's capabilities. If this was the best result after arranging for a month, planet Baiji could forget about attracting investors. When he thought about the other four channel's mining results, Kevin Lin felt his own prospects seem rather bleak.

The instantaneous live broadcasts were arranged to be as close together as possible, but due to them being on different planets, it was impossible for the broadcasts to all be simultaneous. Before Fang Zhao's side had starting mining, the other four had already completed their first day of live broadcasting. Channel S5 had been the last to start.

Online, those users that had just watched S5's live broadcast had started to discuss.

"Hahahaha, it's a pity their expressions could not be seen because they were all wearing helmets. Why didn't the camera turn around. I wish I could have seen the look

on that Colonel Edmure's face."

"It's Edmund."

"Hey, whatever man, I just want to see his expression now!"

"From my statistics, among the five celebrities, Fang Zhao failed the most."

All five channels had arranged for live broadcasts in their respective mining areas. Although the other four celebrities had not needed to mine like the conscripts, for a fruitful live broadcast, they had all gone into the mines and dug at the spots that the respective bases had arranged for them.

S2's Fritz had excavated a palm-sized power ore on his first try. S1's Li Xiaoxiao had fared well too, excavating one slightly smaller than Fritz on his first try. On his second try, though, he'd gotten a larger one.

S3's Andre might have seemed slightly boorish in the eyes of the viewers, but he was careful. On his first try, he had used too much strength and fragmented the ore. On his second try, when there had been a possibility of ore, under the guidance of an old miner, he had patiently chipped away at the sides till he had excavated the power ore. With a little luck on his side, the ore he'd excavated was the size of an adult's forearm. He had even hugged it and taken a photo, and now it was pinned on Project Starlight's news section headlines.

In short, during the first day of live broadcasts at the mining site, although no one had excavated anything larger than Andre's, they had all managed to reap some gains, so it was not too unsightly.

S4's Tianhao had had the worst results among the first four channels. When he had originally mined the least ore, he had only pulled a long face but had not been stupid enough to blame the base personnel. Only after he had returned to the base had he thrown a tantrum.

Now that he knew S5's Fang Zhao's luck was worse than his, Tianhao suddenly felt much better.

Tianhao stroked his chin and pondered. "As long as someone is below, it doesn't look as ugly. I heard that on Fang Zhao's mining broadcast, he got a bug on his first try, a few 'peanuts' on his second try, and only on his third try did he excavate a small piece

of power ore. Say, do you reckon that Baiji's personnel intentionally duped him?"

The special reporter for S4 who was following Tianhao shook his head. "Probably not. Baiji's personnel would not be that foolish."

"Then that just means that Fang Zhao himself is just plain unlucky and could not mine anything," Tianhao concluded.

S4's special reporter nodded his head in approval, at the same time delighting in another's misfortune. He reckoned Kevin Lin would be dying of anger.

As for investors watching the five channels, after the live broadcasts, their impression of planet Baiji was the worst.

A few investors and surveyors of relevant companies smirked. They expected a staged performance of mining large ores in succession, but in the end, the special arrangements only ended up this way. It just shows how low planet Baiji's mineral density is! This sort of place even wishes to attract investors? Not a chance!

Considering the transportation time and extravagant fees for setting up a communications network, as well as paying taxes, only fools would consider investing in Baiji! If there were any future advertisements from planet Baiji's base, they would not believe the advertisements!

Also watching the live broadcast was planet Baiji's highest-ranking officer, Shanta. At this moment, he was not looking too well. None of the other high-ranking officers at the base were smiling. This beginning was no good. Their perfect plan had only just begun and yet they had encountered setbacks. What were they going to do in future!? Did they have to show that they were an extremely destitute place and beg for donations? Which large base had risen to prominence through development from donations? They all relied on pulling in large investments from enterprises!

Over at the mining site, the people here could sense the abnormal atmosphere. They were especially well behaved and did not goof off, as they were afraid of incurring the wrath of Edmund.

Hayden was on the verge of tears. "It... was... was... was really not deliberate!"

He really had not meant any of this and had not wished to have Fang Zhao embarrass himself on the live broadcast. He also did not dare to do anything that would have

harmed themselves even more than Fang Zhao!

At the same time, Hayden wanted to explain to Colonel Edmund. Edmund was the highest-ranked person in charge of the power-source mining area. Hayden's military service only concluded in October. He still had to be under Edmund for another half a year.

Edmund silently looked at Hayden before turning around and leaving the cave. He had decided to write his application to transfer to civilian work.

Hayden stood rooted to the ground at a loss.

Fang Zhao sighed and patted Hayden's shoulder. "I know you didn't mean for this to happen."

Hayden felt that Fang Zhao was a really nice person. Despite being embarrassed live, Fang Zhao could still calmly console him.

"Don't worry about all the other stuff. Tell me more about the rocks' characteristics. How do you judge whether there would be ores here?" Fang Zhao asked Hayden.

Hayden was woken from his daze when asked about his expertise. He explained all he knew in detail, and as he talked, he demonstrated. Holding up the pickaxe, he chipped away at the rock, combining theory and practice, he chipped off a piece of ore around 20 centimeters in length. He continued digging and excavated another large piece of ore the size of half an arm. He was actually just randomly mining yielded large ones.

Hayden: "... It's really not deliberate!!

Afraid that Fang Zhao would get the wrong idea, Hayden immediately tried to explain.

Fang Zhao did not get angry over this matter. He knew that Hayden had not deceived him. He could only blame his own luck for not mining a decent-sized ore. Everyone would have reckoned this was the case.

Fang Zhao laughed as he thought about it. All along people had said that his luck was good. This time, it was rare for him to be so unlucky.

"It's all right, go on," Fang Zhao replied.

Hayden breathed a sigh of relief when he noticed that Fang Zhao was not angry. He told Fang Zhao about all his experiences and everything he had learned in his half a year here, hoping that Fang Zhao would mine a larger ore next time. This way, Edmund and the other high-ranking officers would not hold him responsible.

And as he was explaining, he pried off another power ore the size of an arm. This was the largest ore mined over the past 10 days!

According to customary practice, rewards were given for mining a large piece of power ore. At any other time, Hayden would have been shouting in delight and showing off inside the mine, but today, he couldn't even bring himself to be happy.

This piece of rock had appeared at the wrong time.

Hayden was exhausted. He leaned against the rock wall and squatted down. If during the live broadcast Fang Zhao had mined such a large piece of power ore, everyone would surely have cheered and they would have received some rewards, but during the live broadcast, Fang Zhao had mined thrice, but it had all been unsatisfactory.

"We don't have to send back this part, right?" Kevin Lin asked Fang Zhao in a low voice.

After switching to film mode, the video captured saw Hayden randomly mine such a large ore. If it was sent back for audiences to see, it would further prove that Fang Zhao was useless.

Fang Zhao would not be affected by such a trivial matter. "Send it. Send it back and let everyone know that planet Baiji has plenty of power ores, and that it's worth investing in."

A dejected Hayden, who was squatting down, heard this and looked toward Fang Zhao gratefully.

Baiji's top brass's biggest desire was to attract investors. Fang Zhao was willing to bear the negative image and let the video be released. He was willing to let planet Baiji shed the tag of "barren place," and Hayden was really thankful for that.

Hayden sincerely exclaimed, "Thank you! You can surely mine a large ore too!"

Fang Zhao laughed. "Right, I think so too."

Chapter 193

Grade A Power

To prove that he wasn't lying, Hayden went out of his way to invite a few veteran miners to join them. When they instructed Fang Zhao on how to determine mineral quality, they were able to dig out large ores at will, but the spots they pointed out to Fang Zhao never yielded big pieces.

The miners turned beet red. They wanted to explain themselves, but they didn't know how. They finally knew how Hayden had felt.

Standing to his side, Hayden couldn't help but tell Fang Zhao, "Your luck is... truly terrible."

Even Kevin Lin, who had been observing the process all along, shook his head in resignation. He was angry and amused at the same time. Fang Zhao's luck was so bad that he didn't know what to say.

Now Hayden and the veteran miners didn't dare suggest spots for Fang Zhao any more. After passing on their knowledge, they shut up and stood to one side.

"Really, as long as you remember what we taught you, you'll definitely be able to dig out a bigger piece of ore than Andre on S3," Hayden reassured Fang Zhao.

But Fang Zhao wasn't as devastated as the others thought he was. All he did was study the wall in front of him carefully. He was surrounded by other miners who were digging. The ore they dug out and rock debris kept being shipped out via conveyor belt.

Fang Zhao kept inspecting the wall and replaying the excavation strategies Hayden and the old miners had taught him in his head. He also had a very special feeling.

Mines generated strange energy fields. Ordinary people who spent significant amounts of time in mines typically suffered physically. That was why miners wore protective clothing. After all, they spent most of their days inside the mine.

Many types of excavation machinery didn't function properly in the mines, likely due to these invisible energy fields. This phenomenon occurred in 90 percent of mines. There were excavation devices resistant to the energy fields, but they were too expensive. Maintenance was also costly. Places that were ranked on the bottom end of the development order drafted by the global alliance, like Baiji, would never deploy those types of machines. Also, the conscription system provided plenty of manual labor. They didn't need the machines.

Fang Zhao had read a few books about power ores. The discovery of power ores had marked a quantum leap in technological development. It had ushered in the era of immigration to foreign planets and the beginning of space exploration.

Every power ore released an energy field. The strength of the energy field depended on the quality and size of the ore.

Despite wearing protective clothing, Fang Zhao could still feel the invisible energy fields that surrounded him. This was something the others couldn't detect.

A normal person shouldn't have been able to feel the energy field so acutely while wearing protective clothing under regular circumstances. That was what the professional manuals said. But a select few were able to feel instinctively what regular people couldn't, even if they were sealed in a room insulated from all energy fields.

Fang Zhao analyzed his own circumstances. He was a bit different from those "select few" as well. Those folks had a vague sense of the presence of energy fields, but Fang Zhao could feel them clearly—and the more he tuned into them, the more he could distinguish the individual fields and their respective size and strength. The energy fields indicated the size of the power ores and their distance.

Hayden and company watched Fang Zhao pause at a spot, examine the mineral quality, and nod to himself. This minor celebrity seemed a quick learner. The spot he had picked looked like a likely source of large power ores, but given his track record, they decided to shut up until Fang Zhao actually dug out something.

Fang Zhao started chiseling, Hayden and company craned their necks.

As pieces of rock debris dislodged, the wall revealed an edge whose texture stood out.

"Wait!"

"Hang on!"

Hayden and the others cautioned Fang Zhao, worried that he might chisel too hard.

Hayden rushed over to take a closer look. He excitedly declared, "Indeed, it's an ore! Check out its edge. It's definitely not a small rock. It's gotta be a big one!"

"Really? Let me take a look." The veteran miners rushed over as well.

The miners were even more excited than Fang Zhao.

"Indeed!"

The miners surrounded Fang Zhao and offered up instructions. "It's probably a big piece. Dig it out quickly. Use some finesse and take your time. One bit at a time. It's OK if you take more time, but you have to make sure it's intact. If it's broken up, that will affect its pricing."

Five minutes later, a power ore nearly 20 centimeters long and about as thick as the size of a human wrist was dislodged. It came with useless gangue that obscured the actual ore, but all the excavated ore would be sent to a central location and processed together. The miners didn't have to clean it up.

One of the veteran miners inspected the ore and nodded his head in approval. "Indeed, it's intact."

"Hey, we finally dug out a big one!"

Hayden and company finally breathed a sigh of relief now that this minor celebrity had finally landed a big piece of ore.

"Let me take a look." A curious Kevin Lin picked up the ore and started playing around with it. It was a bit heavy. It took some effort to hold it with one hand. "Not bad, not bad. It's just a bit smaller than the one Andre dug out. Let's press forward. Who knows, maybe we'll dig out a bigger one that will break his record," Kevin Lin said as he returned the rock to Fang Zhao.

"Hurry up and mark it. This will count as part of your service record," Hayden urged.

Every miner marked every ore they excavated with a custom-made spray-paint gun.

The number would be automatically scanned when it was stored so a tally could be kept for each miner.

Fang Zhao pulled out a small spray-paint gun from his pocket and branded the rock he had just dislodged. The imprint he left was his army serial number.

Fang Zhao was just about to place the rock on the conveyer belt after marking it when he heard Kevin Lin blurt out, "Wait! What's the hurry? Let's take a picture. This is the first big piece you have dug out so far. Come on, strike a pose. Don't be serious all the time. Smile."

After taking the picture, Kevin Lin instructed Fang Zhao to set the rock aside first. He wanted to accumulate a few more rocks so they could take another photo.

Fang Zhao was a different person after digging out the first rock. He followed up with three large ores, each larger than the other. The fourth piece stood out in particular. It was clearly larger than the one featured on S3.

"That's a shame. If only you had excavated such a big piece on your first try during the live broadcast." Kevin Lin knew that even if Fang Zhao dug out a bigger rock now, it wouldn't make a big splash unless it was a superbig piece.

But if they could shed Fang Zhao's image as the worst miner of the five, another live broadcast was worth a shot.

Seeing that Fang Zhao was on a roll, Kevin Lin and Fang Zhao decided to go live again.

"We'll be fine as long as you keep up your momentum. Hold on. Hayden, can you gather the four pieces that Fang Zhao dug out already? I'll do a close-up."

Fans scrambled to tune in when they saw that S5 had gone live again.

"Fang Zhao's going live again?"

"Did he finally dig out a big ore?"

"That must be the case. Otherwise they wouldn't go live."

The first shot after the live broadcast resumed was the four rocks that Fang Zhao had dug out.

"Wow, those are mighty big pieces!"

"They're bigger than the one Andre dug out."

"So they staged four pieces and said he dug them out, but who knows? Maybe someone else did the work and is letting him take credit."

"The ores are marked."

"Just because they are marked doesn't mean that he dug them out."

As far as the viewers were concerned, ores that weren't dug out live didn't count.

"Look, he's about to dig again."

"Ha—he actually had the gumption to go live. It must be because someone scouted a prime location for him. I wouldn't be surprised if he digs out a giant rock."

Meanwhile, Kevin Lin was manning the camera in the mine. He was quite nervous. Finishing with such a meager pile wouldn't fly on the first day of their mining broadcast. Having seen Fang Zhao dig out four ores in a row, he didn't want to give up just yet.

Hayden and the veteran miners were also watching nervously. Their gazes were glued to Fang Zhao as they gauged the mineral quality of the wall where Fang Zhao was digging.

Fang Zhao paced for a bit and stopped.

The veteran miners frowned. They thought Fang Zhao had picked a spot five meters ahead. Judging from the mineral quality, it was a likely source of big ores, but Fang Zhao checked out the spot and came back.

"The mineral quality there... doesn't look like it will yield big ores."

"It's not too bad. Maybe there will be a few small pieces, definitely not a big piece," one of the miners mumbled.

Kevin Lin hesitated before deciding not to speak. He heard what the veteran miner had said and knew the comment was intended for him, but considering that the

miners were a poorer judge of mineral quality than Fang Zhao, he decided to believe Fang Zhao for now. He didn't end the live broadcast or interrupt Fang Zhao.

The miners exchanged glances and let out an imaginary sigh. Forget it. If they won't accept the favor, there is no point in saying any more. They had said what they could. If Fang Zhao came up empty during the live broadcast again, they had an excuse when they briefed their superiors.

Ding!

It was the sound of striking gold. An experienced miner could tell from the sound alone whether any ore was present.

The miners wore an expression of disbelief.

The camera zoomed in as Fang Zhao dislodged a large rock from the wall.

There was no sign of power ore, not even an inkling. The mineral quality in the spot was different from what the regular miners preferred. When experienced miners came across a similar spot, it was as if they had dodged a landmine. They would mark the location and steer clear of it.

Embarrassment all around again.

Kevin Lin didn't know what to think. Does this kid have bad live TV karma? Lord knows how many viewers are cracking up right now.

He started brainstorming for explanations for his boss, anticipating a likely dressing down from the First Frontline editor-in-chief.

But standing before the camera, Fang Zhao didn't avoid the spot because of the apparently poor mineral quality. Instead, he wiped the opening a few times.

A few small pieces of debris fell off, and Fang Zhao saw a small corner exposed.

Fang Zhao decided to stick with that spot, as he felt the energy field increase in strength. The energy field was the strongest there and the closest, even though the mineral quality seemed suspect.

The veteran miners approached to take a closer look. They thought it was gangue

again but didn't speak up. Gangue was useless. If Fang Zhao dug out gangue again during a live broadcast, it would be a bit embarrassing to bring it up.

Fang Zhao picked up his pickaxe and chiseled away again, digging out the small piece and chipping away the clutter around it before examining it up close with a flashlight.

The irregularly shaped rock was about the size of half a pinky finger. It had a bright metallic texture but it looked a bit different from ordinary metal.

"What kind of mineral is this?" Fang Zhao asked.

One of the veteran miners shook his head. "Metallic mineral? But it doesn't look like it." He had never seen this type of mineral before.

"Use the device in your waist pocket to find out. It can analyze mineral quality," Hayden reminded Fang Zhao.

Fang Zhao removed a palm-sized device from his pocket. He opened the lid of the device to reveal a small cavity.

The size of the hole was big enough to contain the small rock that Fang Zhao had dug out, so he didn't chip at it again.

When he saw Fang Zhao press the "test" button, Hayden blurted out, "No, you haven't switched modes yet. The default mode is energy detection, not mineral content analysis."

Before Hayden finished his sentence, he could hear the device beep. This was the sound the device made when it was analyzing the quality of an energy ore. The beeping was accompanied by a bar on the tiny screen on top of the device.

The surrounding crowd went silent as their eyes became fixated on the small display.

The beeping increased in frequency, as did the surrounding heartbeats.

Power ores of the same size were classified into several grades based on the amount of the energy they could supply, in accordance to a classification system devised by the Academy of Science. Most power ores excavated on Baiji in the past had been ranked grade A- or below. Samples collected from various locations had never been rated higher than A-, but now, with Hayden and the veteran miners watching on, the

barometer on the screen exceeded the A- mark and kept going.

As the onlookers held their breath, the beeping of the device became even crisper.

As the barometer finally stopped at "A," the beeping halted as well, signaling the end of the test.

The miners working nearby had long dropped their tasks on hand. They were quite familiar with the beeping sound of the mineral analysis device and its rhythm. They could tell from the pace of its beeping what kind of rock the device was examining. The beeping they had just heard was much faster than what they were accustomed to.

What did this mean?

Edmund sat on top of a hill near the mine, frowning and absorbed in deep thought.

Hayden, the "temp," wasn't experienced enough. That was why the base leadership had assigned scouting duties to several experienced veteran miners as well. That was also why everyone had been so confident. A whole team of veteran miners had all thought the spot would yield big pieces of power ore, so he had believed it too.

But could you blame Fang Zhao for failing to land any big rocks?

Edmund knew that even if that was what he thought, even if he believed that Fang Zhao's luck was the problem, the base leadership would only accuse lowly staffers like Hayden and company of lack of effort, inexperience, incompetence, and poor judgment. It would not be PC to accuse Fang Zhao just yet. Otherwise he would quit or stop his fundraising efforts. The base would be in an even tougher spot.

"Sigh!"

Edmund sat on a piece of rock and gazed at the sky. I really wanna transfer into a civilian post. I can't stay here any longer.

Apart from that...

His head drooped. Edmund glanced at the document he was writing. Two hours had only yielded 27 words. There was an unspoken rule that officers of his rank had to

churn out at least 10,000 words in their applications for a civilian post.

He excelled at leading a platoon and wiping out the enemy, and he was a competent miner, but when it came to paperwork... that was a major headache.

After building the mood for an hour, recalling countless battles big and small and his achievements since arriving on Baiji base, Edmund was about to pour his heart into some 800 or 1,000 words when he heard a strange piercing yell.

It sounded like the painful, frantic yelp of someone under threat after enduring a major shock. "Boss!"

The sudden yelp interrupted Edmund's mood and sent his hand shaking. He accidentally deleted the 27 words he had eked out after two hours of labored brainstorming.

So be it if he had deleted his work. It was only 27 words, and his lost work could be restored, but the mood he had worked so hard to cultivate had been eviscerated by the strange yell.

Edmund sat there, his demeanor resembling a furious beast. His eyes were bloodshot, and every hair on his body perked up.

But even an Edmund in that kind of state didn't scare off an emotional Hayden, who only calmed down slightly when Edmund grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up.

Hayden glanced at the ballistic Edmund, his teeth clattering. "B-b-b-boss?"

Edmund's facial muscles twitched as he struggled to contain his anger. However, he knew Hayden wouldn't have abruptly interrupted him if it wasn't something urgent.

"Something go down with our little celebrity?" That was the only reason Edmund could think of. Celebrities were a major hassle.

"Yes, something went down." Hayden nodded with a blank look before recovering his senses. "No, no. Boss, the minor celebrity dug out a grade A power ore."

Edmund released Hayden from his grip. "Oh, heaven's sake. It's just a..."

Hayden had just landed on his feet and had barely recovered his breath when Edmund

grabbed his collar and lifted him up again.

"What. Did. You. Just. Say?" The question came out in bits and pieces, like squeezing a nearly empty tube of toothpaste.

"I said that... that minor celebrity... He dug out a piece of... grade A..."

"Grade A? Are you sure it's grade A?" Edmund's high-pitched voice was shaking toward the end of the question. "Not A-? It's a full-on A?"

"That's what the testing device said," Hayden responded.

Bang!

Hayden finally landed on his feet again and was desperately catching his breath.

Nearby, Edmund took deep breaths, his nostrils looking like they were spewing fire.

Taking in Edmund's reaction, Hayden could empathize with how his boss was feeling.

The development order of the various foreign planets devised by the global alliance was based on the grade of the energy ores they produced. The higher quality its power ore, the higher a planet's military base was ranked and the more resources it would be allocated.

Baiji had quite a low ranking. At their current pace of development, Baiji might not meet the requirements for mass human migration some 100 years later. Edmund wouldn't gain much from staying on Baiji. That was why he wanted to switch to a civilian gig.

But if Baiji produced grade A power ores, and a significant number of them at that, then Baiji's ranking within the global alliance's development order would take a major leap.

Edmund took a deep breath and charged toward the mine where Fang Zhao was working. There were two things he needed to ascertain immediately: first, that the power ore was definitely grade A, and second, how many similar rocks could be excavated.

As for his transfer application? Tsk, who cared?

Chapter 194

I Have Good Hearing

Edmund frantically ran into the mining tunnel. Watching the senior officer behave this way, soldiers stationed at the mining site thought that something big had happened inside the mining tunnel, perhaps a dangerous organism being unearthed, but when they had time to think it through, that did not seem possible. If a dangerous organism had been dug out, the warning alarms would have sounded, but right now, there were no sirens at all.

But if that was not the case, what else could it be?

The mining site's soldiers considered numerous possibilities, but since the senior officer had given them new instructions, they could not make any unnecessary movements and had to continue standing guard at their posts.

Edmund had never felt his heart beat so quickly in his whole life. His blood was pumping so quickly he felt like he was losing control of his body.

Inside the mining tunnel, after he had seen the displayed readings on the instrument, Kevin Lin had filmed the readings from a distance and then decisively cut the live broadcast signal!

Finding a grade A power ore on such a remote planet far back on the development sequence, Kevin Lin very clearly knew what that forebode, but until it was officially confirmed, he did not intend to broadcast it live. At this sort of time, it was best to stay calm. Otherwise, a little carelessness and they could end up with egg on their face.

Switching over to film mode, Kevin Lin could not help but carefully picked up the ore that Fang Zhao had just excavated. After that, he struck a few poses and took a few photos from angles he felt were best.

"Hey, Fang Zhao. There is still something missing on it," Kevin Lin exclaimed. "You haven't made a mark on this piece of ore."

Kevin Lin was only satisfied after Fang Zhao had used a spray gun and marked out the

serial number. Picking it up, he continued to take selfies and let the camera take clear photos of the serial number.

Edmund strode over. "Where is it!" He scanned around as if he was using radar before fixing his gaze on the small ore that Kevin Lin was holding.

Edmund took the ore from Kevin Lin's hands. "This is it?"

This piece of ore was indeed too small. It seemed especially delicate in Kevin Lin's palm. But all those lower grade power ores had no chance of comparing with it.

Edmund trembled slightly, as if afraid that his coarse hands would tarnish it. He carefully tilted his hand to let the small piece of ore roll around in his palms as he fervently stared at the tiny rock.

Edmund looked toward the few old miners beside him. "Has it been confirmed?"

An old miner understood and replied, "We have all used our own instruments to appraise it. The machines should not have been faulty. We even readjusted the instruments once more and even cross-referenced it to other ores. The result is... undeniable."

Undeniable!

The word echoed nonstop in Edmund's head like the roaring of thunder.

Being prudent, or perhaps unwilling to believe this extraordinary occurrence unless he saw it with his own two eyes, Edmund got everyone to take out their instruments, and he personally appraised it.

Watching the reading on the instrument rise to grade "A," Edmund relaxed a little. Following that, he used his comms device to contact the base's commanding officer, Shanta. After he had briefly explained the matter, he turned to the soldiers stationed at the mine and issued new commands. "From now on, the entire planet is on high alert! Outposts scattered everywhere have raised their vigilance, and more people will be immediately dispatched to the mining area!"

Planet Baiji base.

A few conscripts that were staying in base due to injuries or for other reasons watched

as many soldiers who were supposedly off-duty fully suited up and boarded a flying transport.

Not just that, the laboratory also dispatched a flying transport and a cargo transport. Inside were the base laboratory's engineers and scientists.

The entire base's atmosphere seemed a little strangled. This made those conscripts staying back feel curious.

"What happened?"

"Given the direction, they are probably headed toward the mining area."

"Something happened in the mines?"

"Today is Fang Zhao's first official day of military service, right? I heard he was posted to the mining site."

"Then it's highly likely that something happened there. Otherwise, the base would not have so much activity."

Online.

Many people had witnessed for themselves how Fang Zhao had excavated that tiny piece of rock, watched as he had placed the rock in the appraisal instrument, and seen the reading rise to a grade "A." And at that point, the live broadcast signal had been cut!

After that, the internet had gone abuzz.

"The f*ck, grade A? Is it real or fake?"

"Probably real? Would they dare to fake this?"

"Forget about others, for power ore, they probably wouldn't dare to falsify it."

"Hard to say. No one knows for sure what happened. These days, all these variety programs love to deliberately mystify things to attract more viewers. They might do anything just to obtain viewers."

"But this isn't an ordinary variety program. Don't forget who proposed Project Starlight. Wouldn't they be afraid of the consequences if they tried to make a joke out of this?"

"Wait a while more. Whether it's the truth or not, there will surely be a follow up report."

At the same time, "First Frontline's" Press headquarters had become busy on all fronts. This was not just Project Starlight's program, it had already become a major event! They were frantically trying to contact Kevin Lin to verify the truth, but the communications could not get through.

"What lousy internet! Planet Baiji needs to upgrade its communications network!"

Not just the media, other parties had started move as well, especially those mining companies. At this time, they were even more anxious than others about verifying the authenticity. If it was true, they would seize the investment spots!

Planet Baiji!

Shanta had already rushed over to the mining area. En route, he had already received three communications from headquarters, but he had not received all the details yet, so he could not give a proper answer. Now he was also anxious to know the truth. If these people dared to have staged obtaining a grade A power ore, he would rather not have investments or donations. He would personally send these people to prison! Ever since the base's prison had been built, it had not yet received an inmate.

Kevin Lin was already standing outside the mining tunnel's entrance, controlling the camera to film the situation in the air.

A number of military flying transports and a cargo transport descended. Machinery and instruments were carried out. Anybody who was not in the know would think that these were preparations for a war.

The soldiers station at the mine saluted Shanta. "Commanding officer!" Although their faces were serious, they were all dying of curiosity inside. These people stationed at the mining site still did not know what was going on, but they knew it was something big.

Shanta and a few of the base's other high-ranking officers headed straight for the

mining tunnel Fang Zhao was in. At the moment, Edmund and Fang Zhao were already waiting at the tunnel entrance.

As Shanta took large strides over, Edmund handed the ore and the instruments over to him.

Shanta held the tiny piece of ore for a bit before beckoning for the scientist to bring the equipment over. These machines brought from the lab were definitely more accurate than the instruments the military conscripts used.

Noticing the large "A" displayed on the equipment, Shanta's lips curled upward. he wanted to laugh heartily but managed to control his mood. It was not yet time to laugh his heart out. He did not want it all to be in vain.

Shanta sharply glanced at Fang Zhao. "You excavated it?" Although he had not seen the situation during the live broadcast, he had seen the video, but that segment had too many doubts.

Fang Zhao did not feel nervous under Shanta's gaze. "Yes. I initialed it."

Shanta stared at Fang Zhao for two more seconds, then turned toward an engineer. "Can we measure the amount?" What he really wanted to know now was how much grade A power ore there was here!

However, the engineers only gave a worried smile.

"It's a new element. The surveying equipment has not been upgraded in a long time. We will have to make adjustments; otherwise it will be very difficult to get an accurate reading. This type of ore is probably found deeper underground, and it is harder to make proper measurements. Just using the detectors at the base, even if we went one round around the planet, we might not necessarily get a proper reading."

Without any means to get a proper reading and with the ore being found deep underground, it was no wonder they had not been able to discover this. Only now that the mining tunnel was even deeper had they finally excavated one piece.

An Engineer asked, "Your base's equipment is lacking too much. How long has it been since it was upgraded?"

Shanta shrugged helplessly. "No choice. We are poor. Upgrading costs a lot too.

Everyone knows Baiji's ranking on the development sequencing."

The engineers also knew Baiji's previous circumstances. Without saying anything else, they gathered together to first discuss how to upgrade the detector machine.

As they thought back to how Fang Zhao had excavated that piece of ore on the live broadcast...

Shanta asked Fang Zhao, "How did you know there was that sort of ore there?"

Kevin Lin also looked toward Fang Zhao. He also wanted to know the answer. During the live broadcast, Fang Zhao's actions had seemed like he was certain there was something there. On what grounds had he been so sure?

Faced with so many pairs of eyes, Fang Zhao answered, "I am a composer. I can distinguish sounds slightly better than others. Many things have their own sounds, and I can hear them when using the tools to chisel at the wall. In simple terms, I have good hearing. I heard an unusual sound over there, so I decided to try digging."

He was not lying. Other than the energy field, it did indeed sound different, but normal people were not able to hear anything special. He could not reveal the matter with the energy field, but as for his hearing ability, this was all right to reveal. Previously, he had not known that this was a grade A power ore, so he had not taken it to heart, but after that, when he listened attentively in the mining tunnel, he could here a slightly special sound.

Shanta felt as if he had just heard a joke. "Are you saying that your hearing ability is even better than detecting equipment?"

So it was not sight that mattered for mining but rather hearing?

Who do you think you are?! The Diting 1 from mythical stories from the Old Era?

Nonsense!!

In any case, it doesn't feel reliable. Is this young fellow trying to dupe us?

Watching Fang Zhao coolly standing there with nary a look of guilt, Shanta hesitated.

Could it be that he could really hear the difference?

Shanta scanned Fang Zhao with a bizarre expression. "Since you can hear that piece, then can you listen some more and tell us where there is more of this sort of grade A power ore in the tunnel? This sort of genuine grade A ore, not like those we normally dig up."

The group of engineers that were discussing how to upgrade Baiji planet's outdated detector equipment all fell silent and looked toward Fang Zhao.

Under the gazes of everyone, Fang Zhao nodded his head. "Sure."

Kevin Lin had to interrupt. "Pardon me. May I ask whether I can turn on the live broadcast?"

Chapter 195

Entire Planet's Most Precious Ears

To live broadcast or not?

Shanta did not immediately give an answer. Instead, he pondered for two minutes before laughing. "I feel that this question would be better directed at Mr. Fang Zhao, don't you agree?"

Despite smiling, Shanta's penetrating gaze did not let up. He was not afraid to lose face on the live broadcast as long as they were able to excavate a grade A power ore. Face was not an issue, but if they were unable to excavate it...

Fang Zhao met Shanta's gaze straight on, then tilted his head toward Kevin Lin and said, "Turn it on."

"Really?" His question had just left his mouth, but Kevin Lin felt that his own question had been unnecessary. He then coughed out quietly, "When should we start?"

Shanta, Edmund, and the other high-ranking officers all looked to Fang Zhao. They also wished to know the answer.

"Do you need to make preparations? Feel free to let us know," Shanta said. For the sake of excavating grade A power ores, he was willing to offer assistance to Fang Zhao. Even if this young fellow took the opportunity to fish for benefits, he was willing to give them.

"No need. We can start right now. After digging, it'll be just in time for lunch." Fang Zhao turned around, picked up the pickaxe beside him, and walked into the tunnel. This time around, he no longer wore a helmet.

Fang Zhao's reaction caught Shanta unprepared. Shanta then asked, "Do you need us to do anything?"

"Maintain silence," Fang Zhao replied.

Shanta nodded his head and instructed a soldier beside him, "The others stay outside."

Hayden had decided to follow on inside but was obstructed. Not just him, even the other old miners were stuck outside. All of them were considered as "others."

Including Kevin Lin, two soldiers, two engineers, and the three high-ranking base officers, including Shanta, formed a party of eight and entered the tunnel.

Conscripts originally mining in the tunnel had already been cleared out. The conveyor belts transporting ore and waste material had also been stopped.

Work inside the other tunnels of the mining site had already ceased. All the other conscripts were already taking a break in their assigned areas. They did not know what had happened and could only gather and have muted discussions. They also did not dare to wander off. Soldiers standing guard in the area were all wielding guns. Half a year of military service life had told them that, in this place, it was best to follow the rules.

In their hearts, everyone was thinking the same thing: Something big definitely happened!

Online, god knew how many people were monitoring S5's latest news. The moment Kevin Lin had turned on his live broadcast mode, many people had switched over to watch. Whether they were bragging or chatting idly in whichever forum, the moment a live broadcast notification was received, they all flooded to channel S5's comments section.

"Finally the live broadcast has started again!"

"Hurry, hurry, hurry, tell me whether the situation where Fang Zhao excavated a grade A power ore is true or not."

"No media outlet has a definite answer... Channel S5, what are they doing?"

"Is this inside the tunnel? Is the person in front Fang Zhao? Why is he alone? Where are the rest?"

"What is Fang Zhao going to do? Where is the grade A power ore? Is it real or fake?"

The camera followed behind Fang Zhao, and the lens focused on him. In the shot, only

Fang Zhao was there. There was nobody or any activity around him.

Clang—

Clang—

Bang—

The sounds of successive pounding rang out.

Fang Zhao held the pickaxe and walked deeper into the tunnel. As he walked, he used the side edge of the pickaxe to knock against the uneven surface of the rock wall, creating a clanging and banging sound.

Online audiences were a little stunned.

"This pounding beat makes me feel like doing a little rap."

"No wonder he has a composing background. Even knocking against the rock wall can produce such feeling!"

"But why is he knocking against the wall?"

"I just want to know if he is alone over there?"

"The scene looks kinda suspicious. If this were in a movie, this would be the part full of suspense in a horror flick."

"Has channel 5 gone with a supernatural style?"

As though the discussions of the online audiences could be heard, the camera made a 180 degree turn, and the people following Fang Zhao appeared within the image.

Right at the front was Shanta. The general's star on his military uniform told the online viewers of his status.

"Dang! There are so many following behind him?"

"Look at the star. That is probably planet Baiji's commanding officer, Lieutenant General Shanta."

"So many people following behind Fang Zhao. What are they up to?"

"The ranks of those behind Shanta are also not low. The few highest-ranking officers of Baiji are all here."

"With the serious expressions on their faces, perhaps the grade A power ore is real?"

"Even if it is real, shouldn't they be digging? What are they following behind Fang Zhao for? Listening to his musical performance of knocking on a stone wall?"

None of the people shown on the live broadcast made a sound.

Kevin Lin could guess the doubts online viewers were having, but he did not explain. He was afraid Fang Zhao would not excavate a grade A power ore, and if he had explained to everyone beforehand, it would not turn out well.

As for the highest-ranking officer, Shanta, he was feeling a little absurd. Never had he expected that he would one day encounter such a situation. If Fang Zhao could not excavate a grade A power ore, many people would probably treat them as jokes, but for the sake of getting a quick answer, Shanta was willing to take this risk!

Is this little fellow really able to hear it? Shanta gazed at the figure walking slowly before him, trying to distinguish any sounds. He was unable to hear any difference.

Inside the tunnel.

With every knock on the rock wall, there were vibrations. Soundwaves dispersed outward, in the air, through the rock wall, and spread further out.

There was an echo within the tunnel, but under the special rhythm, it did not sound at all clamorous.

Fang Zhao continued on deeper into the tunnel. As there were no longer any other conscripts inside, the tunnel's lighting was much worse and it became dusky. In an environment where his sight was not as effective, his hearing was stimulated by the environment and became even more active.

Whatever noise there had been in the tunnel seemed to have settled. Only the sound of striking remained, one after another, as if it was an undulating rhythm, bringing about a hard-to-describe air of mystery.

For Edmund, this mining area was something he should have been very familiar with. However, at the moment, he felt as if this was his first time entering the tunnel. Everything had started to seem strange. There was a feeling of novelty, and his mood and thoughts seemed to be being pulled along to the sounds.

The striking frequency was changing. The tempo was no longer as it had been when entering the tunnel. The sounds that drifted into the ear seemed to have an elegant crispness and were deep and resounding. The resounding echoes as the sound bounced off the tunnel walls created a strange harmony.

It was obviously just a mining pickaxe striking against the rock wall, yet it felt like there was a percussion team putting on a performance behind the scenes.

As they continued deeper into the tunnel, the tempo of the striking increased. The sounds were not the slightest bit chaotic, and they maintained their original harmony, yet the pressure they produced gradually built up to seem stifling.

An air circulation system was installed in the tunnel, and there would not be a situation where there was a lack of oxygen, but now, everyone felt a little suffocated.

This form of listening seemed to put mental stress on their nerves.

With everyone in silence, only the sounds produced by the continuous striking added on to the building harmony, as if building up for an unseen battle, from the gentle probing at the start till the confrontation.

The striking rhythm was still picking up pace, and the tension seemed about to erupt. Behind him, Shanta was spirited and tensed up.

Kicking up a cloud of dust? Or was it the honest truth?

As he thought about it, Fang Zhao, who had always been in Shanta's sight, stopped in his tracks. Turning slightly to the side, his wrist flicked, bringing the sharp edge of the pickaxe to the front, and he faced the rock wall. Raising his arms, he brought the pickaxe down in a simple and agile downward arc.

Bang!

Chiseling without any hesitation, large and small pieces of rocks fell down in succession.

Shanta's whole body shook with excitement. Has it been dug out?

A few people strode forward and simultaneously took out flashlights.

In a split second, it seemed like a spotlight had been shined at the spot on the rock wall that had been chiseled, as if welcoming the debut of a dazzling superstar.

At the spot was something reflecting all the lights.

As the commanding officer of the base, Shanta's mood was in a jumble, and he could not speak very coherently. "...Is this it?"

"Should I dig it out?" Edmund asked.

"No, let me!" Shanta took a pickaxe that was handed over by one of the soldiers. Carefully, he starting chipping away at the spot, delicately chipping away at the rock supporting the little piece of mineral that was similar to what Fang Zhao had excavated a while back. However, after this piece was excavated, it was slightly bigger than the one Fang Zhao had excavated earlier.

Shanta gently picked up the newly mined ore and used the specialized instrument brought in by the engineers for appraising power ore.

The camera focused on the display screen of the instrument as the meter rose upward. As expected, only after it had risen above grade A did it stop.

Edmund looked at the instrument and then looked at Fang Zhao before muttering, "He really... really can hear it!"

Even though it felt outlandish, everything that had just happened in front of them clearly proved that what Fang Zhao had said was true!

Exactly what kind of ear was this, with the ability to precisely distinguish the sound of ores?

Could his hearing really be like the Diting from ancient myths?

Shanta's voice shook a little as he said, "How much of these sorts of ores are in this tunnel?" His gaze on Fang Zhao was no long as incisive as before. Now his expression was restrained ecstasy and gratefulness.

"There are still many. As the tunnel gets dug deeper, there will be more, but as for a concrete amount, that would require using the adjusted instruments to probe," Fang Zhao replied.

"Good! Hahahaha!" Shanta was no longer able to hold back any longer. Laughing heartily, he flashed Fang Zhao a thumbs up. "Fang Zhao, these two ears that can listen to the position of ores are absolutely... the entire planet's most precious ears!"

Chapter 196

Fang "Diting" Zhao

All viewers of channel S5 found it incredulous and hard to believe.

Being able to detect ore by hearing?

When even the majority of detection instruments could come into contact with magnetic and energy fields but not be able to accurately determine their position, how could this pair of ears locate the position of ore?

Was this even possible?!

If they had not seen this live broadcast for themselves, if not for the speaker being the planet Baiji's commanding officer, who held the rank of lieutenant general, the online audiences would have dismissed it and laughed sarcastically.

However, now, there was no reason not to believe it!

A moment after Shanta had just finished his sentence, many people received multiple push notifications one after another.

The notifications of news from subscribed e-magazines, informing subscribers that grade A power ore had really been found on planet Baiji!

It seemed like every news outlet was in a race, competing to see who could release the news fastest and attract more viewers.

Being Project Starlight's only official news outlet, First Frontline was really reaping in the benefits at the moment.

The first piece of news they released pertaining to planet Baiji's grade A power ore included many photos and video that had been captured by Kevin Lin inside the tunnel. A large portion of these had not been shown on the live broadcast. One of the photos had been taken after Fang Zhao had excavated the first piece of grade A power ore. In the photo, beside Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin were Hayden and a few old miners.

This piece of news gave a more detailed report on the finding of the ore. After it was released, almost immediately, other large media outlets cited it, just removing the headline and sending it out.

When Hayden found out about it, he was happy beyond measure. He had never imagined that a nobody like him would actually appear in news headlines in his lifetime. Although he'd only had a minor role, that was enough for him to brag for decades!

An hour after the live broadcast ended, the military deployed additional personnel to planet Baiji. The Academy of Science's HQ had also deployed a team to follow the military. According to a Frontline First leak, among those were seven veteran mining engineers.

Seven!

And engineers from the headquarters!

In the past, every year, the headquarters had only dispatched a young engineer to Baiji and other such planets that were near the back end of the development sequence. This was only so the personnel could gain experience and train at a basic level. Now they were sending seven veteran mining engineers right away. As for their purpose, even without saying anything, everyone knew.

And this was just a small portion that was leaked. Perhaps there were even more important personnel headed there.

Three hours after the live broadcast ended, channel S5's live broadcast turned on once again. This round, the broadcast time was much shorter, as it was mainly Shanta speaking. He told the audience that after the old detection instruments had undergone a series of adjustments and limited upgrading, they had been able to detect large amounts of grade A power ore. However, it might not necessarily be accurate, so they were required to wait for the specialized team dispatched from Academy of Science HQ as well as the latest models of detection equipment.

Upgrading planet Baiji's old equipment in those three hours had been really hard work. The figures were still not too precise. Luckily, there had already been two pieces of mined grade A power ore to provide data. This had let the engineers save quite some time in setting up the parameters. Otherwise, even if Shanta had pointed a gun at

them, they would not necessarily have been able to complete it in such a short time.

During the live broadcast, Shanta seemed pleased, bemoaning their poverty in an extravagant fashion.

"We are poor. Our detection instruments are old models that haven't been updated in a long time and are difficult to upgrade. We still don't have an instrument that can disregard the energy field and accurately detect the position of ores. As such, for now, we can only trouble Fang Zhao." Shanta also would not forget the outstanding service that Fang Zhao had offered. Beaming at the camera lens, he said, "Speaking of which, if Fang Zhao had not come over to planet Baiji for military service, we would not have discovered this new power ore so quickly."

Given the extent of the mining area, if they continued digging deeper, it was possible that, one day, the ore would be discovered by a random military conscript, but nobody could say for certain how long that would take.

Edmund, who had originally planned to transfer to civilian work, was rejoicing even more. Fortunately, Fang Zhao had arrived at planet Baiji for his military service this year. If there had been no Fang Zhao, he might have transferred straightaway. That cushy job would be better left for someone else.

Shanta had shown off rather excessively, but inside, he was deeply moved. Guarding this harsh land for all these years had not been easy at all!

The development sequence of planets were classified according to their power sources. Previous data had ranked them at the back of the development sequence.

Planet Baiji's position on the development sequence was too far behind. All these years, their facilities had not been able to keep up. Since planet Baiji had been first discovered by an exploratory spaceship, the detection instruments had been unable to discover the grade A power ore buried deep in the ground. After that, they had continued using these old instruments and so had not discover anything new, as before.

All these years, it was not that Shanta had had no plans to survey the planet again but that the equipment had been outdated and they had lacked the funding for upgrades. Numerous equipment requests submitted to the higher-ups had always been overruled. In addition, given that there had indeed been no big discoveries on planet

Baiji all these years, he had no longer daydreamed and ran the place as simply and straightforwardly as possible.

Till now, there was only one planet that had grade A+ power ore. Furthermore, it was a planet still not suitable for habitation. On that planet was a sealed military base and an advanced laboratory, both of which were highly classified. Ordinary folks would simply not have any means of getting involved.

For grade A, there had already been three planets in the development sequence. One was unsuitable for human habitation, and the plan was to establish a military base and laboratory branch there. The other two planets were the focus of the immigration plan. Tourist districts had already been constructed on one of them. People from families with better conditions had already toured there.

There were seven planets with grade A- ore.

It might seem like a small number, but basically, almost all resources were allocated to the four planets right at the front of the development sequence. As for planets down the pecking order, it was up to their own capabilities to solicit military funds and resources. Those without much capability could only wait and hope till the day when planets at the forefront were almost fully developed and started accepting immigrants. Only then would the resources be allocated to the next in line. Planet Baiji had belonged to the tail end of the spectrum.

But now, everything was going to change.

Planet Baiji is going to be developed!

Planet Baiji's position in the development sequence is going to really shoot up!

These were the thoughts of everyone in the know.

Activity had already begun in mining companies and numerous investment firms.

Feeling regret?

Regret!

Regretting that they had not made a move first.

For instance, this was just like a poor and backward little hamlet going through a gorgeous transformation and turning into a nationally developed new district!

In the past, investment firms and mining companies had had an unwilling and uncharitable attitude even when others had begged on their doorstep. Now, even offering money bags might not even get them a taste of this.

A certain reviewer gave his thoughts: "A minor celebrity has triggered a violent storm."

However, online audiences did not agree with that statement.

"Minor celebrity? If you consider the amount of hot topics, Fang Zhao can no longer be considered a minor celebrity, right?"

"Indeed. Shanta said that Fang Zhao has the entire planet's most precious pair of ears. 'Entire planet' probably means Baiji? From what I see, how can it even be considered Baiji's most precious pair of ears? They are simply national treasures!"

In some notes left behind from people during the end of days, it was said that future generations shouldn't depend too much on machines. When a day came when machines no longer worked, and when the time came when the assumed omnipotent advanced technologies couldn't lift a finger against the miracles of nature, a person's own capabilities could be the difference between life and death.

Now, planet Baiji's situation had proven this point. Without Fang Zhao, planet Baiji's grade A power ore would not have seen the light of day so early!

"How much do you people reckon Fang Zhao's pair of ears is worth?"

"A while ago, there were people comparing Fang Zhao to the mythical 'diting' in ancient stories."

"Although it's not as exaggerated as those fables, it is indeed exceptional."

"Hahaha! I just saw a picture of Fang Zhao fused with a beast. I will send it to you guys so you can take a look."

Someone with itchy hands had painted a drawing of Fang Zhao. However, this time, he was no longer muscular. Now he did not even look human!

The curious online audiences clicked to view it. A tiger's head, a lion's tail, a dragon's body, a qilin's legs... ha! Wasn't this the mythical diting from ancient legends!

Below the drawing, the creator had left a remark: "Fang 'Diting' Zhao!"

Fang Zhao's "Diting" moniker, along with that drawing, was circulated in many forums.

This time, Silver Wing had not even acted yet when news of "Silver Wing Celebrity Fang Zhao Excavates a Grade A Power Ore" had spread all around the world.

As Zu Wen was browsing news online, he asked the others in the office, "Why is the commotion when Boss undergoes his military service even bigger than when he wasn't serving?"

Jinro and the others had just come out of their gaming studio. In their hearts, they thought, only Fang Zhao is able to create such a big commotion.

"This is only his first official day of military service. He still has a year to go. Do you think there will be anything else big happening in the future?" Schwarzer asked.

Jinro wanted to reply with "How could there be so many big occurrences," but as he was about to speak, he stopped.

The entire virtual projects department suddenly quieted down as everyone fell into a strange silence.

When everyone outside was making a big fuss, Fang Zhao received a real-time communication from Duan Qianji.

As of now, planet Baiji had relaxed the restrictions on real-time communications. As Fang Zhao had provided outstanding service this time, he had priority to use real-time communications.

Duan Qianji was clearly in a good mood in the video.

"A few old friends have contacted me. After you complete your military service, they wish to invite you to appear on their programs. Oh, there is also an invitation from Fiery Bird. Next year, they wish to invite you to shoot a commercial for their new model of earpieces."

People who were able to contact Duan Qianji directly were definitely not nobodies.

"Whether it is variety shows or invitations from large manufacturing firms, we can talk about it when you return. They have taken a fancy to your ears. Now, your ears are worth a lot. They promised that if you are willing, they will help you insure your ears for a considerable sum. They only hope that when the time comes, after your military service, you will consider them first." Duan Qianji spoke briefly about the matters of commercials. Following that, her smile faded and became slightly serious. "There is still one more thing."

Fang Zhao indicated that he was listening attentively. "Go on."

"In First Frontline's report, it said that there was a new element found in the grade A ore?"

Fang Zhao nodded. "Mmhm."

"My main point is this. New elements need to be named. The Academy of Science HQ has a rule. The first person to discover an element has the naming rights. The HQ has already dispatched people over. I also do not know who they are or their character. When the time comes, you have to be vigilant and not be cheated. Make sure to keep the naming rights in your own grasp. If it is really impossible to do so, at least trade it for some benefits for yourself."

Chapter 197

Naming

Duan Qianji had just ended the video conference with Fang Zhao when she received a video call from her husband Hong Lou.

There was a trace of anxiousness in Hong Lou's voice. "How was it?"

"I have said all that had to be said," Duan Qianji replied.

"That means to say that you have not raised the matter with him?"

Duan Qianji sighed. "Now is not a suitable time to raise matters on your side. I know what sort of person Fang Zhao is. He actually understands a lot. This time, when I spoke to him, besides the stuff that I talked about, there were some hidden meanings that I'm sure he understood."

Hong Lou did not believe it. "Are you absolutely sure he understood? How old is he? There is a limit to what he can understand. If you don't raise it, how would he know? Can he understand the twists and turns here? Wife, how about you give him another call?"

Duan Qianji did not say anything. She just looked helplessly at Hong Lou.

Hong Lou sighed. "All right." He also knew that it was impossible. Duan Qianji surely had her own misgivings too. Although the whole world knew that Fang Zhao was signed to Silver Wing, they did not know that Fang Zhao's contract was different from other artists. At first, his contract as a composer had been more restrictive, but after he had developed, Duan Qianji had had no choice but to change the terms in his new contract.

Now, to her fullest extent, Duan Qianji was trying to keep him at Silver Wing. Duan Qianji had told Hong Lou before that Fang Zhao did not care much about wealth, but if you showed him sincerity, he would also return the good faith.

"Just wait, and we will know the answer," Duan Qianji said.

"Sigh, so anxious. Everyone has started to make their moves. Many of us at Yanzhou's military district wish to join the mix. The allure of planet Baiji is just too great now. You also know that bloke Shanta is refusing to acknowledge anyone. He even ignores higher-ranking personnel, let alone me who is ranked lower than him. He isn't even replying when I use my family connections."

Currently, Shanta had the entire planet under his control. Forcibly stepping in was difficult. Those people that had just been dispatched were connected to him. Shanta had kept himself hidden away well and had only appeared when this big fuss had started. He had endured so many years on planet Baiji and had reckoned there were no prospects for development. Now that a chance had come, Shanta would surely hold on to Baiji till death. No matter what benefits were thrown his way, he would not be removed.

There was a rumor in the military that Shanta would pick a few cooperative partners in each continent's military districts. That's why many parties were in an uproar. Hong Lou believed the saying that the pavilion closest to the water enjoyed moonlight first. Since Fang Zhao was an artist signed to his own wife's company, in times where Shanta was uncontactable, he could get information from Fang Zhao's side. However, Duan Qianji had preached patience, so all he could do was wait. He could only blame himself for not being close to Fang Zhao.

—

Shanta was pleased with himself. He was grateful to all the people who had neglected planet Baiji for so many years. The troops garrisoned at planet Baiji were all his people. Those that were coming later might not be considered trusted aides but were also on the same side. Now, all authority of speech in planet Baiji was his. If those old heads in the top brass wanted to forcibly remove him, he would never yield.

He had indeed decided to pick a few cooperative partners from each continent. In theory, it was picking out cooperative partners, but in reality, it was just pacifying all parties and stopping them from voicing dissent. The choices would not be made right away. He needed to arrange his own personnel first and maintain control over Baiji. Nobody else but him should even think about prying open the planet he defended!

And when Shanta bragged, he had the tendency to make others dislike him. In the next live broadcast, Shanta even said, "Really thankful that the two exploratory spaceships Arcturus and Formalhaut did not accept Fang Zhao's kindness."

Shanta had learned from Fang Zhao that when Fang Zhao had been submitting his applications, he had starting applying to the most difficult vocations. If Arcturus and Formalhaut had not rejected Fang Zhao's request, he would never have come to planet Baiji...

Conveniently, Shanta also flaunted about how he had rejoiced when he had received Fang Zhao's application. Otherwise, he would be included among the people that were regretting today.

As Shanta expected, after the Arcturus and Formalhaut received news about planet Baiji, they were incessantly regretful. Furthermore, watching Shanta's smug manner, the commanders aboard those two spaceships felt like throwing up blood.

Regrettable. Truly regrettable.

First was Project Starlight, followed by grade A power ore. How were they to have known that Fang Zhao, that little celebrity, could do so much?

Regret was not just limited to the commanders of those two spaceships. Other planets toward the tail end of the development sequence were also contemplating.

In the past, planet Baiji had been just like them, part of the "impoverished family," and planets that were even more "impoverished" than Baiji or were placed further behind on the development scale had witnessed planet Baiji's overnight change in fortunes. Now, all these bases had the same line of thought: Should we get Fang Zhao to come over and take a walk around?

After what had happened at Baiji, the Alliance government gave instructions. Professional teams would bring along the latest models of equipment to a few planets to see whether there were others in a similar situation as Baiji.

People unable to get a chance to invest in planet Baiji had their own plans. Even if the military did not have plans to assess, these people would create their own teams and rent apparatuses to make a gamble.

But nobody could know for sure. Power ores were a peculiar thing. Instruments and machinery might not necessarily detect them and could be deceived. Previously, detection instruments that made use of soundwaves had been unable to detect these ores, so nobody knew how Fang Zhao had managed to hear the position of the ore. Perhaps back then, those instruments had been outdated, or maybe there were other

reasons.

However, in principle, Fang Zhao was under the care of planet Baiji during his military service. If Shanta did not approve of it, nobody else could have Fang Zhao.

On that day, when Fang Zhao returned to base, Shanta spoke to him in private and wanted to let his own medical team run a medical examination of Fang Zhao.

Shanta had received news that, among the research team on the verge of arriving, there were some whose objective was Fang Zhao's ears. Shanta had decided that, should his own medical team discover any peculiar features in Fang Zhao's ears, Shanta would help him cover them up. If the situation became complicated, Shanta could make Fang Zhao stay on planet Baiji on the grounds of protecting him.

Fang Zhao agreed to Shanta's suggestion of a medical examination.

However, Shanta found the medical results very unexpected. Other than his eighth cranial nerve 1 being better developed than other people's, it seemed like there was nothing else strange or special.

First, smell. Second, vision. Third, eye movement. Fourth, eye muscle. Fifth, facial sensations. Sixth, outward gaze. Seventh, facial expressions. Eighth, hearing. Ninth, taste. The eighth cranial nerve was also the hearing nerve.

A doctor discovered that, at specific times—for example, when listening to particular sounds or music—Fang Zhao's nerves had a distinctly heightened awareness.

The doctor said that this might be related to Fang Zhao's profession.

Having obtained this result, Shanta could not tell whether to feel relaxed or sorry.

On the contrary, Fang Zhao did not find this unexpected. Back when he had realized he might be different from other people, he had examined himself. There had been a number of examination equipments back at home. He had not discovered anything too peculiar. In addition, he had gone for another medical examination before his military service had started. Other than having a slightly higher rating, there was nothing extraordinary.

"Fang Zhao, since this is the case, why don't you return to the base and rest first. Those people would be arriving soon. Do you know the matter about the naming rights of

the new element?" Shanta asked.

"Yes."

"All right then. Go and think of a name."

Once the detectors were upgraded, there would not be a need to trouble Fang Zhao.

In the last 100 years, Fiery Bird's game consoles had already been developed to the 10th generation. For these sort of detectors, they had gone through close to a hundred iterations, almost one upgrade per year.

Anyone could see how much manpower and resources were put in given the fast-paced upgrades of these detector instruments.

—

When the dispatched troops and research team arrived at Baiji base, Fang Zhao was in his room writing song scores.

An old man with snow-white hair and kind eyes came looking for Fang Zhao. His name was Xike, a vice-president of the Academy of Science HQ. He came personally to invite Fang Zhao over to the laboratory and discuss the new ore.

There were more instruments and machinery in the experimental area. When Fang Zhao stepped into the ore analysis lab, he saw a few people wearing lab coats he had never seen before. Not all of them were mining engineers.

One person's gaze was fixated on the display screen of an instrument, and he was mumbling to himself.

He was watching it fanatically, as if it were his secret lover. "Beautiful, so fascinating!"

"Don't mind him. He is always like this when it comes to ore," Xike told Fang Zhao. On the display screen was a chart of the power ore's chemical breakdown. In it, a new element was shown, a metallic element previously thought to be impossible.

"Have there been a lot of new elements discovered since the New Era began?" Fang Zhao asked.

Xike laughed. "How could that be!"

As Fang Zhao did not understand this area, Xike patiently explained it to Fang Zhao. "Every time a new element is discovered, it brings about an enormous number of possible technological changes. But new elements are not so easy to discover. Ever since the Academy of Science was founded, some new elements have been synthetically created, though these new elements only have a code but no name." Xike pointed at the diagram displayed on the screen and told Fang Zhao, "Actually, this sort of element was synthesized in our institution in the past. However, it could only exist for a short time, and the difficulty of duplicating it was high. The experiment results were not recognized, so till now, it only has a code and has yet to get an official name.

In the New Era, humankind due had discovered some new elements. Some were discovered on other planets while exploring the cosmos, while others were man-made. And of new elements that were acknowledged, there were only two found on other planets. One was an element that existed in grade A+ power ores, and the other was the newly discovered element found in grade A ores. This was also the reason the Academy of Science had mobilized such a task force.

"It's appearance here could be due to a certain period in this planet's history. Perhaps, during that period, certain exceptional conditions that are beyond human technology caused it to be created, leading to the stable condition of this sort of chemical compound."

When Xike looked at the screen, his eyes seemed fanatical yet restrained, unlike those young scientists that were so caught up in their obsession.

Noticing Fang Zhao seemingly pondering something, Xike asked, "What are you thoughts?"

"Just had some inspiration, that's all," Fang Zhao replied.

Remembering Fang Zhao's profession, Xike chuckled. Smiling, he asked, "According to customary practice, the first discoverer gets the naming rights. Have you thought of what to name it?"

Xike thought to himself, If this young fellow suddenly decides to be immature and give a particular name full of "individuality," he and the others would go all out to not permit it.

"I have already thought of it," Fang Zhao replied.

"Oh? That's good. Let's have a meeting to discuss."

Xike notified his team, and together with Fang Zhao, they had a two-hour-long meeting. Kevin Lin was not permitted to join the meeting and could only wait outside. After everything inside was settled, only then could he report the outcome.

Two hours later, Kevin Lin received the meeting's outcome.

The newly discovered ore would be called Baiji ore. As of now, it was only found on planet Baiji.

The new element was named Zhaoium and had the chemical symbol "Zh."

Chapter 198

Why Don't You Come Farming with Me

The discovery of a new chemical element that had something to do with energy ore was bound to spark heated discussion in many fields.

Articles and pieces in the mainstream press on the naming of the new element listed about a dozen people with naming rights.

As the person who discovered the power ore, Fang Zhao had first naming rights and was ranked first. Members of the Academy of Science team that had just arrived on Baiji had made an offer to buy his naming rights, which Fang Zhao had rejected, but he had agreed to adding a list of advisors to the naming document. In accordance with Academy of Science guidelines, their personnel files would be marked with the honor of having contributed to the naming of the element "Zh."

Of course, given the amount of public scrutiny, it was hard to get away with landing naming contributor honors based on connections alone. In an age where information flowed freely and rapidly on the internet, even if that was what you wanted to attempt, you had to lay the proper groundwork. As such, the listed contributing namers mostly comprised genuine scientists, including the several lab technicians addicted to studying new elements Fang Zhao had met.

That was why Fang Zhao hadn't rejected the idea of contributing namers off-hand. He had already secured his interests as the first namer, not to mention that his discovery of a new power ore and a new element had been a stroke of luck. He'd had nothing to do with scientific research and hadn't produced any concrete results, so when it came to issues other than naming the new element, Fang Zhao decided to step aside and make way for the professionals.

Little was known about the new element. There was scarcely any information about Zh in existing literature. As researchers made more progress, the science textbooks would fill with more details, but that would come later. What the general public cared about more for now was Fang Zhao and the new power ore.

"If only I were as lucky as Fang Zhao, maybe I could become famous overnight."

"What you're lacking isn't luck but Fang Zhao's hearing."

"That is to say that the following line will be added to Fang Zhao's personnel file: discoverer of the Baiji power ore and namer of the 'Zh' element. Sounds pretty kick-ass."

"This is the first time I've seen a celebrity cause such an uproar while performing military service."

"If serving in the military generates this much buzz, then celebrities won't dodge the draft anymore. Typically, when they serve, they leverage their connections into a cushy assignment and disappear for a year. This is the first time a celebrity's service period has been so high profile from the very outset."

"That's because Fang Zhao was very lucky that his service period coincided with 'Project Starlight'."

"He was the first celebrity to broadcast live during his military service, the first celebrity to discover a new power ore on a live broadcast, and the first celebrity to discover a new element and name it."

"Speaking of which, will Fang Zhao keep broadcasting live from the mine?"

"Probably. He is still completing his military service, after all. He won't enjoy as much leeway as the other four celebrities."

People had to bust *ss during their service period. As a public figure, it was even harder to slack off. In any case, even if he played hooky in private, it was impossible for Fang Zhao to take things easy during his live broadcast every day.

Meanwhile, while everyone was busy discussing the new power ore, the new element, and related topics, Fang Zhao was holed up in his room, composing.

Every conscript on the base had been given three days off, although they had to remain on base. It was a rare extended vacation for the conscripts. Typically, the conscripts worked every day, unless there was harsh weather. Now, not only did they have a three-day vacation, the cafeteria was also serving better food.

Now that Baiji base was more bustling, losing some of its doom and gloom of the past, the conscripts felt quite proud. They felt they had bragging rights for when they went

home after completing their military service. We served on Baiji, all right. Have you heard of Baiji? The one designated as a high-priority planet for development?

If they were assigned to the Baiji mining team after vacation, then they would have bragging rights for the rest of their lives.

Teams of career soldiers and professional experts had already been assigned to the mine. No one else would be included before the higher-ups decided on a mining plan. The conscripts were the least likely additions, as they hailed from a wide range of backgrounds; base command would definitely not let them butt in. They'd rather give all the conscripts time off. The base wasn't short on funds anymore. One word from Shanta and folks would be scrambling to wire money over. Such a prime investment opportunity might even set off quite a bit of feuding and bickering.

Fang Zhao was required to stay on base as well for the time being, even though he was the one who had discovered the Baiji power ore. Shanta had banned them from broadcasting live from the mine, which was now under curfew.

Still, Shanta had extended many privileges to this key figure. Fang Zhao was allowed to roam around in many parts of the base, but he didn't wander much, instead spending most of his time composing in his dorm room. The process of discovering the Baiji power ore had given him a great deal of inspiration.

Old habits die hard. This was how Fang Zhao had survived the Period of Destruction. Back then, it hadn't been realistic to carry a notebook on him at all times, so he had simply remembered all his ideas.

Not far away, Kevin Lin was listening to music while fidgeting with his feet. He was feeling cocky. His boss had already promised that he would be rewarded handsomely when he returned to Yanzhou. Besides a cash bonus, he would also enjoy many other perks.

But Kevin Lin's mood soured when he thought of the several reporters for the military publication that had arrived on Baiji with the new batch of soldiers. They enjoyed better access than he did. Journalists like him were part military, part paparazzi, while the new arrivals were full-fledged soldiers and were trusted by Shanta and his staff. He could predict now that any scoops about the Baiji power ore and the new element from now on would definitely come from them. Meanwhile, Kevin Lin would be left with scraps that the military reporters intentionally passed on.

He'd be lying if he said he wasn't upset. Kevin Lin felt that he was at a major disadvantage. He had tried persuading Fang Zhao to lobby Shanta for more access, but unfortunately, Fang Zhao had ignored him.

Kevin Lin snickered when he saw Fang Zhao sitting in front of his desk in a daze. Kevin Lin couldn't figure out what was going on in that kid's head all day.

Not that he was a snob, but Kevin Lin had indeed looked down on Fang Zhao in the past, dismissing him as a young starlet who was mildly popular. He was nothing in the eyes of a seasoned journalist who had interviewed many big stars and government and military officials. Even Fang Zhao's looks irked Kevin Lin.

If you weren't good-looking enough, you could make it up with a cool haircut, yet Fang Zhao was a conscript, and conscripts were forced to get the standard crew cut. His hair had been trimmed down to the required length by a designated barber after he had arrived on base. Even though he had nice features and was far from ugly, his looks weren't as refined compared to the other four celebrities, and in addition to being good-looking, the other four had dedicated hairstylists who changed their hairdos every day. Thus, their ability to attract fans was formidable. Not to mention that the other celebs all had considerable track records built up over the years on top of their good looks. Their popularity was established. By contrast, it was understandable why folks didn't see much promise in Fang Zhao.

Kevin Lin had never thought much of Fang Zhao either. Lo and behold, Fang Zhao had become a major sensation on the first day of his military service.

But after spending some time with Fang Zhao, Kevin Lin could tell he was different from other mainstream celebrities.

This was probably what folks called an artist's aura? Fang Zhao did look like an artist, somewhat.

Yet as far as the live broadcasts were concerned, Kevin Lin couldn't count on Fang Zhao. There was a big story all right, but how would he cover it from here on out? He had to brainstorm.

Should he try the lab on the base? If he couldn't get any updates from the mine, a few strands from the lab would do, but Kevin Lin shook his head and dismissed the idea quickly. Word had it that the labs studying the new power ore and the new element

had already been upgraded to classified. It was unlikely he would get any access there.

Fang Zhao seemed to enjoy great renown as the person who had discovered and named the new element, but in reality, he had little say on Baiji, or perhaps none at all. These were all empty laurels.

"Oi, what can we do?" Kevin Lin sighed and glanced at Fang Zhao, who remained catatonic. He let out another sigh. Doesn't this kid understand the urgency of the situation?

A visitor interrupted Kevin Lin's moping.

"Prof. Fan?" Kevin Lin was caught off guard.

The visitor was a middle-aged man, someone from the Academy of Science headquarters who had arrived along with the fresh batch of soldiers. Kevin Lin had heard that Fan Lin was a botanist.

Fan Lin was in his 90s, only middle-aged by New Era standards, but he looked older than his contemporaries. He seemed to be aging prematurely.

Fan Lin was from Muzhou. He had been a key figure behind the improvement of Muzhou crops. Now he worked at the Huangzhou Academy of Science.

Fang Zhao had already put down his pen and gotten up. "Prof. Fan."

"Am I interrupting? So you're composing? Not bad, not bad!" Fan Lin had small eyes, so he winced whenever he smiled.

Some folks gave the impression that they were up to something when they winced, but when Fan Lin smiled, he gave a very friendly vibe.

Of course, the friendly act was just a facade. There were plenty of friendly people among the senior ranks of the Academy of Science HQ. All of them knew how to schmooze, but there was always a purpose behind their friendly demeanor, even if no harm was intended.

Fang Zhao poured a glass of water and handed it to Fan Lin. "You have something you want to discuss, esteemed guest?"

Even though Fang Zhao was older than Fan Lin in reality, his host body was in its early 20s. He had to extend the necessary niceties, not to mention that this was a scientist who had made major contributions to his field. Fang Zhao always held accomplished scientists like him in high regard.

Fan Lin sat down, accepted the glass of water, and took a long sip before asking, "You two have anything scheduled the next few days?"

Kevin Lin's heart leapt. He had been about to bail and give Fang Zhao and Fan Lin their privacy, but he halted when he heard this comment. Fan Lin had said "you two" and glanced at him. Fan Lin had no intention of kicking him out, so Kevin Lin reversed course and said, "No. We're banned from the mine. We were just brainstorming what to do for our next live broadcast."

"So I heard," Fan Lin responded with a nod.

Fang Zhao came in handy when the base didn't have the necessary equipment. Now, the most cutting-edge probes had been shipped over, and three upgraded versions at that. There was no use for Fang Zhao any more. Even if he was hailed as "Diting" or "godly ear," humans couldn't rival the efficiency of machines.

"They no longer need you to 'listen' in the mines anymore. You also won't be allowed to keep mining any time soon." A beaming Fan Lin looked at Fang Zhao. "Mining is very boring. I suggest you not waste your time there. Why don't you come farming with me?"

Kevin Lin: "...". As if farming is not boring.

Kevin Lin hesitated. Compared to exploring a new mine, farming wasn't exactly a crowd-pleaser.

Chapter 199

Purely Natural Energy-Saving Lamp

Fan Lin asked Fang Zhao, "Word is that you can hear sounds that normal people can't. Can you hear the sound of plants? The sound of flowers blooming, for example?"

Kevin Lin secretly cursed. So this old geezer is here to toy with us. The sound of flowers blooming? What bloody sound? What's wrong with his ears?

"I'm not that sensitive," Fang Zhao responded. "My hearing is just slightly better than the average person. Locating the power ore was just pure luck."

Fan Lin chuckled. "Luck is a form of competence." He didn't press further, instead switching gears. "You've never ventured beyond the base except for the mines, right?"

"Right." Security was tight. The miners were bused out together every day. They couldn't come and go as they pleased.

Fan Lin got up and waved at Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin. "Let's go. Let me show you some of the experimental fields."

Kevin Lin glanced at Fang Zhao and responded with a smile only when he saw his roommate nod. "We just happen to be free. Let's expand our horizons under your wise guidance. Can I start a live broadcast?"

"Of course. Shoot as much as you want. You can shoot freely when we get to the experimental fields too. I'll do my best to cooperate," Fan Lin said as he led the way.

Kevin Lin arched his eyebrows. Is this old geezer looking for free advertising? As far as he knew, most farming projects on foreign planets were related to food or medicine. Projects that were still in the experimental phase were normally kept secret. The fact that Fan Lin was letting them cover his project meant a product launch was imminent, or at least in the pipeline.

The thought of a new food or medical product launching on his home planet got Kevin Lin excited. This was no grade A power ore or a new element, but at least it was news.

"Prof. Fan, you have an ongoing experimental project here?" Kevin Lin was so excited that he asked a stupid question. Why else would this senior academic travel all the way to Baiji if he didn't have a project going on? He doesn't specialize in power ores.

"Yup. One of the lab technicians who arrived with you is attached to my project. Come to think of it, the project has been ongoing on Baiji for more than 30 years," Fan Lin responded.

Thirty years was long enough for an experiment to reach fruition, to reap the necessary technical know-how and complete risk assessment. A market launch was around the corner if there weren't any safety concerns to address. Kevin Lin got even more excited.

"Is it a food project? Or medical?" Fang Zhao asked.

"Both. It's a fruit with high medicinal value."

It wouldn't make sense to spend so much money, time, and manpower on an experimental plant on a foreign planet if it didn't have high medicinal value.

"We started with an experimental plot, but in the meantime, the plots on the base have been improved, so we'll start planting the fruit at scale here. If we're successful, maybe you'll see the first batch on store shelves by the time you go home next year." Fan Lin was beaming, his smile widening as he spoke.

"That's great timing. We can advertise the fruit for you first."

Fan Lin wasn't shy about his intentions. "Haha, I approached you guys exactly because of your exposure."

Muzhou was the major food producer on their home planet, but many of their crops were not local species—more than half had been mixed with DNA from foreign plants, through cross-breeding or genetic engineering. There were also species that didn't thrive on their home planet and were cultivated on foreign planets.

The crops that Fan Lin was growing on Baiji were genetically mixed—half of their DNA was from the home planet and half was from Baiji. It did not grow well on the home planet, only on Baiji.

Fan Lin led Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin to his lab to pack. Fan Lin's team had already

started packing.

"Teacher, we're ready. We can give them a heads up," one of the lab technicians told Fan Lin.

Fan Lin inspected the gathered equipment and nodded. "Good. Contact the flying transport and get ready to head to the experimental plot."

"Oh, I almost forgot this." Fan Lin walked to a corner. "I almost forgot to bring you."

Fang Zhao glanced over and saw Fan Lin pick up a small water tank. In it was a white blob that resembled a rabbit, except it didn't have eyes, a nose, or any other facial features.

"Oh, is that a 'choppy hair'? Is it one of the bigger ones?" Kevin Lin was intrigued. The "choppy hair" he referred to was a type of pet sea slug. It looked like a white rabbit curled up together, its two "ears" floating about. The most common type of pet "choppy hair" was only about a finger's length long. The one in Fan Lin's water tank was the size of a human palm. If your hands were small, you wouldn't be able to cover it with one hand.

Sea slugs weren't well known in the Old Era, but they were quite common in the New Era.

Many organisms had gone extinct during the 100-year Period of Destruction, sea animals included, but lo and behold, this tiny organism that hadn't been on anyone's radar had proliferated in a major way during those 100 years. They had grown in size as well as numbers. Scientists who studied the Period of Destruction had hypothesized that the extinction of certain sea organisms had something to do with the rise of these small creatures.

They were a major force behind the curing of many major diseases left over from the Period of Destruction.

Sea slugs were the default lab animal for New Era scientists when it came to studying mutation and disease because they were abundant in number and could reproduce quickly. They were also a hot commodity. Many researchers bred pet sea slugs of all sizes, shapes, and colors on the side when they conducted their experiments.

Sea slugs were one of the most popular pets in the New Era. Kevin Lin had a few pet

sea slugs at home. They were even better looking than the one before him.

New breeds that were quite big in size had also showed up on the market. They were no longer a rarity, but as far as choppy hairs were concerned, the blob before him was a bit large.

"Haha, this is not a purebred choppy hair." Fan Lin chuckled. "It has half Baiji DNA."

Fan Lin lifted his hand and tapped the water tank. "Don't fall asleep."

The sea slug's "ears" shivered, and its body started to glow.

"It's even brighter than a flashlight," Kevin Lin said.

"This is a purely natural energy-saving lamp," Fan Lin responded as he tossed a food capsule into the tank.

Fang Zhao watched the blob lying in the tank extend its body slowly, open its mouth, ingest the capsule, and curl up again.

"I get antsy watching it. It's so slow," Kevin Lin said. Compared to his pet sea slugs, this one was turtle-speed. But the advantage of the one before him was that it was a steady light source and was more practical.

"It's not very sensitive, because the little fella is resting. The water temperature is quite low, so it's not very active," Fan Lin said.

Kevin Lin was puzzled. "Why not warm it up?" The pet sea slugs he kept at home were a bundle of energy. He loved watching those beautiful sea creatures swimming in his large water tank.

Fan Lin pursed his lips. "It's a big eater."

This was a reason Kevin Lin couldn't argue against.

"We'll bring it so we have a light source in case the electricity supply at the experimental plot runs low."

When electric grids went down or were unable to power lighting equipment, or when someone was venturing into an area where electric lighting was impractical, these

natural light sources that glowed but didn't heat up were a good alternative. As Fan Lin had put it, it was 100 percent natural, energy-saving, and easy to breed.

"Sounds like a great species. Why don't you guys breed some more? I'm sure they would sell well too," Kevin Lin said.

"I'm not an expert. From what the researchers who bred this one told me, they wanted to breed more too, but they ended up with only one in 30 years." Fan Lin turned to Fang Zhao and smiled. "It's even older than you are."

"It actually lived this long? I heard that pet sea slugs live for at most a few years, 10 years max. Their life expectancy was supposedly even shorter in the Old Era," Kevin Lin said. "Still, I'm a bit scared of animals with foreign planet DNA."

"You've watched too many sci-fi movies, haven't you?" Fan Lin gave Kevin Lin a sideways glance, paused, then handed the water tank to Fang Zhao instead. "Can you give me hand? Don't be scared. It's harmless."

Fang Zhao took the water tank and observed the "rabbit" as it seemed to go back to sleep.

Harmless?

Sea slugs had been able to multiply exponentially during the Period of Destruction. Even though they made for the most popular marine pets these days, you couldn't erase their track record of wanton killing in the ocean. Fang Zhao had once seen a group of sea slugs swallow a poisonous Portuguese man-of-war.

Whether the sea slug DNA descended from the Period of Destruction inside the blob before him was harmless—well, that depended on how it had been raised.

But for now, it was still harmless. The food it was fed by the lab technicians wasn't too substantial.

The experimental plot Fan Lin used was quite far from base, near Outpost No. 23. The research team set out for Outpost No. 23 with a military escort.

After everyone boarded and all the lab equipment was loaded, the flying transport took off for Outpost No. 23.

Kevin Lin wondered if Prof. Fan had been thinking of using them all along.

He wanted to discuss the upcoming live broadcast with Fang Zhao, but when he turned his head, he saw the composer teasing the blob in the water tank with feed.

Forget it. When it comes to the live broadcast, I have to count on myself, the professional journalist. I can't rely on Fang Zhao.

Chapter 200

Unpresentable

Planet Baiji's many outposts that were scattered across the planet formed an extensive monitoring system, capable of observing the entire planet's situation.

Although it was not perfect yet, once planet Baiji's position in the development sequence changed, Shanta would surely upgrade this monitoring system, perhaps by increasing the number of outposts or strengthening the construction of some outposts.

Yesterday, Fang Zhao had also heard that planet Baiji would start constructing a secondary base. In the past, they had been poor and did not have the means to construct one. Now, Shanta no longer needed to worry. The secondary base would definitely be on the agenda.

Among all these outposts, there were some that were used purely as sentries and nothing else, but there were also some outposts that incorporated research projects and experimental areas due to the geography and environment of their area. Outpost 23 was one such example. According to Fan Lin, there was an experimental plot, but this experimental plot was not known to the public. Therefore, other than Baiji's base personnel, the general public had absolutely no idea that these experimental plots existed.

Kevin Lin also knew that all this had been considered highly classified in the past. This time, the stuff in the experimental had borne results. According to Fan Lin, they were preparing to publicly announce it. Kevin Lin could count himself lucky for getting the chance to receive the news first.

However, filming was slightly restricted at Outpost 23. Even en route to Outpost 23, Kevin Lin could only film a few scenes, and he stopped when they got close to Outpost 23. The outpost's deployed site also could not be publicized. Having been here for a few days, he knew what he could and could not broadcast. Even if he secretly filmed and sent it to his editor to compile, it could not be released. Live broadcasting? If he were to broadcast anything that should not be broadcast, his professional career would come to an end and he would be thrown in jail.

Fang Zhao looked at Outpost 23 from the flying transport. In the past, Outpost 23 had probably been a thick jungle, but the area had been cleared to set up the outpost and the surroundings were all plots of land and defensive constructs.

As a whole, Outpost 23 looked a miniature base. It was surrounded by tall fences and a defensive network at the top, separating the base from the dangers outside.

From the air, plots of land that were fenced in could clearly be seen. En route, although Fan Lin had talked about the experimental plot, Fang Zhao had assumed it was just a single small plot. After all, it was only an outpost, not a base. But from what he saw, Fan Lin had been modest.

Noticing Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin looking at the experimental plots below, a proud smile appeared on Fan Lin's face. He explained to them, "These experimental plots were created by clearing and cultivating the area in the last 30 years. The military expenses used for this were around a few hundred million."

Hearing this, they were speechless.

From what Kevin Lin knew, a few hundred million was already an extremely big investment. That much in the last 30 years meant that tens of millions had been invested every year. Given that planet Baiji used to be at the tail end of the development sequence, it was indeed a huge investment that was hard to come by. No wonder Baiji base personnel treated Fan Lin so well. Given that he had his own specialized team and flying transport, one look and they could tell it was not the first time.

But could there be any returns from throwing such large amounts of money here? Kevin Lin was doubtful.

On the contrary, Fan Lin was not at all worried about this. He had thrown all the research funding here and even coughed up quite a bit from his own pocket. Baiji base had only provided manpower, not money. He had also given the soldiers at the outpost who helped keep watch on the experimental plots some extra allowance. Of course, he was doing what he should. The outpost's soldiers were happy to earn some extra income, and this was all approved.

But as long as his items successfully hit the market, within three years, the investments could be recouped.

The flying transport arrived at Outpost 23 and began descending to the parking space.

When the cabin doors opened, Fang Zhao noticed a few people clad in full combat attire running over.

The leading person of the group got on the flying transport and enthusiastically instructed the other outpost soldiers to help shift the things. "Prof. Fan, you have arrived! This time around, lots of things have been brought over. Seems like you will be in for a long stay on planet Baiji this time." His eyes quickly scanned Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin.

"Not going out hunting today, Small Yan?" Fan Lin jested.

"Cough, according to what you said, we have stringent restrictions for when to head out hunting. Instructions from above say that we aren't allowed to hunt wantonly. Above three times and it is considered poaching. Also, we have a limit each time we hunt. Today we will just drink our nutritional dose."

Yan Biao felt a little gloomy. Why did professor Fan always pay attention to their hunts? Could it be he that he wanted to catch their shortcomings? Only once had they accidentally stepped on a few experimental sprouts, and he remembered it even now. Back then, it had been a younger scientist stationed here. In the end, that scientist had turned around and complained to Fan Lin who deducted some of their allowance. However, because Fan Lin's experimental program had brought about some benefits to their outpost, they had not bickered over it.

Fan Lin did not care about what Yan Biao was thinking. He introduced Yan Biao to Fang Zhao. "Small Fang, this is the outpost team leader, Captain Yan Biao. Small Yan, this is Fang Zhao, Project Starlight's representative and the one who discovered Baiji ore."

The words had just left Fan Lin's mouth when all the other outpost team members who had come on board stopped what they were doing and looked toward Fang Zhao, as if they were taking the measure of a rare creature.

Over at the outpost, their information was somewhat restricted. Other than orders from base, they were not able to hear any sounds from outside, let alone the situation online. Even when it came to Project Starlight, they only knew a little from the reports sent by their superiors. Every day, they could only view military news sent over by the base. They knew little about entertainment news and could only hear such things

through word of mouth from the scientists here. However, a large portion of scientists did not pay attention to the entertainment circle. Even if a few certain popular stars stood in front of them, they would not recognize said stars.

Actually, Project Starlight did not affect the outpost's people much. Everyone knew that conscripts would surely be deployed at the base. Here, they just had to go about their daily routine. However, all this had changed with the discovery of Baiji ore.

Equipment at the outpost had been upgraded when the new batch of troops had arrived. Allocated supplies had also increased, and living conditions had improved a notch. How could they not know who this Fang Zhao person was?

Yan Biao became even more passionate and much more cordial than he treated Fan Lin. "Haha, it's an honor!"

"Hi, sorry bother you," Fang Zhao replied.

"No, no, you aren't a bother at all! Come to the outpost and take a rest first. Dezi, make some of... what's that fruit tea!?"

Although he viewed Fang Zhao even more highly, Yan Biao also did not forget about Fan Lin. "Prof. Fan, you head inside for a rest first as well. I will help you move all the stuff to the laboratory."

Fan Lin only shook his head, but he was not angry. "All right, you guys continue moving the stuff. Be careful not to knock it over. I will take a look at the laboratory first."

"Heh! Just relax!" Yan Biao cheerfully directed his underlings to move the stuff.

Kevin Lin drew close beside Fang Zhao and mumbled, "Do the people at the outpost seem a little different?"

Fang Zhao looked at the members of the outpost team and replied, "They seem fine."

Kevin Lin thought to himself: Fine, my *ss. Comparing them, the soldiers of the base were more proper. But thinking about it more, it made sense. Normally, there was no one managing the outpost. Here, Yan Biao was the highest ranked. From his boot-licking manner, it was obvious he wasn't a good person.

However, Kevin Lin kept all these thoughts to himself. He would not say anything.

Speaking out would bring down his own moral character. He was only a reporter. If he had any opinions, he needed to bring out the facts first. Without any truth or evidence, he could only think it.

As they walked by the experimental plots, Kevin Lin glanced over at the side. "Prof. Fan, where do you grow the 'arrow sunflowers' that are about to hit the market? The two plots closest to the edge?" Besides the two plots closest to the edge that were filled with flowers of diverse colors, the other eight plots were all empty.

"Nope, it's the opposite actually. Rather than those two plots, the other eight are the ones," Fan Lin replied.

Kevin Lin looked at the experimental plots, then turned back in disbelief. "Didn't you say that they have already been planted for two months and you are just waiting for them to germinate? Those plots have nothing."

"That's right. Nothing on top doesn't mean that it hasn't developed below ground. Now we are just waiting for it to sprout. According to our underground monitor's figures, they should start sprouting tomorrow morning. Otherwise, I would not have brought you here," Fan Lin replied.

Kevin Lin stopped in his tracks. "What does that mean? Are we to stay here till tomorrow?"

Fan Lin had "How can you be so slow to realize that?" written all over his face. "That's right."

"You didn't say we would be spending the night here!"

"You did not ask either."

Kevin Lin: "... This professor was even better at being a scoundrel than himself.

Fan Lin did not have plans to explain a great deal to Kevin Lin, and he took large strides toward the laboratory. Inside, there were other seeds that were being cultivated in culture media.

Fan Lin reacted as though he was meeting them after a long period of separation. "Heya, my little sproutlings~." His pitched became higher at the end of his sentence.

Kevin Lin rubbed away the goose pimples on his arms, inclined his head, and said to Fang Zhao, "Is there something wrong with this guy? A 100-plus-year-old person, yet his pitch sounds like a kid's, and even 'my little sproutlings' ..."

However, Fan Lin's students were apparently used to Fan Lin's kiddish style and calmly installed equipment in the laboratory and gave reports on the figures.

Kevin Lin fell silent. What was up with this bunch of people? Weren't they prim and proper at the base? Could it be because they were not on their home planet and were far away from the base and without any supervision that the soldiers did not seem like soldiers and the professor did not seem like a professor?

Fang Zhao looked around the inside of the laboratory and then at Fan Lin, who was speaking to the small sprouts in the culture media. Laughing, he told Kevin Lin, "He might be old, but he is young at heart."

It sounded like Fang Zhao rather admired Fan Lin. It seemed like the 100-plus-year-old Fan Lin acted even younger than a 20-plus-year-old person.

As for Fan Lin duping them into staying overnight at the outpost, Fang Zhao had actually guessed it already. Looking at the water tank he was holding and noticing the "rabbit" starting to glow, Fang Zhao threw in another piece of food.

"Fang Zhao, you two, come over quick! Look, isn't this adorable?!" Fan Lin waved them over and impatiently picked up a small vial. Inside the culture medium was a green sprout with two leaves about a finger tall.

Kevin Lin: "...Hehe." I don't understand the tastes of your botanists.

Fan Lin carefully placed the vial back into the cultivation case, then turned to face Fang Zhao and Kevin Lin. "Do you know when a plant is the most beautiful?"

"When it is most beautiful? Naturally, that is when it blooms," Kevin Lin replied.

Fan Lin laughed amiably, secretly feeling pleased at knowing the answer to this question. He had already prepared a bowl of "chicken soup" for the soul and loved to give youngsters this dose of "chicken soup."

Fan Lin glanced at Fang Zhao. "What about you, Small Fang?"

"When it germinates," Fang Zhao replied.

Fan Lin: "..."

This bowl of chicken soup for the soul could not be used any longer.



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