

Background Character? Nah, I'm Going To Be The Peak Instead

Chapter 124: Admiration Is the Farthest Distance from Understanding

*Toot—!*

Along with the deafening whistle of a steam locomotive echoing through the station, a steam train clad in thick armor rumbled over the rails. Amid the shrill screech of metal grinding against metal, it slowly came to a stop at the platform of Steam City's Upper District.

"Miss, we've arrived."

"Mmm."

Chen Xing, who had been resting with her eyes closed for quite some time, opened them and turned to look out the window.

From this angle, she had a perfect view of Steam City's sharply divided Upper District and Lower District.

Beyond the platform, the prosperity and bustle of the Upper District were plainly visible.

On the wide roads, various specialized steam-powered automobiles moved back and forth, their horns sounding from time to time to urge the vehicles ahead to hurry along.

On both sides of the streets, clusters of brass-toned buildings intertwined with all kinds of advertisements, creating a strange yet compelling urban aesthetic—one that carried the unique charm of a post-apocalyptic era.

But compared to all of that, what truly held Chen Xing's gaze were the gigantic steam pipelines at the boundary between the Upper District and the Lower District, crisscrossing like the city's arteries.

These pipelines extended downward along the change in terrain, eventually disappearing into Steam City's Lower District—known as the “Rusty Iron Hell.”

Unlike the glittering façade of the Upper District, Chen Xing, relying on her exceptional eyesight, could vaguely make out scenes from that “hell at the bottom of the valley.”

Dilapidated sheet-metal shacks were crammed into the gaps and shadows formed by the interwoven pipes.

Mountains of scrap metal and all kinds of industrial waste piled up all around.

Even without setting foot in the Lower District, Chen Xing could already imagine the sour, corrosive stench of engine oil mixed with rust that filled the air there.

And the harsh environment was only part of the problem.

Not far from those mountains of garbage, several tiny figures clung to the outer walls of the pipelines, laboring arduously.

They wore nothing but simple safety ropes, their bare arms swinging scrapers as they struggled to remove the rust clinging to the massive steam pipes.

Considering the height at which they were working, as well as the temperature of the steam flowing within those pipes, Chen Xing's brows drew together ever so slightly.

It wasn't that she felt any particular sympathy for those people, she simply found the situation absurd.

Given what she knew of Steam City's technological level, this kind of basic pipeline maintenance could easily be handled by automated machinery, it's both more efficient and far safer.

Yet Steam City's rulers seemed utterly oblivious to that fact.

They would rather rely on the most primitive form of human labor than make use of automated machines that were actually far cheaper than the used human labor.

As if, to them, machines were far more valuable than people.

The irony of it was unmistakable.

As a "second-order city" of the New Federation, Steam City might not compare to the Seven Floating Cities, but it still far outstripped most other cities.

And yet, this self-proclaimed "city of progress," in Chen Xing's eyes, was steeped in rigidity, backwardness, and a rot so deep it was nauseating.

"It seems the upper echelons here are even more degenerate than I imagined."

Though she had only taken a brief glance, the sharp-minded Chen Xing had already roughly inferred Steam City's predicament.

For only those parasitic insects who feared change would cling desperately to their outdated "power," allowing the lower strata to struggle endlessly in the mire.

"Miss?"

A reminder came from beside her. Raposa—an elderly man who served both as a path-guardian and a steward—regarded her with a gentle gaze that nevertheless carried unquestionable authority. His presence reminded her that this trip was undertaken for a family mission, not for sightseeing or observing city life.

Chen Xing came back to herself and rose from her seat.

"Let's go, Uncle Ra."

She looked straight ahead at the bustling prosperity of Steam City's Upper District outside the window, a chill edging into her voice.

"Some people may have stayed in this place, far removed from the floating cities, for far too long, so long that they've likely forgotten that the patience of the Blazing Sun House is not limitless."

Raposa bowed slightly and replied, "Yes, Miss. After all, even the finest steel billet must be tempered by raging fire before the impurities within can be burned away."

“They may be nothing more than impurities, but if they can be used to pave the road for you, Miss, then that in itself is a rather fitting use for them.”

As he spoke, his gaze fell on the ordinary-looking pair of sunglasses resting by the train window beside Chen Xing.

These sunglasses had been with Chen Xing ever since the very first day she appeared in the Blazing Sun House—almost never leaving her side.

Noticing Raposa’s look, Chen Xing asked, “What is it?”

Raposa chose not to hide his curiosity and spoke frankly.

“Miss, there’s something I’ve long wanted to ask. You rarely wear these sunglasses in daily life, yet you always keep them with you. Do they hold some special meaning for you?”

Hearing this, Chen Xing paused slightly.

She picked up the sunglasses by the window, her fingertips brushing lightly over the cool frame.

A fleeting trace of nostalgia passed through her eyes, so faint it was almost impossible to catch.

After a moment, she withdrew her gaze, her tone calm yet carrying a heavy weight.

“Uncle Ra, have you ever had an experience like this, that no matter how hard you try to catch up, you still can’t even glimpse their back?”

Raposa shook his head. His temperament was relatively gentle, and he rarely challenged things that were obviously impossible to accomplish.

Chen Xing was not surprised by his reaction.

“But I have.”

She lowered her head, looking at the sunglasses in her hand, as if recalling something from the past.

“Uncle Ra, there’s actually something very fortunate about having someone who always walks ahead of you.”

“Because then you won’t feel lost, and you won’t lose your direction. All you need to do is give it everything you have to catch up to them and then find a way to surpass them.”

“But admiration is also the farthest distance from understanding.”

“Because admiration makes you see only their back. You focus single-mindedly on surpassing them, and in doing so, you overlook some incredibly precious things.”

“Overlook what?” Raposa asked.

“You overlook several invaluable chances to truly understand them.”

At this point, Chen Xing lifted the sunglasses in her hand and said solemnly,

“And their existence reminds me at all times that once some opportunities are missed, they can never be reclaimed.”

“I will never allow myself to have such regrets again.”

“Even if that regret... is already almost impossible to undo.”

Raposa fell silent and nodded slowly.

Though he did not know the details of the past Chen Xing spoke of, he could hear, in her slightly subdued tone, a resolve bordering on obsession.

It was clear that the Blazing Sun House’s demonic blade—so often seen as overwhelmingly dominant—also possessed a fragile side of her own.

It was just that outsiders would never see it.

Chen Xing, evidently having no intention of lingering on the topic, put the sunglasses away and said, “Let’s go, Uncle Ra. It’s time to meet the ‘important figures’ here.”

With that, Chen Xing stepped out of the first-class carriage first, her black cloak sweeping out a crisp arc behind her.

Raposa followed closely, carrying their simple luggage.

Their figures soon disappeared into the steam-laced mist at the station exit.

As for their first stop, it was the Starbearer Association’s Steam City Branch.

By convention, when a high-ranking Starbearer arrived in a new city, they were required to first report to the local Starbearer Association.

Only by doing so could many unnecessary misunderstandings and troubles be avoided.

What Chen Xing did not expect, however, was that today happened to be the very day the Steam Branch was selecting the captain of the Fifth Special Operation Squad.

Nor did she expect that she would encounter someone she had once believed she would never meet again.

As for whether she would be able to seize that fleeting opportunity this time—

Only fate would know.

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Link to the Novel Google Drive Fanart:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1f7oPMzGjLKukR1MXGik3EGs71RXZYJ2g>