

Doomsday 111

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 111: Life-and-Death Marathon (2)

The Zombie King skilled in military strategy

At a critical moment, a domain rose over Tongwan, holding back the flood of zombies surging in like a tide.

Song Ke breathed a sigh of relief. 'Well done, Taotao!' She shouted in her mind, aware that Taotao couldn't hear her, yet the lively barking of Taotao echoed in her ears like an illusion.

Xu Xing clung to Song Ke's clothes, their disheveled head poking out of the cabin, releasing their abilities with trepidation. Unfortunately, it had little effect. Even after dealing with a group, more zombies followed closely behind. Xu Xing was a bit afraid of heights and also had a fear of densely packed zombies. With a troubled expression, they asked, "Sister, as long as Taotao keeps the domain open, won't the zombies be unable to get in?"

Before Song Ke could reply, Zhuang Qingyan broke the innocent wish of Xu Xing. "Don't be optimistic. Although Taotao's ability covers a large area, it's only C-level and can't hold for long."

Domain-type abilities require a considerable amount of mental power support. When Taotao covered a single building in the community before, the consumption was relatively small, enabling it to persist for several days. But now, covering the entire city and facing relentless zombie attacks, it was only a matter of time before the ability exhausted.

"Can we find the position of the Zombie King?" Song Ke turned to Lu Xiaoyu.

The number of zombies below was too dense, all one could see were rotting faces and lifeless white eyes. Besides ordinary and evolved zombies, there were also over a thousand mutant zombies, their awakened energies mixed together, making it hard to distinguish.

Lu Xiaoyu released all the unmanned drones, sending them in different directions to quickly scan the zombies.

Both Song Ke and Su Cha were more adept at single-target combat. Faced with a large-scale tide of corpses, they were at a disadvantage. Rushing in recklessly would easily put themselves in danger. It would be best to first find the Zombie King and figure out a way to take it down.

“Clang, clang!”

The zombies at the city gate relentlessly pounded the domain. The golden light dispersed for a moment, returning to normal. Yet in that instant gap, several hundred zombies surged in. Taotao was starting to struggle.

The night was pitch-black, stars twinkling, when suddenly, engines roared from all directions! Steamboats, floating cars, and ornate ships, new and old in various designs, arrived just in time. Dazzling abilities burst forth; windstorms, thunderstorms, intense fires, freezing snow... a multitude of elemental abilities wielded their might, and tens of thousands of zombies fell. A vacuum zone appeared in front of Tongwan’s city gate.

They were awakeners rushing in from other places to support! Whether it was for an S-level mission or for Tongwan, their arrival was crucial.

With the pressure eased at the city gate, Tongwan’s counterattack began. Armored vehicles rumbled across the ground. Led by Zhao Liqiang, members of the security team carried flamethrowers and cannons, bravely charging into the zombie army.

Even ordinary people climbed onto the city walls, hurling sandbags into the battlefield. Some glass bottles hit the zombies, while others landed on the ground, producing a faint shattering sound. Soon after, they were swept by flamethrowers and artillery, causing intense chemical reactions—corrosion, combustion, explosions. The pungent smell of chemicals filled the air. It was truly remarkable, even in the city of medicine, how distinct their methods of killing zombies were.

“Found it.” Lu Xiaoyu enlarged the screen, and amidst the horde of corpses in the middle, a distinct zombie appeared.

Standing at about three meters tall, though not as towering as a Level 3 zombie, it had robust muscles. Its chest veins wriggled like black serpents. What was more horrifying, behind this zombie were two enormous palm-like appendages resembling wings, with claws larger than half its body.

Similar to their time in Xiangang, Song Ke calmly set up a heavy crossbow, aimed, and fired!

The arrow whistled through the air toward the Zombie King's head. But as it approached, a nearby mutant zombie stomped, causing the ground to shake, and huge chunks of earth erupted, deflecting the crossbow's attack. This was a classic use of earth-based abilities.

Song Ke's gaze hardened. Indeed... the Zombie King could control other zombies.

Lu Xiaoyu lowered the starship's altitude to the minimum as Song Ke, Su Cha, Lin Youyou, and Xu Xing jumped down.

"I'll go for the Zombie King. You all provide support," Song Ke said.

Lin Youyou followed behind Su Cha, enhancing the surrounding awakeners with buffs. As they heard the melodious singing, their spirits lifted, their hands moved faster, making it easier to kill zombies. A-level support-type awakeners might have limited combat abilities, but they were remarkably effective on the battlefield.

Song Ke manifested dual blades, rushing toward the Zombie King's position. Her speed was remarkable, almost becoming a blur. Before the zombie army could react, she had dashed past them. With a forceful push from her toes, she leaped into the air, cutting through the battlefield from the side. Both blades came down simultaneously, but the Zombie King sensed the danger, swiftly turned around, and swung all four claws toward Song Ke.

Unfortunately, Song Ke's blades were faster. "Clang!" The sharp edge struck the raised flesh-wing, but it didn't cut through? The Zombie King fiercely swung its arm, its sharp nails clashing against the blades, producing a teeth-gritting scraping sound.

Song Ke somersaulted backward, landing steadily. Only then did she notice that its flesh-wing seemed clad in steel armor, shimmering metallic hues. This was... an awakened ability? Did the Zombie King

possess an ability? No, Song Ke quickly realized. It didn't have any awakened energy within itself, but there were numerous mutant zombies around. At a critical moment, one of them must have released an ability to protect the Zombie King.

The Zombie King agilely evaded Song Ke's attack range, leaping onto a collapsed base station. Its lifeless white eyes fixed on Song Ke, suddenly it dropped onto all fours and let out a low growl.

Several Level 3 zombies leaped from both sides, while more mutant zombies arranged themselves in a backward-stepped formation, enclosing Song Ke in a V-shaped formation. Ahead of her were fierce high-level zombies, while behind her, the Zombie King eyed her hungrily. She was trapped within the enemy lines.

Song Ke suddenly realized the most challenging aspect of the Zombie King wasn't its own strength but its ability to command other zombies at will, even forming an army. Blades gleaming with a faint blue light, Song Ke's awakened energy surged in waves. Instead of fleeing, she chose to confront them head-on.

On the starship, Zhuang Qingyan observed the group of zombies facing off against Song Ke. Her gaze turned cold. "Spearhead formation."

"What's a spearhead formation?" Fang Zhixu asked.

Zhuang Qingyan explained, "A spearhead formation relies on infantry and cavalry cooperation, specializing in flanking maneuvers. I never expected zombies to use tactics. This Zombie King might have served as a battlefield commander before."

Fang Zhixu looked shocked. "Are you suggesting the Zombie King retains memories from when it was human? Then why does it attack humans?"

Zhuang Qingyan stared at the Zombie King's grotesque appearance, shaking his head slowly. "No, it's undoubtedly a zombie. I'm inclined to believe it retains human intelligence."

"If it has intelligence, can't you directly control it? Can't we win easily?" Lu Xiaoyu's thoughts always had an unconventional twist.

The power of a Level 4 zombie was equivalent to that of an A-level awakener. Although Zhuang Qingyan thought the chances were slim, he released his mental ability to probe, only to encounter a hindrance. "It has a mental barrier, similar to Taotao's domain."

"Oh? It can even prepare for this? Seems pretty smart," Lu Xiaoyu felt intrigued.

"Congratulations, you've synchronized brainwaves with the zombie, but unfortunately, it's smarter than you," Zhuang Qingyan couldn't resist poking fun at Lu Xiaoyu.

Of course, the barrier wasn't created by the Zombie King itself; it lacked awakened energy and could only utilize the abilities of other mutant zombies.

To put it simply, the Zombie King was like a worker screwing in screws, familiar with the use of each screw, and able to place them in the most suitable positions.

"I think I understand how Rongzhou was destroyed. This Zombie King is too terrifying," Fang Zhixu sighed.

"This is perhaps the most cunning opponent we've encountered," Zhuang Qingyan said in a deep voice.

Beneath the base station, Song Ke's dual blades were ruthless, tearing through the flank defense. She faced dozens of high-level zombies alone, like a Grim Reaper amidst chaos, cutting through the tangled mess. Even splattered with tainted blood, her expression remained unchanged.

The military tactics of the ancient civilization emphasized "winning before battle," signifying that victorious armies always created a winning momentum before engaging the enemy. And when the situation turned unfavorable, they sought to "conserve strength for a future battle."

The Zombie King watched the dwindling zombie army, clawing at the ground beneath it, making a thoughtful gesture.

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In the center of the battlefield, poisonous mist spread around Su Cha, rapidly harvesting the lives of zombies.

Lin Youyou cautiously followed him, never forgetting to glance back and instruct, "Xiao Xing, stay close."

"Okay," Xu Xing obediently replied.

However, in the midst of the chaotic situation, zombies occasionally lunged forward. Xu Xing, with shorter legs and a timid disposition, got obstructed three or four times, gradually falling behind Lin Youyou. Luckily, his position was relatively close to the city gate, with other powered individuals and members of the guard nearby, so it wasn't particularly dangerous.

Mechanically and numbly, Xu Xing threw ice spikes into the pile of zombies. There were so many of them that even his haphazard throws managed to impale a large number.

Various abilities flew around him, shells and flames intertwined, chemical bottles bobbed up and down intermittently. Xu Xing couldn't help but wonder amidst the chaos: could this kind of chaotic fighting accidentally harm their own people?

For better or worse, a tornado-like power whirled, picking up a massive bunch of zombies.

Whether due to a lack of control or the weight being too much, the tornado's eye gradually veered off course, turning in Xu Xing's direction.

Cursing himself internally, Xu Xing turned and ran. Unfortunately, with his short legs and light weight, he was swept away after just a few steps.

The damned tornado blew for a good ten seconds. Xu Xing felt like he was in a tumble dryer, disoriented. Finally, he was unceremoniously thrown to the ground. He sat there, feeling aggrieved, rubbing his head, and swaying as he stood up, only to realize he was at the back of the shelter. Suddenly, his eyes widened! Several zombies stared at him expressionlessly, having witnessed his sudden descent from the sky.

Describing zombies as “expressionless” was odd, but these zombies sat or stood in pairs, lacking the fierceness and brutality on their faces. They wore a bored expression, completely detached from the ongoing battle on the front lines.

Suddenly, Xu Xing forgot about his dangerous situation, the first thought that crossed his mind was: Do zombies procrastinate too?

One of the zombies approached Xu Xing, yes, it walked, using its legs.

Its hair was braided in an unattractive style, vaguely showing female features. Xu Xing was surprised to notice that this zombie was relatively intact, apart from prominent marks on its neck and the murky gray eyes, it appeared more human in other aspects.

The braided zombie extended its claws, causing Xu Xing to shiver. Secretly forming ice spikes behind his back, he was taken by surprise as he was suddenly overturned, tumbling and landing on his rear end, making a ‘duang-duang’ sound.

The zombie seemed to find this amusing and turned back, emitting indistinct sounds from its throat. The other zombies gathered around, like a group of towering bullies, surrounding Xu Xing, clawing at him, pushing him around, flipping him over, as if toying with a soft ball.

These peculiar zombies seemed to be having fun. They neither killed him nor attacked the city, simply playing around with Xu Xing.

Xu Xing was stupefied: “...” What is happening? Is he being bullied by zombies?

At that moment, a low growl of the Zombie King suddenly came from the direction of Tongwan. The large horde of zombies within a dozen kilometers received the call and, no longer interested in the fight, immediately dispersed like a receding tide.

The Zombie King abandoned the siege! Tongwan was safe!

A thunderous cheer erupted. Excited powered individuals and the guard chased the fleeing zombies, driving them far away.

Several zombies in front of Xu Xing glanced at each other. Yes, they actually made an apparent “eye contact” gesture. The braided zombie retracted its claws, and the others followed her, stealthily blending into the troops and gradually disappearing from sight.

Covered in dirt, Xu Xing climbed up from the ground, feeling utterly perplexed.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 112: Life-and-Death Marathon (3)

The Fallen Ones

The zombie tide was rapidly receding, and the awakeners chased after them relentlessly, seizing the opportunity to kill a few more to earn some points.

Song Ke watched the back of the Zombie King. Its two pairs of sturdy flesh wings not only didn't become a burden but instead, in motion, seemed to grant it added strength. With all four limbs in sync, it leaped several times in succession, swiftly disappearing on the horizon, accompanied by a group of lackeys.

It seemed this time they couldn't kill it. Song Ke spun her dual blades in a graceful dance, then slowly sheathed them on her back.

She returned to the position of the starship, rejoining with Zhuang Qingyan and the others. Soon after, Lin Youyou and Su Cha also returned, but Xu Xing was nowhere to be seen.

“Where's Xiao Xing?” Song Ke inquired.

“He was just here, why did this kid leave?” Lin Youyou also found it strange.

“Xiao Xing, where are you?” Song Ke messaged the V587 chat group. After two seconds, Xu Xing sent a crying emoji followed by a voice message. Upon listening, it was the sound of heavy breathing as if running. “Hoo hoo, wait for me!”

As long as he was safe, Song Ke hopped onto the hovering starship, let one leg dangle, assumed a comfortable position at the door, and waited.

The S-level commission to guard Tongwan was directly issued by the Alliance’s awakener headquarters. As long as the terminal’s real-time recording function was activated, the number of zombies killed would automatically be tallied, and corresponding rewards distributed. Song Ke mainly harvested evolved and mutant zombies in this wave. Leaving aside the points, she received a hefty sum of Alliance coins, suddenly rising from being broke to moderately wealthy.

Indeed, S-level commissions were incredibly lucrative, Song Ke thought, silently counting the balance in her personal account.

Not far ahead, several hovercars raced past, chasing the zombie horde, relentlessly attacking them with wide-range abilities.

Song Ke sensed a strong awakened energy and glanced at it, unexpectedly discovering that the awakeners in those cars were formidable, their coordination precise. They were the ones who had initially intercepted the zombie tide’s charge, allowing the armored vehicles of the security team to come out of the city.

On top of one of the hovercars, a tall young man knelt in a standard sniping posture, his face mostly concealed by night vision goggles. He fired his rifle at an incredible speed, almost without aiming. A shot every second, each one blowing off a zombie’s head with specialized explosive rounds, piercing through their foreheads, instantly exploding them like rotten watermelons. The resulting blast scattered chunks of decayed flesh and putrid blood, a display of extreme and brutal aesthetics.

Observing for a moment, Song Ke noticed that this person not only had impeccable marksmanship but also was highly purposeful. Like her, he specifically targeted evolved and mutant zombies. As the hovercar passed by, a series of notifications echoed from his terminal.

“You have killed one Level 3 zombie, 276 regular zombies, earning 5760 points and xxxx Alliance coins.”

“You have killed three mutant zombies, 155 regular zombies, earning 4550 points and xxxx Alliance coins.”

The kill reports inundated the screen.

The man’s black hair fluttered in the night wind, a ruby earring shining brightly from his left ear, hinting at a rebellious and assertive demeanor.

Song Ke waited for about twenty minutes until the zombie tide vanished without a trace, and the pursuing awakeners returned home. Some left Tongwan, while others applied for temporary access into the city. Only then did Xu Xing arrive, leisurely.

“Xu Xiao Xing, were you slacking off?” Lin Youyou teased.

Believe it or not, Xu Xing indeed resembled a little wild boar rolling in the mud. Covered in sweat and dirt, his curly hair stuck to his forehead, looking quite disheveled.

“I-I wasn’t!” Xu Xing panted heavily, his face flushed. The mention of slacking off angered him.

The tornado had blown him over ten kilometers away, and Xu Xing had to run back on foot, panting heavily. If it weren’t for his awakened abilities and a physique surpassing ordinary people, he would’ve collapsed from exhaustion.

Not an ideal place for conversation, the seven of them headed toward the city gate. Most of the awakeners had dispersed by now, leaving a few hovercars parked at the outpost, surrounded by a dozen or so people. Surprisingly, the magistrate of Tongwan, Chen Zuyi, personally came out to greet them. As they approached, they overheard the conversation between the two.

“Yes, Commander He arrived in District C72 recently and upon hearing about Tongwan’s situation, immediately dispatched us for support.”

“Qihong is really kind, thank her for me. And thank you, too, for today,” Chen Zuyi sighed.

“You’re welcome,” the young man, contrary to his assertive presence, spoke in a polite and courteous manner. “Commander He specifically instructed that with the increasing frequency of the tide of corpses, Tongwan must be fully prepared. She is stationed in District B and cannot directly interfere with the internal affairs of District C. She could only arrange through personal connections to bring in two professional experts to support your work.”

Two academically inclined individuals stepped out from the backseat of the hovercar.

The young man introduced, “This is Ms. Liu Shu, a B-level engineering awakener. She previously served as the Dean of the Fifth Design Institute and conducted in-depth research on the attack patterns of the zombie tide. She will collaborate with you in redesigning Tongwan’s defenses.”

Liu Shu appeared to be around forty years old, dressed in simple work clothes and carrying a white briefcase, presenting a competent and agile demeanor.

Chen Zuyi urgently needed talent in engineering. Upon learning Liu Shu’s identity, he showed delight and eagerly shook her hand.

“And one more person, Gao Xiangyang, a genetic biologist and also one of the first outstanding graduates of the ‘Lozan Training Program.’ I’ve heard that Tongwan is researching anti-zombification agents, and Dr. Gao’s expertise is in this area. He voluntarily applied to come here for exchange and learning.”

Gao Xiangyang, in his early thirties, was slender. Upon hearing this, he adjusted his high-powered glasses and bowed to Chen Zuyi. “Please guide me.”

“Dr. Gao is too modest. Those selected for the Lozan Program are the top research talents in the Alliance. We should seek advice from you. With your participation, the anti-zombification agent will surely be developed soon,” Chen Zuyi hastily replied, gesturing with his hands.

At that moment, Song Ke’s group approached. Zhuang Qingyan took the initiative to greet Chen Zuyi, “Magistrate Chen, good to see you again.”

“It’s you guys,” Chen Zuyi relaxed his demeanor when facing them, his smile warmer. “Thank you for your support. I’ve said it before, Tongwan’s doors are always open to you.”

Zhuang Qingyan smiled, “We came this time mainly because we wanted to perform surgery...”

“What surgery? If needed, I can help arrange...” Chen Zuyi offered.

As the two conversed briefly, Song Ke noticed something unusual about the scientist named Gao Xiangyang. His gaze casually swept over the group, suddenly halting, fixing intensely on Zhuang Qingyan. His eyes displayed confusion, surprise, gradually turning into disbelief.

Gao Xiangyang’s lips trembled a few times, as if wanting to say something, but ultimately chose to remain silent.

Song Ke followed his gaze, looking over at Zhuang Qingyan’s clean and unmarked face. What could be there to notice?

The young man stood patiently by, waiting for Zhuang Qingyan and Chen Zuyi to finish their conversation before speaking again. “To prevent another zombie tide attack, we will stay in Tongwan for two days. During this time, we are at your service.”

“Not at all, I dare not impose such a request,” Chen Zuyi waved his hand again. “Thank you all for your concern.”

The young man led the group, including Liu Shu and Gao Xiangyang, into the city. Chen Zuyi assigned two subordinates to arrange their accommodation.

As the group moved away, Chen Zuyi relaxed slightly, his expression truly easing up.

“Magistrate Chen, if it’s okay to ask, who were those people? They seem quite influential,” Lin Youyou seized the opportunity to inquire.

“They indeed have quite an influence. They’re from the Northern Base (District B10),” Chen Zuyi explained. “The leader is Yin Xiao, the captain of the awakener team ‘Tustan.’ His strength is close to that of an S-level awakener. He’s quite renowned even in District B.”

“He QiuHong, the Commander of the Northern Base, shares a bond with me from our college days. With Tongwan in trouble and her conveniently nearby in District C, she dispatched her awakeners to support us.”

From Chen Zuyi’s tone, it seemed that his old college friend not only generously sent technical experts and combat personnel, without asking for payment or favors, but also came to Tongwan’s aid at a crucial time. However, despite this act of kindness, Chen Zuyi deeply sighed for reasons unknown.

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After entering Tongwan and walking along the central street for a short while, Song Ke witnessed a rather perplexing scene.

Taotao’s mother was pushing a tent stroller, surrounded by enthusiastic locals. Taotao, dressed in new clothes, sat inside, sticking out a pink tongue, smiling with a motherly warmth on her face.

The local residents, crazily stuffing snacks and teething toys into the stroller, almost overwhelmed Taotao with their enthusiasm. “Bang!” Eventually, she couldn’t bear it anymore and activated her field, pushing everyone except herself and her mother away.

Strangely, those pushed away seemed happy, excitedly murmuring strange words to Taotao, who couldn’t understand them. No wonder—Taotao was now the hero of Tongwan, or should it be “hero dog,” having saved the lives of many in the city.

Song Ke struggled through the crowd, waving at Taotao. It had been months; she wondered if Taotao still remembered them.

Taotao’s small eyes spotted her, happily barking twice. It seemed the memory of the mutant dog was pretty good.

After exchanging a few words with Taotao's mother and arranging to visit Taotao in a few days, Song Ke managed to squeeze out of the crowd. This time, they didn't need to rent an apartment. Fang Zhixu had to reapply for identification, and then return to the hospital to coordinate the surgery. Therefore, V587 moved into Fang Zhixu's home.

Finally finding an opportunity to vent, Xu Xing exaggeratedly recounted how the braided zombie had bullied him, deeply indignant.

However, the attention of the others was focused on a different aspect.

"Was its braiding skill any good?" Lin Youyou teased.

"By your account, they only pushed you around and didn't bite you?" Fang Zhixu expressed doubt, diverting the conversation.

"Are you sure you're being objective?" Su Cha questioned Xu Xing's statement.

"I! Am! Sure!" Xu Xing yelled angrily, jumping up and down.

Meanwhile, Song Ke fell into silence.

Zombies with visible decay but coherent thoughts, capable of overcoming the instinct to bite—she had encountered such zombies before. Not only had she encountered them, but she had also saved them. Six months ago, Song Ke had left Fools Wharf in District F177. At that time, Aunt Qing and Xiao Bao had already displayed typical zombie traits, yet for some reason, they retained a hint of consciousness.

"Plan Eternity," Zhuang Qingyan suddenly spoke, introducing an unfamiliar term.

The others looked at him, puzzled.

"Plan Eternity is a secret research project aimed at mutated organisms. It stimulates constant cell division and renewal by controlling radiation variables within the organism. This extends the horizontal

axis of life, awakening unique abilities. When the radiation reaches a stable value, it achieves undying thoughts and perpetuity of the body. The ultimate goal of this research is to accomplish the 'evolution' of humanity."

"If we apply the same concept to zombies, ordinary zombies, the lowest level, are essentially pure failures. Evolved zombies represent a self-rescue attempt of these failures. Even though their decaying bodies persist, they are mindless monsters. Mutant zombies are successes turned failures. Though they awaken abilities, they forever lose their consciousness."

"The researchers once hypothesized whether there might be a type of zombie possessing both consciousness and a robust body. They named this new species—the Fallen."

"Unfortunately, research on the Fallen triggered a chain of ethical issues and was swiftly halted. The project members kept it deeply buried."

"Why?" Song Ke queried.

"Because they started to fear."

"The fundamental distinction that allows humans to surpass other species is our unique way of thinking."

"So, when zombies possess consciousness, are they monsters or... a different form of evolved humans?"

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 113.1: Life-and-Death Marathon (4)

He couldn't have been Zhuang Qingyan

Tongwan, 119th Hospital.

The orthopedic outpatient department on the 10th floor, as an elite discipline of Alliance-level significance with an excellent reputation, has always been the most crowded area. Especially after enduring last night's corpse tide, where hundreds of zombies escaped the nets and broke into the city, residents rose up in resistance, and many were injured. At this moment, apart from the radiation specialist on the 13th floor, the busiest department is the surgery department.

"Ding—" The elevator reached the 10th floor, and a figure in a white coat stepped out. The man had a slender figure, semi-long hair neatly tied at the back of his head. He walked swiftly and steadily through the corridor, stopping at the door of his former office.

He had arrived relatively early, yet to his surprise, a group of people was already waiting there, including several hospital leaders.

"Oh my God, oh my God... Fang, Dr. Fang!"

"Dr. Fang, it's really Dr. Fang, you're finally back!"

"Dr. Fang, we've missed you so much."

The man in the white coat lifted his head, revealing a pair of mature, weathered eyes—it was Fang Zhixu.

The dean, who was aware of the situation, approached, grasping Fang Zhixu's shoulder and examining his gaunt cheeks, saying softly, "I heard about the tragedy involving Nai Kang and his son. You... sigh, it's a small comfort that they got what they deserved. Zhixu, it's time for you to move on, stop torturing yourself."

The dean wasn't aware of Fang Zhixu's relationship with V587 and assumed he was aware of Nai Kang's death and had regained composure only after avenging it.

Lu Ning rushed down from the 13th floor and abruptly halted in front of Fang Zhixu. Tears welled up in her eyes. "Senior Fang..." The light she had been pursuing had returned. Lu Ning had no other thoughts; she just looked at Fang Zhixu and felt like crying.

Fang Zhixu removed his mask, nodded to his former leaders and colleagues, and said, “Dean, and everyone else, I apologize for causing you worry.”

“In a hurry, so I’ll be brief. There’s a patient with a unique condition needing immediate surgery. This operation must be done by me personally. Although I’m no longer a practicing doctor here, I’d like to request the use of the operating room...”

“What are you saying? I haven’t approved your resignation report; it’s still on my desk,” the dean scolded with a smile. “Having Dr. Fang perform surgery is a rare learning opportunity. Who among you will assist?”

“I’ll assist,” Lu Ning said without hesitation.

“I will! I-I-I’ll be the second assistant. I excel in traction and fixation!”

“I’ll help with handwashing and wiping sweat!”

“Can I... stand by and observe?”

“Zhixu, when do you need the operating room? I’ll coordinate the arrangements,” the dean asked.

“Sooner the better,” Fang Zhixu said in a low voice, “the patient can’t afford any delay.”

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VIP Room 7.

Starting from the early hours, Zhuang Qingyan’s remaining right hand also lost sensation. This meant he could no longer move independently. His entire body muscles were atrophying, nerve cells decaying at a terrifying speed, gradually losing control over his own body.

Song Ke lowered her head, fingertips inching along Zhuang Qingyan's right leg, exploring through the thin hospital gown. From the ankle, to the calf, slowly over the knee, and up to the thigh. While lying down, the defect in his right leg was particularly prominent. Compared to the robust left leg, it appeared more fragile and slender, visibly shorter, with a distorted and malformed shape, far from being aesthetically pleasing.

Zhuang Qingyan's broken leg was severe from the start, worsened due to sloppy treatment, causing the broken bones inside to misalign and fuse improperly. During the time with Mu City, he, disregarding consequences, took two shots of powerful sealing agents in a short time, further worsening the injury.

Song Ke felt like a heavy stone was pressing on her heart, gasping for air in a suffocating manner. It felt as if she had swallowed an unripe orange, feeling astringent and swollen inside. She couldn't quite explain why, but seeing Zhuang Qingyan like this made her feel more distressed than her own injuries.

Her worried expression resembled that of a young widow about to be widowed. Zhuang Qingyan smiled faintly, "Song Keke, are you taking advantage of me?"

"Huh?" Song Ke looked up in confusion.

"Come here." Zhuang Qingyan blinked, signaling to speak in a hushed tone.

Glancing at Lin Youyou and Xu Xing on the other side of the ward, as well as Su Cha and Lu Xiaoyu by the window, Song Ke shuffled closer, lowered her head, and brought her ear closer to Zhuang Qingyan's lips.

"Who said you could touch a man's leg like that?" Zhuang Qingyan's voice was light, carrying a subtle charm. "Do you think I'm too weak to resist now? Taking advantage of someone in a vulnerable state?"

Song Ke swiftly withdrew her hand, cheeks puffing up, clearly displeased.

Zhuang Qingyan initially wanted to touch her face in response but found his hands couldn't lift. He paused, still with a smile on his lips, though his eyelashes drooped. "Rest assured, I'm very generous. After the surgery, I'll let you touch as much as you want."

Song Ke scoffed a couple of times. "I-I'm not interested."

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes were deep, filled with amusement as he gazed into her peach blossom eyes.

"The patient in VIP Room 7 can pay for the surgery now," the head nurse reminded, knocking on the door.

"Coming." Song Ke dashed out to make the payment.

As she left, the atmosphere in the ward instantly grew silent. Zhuang Qingyan's smile disappeared, replaced by a touch of melancholy in his eyes.

The sensation of being unable to control his actions was something he had never experienced in nearly thirty years of life, and his pride didn't allow him to accept such helplessness.

Lu Xiaoyu tinkered with his worn-out mechanical arm by the side, the constant "click-clack" noise echoing in the room.

"Can you quiet down a bit?" Zhuang Qingyan's gaze was cutting.

"I'm fixing my leg," Lu Xiaoyu deliberately emphasized the word "leg." "Can I dismantle your wheelchair? Anyway, you won't be needing it."

"Don't even think about it, even if I don't need it, it's still mine," Zhuang Qingyan said icily.

Lu Xiaoyu fell silent for a moment. The "click-clack" noise grew louder.

Lin Youyou leaned on her chin, sighing, "I thought you had a good mindset, turns out it was all an act."

Once Song Ke left, even the pretense was dropped, and all the hostility surfaced.

Zhuang Qingyan didn't argue. He closed his eyes and whispered, "During the surgery, don't let her wait outside."

The young girl appeared innocent but had a heavy heart. He didn't want her to worry, nor did he want... her to witness his most wretched state.

When Song Ke returned after paying, Fang Zhixu had already arrived with the medical assistants and anesthesiologist, ready to take Zhuang Qingyan to the operating room.

As she was about to follow, Lin Youyou stopped her with a hand, "Song Ke'er, I need to go to the Fifth Hospital. It's chaotic outside. Will you come with me?"

Song Ke pointed to the tall figure standing nearby, "There's Su Cha, it's safe."

Lin Youyou hesitated, realizing they hadn't coordinated well and forgot to signal Su Cha, who had no clue about the plan.

"Captain, I need to buy materials," Lu Xiaoyu suddenly spoke up.

"I gave you money already," Song Ke held onto her terminal quietly. Lu Xiaoyu was like a money-devouring beast; her wallet was emptied once again.

"I don't know the way," Lu Xiaoyu said seriously.

"Huh? Do you want me to accompany you?" Song Ke asked.

"Hmm." Lu Xiaoyu retracted the remaining four mechanical arms, settled back into the wheelchair, the silver hair resting quietly on their shoulders, resembling a frail youth.

Song Ke hesitated as she glanced at Lu Xiaoyu. True, Lu Xiaoyu hadn't been to Tongwan, and claiming not to know the way seemed plausible, but something felt off to her.

Fang Zhixu vaguely sensed something amiss and advised, "I'm well aware of Zhuang Qingyan's situation. The main difficulty in the surgery lies in repairing the broken bones, which will take a long time. You don't need to wait at the hospital; we'll contact you immediately once it's done."

Song Ke shuffled her feet on the ground for a while before responding, "...Okay."

Leaving the hospital, Lin Youyou and Su Cha took a turn toward the Fifth Hospital. Meanwhile, Song Ke and Xu Xing accompanied Lu Xiaoyu to buy modified materials. After visiting only two stores, Lu Xiaoyu suddenly insisted on acting alone.

Song Ke paused the navigation projection, a hint of confusion in her eyes: Didn't he claim not to know the way? Didn't he want me to accompany him?

Lu Xiaoyu coldly remarked, "You guys are too slow."

The four battered mechanical arms rose simultaneously—three on the left and pitifully only one on the right. Lu Xiaoyu, resembling a limping spider, didn't need navigation at all. Skillfully navigating the streets and alleys, they swiftly moved away, one high and one low.

Song Ke: "..."

Suddenly, it dawned on her. Lu Xiaoyu, an S-level hacker, how could he not know the way? It was only she who didn't know the way!

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 113.2: Life-and-Death Marathon (4)

He couldn't have been Zhuang Qingyan

With nothing else to do, Song Ke led Xu Xing and opted to head to the shelter, completing tasks to earn Alliance coins. The S-level mission to guard Tongwan hadn't been closed yet. Outside the Luoja Shelter,

wandering zombies were still visible. Under the high walls, piles of decaying bodies formed small mountains, emitting a putrid smell that stung the senses. However, the rewards for killing zombies in the vicinity were exceptionally generous.

The two worked together seamlessly; Xu Xing released wide-ranging ice and snow while Song Ke swiftly moved among the frozen zombie sculptures, harvesting efficiently.

“Girl with braids!”

Mid-battle, Xu Xing suddenly called out, pointing to a spot. Following his gaze, Song Ke noticed a zombie standing out among the rest. While others had their heads up, sniffing for human scent, this one kept its head down, seemingly searching for something.

Before Song Ke could react, Xu Xing dashed out like a runaway horse. With the confidence of having a backer today, he ran up to the braided zombie, hands on hips, shouting, “Come over here!”

The roaming zombies swarmed in. Xu Xing scrambled to deal with them while the braided zombie remained motionless, eyes seemingly contemplating him.

Taking another glance, Song Ke estimated the female zombie to be around thirteen or fourteen, not much older than Xiao Xing.

Once the area was secure, the braided zombie emitted muffled sounds from its throat. It circled around Xu Xing, occasionally extending claws to try to grab him. However, today Xu Xing was well-prepared and maneuvered like a nimble chick, running around while giggling.

In the past six months, Xu Xing had traveled with them, faced death sentences and assassinations, forcing him to mature and become responsible. There were few carefree moments like this, but being young, he hadn't lost his childlike innocence. Lacking companions his age, he unexpectedly ended up playing with a zombie.

After playing for a while, the braided zombie suddenly perked its ears, seemingly hearing something, and dashed toward the direction of the city wall.

Xu Xing, not quite done yet, waved to its departing figure. "Bye-bye~"

After Song Ke cleared the surrounding zombies, she approached Xu Xing. "Let's head back."

Xu Xing took her hand, nodding obediently. "Hmm."

Outside the high walls of Luoja Shelter, several hovercars hovered low. Powerful wide-ranging abilities covered the entire area, dazzling lights flashing one after another, blasting zombies one after another. Song Ke recognized it as the abilities of the "Tustan" awakener team, cleaning up the tide of corpses.

A graceful figure flashed by. The braided zombie, previously playing with Xu Xing, suddenly rushed into the smoke and dust, embracing a nearly bisected zombie carcass, emitting mournful cries. Strangely, Song Ke noticed a hint of "pain" on its face.

The hovercars chased after it. Yin Xiao, an awakener, leaped onto the roof of one, holding a submachine gun, evidently ready to take action.

"Sister..." Xu Xing tugged at Song Ke's clothes, speaking hesitantly.

"Xiao Xing, it's a zombie." Song Ke understood what he was thinking.

Xu Xing shook his head stubbornly, explaining, "No, it's not a zombie; it's... a Fallen."

After Zhuang Qingyan narrated the origins of the Fallens, Song Ke's feelings toward this group of beings on the outskirts became complex. Though they couldn't be classified as human, they shouldn't simply be categorized as zombies in a rough manner.

"Sister..." Xu Xing pleaded once again.

"Okay." Song Ke patted Xu Xing's head and swiftly charged forward like an arrow.

Yin Xiao obviously spotted this unique zombie too. He aimed and shot, bullets hitting a bluish iron plate, providing cover for Song Ke. Taking advantage of the chaos, she pushed the braided zombie, which seemed to sense something, dragging its nearly bisected companion away.

Meanwhile, the stray shotgun pellets veered off course, returning near the hovercars, exploding on impact, eliciting a series of curses.

“Watch out! It almost hit my foot!”

“Captain, even you miss sometimes, haha!”

Yin Xiao jumped off the car’s roof, locking his gaze on the suddenly emerged Song Ke. “What’s your deal? Snatching the zombie from my hands?”

Today, he wasn’t wearing protective goggles, clad in camouflage combat gear, his pants tucked into black military boots, giving him a sturdy and agile appearance. It wasn’t until Song Ke got closer that she noticed his grayish, light-colored pupils.

Admitting her fault, Song Ke hesitantly tried to excuse herself, “Sorry... it slipped.”

Though she didn’t mean it that way, her words sounded quite provocative.

Yin Xiao sneered, his ruby earring sparkling, and said in the common tongue, “Lady, do you think I’m that easy to fool?”

Dropping his submachine gun, he accelerated toward her, delivering a powerful straight jab with his elbow.

Without transforming a spiritual weapon, Song Ke met the attack bare-handed, raising her left knee high, leveraging the ground to propel herself, launching a fierce spinning kick toward his throat. Yin Xiao dodged by lowering his head, then swiftly altered his punch to an inward angle, his lean waist suddenly twisting, aiming a flat punch toward Song Ke’s cheek. Slightly furrowing her brows at the discomfort, she agilely flipped mid-air, kicking away Yin Xiao’s wrist.

As they landed, they clashed without hesitation, surprising everyone. Yin Xiao, not only skilled in sniping but also adept in close combat, always found deceptive angles, interrupting Song Ke's fluid attacks. They exchanged moves for a hundred rounds, neither gaining a clear advantage.

Observing Yin Xiao engage in a one-on-one fight, the other awakeners refrained from interfering. After clearing the nearby zombies, they all jumped off the car to watch the spectacle, cheering and whistling, treating the clash as a sporting event.

Song Ke was increasingly feeling uncomfortable and unable to fully exert her strength. As they continued fighting, her irritation grew. Suddenly changing tactics, she lightning-fast seized her opponent's arm, applied a shoulder lock, and fiercely twisted his joints. With a loud thud, both crashed onto the dusty ground. Yin Xiao landed on his back, with Song Ke's knee pressing down on his left hand and her two hands restraining his right, preventing his movements.

"I really didn't mean to snatch from you," Song Ke, straddling him, explained helplessly.

Yin Xiao grinned broadly. "I've found your weak spot."

Song Ke replied, "Huh? What?"

"My ability is to see through an enemy's weak points. You're really skilled; you have almost no weaknesses in combat," Yin Xiao declared.

Song Ke slightly curved her lips, modestly smiling. "Is that so?"

"What about you? What's your ability?" Yin Xiao focused on her face, where two faint dimples had emerged just earlier.

He was straightforward in his questioning, so Song Ke answered honestly, "Metal manipulation, object transformation."

"So, it means you gave me an advantage?" he inquired.

“You weren’t using a gun,” Song Ke explained sincerely, “I’ll compensate for the zombies I knocked away.”

“Got it. Now release me,” Yin Xiao replied.

Song Ke eased her knee, stood up, and suddenly, Yin Xiao leaped, embracing her shoulder and forcefully pushing forward. Simultaneously, he stretched out a leg, attempting to trip her ankle. Song Ke lost her balance in an instant. With a thud, the gravel scattered as both fell again. This time, Yin Xiao was on top, shielding the back of her head with his palm.

Song Ke glared at him in anger.

Using his elbow for support, Yin Xiao got up and touched his earring, smirking. “Now we’re even.”

Song Ke slowly got up, silently dusting herself off. Xu Xing hurried over to help her brush off the dirt.

Outside the wall, the other members of the Tustan team had finished clearing the zombies. At that moment, Gao Xiangyang was escorted by two other awakeners. “The sample coverage isn’t enough; it’s better to collect more...”

He saw Song Ke and abruptly fell silent, standing still for two seconds before mustering the courage to approach.

“Hello, we met at the city gate yesterday. Do you remember?” Gao Xiangyang asked cautiously.

Song Ke nodded.

“Can I ask you something?” Gao Xiangyang inquired carefully.

Song Ke wasn’t easily swayed. “You first, speak.”

“Are your friends two individuals who use wheelchairs?”

“Yes.”

“Could you tell me the name of the man who uses a wheelchair but has intact legs?” Gao Xiangyang’s tone suddenly became urgent.

“What do you want with him?” Song Ke’s expression turned cautious. This person was already acting suspiciously yesterday, and now this sudden agitation made him even more suspicious.

“I-I don’t mean any harm. I just want to know his name. He... he looks extremely similar to someone I know. There might be a connection!” Gao Xiangyang appeared very anxious. “I’m not a bad person, truly. My name is Gao Xiangyang, I’m thirty-three years old, graduated from the First Military Academy of Askar, majoring in Biology...”

Fearing that Song Ke might not believe him, Gao Xiangyang used his terminal to display all his identification documents and details.

Yin Xiao, accompanied by the Tustan members, surrounded them but remained silent, observing the conversation.

Glancing at Gao Xiangyang’s information, the lengthy list of honors and unreadable thesis titles felt like a swarm of insects crawling before her eyes. With just a glance, it made her feel dizzy and overwhelmed.

“Can you tell me, please?” Gao Xiangyang pleaded.

Was there any taboo related to Zhaung Qingyan’s name? Not really. Since they met, whether among the people from Azure Phoenix or various magistrates, he never hesitated to introduce himself.

“His name is Zhuang Qingyan,” Song Ke replied.

Gao Xiangyang was thunderstruck. His terminal fell to the ground with a clatter. "How is that possible... He couldn't possibly be Zhuang Qingyan!"

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 114: Life-and-Death Marathon (5)

Vincent.Z

Gao Xiangyang asserted firmly, "He could never be Zhuang Qingyan!"

"Dr. Gao, if you speak any louder, you'll summon all the zombies back," Yin Xiao teased lightly.

"Ah! I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Gao Xiangyang realized his reaction was excessive and quickly apologized, lowering his voice.

"Shall we talk inside the car? It's not safe down here," Yin Xiao suggested proactively.

"No need," Song Ke rejected instantly.

Yin Xiao chuckled, didn't say more, waved to the sky, and a hovercar approached slowly. With a single hand support, he leaped into the car.

Song Ke stared at Gao Xiangyang, slowly speaking, "Why can't he be Zhuang Qingyan?"

Gao Xiangyang sighed, "Do you know Vincent.Z?"

Song Ke shook her head confidently, "Don't know."

Gao Xiangyang pressed further, "What about Dr. Zhuang?"

Song Ke continued shaking her head, "Don't know."

Gao Xiangyang hesitated for a moment, "...The Qinglan Institute, you've heard of it, right?"

This time, Song Ke nodded, "I know." It was from Zhuang Qingyan.

Gao Xiangnan breathed a sigh of relief, "Vincent, also known as Dr. Zhuang, is a godfather-level biological scientist of the Alliance. He's the soul behind genetic engineering, and the initial purpose of the Qinglan Institute was to gather the entire Alliance's scientific force to support his research to the fullest."

"Vincent led the gene splicing and DNA recombination project, breaking the boundaries of inherent biological species. It truly achieved the transfer of genetic information across species, marking the greatest scientific achievement since the New Era (the first year of the New Calendar) worldwide!" Dr. Gao became more excited as he spoke, his eyes reflecting a certain fervor, "My lifelong dream is to join the team under his personal guidance!"

Song Ke silently opened the terminal and searched for this Vincent.Z. The results showed up in thousands of pages, overwhelming compared to Gao Xiangyang's honorary titles. Song Ke roughly scanned through Vincent's biography, encountering dense blocks of professional descriptions that made her eyes sparkle and breathing difficult, almost causing her to feel dizzy.

Amidst the haze, she only remembered "the greatest scientist of the New Era" and "the godfather of Qinglan."

Yin Xiao emerged from the hovercar and, from a distance, tossed two things towards Song Ke. "Keep going."

Song Ke received them in her hands and glanced down. They were special energy drinks supplied exclusively to awakeners in the Northern Base. Unopened, the bottles had codes on them, seemingly not regular items available in the market.

She glanced up at Yin Xiao, who made a drinking gesture. Song Ke handed one bottle to Xu Xing, held onto the remaining one, but didn't drink it.

“What’s the relationship between Vincent and Zhuang Qingyan?” she persistently asked Gao Xiangyang.

“Of course, there’s a... relation—!” Gao Xiangyang involuntarily raised his voice, got a glance from Yin Xiao, and lowered it, “...relationship.”

“Vincent once held a lecture in Askar. I was incredibly lucky to get selected to attend. I remember it vividly. During the Q&A session, someone asked him if he deliberately maintained a mysterious persona online because everyone referred to him as Vincent or Dr. Zhuang, not knowing his real name.”

“Vincent said no, that there were no public images of him to avoid unnecessary trouble. As for his real name, it actually came from an ancient writing tool of an old civilization, signifying perseverance and determination. Because the pronunciation in the common language was awkward, everyone got used to calling him Vincent.”

“After answering, Vincent even displayed on the screen the name he wrote with his own hands, which was... ‘Zhuang Qingyan.’”

“Oh, so Zhuang Qingyan is Vincent?” Song Ke naturally assumed that someone who knew so much must be some kind of scientific luminary.

Gao Xiangyang shook his head gravely, “No, I attended that lecture when I was thirteen.”

Song Ke widened her eyes slightly, “?”

“Twenty years have passed, how could a person remain unchanged, or even appear younger and healthier?” Gao Xiangyang murmured to himself. “Even if the appearance is identical, your friend couldn’t possibly be Zhuang Qingyan!”

Perhaps due to long seclusion in the laboratory, Vincent rarely appeared in public, and although his face was strikingly similar, he didn’t look too well. His hair was disheveled, his skin pale, and he had prominent dark circles under his eyes, appearing extremely fatigued.

“Did your friend use Vincent’s genetic information for facial reconstruction?” Gao Xiangyang suddenly speculated, speaking faster. “Facial changes aside, how could he dare to use Vincent’s real name? Shameful, absolutely shameful!”

“Is it illegal?” Song Ke asked expressionlessly.

“N-no, it’s not illegal...” Gao Xiangyang’s eyes held condemnation. “But it’s unethical! Even if one idolizes Vincent, they should use some common sense! Even if his appearance is the same as Vincent’s, the biological information cannot be altered; he can never become Zhuang Qingyan!”

“Okay,” Song Ke responded dryly.

Gao Xiangyang felt indignant and passionately said, “You should advise him to change back to his original appearance; I can offer help...”

“We’re leaving,” Song Ke automatically ignored his ramblings, grabbing Xu Xing’s hand, heading towards the entrance of Luojia.

“Wait,” Yin Xiao positioned himself in front of her. “What’s your name?”

Just hearing the word “name” gave Song Ke a headache. Without looking back, she passed by him. “None of your business.”

“Please, try to talk some sense into him!” Gao Xiangyang continued shouting from behind.

...

Song Ke and Xu Xing sat side by side on a park bench, sipping their drinks. Xu Xing delicately sipped through a straw, legs swinging gently, while Song Ke tore open the cap and guzzled down half the bottle, feeling refreshed, even a tad more energetic.

Song Ke didn't believe Zhuang Qingyan was the kind of person Gao Xiangyang described—someone who went through extreme lengths of idolizing Vincent and underwent surgery to resemble him. From the beginning, Zhuang Qingyan claimed to be a researcher at Qinglan Institute, showing genuine familiarity with it. If he were masquerading as Vincent for work, wouldn't it be easy to get caught?

Then there was his work ID, verified by Wu Juemin as “authentic” with “high permissions.” Would Azure Phoenix's people make such an error? At least it meant Zhuang Qingyan's credentials were genuine. How could he possess his ID if he wasn't truly “Zhuang Qingyan”?

Moreover, even if Vincent didn't often appear in public, he was someone whose information spanned thousands of pages online. There would be people who knew him, recognized his face. Why would Zhuang Qingyan choose to look like Vincent instead of altering his appearance to be more ordinary?

And the most crucial question remained: why would he modify his own genetic information?

Lost in these thoughts, Song Ke's mind drifted. If Zhuang Qingyan wasn't “Zhuang Qingyan,” then who was he really?

She sighed heavily, troubled, covering her face. Zhuang Qingyan had claimed he wouldn't lie if she asked, but did she really want to ask?

“Zhuang Qingyan is a huge liar,” Xu Xing piped up, seizing the chance to complain while sipping his drink.

“Xiao Xing, he's our... teammate,” Song Ke replied, ruffling Xu Xing's hair, her disagreement apparent.

“He's always lying, never telling sister about his abilities, always bullying me secretly. I said he's a wanted criminal, and he threatened me.”

“You can't just casually accuse others of being...” Song Ke's words halted abruptly.

Wanted.

In her mind, a flash of light occurred momentarily, gathering all the scattered clues into a tangled mess, unraveling the threads of the mystery right before her eyes.

Why would someone change their appearance? Unless they had a reason they couldn't avoid, like being a wanted criminal.

At the Qinglan Research Institute, the key, the anomaly when Zhuang Qingyan met Xie Ningyu...

The answer was on the verge of emerging.

"Xiao Xing, can you go back on your own?" Song Ke turned and asked.

"Yes, I can." Xu Xing nodded obediently.

After Xu Xing walked away, Song Ke messaged someone, "Where are you?"

The other person quickly replied with a location.

At the entrance of a high-end materials store, Lu Xiaoyu was sorting out scattered materials, attempting to evenly distribute them among each robotic arm.

Song Ke squatted beside him, "Later, are you going back to the hospital?"

Lu Xiaoyu nodded, "Yes."

Having stayed outside for nearly a day, they knew that according to Fang Zhixu's estimation, the surgery was expected to take about eight hours and should be ending soon.

Song Ke casually asked, "How do you know Zhuang Qingyan?"

“When we were in school, I unfortunately ended up taking most of the same courses as him,” Lu Xiaoyu replied.

“What school? Ah-something Askar, the First Military Academy?”

“Askar? No.” Lu Xiaoyu glanced at Song Ke. Askar’s First Military Academy was in District B9 and consistently ranked in the top three within the Alliance. Song Ke knowing about that place surprised him a bit. “We were in Liuboni.”

“Liuboni in District A4.”

Lu Xiaoyu didn’t delve into further details, such as Liuboni being the most heavily monopolized knowledge center in the entire Alliance. The city consisted mainly of vast academic institutions, divided into different disciplinary factions, and only accepted “gene-selects” for admission, advocating a so-called “elite-style education.”

“When you knew each other, was he already called Zhuang Qingyan?” Song Ke suddenly asked.

“Yeah,” Lu Xiaoyu paused for less than a second, barely detectable.

“Oh,” Song Ke nodded, “then why didn’t you recognize him in the Death Prison?”

“It’s been almost ten years since we last met. We’ve both undergone significant changes. It’s not surprising that we didn’t recognize each other.”

“Has he changed a lot?”

Lu Xiaoyu looked serious. “Yeah, quite a lot. After all, I just lost my legs, but he gave up a portion of his intelligence.”

Song Ke couldn’t help but chuckle. These two always took jabs at each other whenever they got the chance, quite the pair.

“Is the Lu family on good terms with the Xie family?” Song Ke inquired.

This time, Lu Xiaoyu remained silent for a good three or four seconds. “Which Xie family?”

Song Ke blinked. “The Xie family from North County (District B6).”

“We’ve met, Lu Xinglan. He, like you, hails from Erjia (District B8) and is quite familiar with Xie Ningyu.”

“Who’s Lu Xinglan? I don’t know him,” Lu Xiaoyu said calmly. “I never waste my memory on people significantly weaker than me.”

“Do you remember people from the Xie family then?”

Lu Xiaoyu’s icy eyes flickered, fixed on Song Ke. For a moment, it seemed as if that name was about to slip from his lips.

Lu Xiaoyu: “No...”

Suddenly, Song Ke hoisted up a whole bag of materials from the ground and placed it on the only mechanical arm on his right side. “It’s getting late. Let’s head back.”

Then, without paying attention, she tinkered with the terminal and walked away on her own.

Lu Xiaoyu: “...”

He swayed on the spot for a moment, barely maintaining balance, muttering to the air, “I didn’t say anything.”

...

Outside the operating room, members of V587 patiently awaited the outcome.

Lin Youyou casually scrolled through her terminal. "In two more days, we'll be heading back to Ferrara. The finals are about to begin, and this time Ilya himself is hosting. They even arranged a pre-game rally, quite a show."

No one responded to her. Lin Youyou looked up and noticed that her companions seemed lost in thought.

"Song Ke'er, what are you thinking?"

"N-nothing," Song Ke stuttered.

Lin Youyou put away her terminal and scanned the faces of Song Ke, Xu Xing, and Lu Xiaoyu one by one, suspicion written on her face. "Why do I feel like something's off with you three since you came back?"

"Not at all," Song Ke blinked rapidly.

Lin Youyou wanted to inquire further, but the lights outside the operating room went out.

Song Ke immediately stood up. "He's coming out."

Fang Zhixu, wearing a mask, slowly emerged, weariness evident in his eyes, a sign of excessive use of his abilities.

As he spotted Song Ke and the others, a hint of relief crossed his face. He removed his mask and smiled, "Let me say something every patient's family loves to hear: the surgery was a success."

"With a month or two of rest, he'll be able to stand up again."

...

After half a year, Zhuang Qingyan woke up once again from the endless cold fog, thankfully this time, able to sense his right leg clearly.

Song Ke hugged her knees, chin resting on her arm, quietly watching him. The hospital room was empty except for the two of them.

“Song Keke,” Zhuang Qingyan whispered.

“Yeah,” Song Ke didn’t change her position but acknowledged him.

Zhuang Qingyan slowly lifted his hand. The effects of anesthesia hadn’t completely worn off, making it a bit difficult for him to exert force. Nonetheless, he managed to control his hand. His slender fingers paused near Song Ke’s cheek, lightly pressing where he remembered her dimple to be. “Who made you angry again?”

“You said last time that we should talk,” Song Ke countered without answering.

“No rush, let’s talk in a couple of days,” Zhuang Qingyan thought. He wanted to find a better moment.

“Okay.”

Song Ke spread her hand towards him. “Show me your identification.”

Zhuang Qingyan was somewhat surprised but retrieved it from his space and handed it over.

Song Ke took the work ID, featuring the Qinglan Institute’s logo, a blue background with a large headshot. She scrutinized the man in the photo carefully, then glanced up at Zhuang Qingyan. No wonder she felt he looked better in person than in the picture when they first met.

“Zhuang Qingyan,” Song Ke called out to the headshot photo.

“What’s wrong?” replied Zhuang Qingyan on the hospital bed.

Impostor. Song Ke thought to herself.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 115: Life-and-Death Marathon (6)

The format of the finals

The day after the surgery, V587 set off for Ferrara to prepare for the final race of the Throne Race Competition.

Tongwan and Ferrara were both located in the eastern part of the Alliance. The distance between the two cities wasn’t too far. The starship traveling in low orbit would take about four hours to reach there, while in high orbit, it would take half the time but required manual control. Luo Xiaoyu was completely absorbed in repairing the mechanical arm and decisively activated the autopilot.

Song Ke opened the porthole and looked down. Through the drifting thin clouds, one could vaguely see cities arranged like a chessboard. Some had turned into cold ruins, while others still stood tall. The highways were jammed with fleeing vehicles and pedestrians, moving in groups toward different directions to escape.

Unconsciously, Song Ke leaned out further, wanting to take a closer look.

A strong pair of arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her back from the window.

“Be careful, don’t fall out,” Zhuang Qingyan said with a smile. He still needed to use a wheelchair for a while, but his hands’ nerves had returned to normal.

“Who are these people...?” Song Ke asked.

“They are refugees, seeking new shelter,” Zhuang Qingyan replied.

“But their city hasn’t faced the zombie tide yet, why are they running?” Song Ke felt puzzled.

Zhuang Qingyan’s eyes were cold, “People, you know, are always greedy. As long as there’s a little ability, they want to find a safer place.”

Song Ke fell silent. Zhuang Qingyan was right. Humans were creatures that sought advantages and avoided harm. When District F177 first had the zombie outbreak, many “capable” people were the first to board the starships and flee. But now, with the apocalypse upon them, where could truly be safe?

Song Ke asked, “Is there any news about that zombie king?”

Zhuang Qingyan nodded, “Come here and see.”

Song Ke jumped down from the porthole and sat close to him.

Zhuang Qingyan brought up the map on his terminal and deliberately slowed down the speed while marking it. “In these two days, it has destroyed two D-class cities. If we take Tongwan as the center, in chronological order, first at the 11 o’clock direction, then at the 4 o’clock direction.”

Song Ke noticed something amiss, “Why doesn’t it directly go to the 12 o’clock direction?”

After attacking the 11 o’clock location, the Zombie King chose to take the longer route to the 4 o’clock position because it is extremely cunning. It had done its homework beforehand.” Zhuang Qingyan drew a rough map of the three cities densely located in the 12 o’clock direction. “Greenwater City (District D132), Reshufu (District D133), and Haimen (District D135) are all situated in difficult terrains, backed by mountains and water bodies. They are typically easy to defend and hard to attack. Greenwater City used to be a transportation hub with complex road conditions, Haimen is a food distribution center heavily guarded by forces. After its failure in Tongwan, it became more cautious, resorting to guerrilla warfare against humans.”

“So it abandoned the 12 o’clock direction?”

“Quite the opposite,” Zhuang Qingyan explained with a serious expression, drawing several arrows between the three cities. “The eastern part has been nearly destroyed. If it wants to break through to the west and north, these locations are inevitable chokepoints. The Zombie King will undoubtedly make its move there.”

Once the Zombie King infiltrates deeper into the Alliance, the number of zombies will only increase, and the zombie tide will become more frequent.

Zhuang Qingyan reconstructed maps of the three cities from memory, logically analyzing, “I speculate that its first attack will be on Reshufu, and it’s likely to be a probing attack.”

Song Ke looked at the densely marked points on the terminal and couldn’t help but exclaim, “Impressive! Did you memorize all of this?”

Although aware of Zhuang Qingyan’s extensive knowledge, every display of memory beyond ordinary capabilities never failed to amaze Song Ke.

Pleased by the praise, Zhuang Qingyan’s lips curved into a faint smile, “When I first arrived in Qinglan, I didn’t have many qualifications. I could only spend time as an ordinary clerk, going through these materials to pass the time.”

Another instance of “I’m just an ordinary clerk” spiel. In the past, Song Ke might have questioned, “Aren’t you a pharmaceutical researcher?” But at this moment, she struggled to express her feelings, silently gazing at Zhuang Qingyan for two seconds before turning away, her expression difficult to read.

Keep pretending if you want to.

“Someone is tracking us,” Luo Xiaoyu suddenly spoke up.

Su Cha immediately drew out his dagger and cautiously observed through the cabin door, while Lin Youyou and Fang Zhixu instinctively stopped their conversation.

Lu Xiaoyu brought up the rear radar screen, confirming that indeed, four hovercars were steadily following behind the starship.

Xu Xing hurriedly dashed to the other side, tiptoed, and peered out. Then, in a low voice, he exclaimed, "Oh!"

As Lu Xiaoyu was about to send a warning signal via radio waves, one of the hovercars suddenly accelerated, leaping forward. The sunroof opened, and a swift figure smoothly climbed onto the car roof, removing tactical goggles and waving towards Song Ke from a distance, "What a coincidence~"

Having recently drunk their specially provided drinks, Song Ke felt awkward pretending not to recognize them. "Ah, what a coincidence."

"Where are you all headed?" The person on the car roof stared at Song Ke's tousled hair and spoke up.

Song Ke didn't respond immediately. Just as the person was about to speak again, their attention shifted abruptly to someone else.

The man had a handsome face but an aloof and cold demeanor. His gaze through the porthole was as icy as his expression.

The person on the car roof exchanged a glance with him. A surge of unseen tension clashed between their auras, dissolving without a trace.

Zhuang Qingyan remained composed. The person on the car roof tapped the roof with his fingertip, a slight smirk on his lips, deliberately provokingly smiling at him, "Hey~"

Then, selectively ignoring Zhuang Qingyan, he continued conversing with Song Ke.

Zhuang Qingyan's brow furrowed tighter and tighter. How could he not remember that Song Ke knew the captain of this "Tustan"?

“Sorry, I should have spoken first,” the person on the car roof chuckled. “We’re heading to District C72.”

District C72? Wasn’t that Ferrara? The destination of Tustan’s group unexpectedly aligned with theirs?

“We... are heading there too,” Song Ke replied politely in return.

“I heard there’s a significant competition for awakeners in District C72. Are you going to watch it?” the person on the car roof asked.

“No,” Song Ke felt a slight sense of pride in her heart, her lips subtly curling upward. “We’re going to participate.”

“You’re a finalist?” This time, the person on the car roof seemed genuinely surprised. “Then I have to go watch; I’ll cheer for you.”

“Thank you,” Song Ke replied politely.

“Lady, you’re lovely,” the person said suddenly, catching her off guard with a phrase in the Alliance language.

“Huh?” Song Ke’s grasp of the Alliance language wasn’t great to begin with, and the person spoke quickly. She didn’t quite catch it at first.

Zhuang Qingyan’s expression darkened instantly. He turned his wheelchair without a word and glided towards the main control panel.

“Turn off the autopilot and switch to high-orbit mode,” he commanded.

“Why?” Luo Xiaoyu lifted his head from a pile of parts. “Are you in a rush?”

“Yes, I’m in a rush,” Zhuang Qingyan replied expressionlessly.

Luo Xiaoyu was about to retort when, for some reason, he fell silent again as he thought of something. He fiddled with the control panel, glanced at Song Ke, then back at Zhuang Qingyan, his gaze uncertain and his movements distracted.

Zhuang Qingyan glanced over to find the young man on the hovercar roof leaning forward, his left hand resting on his knee, engaging in a cheerful conversation with Song Ke.

He turned back, his tone chillingly cold, “Can you handle this or not? If not, move aside, I’ll take over.”

“Alright, alright, I got it,” Luo Xiaoyu conceded reluctantly.

With a swift acceleration, the starship shot forward like a meteor, leaving the hovercars far behind in an instant.

Zhuang Qingyan was about to return to the window when his wheelchair abruptly halted. He squinted slightly, “What guilty thing have you done?”

Suddenly becoming so accommodating, ready to do whatever asked.

Luo Xiaoyu paused for a moment, innocently smiling, “Why would you think that?”

Perhaps not accustomed to making this expression, his forced smile seemed stiff and strained.

Zhuang Qingyan stared at him for two seconds longer than usual.

...

Ferrara.

When the starship descended, an unexpectedly long queue formed at the city gate, extending several kilometers away. It was seemingly endless, with a temporary checkpoint at the front where a few AI officers in police uniforms patrolled, maintaining order at the scene.

Song Ke and her group were somewhat surprised. Ferrara had always advocated freedom and welcomed travelers from all directions, without any admission restrictions. How come, after being away for half a month, there was now a checkpoint for entry and exit?

Su Cha returned with reconnaissance information and whispered, "It's just a simple population registration. There have been too many refugees pouring in recently."

"Why are refugees coming to Ferrara?" Song Ke was puzzled. Did they consider Ferrara to be very safe?

"Ferrara has highly advanced mechanical capabilities, advantageous for fighting against zombies," Zhuang Qingyan explained. "Moreover... it's one of the few C-level cities in the east that has never been attacked."

"Yes," Su Cha nodded. "Those refugees believe that Ferrara is the 'City blessed by the Gods.'"

Song Ke asked, "...What city?"

She couldn't help recalling their previous experiences, how Ilya had hunted live zombies extensively to accumulate resources for the Throne Race Competition, detaining them in the underground of the Sycara Theater. Though later, due to the unrest, all those zombies escaped. But who knew if this super AI would have some sudden whims and create more absurdities? Were these refugees making the right choice by coming to Ferrara?

Lin Youyou had donned a mask immediately upon disembarking from the starship. After all, Ferrara was her hometown, and the chances of being recognized were too high. The group returned to their hotel to rest for half a day, setting out for the mobilization meeting only when night fell.

The mobilization meeting was a public event held in the central square, filled with excited and jubilant crowds. Song Ke and her companions didn't push forward; instead, they stood at the periphery, waiting

for the holographic projection to appear. After all, Ilya was an AI, and they could see clearly from any location where it emerged.

At exactly eight o'clock, three bells rang, neon lights flickered, and in the high sky shrouded in a faint purple mist, flower boats cruised smoothly. Cannons fired in unison, sprinkling shimmering confetti and flower petals. The observation elevators of the tower began to operate, ding-ing as they stopped at the floating platforms.

The magnificent platform rose before the crowd, and soon after, a real and tall figure emerged.

The man possessed a dazzling mane of golden hair, a tall and slender figure, clad in a pure white suit of satin material that exuded elegance and nobility. His once colorless glassy eyes had transformed into a more fitting — translucent icy blue.

Song Ke shivered involuntarily, sensing traces of someone else in the man's presence.

Luo Xinglan? No, this was... Ilya!!

This super artificial intelligence, the highest executive of Ferrara, had finally achieved his wish and obtained his own body.

Ilya's eyes scanned through the dark mass of people in the square, then revealed a smile that was no different from that of a human.

"Are you all curious about the format of the final Throne Race Competition?" he asked.

"Yes!"

Ilya mysteriously winked, "The mystery is revealed—it's a marathon."

"The total route this time covers 200 kilometers over three days and two nights. Participants must complete the entire course within the time limit and return to the finish line."

The crowd was suddenly in an uproar.

200 kilometers, three days and two nights, what kind of marathon was this? Even an ordinary person could complete that distance in nearly a day, let alone someone with special abilities.

“Shhh—” Ilya gestured for quiet, immediately calming the restless crowd. “I know you’ll ask, what’s special about a marathon? So, I’ve set up some ‘tiny’ ‘check-in point’.”

“Every ten kilometers along the track, there will be a ‘check-in point’. Only by collecting all the points will the race be considered completed.”

Ilya’s expression conveyed a hint of trouble, “We have the ‘check-in point’, but what about the most important thing—the route?”

“So, I personally drew the route map again.”

Ilya snapped his fingers, and the city’s projections simultaneously switched to a real-time map.

The citizens were initially puzzled, whispering among themselves. But as time passed, suddenly, earth-shattering cheers erupted.

As Song Ke looked at the marathon map displayed in the projection, it became increasingly familiar. Hadn’t she seen it somewhere recently?

A flash of realization struck her mind. She immediately grasped it.

Rongzhou, Greenwater City, Reshufu, Haimen...

This wasn’t a marathon map; it was clearly a list of cities the Zombie King had already occupied or was about to attack!

What was Ilya's intention? Was he asking them to run a marathon on the Zombie King's face?

"I heard in the recent consecutive waves of zombies, there's one called the 'King,'" Ilya smirked. "I don't like that name."

"As the magistrate, I don't like my things being coveted by others all the time. So, I've decided to take the initiative."

"Only through fire and thorns can the true crown of a king be forged."

Ilya slowly recited the slogan of the Throne Race Competition, his eyes filled with indifferent mockery and disdain for life and death.

"Only the team that kills the 'King' can ascend to the final championship throne."

For a moment, the people in the square were silent, then they began shouting his name in unison.

"Ilya! Ilya!! Ilya!!!"

This unparalleled final would undoubtedly trigger a frenzy of viewership in the eastern Alliance.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 116: Life-and-Death Marathon (7)

This rapper is quite spicy

When news about the finals' format being a marathon spread, the first ones to become restless were the governing officials in the Eastern region.

With the rampant presence of zombies outside now, unless a city was destroyed or they abandoned their positions to seek emergency refuge, the Alliance's officials couldn't easily leave their territories. Even though people couldn't come to them physically, communication requests bombarded incessantly, demanding Ilya provide a reasonable explanation.

At the top floor of the tower, Ilya rested his chin lazily on his hand, one leg casually propped up while seated on a large leather sofa. The holographic screen shifted scenes, displaying an ongoing video conference where the magistrates from several Eastern districts were engaged in a heated argument.

"Don't think I don't know what game you're playing! Trying to shift the crisis of the Zombie King onto our territories to solve your problems—why should we carry the burden for you while you enjoy your peaceful days? I object! Strongly object!!"

"You're not even present, what are you objecting with?" someone immediately sneered.

"I..." The first magistrate to speak choked momentarily. His city had already fallen, and he had long fled to District B. Speaking up now lacked any persuasive force.

"We don't object, we warmly welcome it!" The magistrates from Greenwater City and Reshufu declared, jumping in. Their District D held lower status, they finally had the chance to participate in such a meeting; naturally, they had to maintain a firm stance.

These two cities were currently in dire straits. They didn't know when the horde of zombies might strike. If the final contestants could eliminate the Zombie King, they wouldn't oppose it; they'd enthusiastically welcome it, celebrating with fireworks for days.

"Hey, Haimen, say something too?"

The magistrate of Haimen smirked disdainfully. "Be it zombies or humans, if they dare to intrude into my territory, don't blame the cannons for being blind—they won't return if they come."

"You brute!" Greenwater City and Reshufu scolded in unison.

Participants exchanged glances in private. Only a few were aware of the true situation. It was said that Haimen had imported a batch of superpowered weapons from the Northern base, highly lethal and specifically designed to deal with the Zombie King.

The governors continued their arguments, expressing their grievances while conspicuously excluding the initiator of this marathon. No one asked for the opinion of the Ferrara magistrate. They regarded Ilya as an outsider, harboring a sense of wariness toward him. There's a saying – "Alien minds among our own kind will always be different." No matter how advanced an artificial intelligence might be, it's still a machine, not of their species.

Chen Zuyi from Tongwan also attended the meeting. When asked about his opinion on the matter, he diplomatically smiled and said, "Whatever you say is what it is. I have no objections. After all, I'm getting old, nearly seventy."

"Stop lying, you're only sixty-one!"

This sly old fox, he could talk his way out of anything. He only cared about himself, especially since Tongwan wasn't even on the marathon's route. It was said that recently there was an engineering-type awakener helping reinforce their defenses, so he had nothing to worry about.

Ilya shifted legs lazily and yawned absentmindedly. These were human politicians, each with their hidden agendas, quite amusing indeed.

Regardless of how much they argued, it wouldn't have any impact on the Throne Race event.

Feeling gradually bored, Ilya rose from the sofa and casually left the top floor. However, in the holographic projection, his image lingered, but his pupils discreetly shifted to a glassy color, his expression more rigid.

The automatic sensing door opened, revealing a magnificent reception room where a woman sat with her back to him, sipping tea from a bone china cup.

Ilya walked around and sat opposite her. "Magistrate He, regarding our cooperation, what are your thoughts?"

He Qihong set down her teacup and looked up. She wore black-framed glasses perched on her nose, her hair impeccably arranged. Wrinkles adorned her eyes and two deep lines near her mouth made her look unapproachable, exuding an air of seriousness that demanded respect.

“I can’t make decisions about establishing communication channels with District B for you.”

“Let me correct that, it’s not District B, it’s the Northern Base,” Ilya chuckled.

The Alliance’s 20 District B areas were either controlled by influential families (like B6’s North County and B8’s Erjia) or directly administered by the Central Court (as in B9’s Askar), with only one exception.

B10, the Northern Base, stood outside both power structures. It remained the largest surviving refuge within the Alliance after the apocalypse, housing over a million high-level awakeners and tens of millions of civilians, dubbed as “Humanity’s Last Hope.”

Ilya was a rare democratically elected magistrate and a super AI. Despite Ferrra’s good order, technological advancements, and its unique style in District C, his presence was still excluded by the Central Court.

The information privileges between Districts C and B were vastly different.

Privilege was exactly what Ilya urgently needed now.

“I will report this matter to General Ye,” He Qihong said slowly.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “I thought you, Magistrate He, was the one truly in charge at the Northern Base.”

He Qihong’s expression turned cold. “Be careful with your words. I am merely General Ye’s deputy.”

Ilya's ice-blue gaze fixed on He Qihong, his tone carrying implications. "Magistrate He, then I'll await good news."

"Oh, Magistrate He, why not stay and watch the competition before leaving?" Ilya casually suggested, "Perhaps some of the contestants might head to the Northern Base in the future."

"Naturally, the Northern Base welcomes awakeners," He Qihong finally relaxed her tightly pressed lips at the mention of awakeners.

*

Song Ke, Lu Xiaoyu, Su Cha, Lin Youyou, and Xu Xing were ready. Each team in the Throne Race event had a maximum of five members. Zhuang Qingyan had just undergone surgery and was weak, so Fang Zhixu decided to take care of him. Both of their conditions weren't suitable for participating in the marathon and were kindly "persuaded" by Song Ke to withdraw.

"Have you checked the communication devices?" Zhuang Qingyan asked, feeling concerned.

Song Ke touched the narrow black collar around her throat. "Yeah, the devices are working fine."

The finals didn't prohibit communication. The V587 team all wore the mini communication devices developed by Lu Xiaoyu. These operated on an independent frequency, ensuring messages couldn't be intercepted. With all seven team members simultaneously online, they could communicate at any time.

Zhuang Qingyan circled several cities on the map. "These places currently have no zombie waves. Old Fang and I will find an opportunity to meet up with you."

"Wouldn't this be considered external aid? Is it against the rules?" Lin Youyou asked.

Zhuang Qingyan calmly shook his head. "The only rule to clear the marathon is to collect stamps at various check-in points. To win, you must kill the Zombie King. Apart from that, there are no restrictions. You could even take a spaceship straight to the finish line if you want."

Lin Youyou suddenly realized something. “Isn’t it unfair? Teams like ‘Shunxing Tea House’ have a strong foundation and numerous awakeners under their command. If they clear the path in advance and simultaneously collect stamps while killing the Zombie King, couldn’t they just clear the game directly?”

“Exactly. If they can pull it off,” Zhuang Qingyan replied, “this game was never meant to be fair.”

...

On the day of the finals, the 16 teams gathered at the gates of Ferrara.

As Zhuang Qingyan anticipated, there were quite a few hovercars and steamships present. As soon as the race started, some of them zoomed ahead.

Drones capturing the action closely followed, and the personal live streams of the participants were open for viewers, contributing to the swelling wealth in the betting pools outside.

The starships drew attention due to their conspicuous designs, more suited for long-distance travel rather than this marathon. Song Ke’s group found an off-road pickup truck with Su Cha at the wheel. Though they fell behind in speed, this final race wasn’t solely about speed.

V587 quickly reached the first checkpoint—Rainbow Cloud City in District D140.

Unfortunately, it was a city that had already fallen to the zombies. The outbound direction was clogged with various private vehicles, making progress nearly impossible. Those trapped in the cars not fast enough to escape were restrained by seat belts, roaring in panic. Roaming zombies traversed between the traffic, leaving barely any space to maneuver on the main road.

A steamship conveniently flew overhead, drawing the attention of the zombies. They turned their collective gaze toward the noise, gathering more and growing increasingly agitated. Trying to force through would definitely waste a lot of time.

The team decisively changed course towards the entrance to the city, which had slightly better conditions. Despite some overturned vehicles, they could still manage to pass, albeit barely.

Lin Youyou glanced at the map. "What do you think the check-in point will be?"

Ilya always had ways to challenge people, such as the "flag" in the Mirror Lake race, which turned out to be the crystals of mutant zombies.

"Could it be a Level 3 zombie?" Song Ke speculated. As time passed, dealing with mutant zombies had become less challenging. Would Ilya increase the difficulty for this reason?

"Not very likely," Zhuang Qingyan's calm voice came through the earpiece. "The movements of Level 3 zombies are uncontrollable. If they move away from their original positions, the distances between checkpoints would change. I lean more towards a fixed location."

"Doesn't that mean we have to search the entire city?" Lin Youyou frowned, finding the workload quite extensive.

Zhuang Qingyan paused. "There's no need to waste time searching. We can take a shortcut."

"What shortcut?"

"Head to the highest point first."

"To the highest point? What for?" Song Ke inquired.

Zhuang Qingyan chuckled lightly, his magnetic voice coming through the earpiece, "Since the finals are being broadcast live throughout, the organizing committee must have done preliminary scouting and filming preparations. No matter where the check-in point is, there will definitely be traces of drones around, and drones produce data."

"You mean, finding the check-in points from the drones?" Lin Youyou couldn't hide her surprise.

This, this... was simply a strategy like a bug, a breakthrough method like that of a thief.

According to Zhuang Qingyan's logic, there would be drones hovering near the checkpoints, leaving behind residual data. Analyzing data was Lu Xiaoyu's specialty. Using process of elimination, he could easily pinpoint the location of the check-in point.

The highest point in Rainbow Cloud City was the observation tower in the city center, towering over five hundred meters, offering a panoramic view of the entire city. Due to congestion on the main roads, the quickest way to reach it was to take the circular overpass. However, the entrance to the bridge had collapsed, needing clearance.

Just as V587 was about to take action, a group suddenly appeared around the corner. The woman leading them had a doll-like face, sweet-looking. Upon recognizing each other, she was first surprised, then her eyebrows furrowed in anger.

What a coincidence, it was Feng Duona and "Ferrara Star."

The grudge between V587 and this team could be traced back to Mirror Lake when Feng Duona suspected them of hoarding crystals and aggressively confronted them. In the subsequent arena match, their bassist was knocked out by Lu Xiaoyu in one move. It could be said that "Ferrara Star's" two times advancing was almost jeopardized by V587.

Song Ke raised a hand, awkwardly greeting, "Uh... Hi?"

Feng Duona gestured with both middle fingers.

Song Ke: "... Diplomacy failed.

Meeting head-on, they couldn't avoid a confrontation. With Feng Duona's lively yell, the band of awakeners struck a combat stance. The guitarist played a vibrant melody, signaling the attack. The bass and electric piano swiftly followed suit, the deep jazz drums setting the rhythm.

The most terrifying part began when Feng Duona started to sing!

“Turning away, unable to say goodbye~ Sea birds~ and fish! Falling in love! Was just! An accident~”

V587 felt their scalp tingling, the piercing discordance hammering their nerves. Xu Xing covered his ears directly, but the noise permeated through. It was like a tired office worker, rudely awakened at 4 or 5 AM by someone banging an old drum, evoking not just anger but a murderous intent.

“Zhuang Qingyan...”

Song Ke wanted to ask if Zhuang Qingyan had a way to quiet them down but shouted for a while without any response.

She glanced at the signal light and realized it was off.

Wow, he and Fang Zhixu had turned off the receivers!!

Song Ke angrily drew her dual blades and charged toward Feng Duona. Su Cha furrowed his brow, seamlessly blending into the shadows.

Simultaneously, Lin Youyou, wearing a mask, took a step forward and cleared her throat.

“Today, we’re ready for everything. We’re here to stay vigilant! North, South, East, West, let me tell you who is your—father!!”

Lin Youyou lowered her voice, completely letting herself go. Her speed of speech was astonishing, uttering strange lyrics. The opponent’s music instantly diminished. Feng Duona seemed choked, unable to sing her off-key and unpleasant love song any longer.

Lin Youyou’s lyrics were not only infectious but also came with a debuff that crushed the opponents’ morale, leaving them lacking enthusiasm.

The guitarist from “Ferrara Star” ceased playing and, with interest, stroked his chin. “Wow, that rapper on the other side is spicy! Hey, you! How about joining our band after the match?”

Lin Youyou, with slightly raised red lips, confidently sang the Killing Part: "...In the eyes of the Black Serpent Warrior, you're just a turtle, he will release poison mist to wipe you all out!!"

"Ferrara Star" fell completely silent.

Su Cha slipped from the shadows, tumbling out, his neck turning crimson. Following the Sin City, this second time brought an indescribable, immense sense of shame upon him.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 117: Life-and-Death Marathon (8)

Congratulations, 'Shunxing Teahouse,' for successfully checking in

To prevent their identities from being exposed, Lin Youyou and Su Cha used random names for the race. She even gave herself a nickname, "Rapper Trainee," in the group chat of seven people, and called Su Cha "Black Serpent Warrior" (because of the black serpent tattoo on the back of his neck). Song Ke and Xu Xing joined in the fun, respectively naming themselves "Master of Spiritual Artifacts" and "Ice Prince." However, everyone was just playing around. No one expected that Lin Youyou would, in this kind of situation, sing unabashedly in such an extremely juvenile way.

Not to mention Su Cha, who felt like curling his toes, even Song Ke was stunned.

The audience squatting in the V587 live room burst into laughter instantly, and the barrage of hehes and hahas flooded the screen.

"LOL, is the Black Serpent Warrior going to transform in the next second, hahaha."

"I originally thought V587 would make it to the finals based on skill, but turns out it's by making opponents feel awkward..."

"I'll admit, if this rapper releases a single, I'll buy it. It's oddly catchy despite being cheesy."

“Agreed, +1 to the commenter above.”

In the official live room, Ah K switched the main screen to the two confronting teams, commenting with interest, “Different music styles colliding, what kind of spark will they produce? Let’s wait and see.”

Ferrara is a paradise for musicians, so AI guests immediately began their evaluations.

“Feng Duona’s singing, is that even called a song? Clearly, it’s noise pollution!” This comment was rather spicy.

“I find the music of the other contestant quite interesting. Although the rhyming is a bit unpolished and the lyrics are straightforward, her breathing rhythm, including enunciation, is very clear, devoid of the typical issues rappers face. It shows she has some solid foundation.” This was an analysis from a professional perspective.

“Setting aside the music itself, I believe this is also a clever strategy in the face of battle.” Luo Qinghe, who had been quietly watching the match, suddenly spoke up.

“Oh? Qinghe, please elaborate.” Ah K gestured as if to listen attentively.

“I don’t know if anyone noticed, this...,” Luo Qinghe glanced at the list of competitors, “Ms. Rapper Trainee’s ability relies on her singing voice, so it takes some time to take effect. Rapper Trainee intentionally used exaggerated and bold lyrics to initially shock the ‘Ferrara Star,’ causing their concentration to scatter, and then took advantage of the opportunity to gain control. Now, the opponents have fallen into her trap.”

Luo Qinghe’s technical analysis greatly raised his popularity, and fans were screaming in excitement.

Ah K nodded in agreement and then burst into laughter, “But it doesn’t change the fact that she’s really hilarious, hahaha!”

Amidst the laughter in the barrage, the situation at the scene in Rainbow Cloud City suddenly changed.

After stumbling on flat ground, Su Cha resisted the pressure and ghostly attacked the “Ferrara Star.”

A dark light flashed, and the guitar strings being played were severed. Su Cha revealed his figure, showing a finger tiger wrapped in adhesive tape on his fist, entirely in a ghostly blue—a spiritual artifact! The finger tiger, a common weapon for martial artists, had an extremely sharp striking surface, capable of cutting through iron like mud. Its versatile nature and immense destructive power made it a perfect match for Su Cha.

After cutting the guitar strings, Su Cha repeated his previous move. In a flash, he appeared mysteriously behind the bassist. Sensing the danger, the bassist immediately played a flashy and skillful slide. Su Cha was affected, his footing slightly slipping. Just as the bassist was about to escape, he found his feet frozen!

Not just him, including Feng Duona and the other five members, they were all gradually covered in ice, up to their calves. It was the ice-based awakener from V587, but when did this happen? Why didn’t anyone notice?

Before they could comprehend, Su Cha made a swift move with his finger tiger, and the bassist’s strings snapped.

On the other side, Song Ke almost simultaneously made her move with Su Cha. Her dual blades spun down, first dismantling the electric piano and then crashing into the jazz drums, causing them to disintegrate into pieces. After dealing with the two, she turned towards the source of the heinous noise, Feng Duona.

Feng Duona, suppressed by Lin Youyou’s ability, couldn’t speak at all. Witnessing her teammates consecutively taking hits, she took a deep breath, intending to sing again, but a sharp dark figure struck her, a punch straight to her face. Immediately after, a thick towel was stuffed into her mouth.

Poor Feng Duona couldn’t even utter a sound before collapsing, seeing stars.

In less than ten seconds, the “Ferrara Star” was completely wiped out!

V587's exquisite coordination and rapid response astonished the audience. They didn't need commands or communication. Starting from Lin Youyou's control, everyone executed the right skills at the perfect moments, subduing their opponents flawlessly. In terms of teamwork, they were even on par with the championship favorites, "Three Grandsons and One Grandpa."

The barrage went silent for a few seconds, then quickly transformed from "hahaha" to a dense "666."

Feng Duona and her group were only temporarily incapacitated and would soon recover on their own. While they were engaged in battle, Lu Xiaoyu cleared a path for them at the bridge entrance. Song Ke and her group bypassed them, swiftly heading towards the skyscraper.

Clearing a path through the congested heap of zombies, they ascended to the rooftop of the observation tower, where Zhuang Qingyan's voice resounded in their earpieces once more.

"I just thought that the player's drone for tracking might change position; its data capacity is larger than the positioning device..."

"You just turned off the receiver," Song Ke held a grudge, not willing to let it go easily.

"Cough, cough," Zhuang Qingyan coughed lightly, "Try to find the one that hovers in place..."

"You turned off the receiver!"

Song Ke raised her voice, growing angrier as she thought about it. How could this be? It was agreed upon to face difficulties together, so how could you sneakily turn off the receiver?

The captain was furious, and nobody dared to intervene. Not even laughing at Zhuang Qingyan.

Zhuang Qingyan received a scolding, but he chuckled softly, obediently admitting, "I was wrong, Captain. I will listen to the noise with you next time."

Song Ke: "Hmph."

*

Ferrara.

In the hotel suite, He Qihong tuned into the official live stream. Even while watching the match, she remained focused, sitting with her legs together and her back straight, maintaining an exceptionally upright posture. He Qihong watched and made notes, particularly focusing on the popular teams like “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa,” “Shunxing Teahouse,” “Anna Knights,” and “V587,” delving into the profiles of the players.

A knock at the door interrupted her—Yin Xiao, the captain of “Tustan,” entered. They had returned to Ferrara two days ago, but He Qihong had official matters to attend to, so he refrained from disturbing her.

“Commander, Liu Yuan and Dr. Gao have been sent to Tongwan, the zombie tide has receded, and all the tasks you assigned have been successfully completed,” Yin Xiao informed, settling on a couch he found for himself. Stretching out his legs casually, his tone was respectful, yet his attitude was relaxed.

He Qihong was accustomed to his style and nodded. “You’ve worked hard.”

“You’re not in a rush to return to the base?” Yin Xiao asked, glancing at the projection showing the ongoing match.

“Not particularly. I’ll be staying in District C72 for about a week,” replied He Qihong.

“Oh, that’s good then,” Yin Xiao said casually, touching his earring. He casually asked, “Are you watching the Throne Race? These competitors are from District C, right?”

“There are quite a few exceptional awakeners in District C,” replied He Qihong without directly answering.

Yin Xiao shrugged. He knew He Qihong tended to be more gentle in her attitude towards awakeners.

In the Northern Base, strength was the only pass. The more powerful the awakener, the better treatment they received. For instance, the “Tustan” team, despite nominally serving General Ye, had significant operational freedom and fewer constraints when talking to He Qihong.

“Why, are you interested too?” He Qihong noticed his prolonged gaze on the projection and asked.

“Yeah,” Yin Xiao chuckled, “but I’m not interested in the competition.”

Yin Xiao stood up. “Commander He, I’ll take my leave.”

He Qihong was watching the official live stream. The scenes kept changing without any specific focus, so he decided to go back and watch the individual live streams of the players instead.

...

Lu Xiaoyu’s silver hair fluttered without any breeze as his overwhelming awakened energy spread out.

Currently, all 16 final teams were within Rainbow Cloud City, and there were hundreds of player drones alone, not to mention the scene cameras, motion captures, audio systems, tripods, rails, and various other devices, totaling over five hundred.

After about five or six minutes, Lu Xiaoyu opened his eyes, his ice-blue eyes displaying a plethora of data. Swiftly, the data disappeared, and he raised a brand-new, shiny mechanical arm, pointing in a direction. “There, abnormal data flow. A team has already gone there.”

Zhuang Qingyan’s suggestion worked indeed. With a top-tier hacker like Lu Xiaoyu, they could forcibly exploit bugs and find the check-in point.

Song Ke made a quick decision. “Let’s go.”

The five of them dashed towards their destination, encountering zombie blockades on the way, taking some time to clear them out.

Surprisingly, the place Lu Xiaoyu pointed to was a wildlife sanctuary.

“Rainbow Cloud City Endangered Species Breeding Research Center,” Xu Xing read aloud the name on the gate, “What’s this?”

“No zombies nearby,” Su Cha reported after his investigation.

“Rainbow Cloud City boasts a 5A-level ecological scenic spot in the Alliance, specifically dedicated to cultivating and restoring flora and fauna from ancient civilizations,” Zhuang Qingyan explained through the earpiece. “Don’t let your guard down. Since Ilya set this as a check-in point, it won’t be easy.”

Song Ke and her team followed behind Lu Xiaoyu, maneuvering through the densely covered bamboo forest. Finally, they arrived at the Predatory Animal Viewing Area. Peering down through three layers of transparent barriers, they saw an object resembling a wax seal floating on a platform, a holographic projection above it—the emblem of the Throne Race.

Song Ke’s spirits lifted; this seemed to be the check-in point! However, getting closer to the check-in point wasn’t easy. The perimeter of the park was teeming with various mutated beasts, blocking the entrance entirely. Next to the holographic projection stood a two-story black-and-white building, conveniently blocking the platform where the wax seal was placed.

After staring for a while, Song Ke noticed something peculiar—the building seemed to have... moved.

She rubbed her eyes, feeling increasingly unsettled. Just as she leaned in for a closer look, at that moment— the little building lifted its “legs”.

Song Ke gasped, finally seeing it clearly. This wasn’t any ordinary building—it was a two-story tall zombie bear!

The bear was massive, its body overweight and covered in patchy, shedding fur that revealed yellowing bones beneath. As it lifted its leg, a large pile of rotten flesh and dried leaves cascaded down, scattering the pinned zombie rats as they fled. Even from a distance, the unmistakable stench of zombie decay filled the air.

Fortunately amidst the unfortunate, the surrounding environment remained quiet. The colossal creature lay napping on its back.

The zombie bear rolled over, emitting dog-like murmurs. Its razor-sharp claws, as if surgical blades, lightly scratched the platform, unaware.

Lin Youyou gently nudged Song Ke, gesturing for her to look in another direction—Shunxing Teahouse was also present.

Under hushed instructions from Mr. Xiang, a faint shadow manifested behind them. Another awakener seemed to shift a few times, stealthily brought above the platform. This was... spatial ability? Suddenly, Song Ke recalled encountering this person before; during their time in Luli Port, it was this individual who continuously moved, making it difficult for others to approach the A-level zombies.

The gecko-like awakener seemed skilled, agilely maneuvering with limbs adhering tightly to the ceiling like a gecko, inching toward the projection while holding a terminal in their mouth. Upon reaching the projection, they swiftly scanned the wax seal.

The zombie bear brushed its ear, its sharp claws slicing through a few strands of hair from the gecko-like awakener who froze in terror, his face turning pale. Luckily, a system prompt arrived swiftly.

The holographic projection displayed a line of text: "Congratulations, 'Shunxing Teahouse,' for successfully checking in."

Mr. Xiang's face lit up with joy as the spatial awakener exerted force again, bringing back the gecko-like awakener. The group swiftly departed.

Song Ke lowered her head and discussed with her companions under the barrier, "Should we... follow their lead?"

Mr. Xiang had demonstrated an excellent example for them. It was a perfect opportunity to act now without alarming the zombie bear, quietly making the check-in and leaving. It would allow them to complete the marathon in Rainbow Cloud City at the fastest pace possible.

Although V587 didn't have a spatial awakener, they had Su Cha, whose stealth abilities were top-notch.

"Su Cha, you go for the check-in. I'll cover," Song Ke gestured.

"Okay."

The two immediately sprang into action. Su Cha silently descended to the lower level, while Song Ke climbed over the beams from above to provide backup. But halfway there, they ran into another team. They exchanged a two-second gaze and simultaneously made a "shh" gesture, instantly reaching an understanding. A shared smile passed between the two groups.

On the ground, Su Cha was inches away from the platform. Just one reach, and the wax seal would be within grasp.

But Song Ke's heart sank slowly.

"Boom! Boom!"

Deafening cannon fire echoed from outside the park, startling the mutated beasts, which scattered in a frenzy.

The blocked entrance was violently blasted open. Irene, carrying a rocket launcher single-handedly, kicked over the barrier and, upon seeing Song Ke, raised an eyebrow with a smug grin. "Well, well, if it isn't you guys. So, did you find the check-in point?"

"We found it," Song Ke sighed in utter disappointment.

“Roar!”

The zombie bear sprang up, its furious roar resonating throughout the entire zoo.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 118: Life-and-Death Marathon (9)

A world-shaking blow

The continuous gunfire startled the originally slumbering zombie bear.

With its earth-shattering roar, birds took flight in droves, small animals scattered in all directions. On closer inspection, their pupils were a murky gray-white. This wildlife park had long been occupied by various zombie beasts.

The moment the zombie bear stood up, the holographic projection on the platform shut down. Su Cha froze in place. The stamp, almost within reach, vanished before their eyes. But then, abruptly lowering his head, he executed a swift roll, leaving the spot. Almost simultaneously, the enormous bear paw fiercely swept past, smashing the platform with a resounding “bang,” leaving deep marks on the ground.

“Ah, sorry, it seems we’ve come at an inopportune time...” Irene covered her face, apologizing with a mix of guilt and politeness.

Song Ke was about to respond when the zombie bear turned its head and spotted her hanging from the ceiling. The massive creature stood on its short hind legs, tilted its head back, bit into the beam, and began to tug it from side to side. The sturdy steel soon cracked and twisted into two pieces. Song Ke made a quick decision and, like swinging on a swing, leaped into the fence where Lin Youyou and the others were.

The zombie bear’s front paws slammed heavily onto the ground as it began crawling towards the viewing area.

“Guns and Roses” immediately raised a rocket launcher and fired at the zombie bear, but this behemoth, thick-skinned and robust, was not harmed by the shells. Instead, it became thoroughly enraged.

“Where’s the stamp?!” Song Ke yelled amidst the relentless artillery fire.

“Didn’t hit it, it’s gone!” Su Cha, looking disheveled and having barely made it back, replied in a similar tone.

The zombie bear charged forward, crashing forcefully. With a resounding “crash,” the hundreds of kilograms-heavy fence gave way and broke apart.

Its putrefying and deformed colossal head squeezed into the viewing passage, getting stuck halfway. It thrashed left and right, spraying foul-smelling saliva all over the ground. Xu Xing turned pale with fear, clutching tightly onto Lu Xiaoyu’s mechanical arm, gritting his teeth to stifle any sound.

The restricted movement of the zombie bear led it to start smashing the walls. A deafening “boom” reverberated from outside the passage, causing the ground to tremble, and chunks of concrete to fall.

Another thunderous “boom” echoed as if it were right next to them. The entire viewing passage seemed on the verge of collapse.

“Zhuang Qingyan, the check-in point, it’s gone!” Song Ke shouted, touching the collar.

“The fire seal stamp is linked to the zombie bear’s position,” Zhuang Qingyan spoke rapidly, “To check in, we have to get it back there.”

“How do we get it back?” Song Ke was at wit’s end. This bear seemed to have mutated and couldn’t understand human speech.

“Two ways: either lure it back or kill it. Its weak point is its head.”

Song Ke looked up, and Zhuang Qingyan was right. Compared to its massive two-story-tall body, the zombie bear's head appeared particularly delicate, hidden in its dirty black-and-white fur, as if afraid others wouldn't know it was its Achilles' heel.

"Irene, aim for the head!" Song Ke shouted.

"Got it!" Irene, positioned near the emergency exit, replied loudly.

Armor-piercing shells trailed with fiery sparks flew in, but the zombie bear had already smashed through the stone wall, retracting its head. It crawled and spun within the park's bamboo grove, its thick fur blocking all attacks, remaining unscathed. Xu Xing attempted to freeze its limbs, but the bear's size was immense, and it broke free in no time. He switched to ice blades, but they couldn't pierce through the creature's hide.

Song Ke and Su Cha jumped down from the passage entrance, approaching the bear once again.

Su Cha activated his abilities, enveloping the zombie bear in a green poisonous mist. It howled in agony, chunks of flesh falling from its face, but it remained unharmed.

Song Ke climbed up along its sturdy, short legs. A missile flew past her head, exploding on the bear's shoulder, revealing its foul-smelling yellowish bones. The armor was breached! Song Ke seized the opportunity, drew her dual blades, and thrust relentlessly towards its neck.

The spiritual weapon pierced through the fur, sinking deep into the fat layer, getting stuck – not much different from administering an injection.

The zombie bear flew into a rage, taking a few heavy steps forward, its hefty body occupying the space. It raised its foot to stomp Su Cha, who quickly ran to dodge, but the bear's paw "pia!" slapped him, sending him crashing into a stone wall.

Song Ke wasn't faring much better. Gripping her dual blades, she was tossed around by the zombie bear's movements, akin to a kite with a broken string, blowing back and forth in the bamboo grove. Her stomach churned, the world spun before her eyes, and as she saw the bear about to squeeze into the passage again, she knew she'd be flattened if this continued.

Thinking quickly, Song Ke let go, dropping from a height, curling up as she hit the ground. The zombie bear's four enormous claws stamped back and forth, resembling four moving hills of death. Amidst it all, Song Ke swiftly rolled, her slender figure flickering in and out of sight.

Viewers watching the live broadcast were both nervous and thrilled, holding their breath, their hearts pounding in their throats.

“Holy xxxx, did she get stepped on? Did she?”

“Help, I can't bear to watch anymore!! Can someone tell me the outcome?”

“No, I've bet everything on V587, give me a sign!!”

In a critical moment, six mechanical arms swung into action, lashing at the zombie bear's legs mid-air. Simultaneously, a melodious, ethereal song echoed. The beast's movements stuttered momentarily, and seizing the opportunity, Song Ke, looking bedraggled, rolled out, spitting out rotten bamboo leaves.

The shattered entrance to the passage was temporarily held by Lin Youyou and Lu Xiaoyu, while Irene and the others forced the zombie bear back with their strongest firepower, but the situation remained dire.

Song Ke understood that the main reason for their current predicament was the absence of a control-type awakener among V587.

Zhuang Qingyan might count as one, with his mental prowess strong enough to command a Level 3 zombie. The bear, possessing rudimentary intelligence, could likely be controlled, but he wasn't present on-site, limited to remote commands through an earpiece.

They had no choice but to go for the kill.

Song Ke's eyes turned cold as her fingertips traced the giant slab covering the entire park, casting an eerie blue glow.

The zombie bear was drawn to the light, its head turning slowly, its empty eye sockets fixing on Song Ke—

At that moment, the bamboo grove within the park shook violently. Countless thorny vines surged upwards as if imbued with life, wrapping firmly around the bear's limbs and neck. Three figures leaped down from the ceiling's hole, darting in different directions, gripping the vines and pulling backward.

“Ao—!”

The zombie bear was pulled back a step, away from the fence.

Behind Guns and Roses, a refined young man in a blue robe stepped out with a serious expression. Song Ke recognized him immediately – it was Duanmu Qi, the “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” had arrived!

His arrival was timely and fortunate. Duanmu Qi was a group control-type awakener.

However, when the “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” leaped down, only three individuals followed. The zombie bear's left paw was still free. With a sudden swipe, it raised the vines, aiming to flatten Duanmu Qi standing at a distance.

One person was still missing.

Su Cha, who had fallen from the wall, coughed twice, covering his mouth, and swiftly ran towards the gap, grabbing hold of the thorns there.

At moments like this, there was no need for verbal communication between the teams. None of them could take on the zombie bear alone. To complete the checkpoint, they had to work together to eliminate the obstacle before them.

“Not enough strength!” Xiao Chen's face flushed red, veins bulging on the back of his hand as he shouted forcefully.

The four awakens, dragged by the zombie bear, kept sliding forward. Members of Guns and Roses, V587, and even two other teams that had been watching from the shadows didn't hesitate; they jumped down, grabbing onto the vines on the ground, pulling backward, engaging in a strenuous tug of war with the zombie bear.

Song Ke's spiritual weapon transformation was nearly complete.

The ethereal blue light grew brighter, almost blinding, encompassing her from head to toe. In full view of everyone, a heavy, dominating war hammer gradually took shape, its head almost as large as the zombie bear's body, emitting a metallic sharp "clang" in the air.

With both hands gripping the hammer's handle, Song Ke's face reddened. Amidst the astonished gazes of everyone present, she raised the war hammer high.

Dragging her steps towards the zombie bear, muscles tensed, her entire core strength erupted. She lifted the war hammer high—

"Boom—"

A thunderous impact, deafening, struck the zombie bear's head, causing it to cave in halfway. The entire bear took a step back, the awakener gripping the vines stumbling under its pull.

"Boom—Boom—"

The zombie bear retreated as Song Ke advanced, swinging the war hammer with a fierce whirlwind. With her small stature wielding a colossal hammer nearly five to six meters tall, she mercilessly struck the zombie bear's skull again and again.

The bear was pushed back repeatedly by the hammer blows, its roars gradually weakening until it finally reached the ruined remains of the initial platform.

With an impetus, Song Ke twisted her waist and abdomen, and her slender body unexpectedly leapt into the air. Her hands lifted the enormous hammer high above her head and brought it crashing down!

If time stood still, the impact of this scene would be hard to describe in words.

“Boom—” The devastating strike of the war hammer obliterated the entire head of the zombie bear. Its skull rolled away, and putrid brain matter sprayed recklessly in the park. Song Ke, at the forefront, was drenched from head to toe, and everyone else suffered as well.

The headless zombie bear staggered briefly due to inertia before crashing heavily to the ground.

Whether in Rainbow Cloud City, Ferrara, or even other regions in the eastern part of the Alliance, viewers watching the live broadcast were collectively silent.

The immersive experience left such an impact that some people, still shaken, checked their own necks to ensure they were unharmed.

After the silence, an eruption followed. The screen was filled with “666” barrage comments, and V587’s support rate skyrocketed instantly!

The holographic projection reactivated, and the fire seal stamp of Rainbow Cloud City reappeared.

After the other two teams completed their check-in points, they stared at Song Ke for a few seconds with eyes akin to seeing a comet, then hastily retreated.

Duanmu Qi nodded slightly at Song Ke. After all, they were opponents, harboring old grudges. It wasn’t appropriate to say much. He led his team away.

The girls from Guns and Roses looked at Song Ke in speechless gratitude. Wanting to express their thanks, they were repelled by the foul stench emanating from her. They approached hesitantly but ended up covering their mouths and rushing out, gagging.

Song Ke: "..."

Irene wiped off the flesh splattered on her and grinned, giving her a thumbs-up. "Let's catch up later, after the game. We're heading out now."

She turned gracefully and walked away. However, Song Ke keenly observed Irene, who covered her mouth with one hand, clearly feeling queasy.

"Sister!" Xu Xing dashed over cheerfully, ready for a hug. But upon reaching her, he abruptly stopped, hesitating. Lin Youyou and Lu Xiaoyu didn't hide their disgust, pinching their noses.

A faint chuckle came through the earpiece. Zhuang Qingyan didn't say anything, yet it seemed like he said everything.

Song Ke: "???" Is it really that bad?

She gingerly picked up her coat and took a deep breath.

"Gag—" She almost gagged from her own odor.

Dubbed as a "kind reminder" by Lin Youyou and the others but actually more like "forceful insistence," they demanded she change clothes.

Her cheeks puffed up, muttering, "Who am I doing this for?" She had to endure the stench while wiping off the decaying flesh and blood. After cleaning herself up and changing clothes, the others completed the first check-in point.

V587 officially departed from Rainbow Cloud City, heading to the next stop – Greenwater City in District D132. Zhuang Qingyan and Fang Zhixu would meet up with them there.

Though Greenwater City hadn't suffered from the undead onslaught yet and seemed temporarily safe, it was situated near multiple C districts, some of which had fallen. Consequently, refugees fleeing the

chaos were converging towards Greenwater City, prompting the establishment of makeshift shelters both inside and outside the city.

What Song Ke didn't know was that, at this moment, in a certain shelter outside Greenwater City, an elderly person watching the match couldn't believe their eyes, murmuring to themselves, "Could it be... Girl Ke?"

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 119: Life-and-Death Marathon (10)

Missing Check-in point

Outside the Greenwater City at the intersection of the expressway, an off-road pickup truck revved its engine to the max, wildly drifting towards them. As it approached, the exaggerated 180-degree spin of the vehicle narrowly stopped just in time, with Zhuang Qingyan and Fang Zhixu already waiting for a while.

Song Ke leaned out from the passenger seat, "Old Fang, hurry up!"

Ever since Zhuang Qingyan stopped calling him "Doctor Fang" and switched to "Old Fang," everyone else had followed suit.

Fang Zhixu briskly hopped onto the pickup truck. His gaze scanned inside and saw that the driver's seat was now occupied by Lu Xiaoyu; it was the same car he had been driving earlier. Xu Xing was seated in the back, with Lin Youyou supporting someone in the middle. Fang Zhixu breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing them.

The reason for their urgency was because Su Cha had been injured.

As a close combat expert of the offensive-type ability, clashes resulting in injuries and bloodshed were unavoidable. However, this time Su Cha was genuinely unlucky. He had been sent flying by the zombie bear in a direction where there happened to be protruding steel bars. Despite Su Cha's exceptional reflexes allowing him to twist away in time to avoid a fatal puncture, he still collided with the joint, causing his whole body to vibrate intensely.

After a quick examination, Fang Zhixu swiftly said, “He’s broken two ribs, but luckily, they are not displaced. I will fix them so that they will not affect the movement.”

A bright white energy flowed from Fang Zhixu’s palms—an A-level healing ability—significantly easing Su Cha’s pain, and his complexion returned to normal.

Lin Youyou reclined the seat, squatting in front of Su Cha. She gently pressed around the wound, saying, “Does it hurt? If it does, speak up; sister will help you feel better.”

After knowing that everything was fine, her tightly pursed red lips relaxed, and she even had the mind to tease Su Cha.

Su Cha, at a height of 1.9 meters, curled back a bit, the muscles of his waist and legs instantly tensed, resembling a stimulated cheetah ready to pounce on its prey at any moment. However, after the tension, he still crouched down, allowing Lin Youyou to examine him up and down. “...It’s really okay,” he paused and added in a low voice, “...don’t joke about it.”

Meanwhile, Zhuang Qingyan didn’t hurry to get on the car. He took out a bottle of spray from his bag and handed it to Song Ke. “Here.”

“What’s this?”

“Molecular deodorizer. I thought the captain might really need it.”

“...”

Song Ke stared at Zhuang Qingyan, momentarily unable to tell whether he was genuinely giving a helpful reminder or teasing her.

Ever since Zhuang Qingyan had his leg surgery, he visibly became more cheerful, often teasing Song Ke and frequently getting on her nerves.

Song Ke, expressionless, unscrewed the bottle and aimed it at Zhuang Qingyan, giving a vigorous spray.

“Song Keke!” Zhuang Qingyan raised his hand to block, but with little effect. He used his forearm to hold down the wheelchair, raised his right leg slightly, and made a half-rising motion. Unfortunately, he had little support and fell back down.

Song Ke slammed the car door shut, leaning against the window, smiling triumphantly at him, the little dimples filled with joy at the corners of her cheeks.

“Beep beep—” The driver, Lu Xiaoyu, couldn’t bear watching the scene from the driver’s seat and bluntly honked the horn. “Hey, have you forgotten? We’re still in a marathon!”

...

“Greenwater City doesn’t have a zombie tide, nor does it boast an ecological scenic area. Its modernization is commendable, with well-established infrastructure, and there aren’t any wild animals, reducing the likelihood of mutated ferocious beasts,” Zhuang Qingyan calmly analyzed as he viewed the footage captured by the drone.

“It seems like there’s nothing particularly noteworthy about it,” Lin Youyou frowned, showing difficulty. “So, where could its check-in point be?”

After studying the city map for a while, they found it challenging to make an effective judgment based on the information they currently possessed.

“Let’s stick to the old method of searching for anomalous data, or else we’ll have to search the city.”

Lin Youyou inadvertently switched to the thermal imaging mode with a tap of her finger. The map instantly shrank, revealing the overall view of the surrounding areas. As an essential transportation hub in the eastern part of the Alliance, Greenwater City bordered three C districts to the north and south and was surrounded by the D districts in the east and west. At this moment, most of its neighboring areas appeared in dark gray, a sign indicating the city’s occupation by the zombie tide.

“I have a question,” Fang Zhixun spoke after a moment of silence, “Is the number of refugees in Greenwater City too high?”

According to the thermal imaging display, both Greenwater City and nearby shelters were surrounded by a multitude of colorful heat sources. Despite the real-time view showing refugees fleeing, the sight and numbers were enough to chill one’s heart.

“Exactly,” Zhuang Qingyan nodded slowly, “And it’s increasing.”

As he spoke, he paused, faintly sensing why Ilya chose Greenwater City.

The off-road pickup raced ahead, quickly approaching Greenwater City. They could already see the towering walls and iron mesh fences from a distance. However, the road gradually narrowed, and the flow of people became increasingly dense. When passing by shelters, Lu Xiaoyu had to slow down the vehicle.

Countless refugees instantly swarmed the pickup truck, surrounding it completely. Some grasped the bumper, attempting to climb onto the roof, while others desperately banged on the glass windows, using hand gestures to plead with those inside to open the doors. In such a situation, V587’s vehicle could hardly move an inch.

Looking up, they were surrounded by faces in panic from all directions: elderly individuals with tears streaming down their faces, women whose disheveled hair held infants tightly, and aggressive men punching and kicking the vehicle while yelling, “Open the door!”

The pickup truck had one-way tinted glass, rendering the outside situation obscure to those inside, but those within could clearly see what was happening.

“What do they want?!” Xu Xing angrily shouted, almost as if in response, the loud banging of a hammer striking the car echoed.

“They want to get into the city,” Fang Zhixu sighed. “They want us to take them in.”

“We can’t open the doors,” Zhuang Qingyan said coldly.

“We can’t... open... the doors.” He slowed his speech, repeating the words with firmness.

Silence enveloped the people inside the car.

Song Ke’s long eyelashes drooped down silently, offering no opposition.

Zhuang Qingyan was right. Wanting to save people also meant assessing whether they had the capability. These refugees were undoubtedly in a dire situation, but one car couldn’t save them all. Opening the doors at this moment would only lead to greater chaos, with unpredictable consequences.

“Accelerate. Charge through,” Zhuang Qingyan spoke sternly.

The engine roared louder. Some of the refugees hesitated and backed off, but more daring ones clung to the roof, banging it with hard objects.

Lu Xiaoyu’s mechanical arm forcefully pressed the accelerator. The off-road pickup truck surged forward like a sharp axe splitting through water, unstoppable, causing those blocking the path to startle and dodge, watching helplessly as the truck sped toward the city gate.

Greenwater City was completely sealed off, covered by a thick iron mesh outside the city walls, with high-voltage electric currents shimmering. An official in municipal hall uniform stood on a lookout post three to four meters above the ground, holding a megaphone, shouting hoarsely:

“We’re already overloaded with the refugees we’ve accepted. We can’t allow more people in.”

“Please, everyone, wait a little longer! Please be patient!”

“If there’s any extra space, we’ll make sure to let everyone in at the earliest opportunity!”

The city gate was crowded with refugees unwilling to leave. Even smashing the horn had no effect. Zhuang Qingyan opened the public address system and spoke upwards, “We’re participants in the Throne Race Competition, please allow us entry into the city.”

Hearing the words “entry into the city,” the surrounding crowd became instantly excited, pushing forward madly, managing to move the off-road pickup truck half a meter.

The official was in a panic, adamantly refusing to open the gate, shouting, “Permission granted to enter, find your own way in!”

Find their own way in... that meant finding their own way.

Song Ke sighed.

The sunroof of the pickup truck opened, and with swift movements, Song Ke threw a section of a spiritual weapon grappling hook that hooked onto the entrance of the lookout post. Then, with a single hand, she pulled up Zhuang Qingyan. They soared into the air, Song Ke using the wall to propel herself up, showcasing her agility to everyone—like a skilled acrobat.

Su Cha lifted Lin Youyou, following the same procedure, closely behind Song Ke’s landing.

With Xu Xing and Fang Zhixu held by Lu Xiaoyu on each side, his mechanical arms extended, grabbing the wall, and lifting them up, safely landing them atop.

In just a few seconds, all seven members of V587 arrived at the lookout post.

Before the official finished his sentence of “find your own way in,” a row of people suddenly appeared in front of him.

“We’re in,” Song Ke said calmly.

The official, holding the megaphone, stared in amazement, "That was... pretty quick."

After the completion of the player verification process, Song Ke glanced once more at the crowded masses below the city walls before turning away.

The situation inside Greenwater City wasn't much better than outside. The influx of people from nearby cities had overwhelmed it.

Streets and alleys were lined with makeshift tents, refugees sleeping on the ground, enduring harsh conditions. The atmosphere was bleak, filled with anxiety and fear.

Wanting to emulate their strategy in Rainbow Cloud City by finding the check-in point drone, V587 found that the committee might have become wary and retrieved the drones. Besides the filming drone, Lu Xiaoyu couldn't detect any useful data. They spent half a day circling within the city but found no anomalies.

"Now what do we do?" Song Ke asked.

Zhuang Qingyan lowered his gaze towards the visible refugee camps and uttered a single word.

"Wait."

If he guessed correctly, the check-in point would soon manifest on its own.

Outside Greenwater City, shortly after V587 entered, several steamships and floating cars followed suit.

The gathering refugees grew increasingly agitated, unable to contain their angry queries:

"Why can they go in?"

"Let us in, the zombie tide is coming, let us in!!"

“Open the doors!”

The officials from the municipal hall shouted themselves hoarse, but the refugees, enveloped in the shadow of the zombie tide, had lost their rationality completely. With eyes reddened, they pushed forward blindly, unwilling to touch the high-voltage electric fence, instead, colliding with the lower protective barriers.

“Boom—”

A deafening noise reverberated as those in the front, propelled by their momentum, unexpectedly fell, but the refugees behind were oblivious, continuing their frenzied push, trampling their compatriots mercilessly.

“Boom—”

The official on the lookout post staggered, and bits of wall debris fell. Armed soldiers aimed at the crowd below, uncertain where to engage.

“Boom—”

The sturdy barriers gave way, the city gates teetered, and thousands upon thousands of refugees, seeing a glimmer of hope, broke free, rushing madly towards Greenwater City.

From a high vantage point, the mass of people, distorted figures running amok, bore no distinction from the zombie tide.

Inside the city, Song Ke and the others received a system prompt: “Greenwater City check-in point has appeared.”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 120.1: Life-and-Death Marathon (11)

Song Ke = White-Eyed Wolf?

“Charge! Just charge in and you’ll survive!”

“Don’t push, stop pushing!”

Two completely opposite voices rang out simultaneously.

The high-pressure iron net had already twisted and deformed. Those at the front charged forward like falling dominoes, pinned down under the weight, unable to move. They convulsed from head to toe, foaming at the mouth, shrieking in agony, instantly meeting their demise, electrocuted. Yet, the following tide of refugees continued frenziedly, trampling over the bodies of their compatriots, striving to cross over the tall wall.

Under wave after wave of impact, the outer wall of Greenwater City collapsed under unbearable pressure, and the swarming refugees finally surged in.

Just above the pile of victims, a radiant holographic projection descended, bearing the seal of Greenwater City.

From afar, it appeared like a flower blooming from corpses—a malevolent blossom nurtured by flesh and blood.

“Mass hysteria,” Zhuang Qingyan spoke with a somber face, explaining the horrifying phenomenon from a psychological perspective. “When individuals with similar demands gather and become part of a group, their behavior no longer bears individual responsibility. Normal constraints disappear, and they become blindly obedient, cruel, paranoid, and fanatical, resorting to violence and aggression to fulfill their own desires.”

“Greenwater City is finished,” Zhuang Qingyan said coldly.

With its defenses breached, Greenwater City lay wide open, akin to a vulnerable infant, susceptible to being obliterated by even a small-scale wave of corpses.

“After we check in, we leave,” Song Ke decided firmly.

The seven individuals turned back towards the direction of the city gate. Song Ke hurried like the wind. After scaling the city wall, she leaped into the air. Her oversized coat fluttered in the wind as she landed lightly on top of the pile of corpses. Her feet touched the warm bodies, blood instantly soaking through her shoes.

The bodies, dead from the stampede, had already piled up several tens of meters high, extending over an area of about two hundred meters in diameter. However, the checkpoint was buried at the very bottom of the corpse mountain.

Song Ke conjured a shovel and began digging.

As she dug, her eyes inadvertently met those of a girl. The girl appeared to be about the same age as her, pinned down by a dozen or so people. Her left half twisted unnaturally into a contorted mass, weakly pleading for help from Song Ke: “Save... save me.”

Song Ke fell silent for two seconds, then discarded the shovel, using her hands to peel away the layers of bodies to drag the girl out. Even though she knew in her heart that even if she freed her, the girl wouldn't survive. Her hands quickly became covered in sticky, fresh blood and fragmented innards. Once the survivor regained her freedom, she weakly smiled at Song Ke, “Th...thank...”

Before she could finish her words, a rumbling particle cannon descended from the sky, striking the pile of bodies, its explosion engulfing Song Ke and the girl in an instant.

“Song Ke!” “Captain!” “Sister!!”

Members of the V587 on the other side shouted loudly.

The glaring light gradually faded away, leaving behind gaping holes in the pile of corpses caused by the explosion. Song Ke crawled out from the shattered wreckage, barely recognizable, yet miraculously unharmed. However, as she looked down, the girl who had just been there was now blown to pieces by the blast.

Song Ke closed her eyes, refusing to look at her anymore, swiftly turning her gaze towards the attackers.

Apart from V587, several other teams had swiftly arrived, including the reorganized “Anna Knights.” Despite the severe blow to their strength after Song Ke single-handedly took down their ace, Sai Ang, they remained formidable opponents not to be underestimated.

Members of the “Anna Knights ” were using heavy weaponry to clear the area.

These robotic entities seemed impatient, blasting openings with particle cannons only to have new bodies cover the gaps. They resorted to jumping onto the city walls, facing the surging civilians, ruthlessly using their abilities to massacre, limbs flying, and bodies torn apart. The “Anna Knights” showed no emotion, treating it like exterminating a bunch of inconspicuous cockroaches, violently tearing down defenses, steadily approaching their checkpoint.

There was a momentary confusion in Song Ke’s eyes. What were they doing? Was this... right?

Before entering the Throne Race, all participants had signed waivers, acknowledging the risk of death with every victory they sought.

As long as it meant winning, any means were deemed justifiable.

But this wasn’t killing zombies; this was... damn it, it was killing people, an outright massacre.

Song Ke’s fists clenched tighter as she abruptly leaped onto the fractured wall, her cold, sharp movements driving back the refugees who were still pressing forward.

“Don’t come any closer! Move back!!”

Those at the front realized the danger and tried to escape, fear evident on their faces. However, the refugees rushing from the shelter remained oblivious, heedlessly shoving forward, inadvertently sending countless compatriots to their demise.

Zhuang Qingyan looked up at Song Ke from a higher vantage point, one hand pressed tightly against his forehead. This couldn't continue; if the refugee tide didn't recede, they wouldn't be able to approach the checkpoint. He rapidly recalled the map of Greenwater City. Aside from the main gate, there were three other exits on the east, west, and north sides.

"Open the side gates, let them in!"

Lu Xiaoyu and the others instantly grasped his intention. They dispersed, using their abilities to attack the defensive line. Greenwater City was beyond saving; sooner or later, it would be overrun by the uncontrollable refugees. Their immediate task was to swiftly evacuate the crowd congested at the main gate, preventing further stampede incidents.

Sounds of the city walls collapsing echoed from the east and west sides, accompanied by choking clouds of smoke and dust.

Zhuang Qingyan mobilized his awakened energy, his commanding voice resonating clearly above Greenwater City, exerting pressure, "Listen, everyone! The main gate is sealed off. There are new entrances one kilometer to the east and two kilometers to the southwest. If you want to enter the city, head there!"

"The entrance capacity is limited. Seize the opportunity. Whoever runs fast will survive!"

Human nature probably couldn't tolerate words like "limited" or "restricted." As Zhuang Qingyan's voice echoed, the refugees at the rear slowed down, hesitated for a moment, then turned and ran to the sides. It was like a miraculous scene from Moses parting the sea; the blocked crowd automatically diverted, dispersing at an extremely fast pace. With the release at the back, the pressure ahead suddenly decreased, and the number of trampled bodies stopped increasing.

Song Ke had just breathed a sigh of relief when suddenly curses came from behind, and a row of particle cannons fired at her.

“What the hell are you guys doing?!”

“If you don’t want to compete, then quit quickly! I’ve had it with you for a long time!”

Song Ke raised the cold, sharp sword to deflect the attack, glanced up, and saw members of the “Anna Knights” glaring at her viciously. Her brow furrowed in confusion for a moment, but then she was astonished to realize that the check-in point, previously buried beneath the trampled bodies, had vanished!

But she quickly understood.

Since it was a check-in point nourished by bloodshed, as the violence dispersed, the checkpoint naturally disappeared.

“You just wait for me.”

Aware of Song Ke’s prowess, the “Anna Knights” didn’t want to confront her head-on at this moment. They only left threatening words behind and departed.

...

The influx of refugees into the city had nowhere to go. Gradually, they transformed from lost lambs to fierce wolves. They ignited parked vehicles with gasoline, shattered the glass of storefronts along the streets, and even broke into and invaded the homes of terrified residents.

Extreme anger and fear drowned out the rationality of these individuals. They were no longer refugees but had transformed into outright rioters.

Malice brewed incessantly within them; the blade of death would always fall. If they couldn’t escape doomsday, then everyone would perish together!

Song Ke gazed ahead, noticing a projection descending from a certain spot in the high sky, disappearing the next instant, only to reappear in another direction.

The location of the check-in point kept changing, with the shortest stay lasting just a few seconds.

“Split up,” Song Ke said, “and reach the check-in point as quickly as possible.”

Amidst blaring alarms and shouts, Song Ke maneuvered through the panicked crowd. Vehicles set ablaze careened wildly, and if she wasn’t careful, she’d find herself face-to-face with them, triggering raging fires. She narrowly dodged to the roadside, narrowly avoiding disaster.

“Girl Ke, it’s you...” A ragged old man suddenly grabbed her. “You’re Girl Ke, right?!”

Song Ke paused, staring at the old man for two seconds before recognizing him. “Grandpa Cheng.”

Oldman Cheng, in an excited tone, tightened his grip on her wrist. “It’s really you, Girl Ke! This is so good, so good...”

He kept repeating “so good” as his thin fingers clenched tighter, as if afraid she would vanish.

“Now you’re an awakener, you’ve made something of yourself. I saw you in that competition, I knew you would come, you must have a way. Quickly, take Grandpa away from here, find a safe place...” Oldman Cheng’s eyes gleamed, his speech fast and urgent.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 120.2: Life-and-Death Marathon (11)

Song Ke = White-Eyed Wolf?

After leaving District F177, Oldman Cheng’s feverish son mutated into a zombie on the starship and was killed by other passengers. His daughter-in-law, upon reaching District C, ran away with the money and grandchild when he wasn’t looking. Fortunately, Oldman Cheng had already moved his funds. He had

planned to retire peacefully in District C, but soon after settling down, the zombie tide arrived, destroying the city where he resided.

Having fallen into despair and near the vicinity of Greenwater City, Song Ke's appearance reignited hope within him.

"No, no," Song Ke slowly shook her head, resolutely pulling her hand away. Indeed, her wrist was red from his grip. "I still need to... compete."

Oldman Cheng's expression turned cold in an instant. "Why not? Don't you want to help Grandpa?"

Song Ke sighed inwardly.

Oldman Cheng still saw her as that naive girl from District F, wanting her to abandon the competition, leave her companions, and abandon the Zombie King that could threaten the next city, just to take him to a safe place.

How could someone be so selfish?

Song Ke's reluctance to dwell on the past didn't mean he could manipulate her again.

She didn't bother saying more; she turned to leave. A passerby accidentally bumped into Oldman Cheng's back, causing him to stumble. At that moment, a surveillance drone flew by, capturing a close-up shot of the two.

Oldman Cheng suddenly leaped up, his aged face directed at the camera of the unmanned aerial vehicle. The screen flickered, displaying his extreme indignation. "Song Ke, you white-eyed wolf! I've raised you with hardship. I'm your grandpa, yet you'd watch me die, you'd watch me die in front of you!"

The refugees in Greenwater City were busy escaping for their lives, indifferent to the spectacle before them. However, across the screen, Oldman Cheng's actions stirred a commotion, not just among the viewers in the Eastern Alliance but also Ferrara, inciting outrage.

Anti-fans, standing on the moral high ground, pointed fingers:

“Even ignoring her own grandpa, didn’t expect Captain V587 to be this kind of person.”

“She seems strong, but her heart is so dark. Regretting voting for her.”

“Saving someone in passing, why can’t she be a bit kinder?”

“You’re not... my grandpa.” Song Ke halted her steps, her voice lowering to an icy point, each word enunciated.

She initially intended to shake him off and leave, but Oldman Cheng persistently brought up “grandpa,” poking at her pain.

“You don’t deserve to be my grandpa.”

She blamed herself for not noticing the messages left by Song Zhiyuan on the screen. Yet, Oldman Cheng deliberately concealed it, never mentioning it once. Song Ke swung the cold, sharp saw precisely, tearing Oldman Cheng’s collar and revealing the chilling expression on her face.

“Get lost.”

Oldman Cheng’s eyes darted around, completely abandoning any shame, clutching his chest, “Ai, ai, my heart! How could you, you little beast, you white-eyed wolf, are you trying to kill me, no, you want to kill me...”

Speechless, Song Ke turned away. Her actions were measured, not even harming Oldman Cheng in the slightest. Why was he spouting such nonsense? Oldman Cheng noticed her movement, suddenly exerting infinite strength, grabbing her trouser leg, falling to the ground, wailing incessantly, refusing to let go.

The drone captured the elderly man's dehydrated and cracked skin, the prominent veins on his hand, and his pained expression, all recorded vividly.

The barrage of comments condemning her continued, and V587's support rate plummeted rapidly.

"I can't stand it! How could you attack an innocent old man! You'll face retribution."

"Poor old grandpa, he looks like he's about to pass out."

"Where did these holier-than-thou people come from upstairs? Maybe you should go be a saint in Rainbow Cloud City?"

"Exactly, this old man using moral manipulation."

"The old grandpa is ill, and Song Ke is so strong, can't she help a bit?"

"You're just talking, why don't you go and help?"

"I... I didn't participate in the competition, it's not my business!"

The comments in the barrage became chaotic, and AI administrators kept banning waves after waves of users.

Song Ke had never been this angry, yet she couldn't actually kill Oldman Cheng. It would complicate things beyond explanation! Some people are naturally bad at arguing; when emotions run high, their language system goes haywire. That was Song Ke's case. Coupled with her stuttering issue, she ended up muttering, "I #%&* you..." for a while, unable to muster a complete sentence to hurl back.

"Hey, you rotten old man! You've been on my nerves for too long!" Lin Youyou, wearing a mask, suddenly rushed from behind the two, her tone rattling like a machine gun. "You embezzled money from others, treated a child coldly, and yet have the nerve to fake emotions here?"

“Heart trouble? I’m a doctor, let me have a look.” Fang Zhixu stepped forward without hesitation, holding Oldman Cheng’s arm for a check-up. Oldman Cheng struggled desperately, but Fang Zhixu, despite looking fragile, being an awakener, had no trouble restraining him.

“The old man is vigorous and in excellent health, stronger than the average person, no ailments whatsoever,” Fang Zhixu said coldly.

“Song Ke has a real grandpa; what kind of ‘grandpa’ are you, you shameless one? Embezzling money, abandoning a child to fend for themselves, or when the apocalypse came, kicking her out, abandoning her to the zombie tide? If I were you, I’d kneel down and apologize to Song Ke. You still morally manipulate her, expecting her to save you? Disgusting!” Lin Youyou’s firepower was at its peak, relentlessly firing.

Lu Xiaoyu’s fingers flew, adding in, “Up until April 5th, New Calendar year 47, Cheng Aiweng illegally seized Song Ke’s assets totaling over 1.2 million and refused to return them. The amount reaches the highest sentencing standard, and as her legal guardian, he committed abandonment...”

He hacked into Oldman Cheng’s personal account, tracing it back to the day Song Zhiyuan sent money. Every financial transaction was crystal clear, even snapshots of his proud face while swiping his card, like a public execution.

The drones filming caught wind of the big scandal, immediately zooming in on the screen, capturing irrefutable evidence.

The anti-fans who had just rallied behind Oldman Cheng, condemning Song Ke for her lack of conscience, vanished into thin air, mouths sealed shut.

Zhuang Qingyan patted Song Ke on the back, comforting her softly, “Don’t mind them. People are often stupid. With a bit of cheap sympathy and tears, they easily overlook the provokers and instead criticize those who react in anger.”

Song Ke glanced lazily at him, not really paying attention, but she lowered her voice, genuinely musing, “So much money.”

Zhuang Qingyan: "...?"

Having lived through the post-apocalyptic struggles, especially worrying about earning money for the team (mainly for Lu Xiaoyu), Song Ke realized for the first time just how wealthy her grandfather was. She had missed the chance to become a little rich lady!

Cheng Aiweng, having been thoroughly scolded by Lin Youyou and exposed by Lu Xiaoyu, found himself unable to save face. His retreat, despite his insults of "Little beast, white-eyed wolf...", couldn't hide the defeat in his eyes. He walked away, seemingly unperturbed.

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes flashed and Oldman Cheng's hunched figure stiffened for a moment before he nonchalantly continued on his way. These insignificant details went unnoticed by others.

Song Ke looked at her allies who had stood up for her, feeling grateful but a bit lost, "Thanks, every...wah?"

Lin Youyou reached out, pinching and squishing Song Ke's cheeks, "You! If you can't handle it, just call for us."

Song Ke mumbled unclearly, "You, you, don't... squish me... Ah."

Lu Xiaoyu opened the terminal and displayed footage from the drone, announcing, "Stop kidding around; there's bad news."

On the thermal imager, a large green radiation zone was closing in on Greenwater City, less than five kilometers away.

"The real zombie tide is coming."

Song Ke pushed away Lin Youyou's hand and shouted at the team, "Check-in point! Quickly!"

She bounced away, running swiftly.

Lu Xiaoyu glanced sideways at the silent Zhuang Qingyan. “Why didn’t you say something? Don’t tell me you didn’t know.”

With Zhuang Qingyan’s mental abilities, he must have sensed the approaching zombie tide but had not warned anyone.

“You did something.” Lu Xiaoyu sounded certain.

Zhuang Qingyan raised an eyebrow. “I always retaliate when provoked.”

...

Oldman Cheng’s eyes were confused, and he stood bewildered at the city gate, momentarily forgetting what he was supposed to do.

“Why am I here?” He muttered, puzzled.

His plan to leave with Song Ke’s help shattered. He needed to think of another way. Oldman Cheng accessed his terminal, wanting to check the balance in his account. Even though money had minimal value during the apocalypse, having money was still preferable.

But soon, he froze. There was nothing in his personal account.

His money, all of it, was gone!

Oldman Cheng lifted his head in disbelief, his dilated pupils reflecting the distant, undulating black tide.

“Wh-what... what’s that?” His face showed horror, his voice lost.

Oldman Cheng tried to escape, but his limbs felt frozen in place, unable to move.

A continuous wave of zombies surged towards Greenwater City, breaking through the seemingly nonexistent defense line and instantly overwhelming Oldman Cheng.

In the fleeting moment before losing consciousness, Oldman Cheng had a vague feeling that the zombie, baring its fangs, bore some resemblance to Song Zhiyuan.