

Doomsday 171

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 171.1: Key (14)

S7 attended the trial with two family members

Northern Base, 10:00 AM.

A highly anticipated trial is about to begin.

As the person involved was formerly the highest-ranking official in the Awakener Department and the crimes committed involved national secrets, only a very small number of people were allowed to participate. The media and reporters who entered went through layers of screening. In the spectator seats, officials dressed in suits sat upright, awakeners suppressing their awakened energy, and silent witnesses.

Before the formal start of the trial, two figures entered against the light.

Zhuang Qingyan wore an impeccably crafted light gray suit, his side profile tall and lean, outlining broad shoulders and long legs as he walked. Song Ke, on the other hand, had a much simpler attire, white T-shirt and shorts, with short hair neat and refreshing. The two uninvited guests walked in as if they owned the place.

“Is that Song Ke?” A special reporter in the media area covered his mouth and whispered to his colleague, “She looks quite approachable.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” the colleague, a local, shook his head in disagreement, whispering with a hushed tone, “You know nothing about her brutality.”

“How brutal is she? I don’t believe it unless I see it myself.”

“Do you have the video of the armored sea turtle?”

“No, but I’ve heard of it. Isn’t it too exaggerated? How could a Level 5 ferocious beast be killed single-handedly?”

“...I’ll send it to you.” The colleague sighed deeply. The video was once so popular, but its popularity inexplicably plummeted after a couple of days, with no one interested anymore. Fortunately, he wisely saved a copy.

“Wow! Oh my god! I can’t believe it!” The reporter watched in awe, his words stumbling, “I was blind, she’s so amazing. Why is she here today? Does she have any friendship with He Qihong?”

“Quite the opposite,” the colleague wore a mysterious expression, “It’s more like having a grudge. I heard... not sure if it’s true, He Qihong kidnapped this person.”

“...?” The journalist gasped, his expression puzzled and blank. Kidnapping S7? This would be an explosive piece of news throughout the entire Alliance. Is He Qihong out of her mind?

As soon as the colleague’s words fell, the tall man with his hands in his pockets walked past them, casting a cool glance.

The journalist shivered and instinctively turned off the terminal playing the colorful video.

Members of V587 sitting in the front row turned their heads in pleasant surprise, their eyes assessing, as if saying: Captain, back to your usual self?

Song Ke made a “shush” gesture, playfully blinked, spun around to signify that she was unharmed, and sat next to Lu Xiaoyu. Lu Xiaoyu casually extended his hand, and Song Ke touched her pocket, handing him the terminal for the routine anti-intrusion check. Then, she leaned in and spoke softly to Lu Xiaoyu, their heads close together. From certain angles, their faces were very close, almost as if they were kissing.

Zhuang Qingyan stretched his arm lazily, resting it on the back of Song Ke's chair, displaying both intimacy and possessiveness.

Sharing a terminal among the three had become a habit, and they didn't think much of it. However, to others, it seemed somewhat scandalous.

The eyes of two journalists next door widened.

If they were from the "Crooked Anecdotes of Awakeners," they would have already imagined a passionate and scandalous love affair based on S7's gimmicks, ensuring tomorrow's best-selling headline. However, they were from the "Northern Base Legal Daily," an official and serious media outlet! The two exchanged glances and finally wrote down in a proper manner: "On [date], S7-level Awakener Song Ke attended the trial with two family members."

Clang—

The passage door opened, and six solemn-faced judges were escorted in by the awakener guards. The chief judge in the center was a woman around forty, with a straight posture and deep eyes containing a glint of intelligence. As she scanned the spectator seats, people avoided her gaze, as if once seen by her, all secrets would be exposed.

Song Ke's spirits lifted, sensing that this was a high-level awakener.

"Tian Wenli, A7-level Mental type, Ability: 'Truth Reconstruction,' can make time and space flow backward, replay scenes that have happened before, and... reveal the true psychological activities of the individuals involved," Zhuang Qingyan explained in a low voice, pinching Song Ke's ear. He was now a mobile central hub of resident information, knowing the background of every resident in the Northern Base.

Tian Wenli's ability was somewhat similar to Bai Ruotong's "Lie Detection," but unlike Song Ke's young senior sister, Tian Wenli, an experienced early awakener, had been working as a judge for over seventeen years, a bona fide expert in interrogation.

Back then, A-level Bai Ruotong couldn't extract much information from S-level Zhuang Qingyan's mouth, but today, A7-level Tian Wenli against B3-level He Qihong was almost a crushing blow.

"Now, the trial begins. Bring the defendant, He Qihong, into the courtroom," Tian Wenli spoke in a deep voice after taking her seat.

The law enforcement officers brought He Qihong, whose hands and feet were bound by ability restraints, to the courtroom. After removing her high-ranking official uniform, she appeared frail, moving slowly. The deep lines on the sides of her cheeks had intensified, but her expression remained as calm as ever.

"Director He..." on the spectator seats, He Qihong's administrative secretary couldn't help muttering, quickly bowing her head amidst the surrounding glares. She was just a newly appointed insignificant figure, with little understanding of the crimes committed by her former superior. Her sigh at the imprisonment of her boss unexpectedly caused an uproar, and the secretary regretfully patted her mouth, not daring to speak further.

In the front row, Ye Zimei sat upright, her expression cold and concentrated. Today, she represented Ye Zheng and Bai Qi, witnessing He Qihong's fate.

"He Qihong," Tian Wenli, sitting in the center of the judge's bench, used her awakened energy and her voice resonated throughout the venue. "You are accused of betrayal, treason, endangering national security, abuse of power, intentional murder, and a total of thirteen charges. Do you have any objections?"

"I have objections," He Qihong's expression was surprisingly calm. "I deny the unfounded accusations. I did not betray the Northern Base. Issuing the order for the residents of Qianzhan City to stay put was due to being controlled by an S-level parasite, not of my own volition."

There was an uproar in the spectator seats, angrily cursing He Qihong for being defiant and refusing to confess even at the brink of death.

"Spectators, please maintain silence," Tian Wenli knocked the gavel. "You deny intentionally plotting against General Ye Zheng, but the order to prevent the entry of Qianzhan City residents was issued when you were conscious."

He Qihong hesitated for a moment and answered calmly, "I did it for the benefit of the Northern Base."

Tian Wenli's eyes were sharp, and she suddenly raised her voice, "Liar."

"I request the use of 'Truth Reconstruction.'"

"Approved," the decision was made after consultation among the five judges.

Dong, dong—

Like the striking of a grand bell, He Qihong's face showed pain, completely defenseless, her consciousness thoroughly swept away, and scenes from the past unfolded.

First was a cold voice, "Close all connection channels with Qianzhan City."

Then came a mixture of contemptuous psychological activities, "Those ordinary people? Useless waste, not worth mourning. It's their own bad luck."

"Awakeners... forget it, a group of eliminated people with no strength. Just clean them up, and issue a recruitment notice after the crisis is over."

The scene fell into complete silence; everyone was shocked by her disregard for life.

"Murderer! Despicable woman!" Suddenly, from the direction of the witness stand, a rotten egg flew towards He Qihong, landing at her feet.

"Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to decide our life and death? Who the hell do you think you are!"

The law enforcement officers hurriedly intervened to stop the disturbance. The enraged man, seemingly using an ability, threw another rotten egg out of thin air, and this time, he was fortunate enough to hit He Qihong's face. A gray-green, foul-smelling liquid oozed down, creating a nauseating odor.

“Please have the witness temporarily leave the stand,” Tian Wenli raised her hand, signaling the officers to escort the man out. She then turned to the public and explained, “The witness lost his parents in the ferocious beast tide, and his emotions are quite intense. Please understand.”

Song Ke rested her chin on her hand, her lips slightly curled. She initially thought the chief judge, Tian Wenli, was impartial, but she could see clearly that Tian Wenli had noticed the witness reaching for the rotten egg, yet deliberately waited two seconds before intervening.

“He Qihong, you discriminate against ordinary people with an unequal perspective, causing a significant negative impact on the peace and stability of the Northern Base. The court has received additional information that former S4-level awakener Lei Zhao left for Tokushima with resentment due to your unreasonable arrangement for his family.”

The effect of “Truth Reconstruction” was still in place, and upon hearing Lei Zhao's name, He Qihong's pupils contracted slightly, uncontrollably recalling the past.

Lei Zhao grew up in the orphanage of the low-level district. His “family” consisted of disabled individuals. Because Lei Zhao was allowed to enter District B, He Qihong, following regulations, assigned him a residence without considering whether it was “appropriate.” The community was full of awakeners, and a culture of comparison thrived. Lei Zhao's family suffered severe bullying, and he, busy with commissions, neglected them until incidents of self-harm forced him to wake up. Eventually, he left District B10.

Another S-level weapon-type awakener, the chief designer of the “Hell” firearms, also left the Northern Base for ideological differences. Before leaving, he expressed to his friend, “The original intention of designing the Hell firearms was to give ordinary people the ability to fight against zombies and ferocious beasts. If my weapons can only be provided to awakeners, I don't know what purpose they serve anymore.”

His friend asked, “Where did you get this information, and who talked to you?”

The chief designer sighed, shook his head with a bitter smile, unwilling to say more.

A commotion spread through the spectator seats, with awakeners expressing their indignation. No wonder, all this time, the Northern Base had fewer top-level awakeners compared to other regions – turns out it was because of He Qihong, the troublemaker! Despite her lofty speeches about the importance of awakeners, in reality, she hadn't accomplished anything substantial. Ultimately, it was all about maintaining her own rule and power.

He Qihong's governing philosophy contradicted the entire Northern Base, and it's no wonder that talented individuals found it difficult to stay! V587 members in their seats couldn't help but smirk. He Qihong had offended more than just these S-level awakeners; they had three more in their team. If it weren't for Ye Zheng's strong retention efforts, they might have left in a fit of anger, just like Lei Zhao.

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Chapter 171.2: Key (14)

S7 attended the trial with two family members

The trial continued, and He Qihong's crimes were exposed one by one. When the charge of intentional murder was pronounced, Tian Wenli activated her ability again. The scene of Chen Xuerou's death emerged, revealing He Qihong not only ignoring her life and death but also displaying jealousy and malice towards Chen Xuerou in the reconstructed psychological activities, intense to the point of pitch black.

“Chen... Commissioner Chen!” Even some senior officials from the Awakener Department couldn't sit still this time, tears streaming down their faces. Chen Xuerou, once the widely anticipated successor to Ye Zheng!

The clamor echoed from all directions, and the condemnation against He Qihong escalated.

Tian Wenli pounded the gavel, “Order, please maintain order.”

“Criminal He Qihong, do you have anything to refute?”

He Qihong's gaze was numb, but she persisted, "I do not admit guilt."

After a moment of contemplation, Tian Wenli, mindful of her ability's three uses per day limit, decided to use her last opportunity.

Disordered images alternated, revealing He Qihong's dark life like a fast-forwarded movie, displayed in front of everyone. Unfortunately, there were no additional discoveries.

In the spectator seats, Zhuang Qingyan caught a fleeting shadow among the chaotic images, subtly furrowing his brow.

He turned his head, and Lu Xiaoyu happened to look at him. They locked eyes for a second, and Lu Xiaoyu leaned closer to Song Ke, passing the terminal to Zhuang Qingyan.

In the adjacent "Northern Base Legal Daily," the reporter, sneakily perusing "Crooked Anecdotes of Awakeners," was caught off guard by this scene.

Quickly averting his gaze, he whispered to himself: "Oh my, this S7 is not ordinary, not ordinary at all. Harmony in both main and side rooms, quite impressive."

The court proceedings prohibited recording, but Lu Xiaoyu, using special means, saved all the records of the "Truth Reconstruction," including a startling conversation between He Qihong and a Central Court official.

Zhuang Qingyan's raven-like eyelashes drooped, concealing the cold brilliance in his eyes.

– Park Jae-woo.

Because it wasn't crucial evidence, this part didn't attract much attention. Zhuang Qingyan played it frame by frame, deciphering the conversation based on their lip movements. From the timing, this call occurred shortly after Song Ke announced the news of S7. Park Jae-woo, representing the Central Court, called the Northern Base, seemingly interested in Song Ke's background. He Qihong casually explained

that Song Ke came from the low-level district and joined voluntarily in response to her recruitment order.

Park Jae-woo repeated with a meaningful tone, "Oh? The low-level district? That's quite rare."

Then, he smoothly shifted the topic, exchanged a few pleasantries with He Qihong, and terminated the communication.

If Park Jae-woo didn't know Song Ke, had never seen V587, everything would seem reasonable. However, the reality was quite the opposite. They had clashed violently during the Mu City incident. In front of Park Jae-woo, Song Ke killed the magistrate Nai Kang and S-level dual-system awakener Punk, and if it weren't for Zhuang Qingyan's efforts, the situation at that time would have been irreparable.

Given this context, Park Jae-woo's phone call became intriguing. He didn't disclose anything about his past with Song Ke, nor did he attempt to expel or recruit V587. It seemed like he only wanted to confirm their presence in the Northern Base. What exactly was he up to?

Zhuang Qingyan subtly glanced at the adjacent Song Ke. The majestic S7, seemingly attentive to the legal proceedings, had her chin resting on Lin Youyou's shoulder. However, in reality, her right hand subtly moved as she discreetly stuffed a piece of preserved fruit into her mouth, squinting her eyes contentedly.

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes carried a smile, but his grip on the terminal gradually tightened.

No matter what Park Jae-woo intended to do with Song Ke, as long as he was around, his plans wouldn't succeed.

After nearly two hours of the lengthy trial, Tian Wenli solemnly stood up, "Now, I declare that the defendant, He Qihong, is found guilty of the thirteen charges brought against her. She is sentenced to life imprisonment, with the deprivation of citizenship and the revocation of ability usage rights. She will be confined and monitored at a maximum-security facility."

As a first-degree offender, He Qihong was required to undergo compulsory rehabilitation with a minimum of 100 hours of labor per week. Coincidentally, the Northern Base was expanding by one-

third, intending to accommodate more residents from the Qianzhan City, and He QiuHong would undoubtedly be assigned to perform laborious tasks.

Upon hearing that it wasn't a death penalty, there was a murmur of private conversations among the audience, expressing some dissatisfaction. Only Zhuang Qingyan understood and smiled knowingly, "This Judge Tian is very wise and insightful."

"How so?" Lin Youyou and the others in the front row turned curiously.

"Based on my superficial understanding of her, death penalty wouldn't be a punishment for He QiuHong; instead, it would be a kind of disguised relief. Her twisted thoughts would make her believe that she was not wrong; it was the others who didn't understand her. She died for the Northern Base."

After Zhuang Qingyan explained, the others shivered, realizing that, with He QiuHong's distorted personality, she might indeed think this way.

"So, the most severe punishment is not the death penalty, but the day-to-day despair, making her aware that she's an awakener but can only lower her arrogant head, surviving like the ordinary people she once looked down upon, using the rest of her life for redemption."

Indeed, after hearing the verdict, He QiuHong's calm expression shattered. She struggled frantically, and the sound of the ability shackles echoed.

"I don't admit guilt! I want to see my teacher! I demand to see General Ye!"

"Rejected," Tian Wenli decisively announced.

...

The trial concluded.

When Song Ke left, she coincidentally encountered Zhao Yuqing outside. The indifferent water-type awakener lit a cigarette and took a long time before inhaling a puff.

“Hey, isn’t that Zhao Yuqing? I’ve never heard that she smokes.”

Someone nearby nudged their companion’s shoulder, silently indicating with their lips—Lei Zhao.

“…They used to be in the same team before, probably that kind of relationship.”

“What kind? Seriously?”

“Don’t stare. Let’s go.”

Suddenly, Song Ke remembered the beach mission where Yin Xiao asked for her help, and Zhao Yuqing mentioned that Lei Zhao was her partner.

A slender figure stopped in front of her. Zhao Yuqing looked up and saw Song Ke.

“Smoking is harmful to health,” Song Ke advised with sincerity, taking out a lollipop with a happy pistachio flavor from her spatial storage.

“Alright, I won’t smoke.” Zhao Yuqing obediently extinguished the cigarette.

“You seem upset. Is it because of Lei Zhao?”

“Yes, but we don’t have ‘that kind of relationship,’” Zhao Yuqing replied calmly, apparently aware of the recent discussions. She smiled faintly, “Who says men and women must have emotional entanglements? I just feel guilty. As his captain, if I had paid more attention to him at that time, he wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

Betraying the Northern Base, assassinating the District B magistrate, and then betraying Tokushima, Lei Zhao was ultimately sentenced to twenty years in prison. Fortunately, due to his voluntary confession, his family was safely escorted back and settled in the Central Antique Street, where ordinary people lived. Currently, their lives were good.

“Don’t be sad; the sun will come out again.”

Song Ke earnestly comforted Zhao Yuqing. Turning around, she took Zhuang Qingyan to visit Lei Zhao. With his keen insight into people, if Lei Zhao wasn’t as bad as he seemed, there might be a chance for him to redeem himself and seek a reduced sentence.

“Yeah, the sandstorm has ended, and everything will pass. I believe I can find a way.”

Zhao Yuqing tore open the lollipop wrapper, put it in her mouth, and, along with Song Ke, looked up at the sky. The massive three-dimensional city was bustling as usual, with various flying terminals shuttling back and forth, and the bright sunlight was blinding.

Summer was in full swing.

...

Two days later, Utopia issued a global announcement that they would officially host the first Awakener Challenge in a year. Based on this, they would distribute passes and select new residents for the floating cities. The news caused a sensation in the New Asia Alliance, the Cario Empire, and the Luce Federation.

As Zhuang Qingyan expected, people on the ground erupted with great enthusiasm and eagerness. They geared up for the challenge, and conflicts between various regions even decreased.

As days passed, peace gradually settled in, and time seemed to fast forward. V587 continued to focus on accumulating points, striving to become the top of the Alliance leaderboard.

The notable difference was that one person was absent from their actions—Zhuang Qingyan no longer went on field missions. He immersed himself entirely in the genetic project with Ning Rong, working

tirelessly. With abundant funds, sufficient data, and the support of a team of nearly a hundred people, the organ regeneration project made significant progress. Ye Zheng actively volunteered to be their first clinical trial subject.

In the midst of a dense zombie wave, Song Ke danced with dual blades, swiftly beheading 3rd-level zombies, while Fang Zhixu followed closely behind, skillfully extracting crystals. The surrounding teams sighed in resignation, helpless against the norm. Everywhere V587 went, it was as if a bandit had passed through – no grass grew, or rather, no zombies remained.

Blood splattered on Song Ke's cheek as she lowered her head to glance at the terminal, and her points skyrocketed significantly. "You guys clean up; I'll head back first."

"Song Ke'er~ remember to take a shower, or Princess Zhuang will throw a tantrum again," Lin Youyou called out with a teasing tone.

Song Ke paused, sniffed herself, and said grudgingly, "Understood."

...

As the night fell, Zhuang Qingyan had just stepped out of the laboratory when he saw Song Ke sitting cross-legged on a floating supercar, holding a large bottle of honey and scooping it up with a spoon. The deadly amount of sweetness, which would be lethal for ordinary people, seemed to satisfy her.

Addicted to sweets as if it were her life, a lingering side effect of the brown bear gene.

Zhuang Qingyan shook his head inwardly, stopped in front of her, and saw Song Ke looking up at him, with golden remnants on the corner of her mouth.

A faint, almost imperceptible laughter echoed as Zhuang Qingyan's slender fingertips wiped it away. After a few strokes in his palm, even though he hadn't tasted it, the sweet nectar seemed to soak into his heart. "Why is it just you? What about the others?"

"I'm here to pick you up," Song Ke replied confidently.

“Is that so? Then, let’s go home quickly.” Zhuang Qingyan smiled teasingly, joking with her, “This car is quite expensive; the owner might ask you to compensate when they come.”

Upon hearing the mention of compensation, Song Ke’s eyes widened. Like a feline creature, she lightly pushed him from behind. “Run!”

Zhuang Qingyan laughed heartily, and the long-lost tranquility gradually filled his chest.

Suddenly, he felt that this ordinary and warm life was quite good. Song Ke was responsible for slaying monsters and supporting the family, while he went to work as an ordinary researcher. Every evening, as the sun set, they would return home hand in hand, discussing what to eat for dinner.

It was a life that Zhuang Qingyan had never imagined, but surprisingly, he didn’t feel any rejection towards it.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 172: Key (15)

I will restart Operation Key

New Asia Alliance.

District A1, Central Court.

As the political center of the entire Alliance and the most important city, the Central Court’s main function is administrative management. There are no residential areas within its jurisdiction, and entry and exit are only permitted with authorization. After Utopia ascended, most officials successfully transferred, but there were still some “inexperienced” individuals who stayed behind to handle ground affairs, working diligently and hoping to one day obtain a “ticket” to join Utopia.

The fully automated streets were clean and orderly, with modern skyscrapers standing in a grid. Two inspectors hurriedly disembarked from a starship, changed to a floating car, and flew to the majestic Parliament building in the city center. The glass elevator ascended smoothly and stopped at the entrance of a conference room spacious enough to accommodate a hundred people. Artificial intelligence guided the guests to their seats.

At this moment, an important meeting was taking place in the room. The two inspectors bowed their heads and walked around the edges, not daring to make any noise.

Both sides of the long table were filled with influential figures from various countries, including both awakeners and ordinary people. Each face was a regular feature in news reports, but they were all lifelike holographic projections. These people had long since reached Utopia, and at the moment, in the vast conference room, there were no living beings except the two inspectors.

The influential figures were discussing the development plan for Utopia in the next three years. Every policy announced was explosive news. The only two living individuals present sat nervously, wiping their foreheads with handkerchiefs under the immense pressure, feeling uneasy and anxious.

About forty minutes later, most of the projections in the room disappeared, leaving less than twenty people, including the leaders of the Cario Empire and Luce Federation.

A solemn and deep voice sounded from the head of the long table. The speaker sat in the shadows, and only a vague silhouette could be seen: "The reason you were asked to stay is that a few days ago, I happened to come across this photograph."

The name tag displayed that he was one of the three titans of Utopia, once the leader of the New Asia Alliance.

A clear photo appeared, showing two researchers, dressed in lab attire, leaving the laboratory side by side. The older one had a cheerful smile at the corner of his mouth.

Whispers erupted from all sides, and everyone was puzzled. What was unusual about this photo?

“Please let the official in charge of this matter provide specific details,” said the figure from the head of the table.

The sweating inspector stood up nervously and said, “I... I provided the photo. The person on the left is Ning Rong, a core member of the Eternal Life Project who left the project team a year ago. I was ordered to track his movements. The person on the right is named Zhuang Qingyan. As far as I know, the two of them are secretly conducting research on cell division, and the specific purpose is unknown.”

“Cell division?” A holographic projection slammed the table and exclaimed angrily, “Are they trying to achieve human body self-repair? This is part of the Eternal Life Project, and Ning Rong has indeed stolen confidential information.”

Another older official murmured to himself, “Zhuang Qingyan? The name sounds familiar.”

The shadow raised a hand, and another photo appeared on the screen.

This photo looked a bit dated, with the same two individuals as the main characters. A young Ning Rong was flushed, engaged in a heated argument with another person. The researcher facing him had a handsome appearance, with a calm expression that seemed to completely ignore Ning Rong’s protests. He furrowed his eyebrows slightly when he saw the camera, leaving behind a graceful side profile.

“I’m sure this person’s name is well-known to everyone present. He is the most famous bio-scientist since the New Era, the pioneer of genetic engineering, and the leader of the Eternal Life Project— Vincent Zhuang.”

As if dropping a nuclear bomb on flat ground, most people didn’t react immediately, but a few had their faces change abruptly, almost standing up in shock.

The Eternal Life Project, once the aspiration of countless people in the Alliance, was now the most fervent pursuit of Utopia.

For security and confidentiality reasons, although Vincent’s name was widely known, what he actually looked like was rarely circulated.

Looking at the two photos again, the faces that appeared identical under different lighting conditions made even the slowest person realize something was amiss.

“Vincent... Vincent’s original name, isn’t it Zhuang Qingyan?!” exclaimed the older official, finally recalling where the familiarity came from.

The shadow gazed at the silhouette of the young man and shook his head slowly, “He is not Zhuang Qingyan. His real name is—Xie Zhuo.”

The air fell silent for a moment.

Xie Zhuo, the name behind this revelation, held a meaning that everyone in the room understood all too well.

Vincent had already passed away, and it was said that he was in a semi-demented state before his death. No one knew what he had experienced in the final stages of his life. All that was known was that after Vincent’s death, all research findings were sealed into a storage hub through a special means. Strangely, that hub had never been opened again, or more accurately, it could never be opened again—whether it was Vincent himself or the biological information of his close relatives (extracted from the genetic database).

In the end, the Alliance had to resort to some covert methods and learned from the residual memories of Vincent that the only condition for unlocking the hub was the “key.”

What was the key? A physical key? A virtual identity card? Or a secretive access code?

No one knew.

The only remaining clues back then pointed to Vincent’s lone son, Xie Zhuo.

In the last few years of Vincent’s scientific career, he rarely stepped out of the laboratory, and Xie Zhuo had been by his side, handling all matters for him. After Vincent’s death, Xie Zhuo mysteriously disappeared, and the whereabouts of the key became unknown.

This also became an unspoken fact among the Alliance's high-ranking officials: the key to retrieving the key lay with Xie Zhuo.

The shadow silently observed the confident young man in the photo.

Over the years, he had been following the news of the Eternal Life Project, expending significant human, material, and financial resources for a thorough search. However, Xie Zhuo seemed to have evaporated from the human world. There was no trace of him even on the star network. Gradually, everyone assumed he was dead. Unexpectedly, he had resurfaced, changing his identity to "Zhuang Qingyan" and openly walking in the sunlight.

If it weren't for the accidental capture of the photo during the surveillance of Ning Rong, the secret agent's careful consideration in organizing and archiving it, and subsequently bringing it up, perhaps the existence of "Zhuang Qingyan" would never have been discovered.

"The Fire Seed project back then must have buried important results."

After the Loak incident, Vincent publicly declared the failure of the Fire Seed project, but in the following year, he initiated version 2.0, naming it the "Eternal Life Project." He wanted to continue the research of the Fire Seed, and during this time, he must have discovered something.

Unfortunately, a few years later, Vincent passed away, and the research progress of the original Eternal Life Project was indefinitely shelved. Later on, due to disagreements in understanding, some scientists voluntarily withdrew from the project, including Ning Rong, while another group shifted focus to hybrid experiments, attempting to break through from a different direction.

"All the answers are in that hub."

They had tried countless methods to crack it, but the hub left by Vincent seemed like a formatted blank computer, devoid of any data.

"Only the key can activate the hub."

The shadow sighed deeply, and his authoritative voice echoed through the room, "I will restart Operation Key. Does anyone here object?"

No one raised their hand or spoke. The influential figures present had complex expressions, exchanging covert glances. None of them wanted to be the one to step forward.

After a pause, a hoarse voice spoke up, "No objections. I fully support it."

The projection on the opposite side couldn't help but sneer, "Xie Ping, do you have the final say? Can you represent the Xie family of Beijun?"

Xie Lan was the true master of Beijun, and she was no ordinary woman. She had even refused the pass to Utopia. Moreover, Xie Lan still controlled the Azure Phoenix Army, a force that sent chills down people's spines worldwide.

Xie Ping, the magistrate of Beijun, was not invited to the secret meeting today.

Xie Ping retorted coldly, "I can indeed only represent myself, but I can risk my life, can you?"

The person who tried to counter fell silent. Everyone knew that Xie Ping was already in the throes of a terminal illness and had been waiting for a breakthrough in the Eternal Life Project. The mindset of a dying person could be terrifying, capable of anything.

"Lu Qiusuo, what about you?"

Everyone turned to look at another special holographic projection, a large-scale AI.

This individual was also a remarkable figure, the dignified head of the Lu clan, Lu Qiusuo. He had abandoned his physical body, merging his consciousness into a supercomputer, achieving "eternity" in another way.

A line of text slowly appeared: “The Lu clan advocates neutrality and will not participate...”

In the blink of an eye, Lu Qiusuo’s statement paused, as if glitching. The original text disappeared and was replaced with:

“The Key wouldn’t disappear from the Star Network without a reason. Someone is covering his tracks.”

“The Lu clan will participate in the operation.”

With these two taking the lead, others hesitated for a moment before nodding in agreement.

The shadow, still shrouded in darkness, slowly spoke, “How is the intelligence on the key?”

“Yes, yes,” another nervous inspector reported, “This... uh, the key, comes from the lower district and is currently settled in the Northern Base, District B10. The affiliated team is V587, led by an S7-level Attack-type awakener. All team members are A-level, and they have quite a close relationship with the local magistrate.”

“...Ye Zheng’s territory.”

The recent high-profile assassination attempt in B District had naturally reached Utopia. After this incident, the Northern Base became impregnable, with both military and civilians reaching peak cohesion. Whether it was infiltrating agents or launching a direct assault, it became a challenging task.

In the somber meeting room, a smooth voice suddenly emanated from the corner, and the name tag identified the speaker as someone from the Alliance Regional Affairs General Bureau, holding the position of Deputy Director, “Regarding V587 and Song Ke, I have some rough understanding.”

The composed face of Park Jae-woo slowly appeared. As a politically astute figure, he had promptly confirmed and concealed Song Ke’s whereabouts when he discovered it. Park Jae-woo, of course, wasn’t motivated by kindness. It was simply that revealing Song Ke’s origins at that time held no benefits for him, and he had a hunch that Song Ke’s existence could be a trump card, capable of securing greater advantages for him. And indeed, he made the right bet.

“Hmph, if it’s just a rough understanding, then there’s no need to speak, right?” sneered Simon, Park Jae-woo’s arch-nemesis, a middle-aged man with a hooked nose.

“Oh no, Director Simon, I believe you’d be interested. Let me think... this Song Ke once single-handedly killed an S7-level Dual-type awakener, someone called... the Bloody Killer, Punk.” Park Jae-woo nonchalantly adjusted his suit, his expression seemingly oblivious, as if he truly didn’t know that Punk had once been the most loyal lackey of the man opposite him.

Simon’s eyes dangerously narrowed.

*

Garden Apartments.

V587, who had finished a day of hard work, was enjoying a rare leisure moment.

Even though the Awakener Department had assigned a suite to each of them, all the team members preferred to squeeze into Song Ke’s luxurious penthouse.

Fang Zhixu, wearing an apron, was at the cooking counter preparing barbecue. Although the ingredients were all artificially cultivated, the freshness made up for it.

Xu Xing stood on tiptoes, peering into the pot, pointing and complaining, “I don’t want broccoli, and I don’t want carrots!”

“Do you know why you’re not growing tall? Because you’re a picky eater,” Fang Zhixu, with a lollipop in his mouth, said unclearly, “Keep complaining, and I’ll spank you again.”

“You’re the one who’s not tall!” Xu Xing exploded in anger, jumping up to create chaos, and the two of them began a lively squabble.

In the living room, Zhuang Qingyan clicked on the screen, quickly browsing, while Song Ke grabbed his other hand and placed it in front.

The background music of a palace intrigue drama played, with the beauties in distress crying, forming a tangled mess. Song Ke laid his head on Zhuang Qingyan's sturdy thigh, sleeping soundly, his mouth shining with drool, unconsciously wiping it with Zhuang Qingyan's hand.

Zhuang Qingyan hesitated for a moment, then turned his head to look at her, curling his fingertips, but ultimately didn't pull it back.

On the balcony, Lu Xiaoyu rested with closed eyes. His metal arm connected to the small bee terminal, emitting a dazzling gloss. Recently, the consciousness link with the District B terminal seemed to have deepened. To be safe, his anti-intrusion check was changed from three times a week to once a day.

Another terminal next to him suddenly made two "beep beep" sounds, coming from an ancient device in the lower district.

Lu Xiaoyu didn't open his eyes; his metal arm added an interface, and a massive amount of data flashed before his eyes. Two pieces of information were particularly eye-catching.

"I hope your anger has never extinguished."

"Because I have embarked on a journey."

A melodious humming came from the bathroom. Pink bubbles scattered everywhere as Lin Youyou opened her terminal to check the news.

The group chat for the "District B10 High-level Awakener Matching Conference" was exceptionally lively. People were discussing a newly released A-level mission. Despite the staggering reward, so far, no team had accepted it.

"Huangyuan? Isn't that place heavily contaminated with nuclear radiation? Who would be willing to go there?"

“Moreover, there are not many people in District E to begin with. The Zombie King is just a Zombie King; it doesn’t come out and doesn’t bother anyone.”

“The points are indeed high, but it’s not worth it if you have to exchange it with your life!”

“Anyway, our team can’t handle the Zombie King.”

Lin Youyou was about to switch to the system platform to take a look at the mission they were talking about when, accidentally, bubbles blocked her vision. She slipped and fell with a cry, a high-pitched sound echoing as the pain in the tail vertebrae pierced her.

Outside the door, Su Cha heard the scream. He quickly rushed in and, upon seeing the alluring scene in front of him, stood stunned on the spot.

He pursed his lips, turned his head, closed his eyes in one breath, and covered Lin Youyou with a bathrobe. He lifted Lin Youyou princess style with his arms held straight, with no physical contact between them. The distance between them could even accommodate a 120-pound Lin Xiu.

Lin Youyou stared at Su Cha’s reddened earlobes and couldn’t help but laugh with anger: No, is she some kind of snake or scorpion? To be avoided like this.

Supporting her waist, Lin Youyou limped to the living room. Two seconds later, Su Cha followed, looking a bit lost.

“Song Ke’er, wake up, take a look at this mission.” Lin Youyou poked Song Ke’s cheek.

“… How many points?” Song Ke grumpily turned over.

“Enough to propel us to the top of the entire Alliance.”

Song Ke instantly perked up, rubbed her sleepy eyes, and jumped off the sofa. "So many? Let me see."

Two hours ago, the platform released a territory-wide mission: "A-level mission: Suspected appearance of Zombie King in Huangyuan (District E172), all awakeners from various districts are requested to kill it."

Only 4th-level zombies with advanced intelligence could be called Zombie Kings, like the one they killed in Haimen. Therefore, Zombie Kings are extremely rare. Unexpectedly, in just a few months, another Zombie King appeared in the lower district?

This mission was quite suitable for V587. Song Ke wasn't afraid of low-level radiation, Lu Xiaoyu could pilot the starship to save travel time, and Su Cha was familiar with the environment in District E. With so many points, it was enough for them to climb to the top of the leaderboard!

Song Ke decisively clicked to accept the mission, then looked up to remind Zhuang Qingyan.

"Starting tomorrow, you can get off work by yourself, okay?"

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 173.1: Key (16)

Hi, familiar face

"Song Ke'er, let's go," Lin Youyou urged, leaning against the apartment door with her hands crossed.

Her attire today was the same as when they first met, sporting a refreshing sports outfit. Her chestnut-colored voluminous curls were tied into a ponytail, exquisite makeup adorned her face, with plump red lips giving off a hint of her former sweet idol style.

Behind her, Su Cha was carrying two tactical bags with a single hand, he wore black T-shirt and long pants, wrapping around his well-defined and smooth muscles. Military boots landed silently, resembling a poised cheetah ready to pounce.

Xu Xing, with a little yellow duck backpack on his back, fully equipped with sunglasses and a sun hat, was dressed head to toe in designer brands, happily bouncing out the door.

Fang Zhixu shook his head with a tut-tut sound, and the braid at the back of his head swayed back and forth: "Luxurious stuff, roll in the zombie pile, and it all has to be thrown away."

"You're jealous; I've got money!" Xu Xing snorted.

"Can money make you taller? When Tiantian was eight years old, she was already taller than you..." Fang Zhixu muttered.

"Are you really that great? Only 1.7 meters!" After spending a long time together, Xu Xing had long abandoned the innocent and naive image, exposing the true face of a young lion, teasing Fang Zhixu and Song Ke occasionally.

Fang Zhixu blushed, his neck stiff as he argued, "I'm 1.75.6 meters, rounded up to 1.8 meters!"

With a "swoosh," the 2.5 meters tall Lu Xiaoyu's mechanical arms swung by, passing by the arguing duo.

Fang Zhixu and Xu Xing both went silent: "...". This man has such an inexplicable desire to win.

After checking her equipment, Song Ke pulled up the zipper of her jacket and turned to look.

Zhuang Qingyan leaned against the bar, shirt tucked into his pants, two extraordinary long legs casually crossed, silently watching her.

Song Ke was momentarily stunned, suddenly realizing that since she found Zhuang Qingyan in Hua City, this was the first time they were separating for an operation.

"You..." The melancholic mood had just started to rise, and Zhuang Qingyan unexpectedly broke it.

He held his chest in a dramatic manner, tearfully said, "As long as you don't cheat outside, I can also endure being alone in an empty room."

Song Ke remained expressionless, casually donning a hood with an air of indifference. "Let's go."

If everything went smoothly, the round trip would only take three or four days. Why make it so awkward? Even her goosebumps were rising.

The brilliant sunlight pierced through the clouds as a special starship was setting sail. On the outer surface of the cabin, the words "V587" were spray-painted in red and blue, each stroke exuding extravagance. Various types of weapons were graffitied alongside, intertwining in a display of boldness. On a massive billboard, the hotline for ordering Song Clan's spiritual weapons played in a continuous loop.

"Look, it's the exclusive starship of V587! Are they going on a mission?"

"I heard V587 took on the commission from the Huangyuan Zombie King. They truly live up to the reputation of our B10 district!"

"By the way, have you guys bought spiritual weapons? This thing is still on limited edition. I've been squatting in the black market for a week and haven't managed to grab one."

"Cough, cough, actually, I ordered a plum blossom hairpin, planning to propose to my girlfriend."

"Damn, when did you get a girlfriend?!"

Amidst the gazes of numerous awakeners, a silver light flashed in the sky, and V587 departed from the northern base.

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At the residence of the magistrate, an unmanned floating car slowly came to a stop. As Zhuang Qingyan just arrived at the villa entrance, he heard Ye Zimei's roar:

"Captain Song, the starship is public property! How could you... how could you casually spray-paint and modify it, and even put s on it!"

"No, it's not about the division of profits! I can't accept a three to seven split! It's about the bad influence; there has never been such a precedent."

Whatever was said on the other end, Ye Zimei weakly massaged her temples. "You want to save money to buy rhenium? To restore... fine, fine, if it can be restored, it's fine. No need for your compensation."

Zhuang Qingyan's lips curled slightly. Knowing Song Ke as he did, at this moment, she must be tightly holding onto her purse, defending herself with a guilty face.

Yearning began to sprout in his heart, but reason forcefully suppressed it once again.

Zhuang Qingyan exchanged greetings with the exhausted Ye Zimei. With his information already saved in the access control system, he smoothly entered the front hall.

Bai Qi, with both arms covered in numerous steel nails, was engaged in rehabilitation training alone in the courtyard.

"How's it going?" Zhuang Qingyan stopped beside him, his expression indifferent, as if casually inquiring.

"Not bad," Bai Qi nodded.

From the worldly perspective, Bai Qi's fall from S5 to S2 was lamentable, but he had never regretted it. There was no trace of "sympathy" or "pity" in Zhuang Qingyan's eyes. Bai Qi seldom spoke, expressing his gratitude to Ye Zheng for adopting him as a war orphan. Due to his personality, he wasn't articulate, only silently appreciating Ye Zheng's kindness.

After awakening the S-level ability “Determined Resolve” during the apocalypse, his first thought was, “I want to stand in front of General Ye, be his sword and shield.” As for the levels that ordinary people cared about, he had already made psychological preparations and didn’t value them so much.

In the assassination incident, Bai Qi dropped three levels consecutively, delaying time to ensure Ye Zheng’s safety. He genuinely felt that it was “not bad.”

Zhuang Qingyan patted his shoulder. “Old Fang is an orthopedic specialist. If you have any problems, you can always find him.”

“Thank you,” Bai Qi nodded solemnly.

Ye Zheng was practicing calligraphy in the study. Although the aging process couldn’t be reversed, his complexion was noticeably healthier, and his spirits were good. In the first phase of Ning Rong’s clinical experiment, Ye Zheng’s crucial heart underwent short-frequency radiation stimulation. Although it didn’t reach the level of “regeneration” yet, cell division promoted self-repair, and the surrounding organs were functioning normally. Combined with Ye Zheng’s well-adapted S-level physique, there were currently no adverse reactions.

Ning Rong predicted that if the development continued successfully in the subsequent experiments, Ye Zheng could live at least another ten years.

“Has Xiao Song and the others already set off?” Ye Zheng asked without looking up.

“Yes, they left in the morning,” Zhuang Qingyan replied.

“I asked you to stay; there’s no resentment in your heart, right?”

“General, your words are too heavy.”

Originally, Zhuang Qingyan intended to go to the Huangyuan with V587, but it was Ye Zheng who spoke up, requesting him to stay at the Northern Base.

As Ye Zheng dropped his wrist to the pen, the strength penetrated the paper, and he seamlessly wrote two characters with a brush – “Cang Feng” (Hidden Blade).

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t mean to separate or coerce you. I just want you to help me with something,” Ye Zheng explained.

“Please speak, General.” Zhuang Qingyan’s gaze swept over the two characters, his expression impeccable.

Ye Zheng put down the pen and looked at the young man in front of him. This person, intelligent enough and rational enough, had a heart too cold, distancing himself from the world, not wanting to get involved in anything. Without a bit of attachment, he might easily drift towards another extreme.

“A month ago, I asked about your impression of the Northern Base,” Ye Zheng began slowly. “At that time, it seemed quite unfavorable. Has your opinion changed now?”

“Both you and District B10 are very admirable,” Zhuang Qingyan replied affirmatively.

Ye Zheng circled out from behind the desk, his steps steady without the aid of a cane. “People like Xiao Song, awakeners with ideals and pursuits, can’t be stopped from going out to explore. But when they’re tired or in trouble, there must be a place they can return to with peace of mind. Don’t you agree?”

“Do you think the Northern Base can become a ‘home’?” Ye Zheng asked.

Zhuang Qingyan remained silent for a moment, not directly answering. “Song Ke really likes it here.”

Ye Zheng smiled. With the recovery of his strength, the dignity he once held over the world was gradually returning.

“If you stay at the Northern Base and help the old man with some tasks, rest assured, as long as I’m alive, no one can harm you.”

The eyes behind Zhuang Qingyan’s lenses flickered subtly, sensing that Ye Zheng might have guessed something.

Ye Zheng tapped a few times on the terminal and pulled up several thick files. “These days, I’ve had the Ling siblings follow you first to talk about official matters. I’ve been researching the things left by our ancestors, trying to extract some essence to use in practical combat.”

Zhuang Qingyan glanced at it and immediately recognized, “Ancient Civilization Military Strategies?”

“Oh? You’re familiar with it too?” Ye Zheng expressed surprise.

“A little, just a little,” Zhuang Qingyan modestly replied.

Ye Zheng’s lips curled with a smile, beckoning him to come closer.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 173.2: Key (16)

Hi, familiar face

No matter how knowledgeable Zhuang Qingyan was, he was not omnipotent. With Ye Zheng’s experience and wisdom, he was willing to impart some knowledge, making it a valuable treasure for anyone. Unconsciously, the two talked extensively throughout the morning, and Zhuang Qingyan gained a lot.

After taking a sip of tea, Ye Zheng casually said, “Later, go to the City Defense Department for me and supervise the progress of the reconstruction project.”

Zhuang Qingyan hesitated to decline, "General, it may not be appropriate."

"What's inappropriate about it? You did it last time, didn't you?" Ye Zheng dismissed the concern.

"Last time, it was because you were injured, and I temporarily took over. It could only be considered a special circumstance. But today, you are perfectly fine..." Zhuang Qingyan didn't let himself be drawn into it, calmly pointing out the logical flaw.

Before Zhuang Qingyan could finish, Ye Zheng suddenly sighed and bent his waist, "I'm getting old. Can't withstand any excitement. I've been talking for a whole morning, and my legs can't stand straight. The City Defense Department is buzzing with machines, oh my heart, I don't know if it can take it."

Zhuang Qingyan was speechless. He experienced for the first time what it meant to "make one's own hands soft." Helplessly, he responded, "Understood, General."

Ye Zheng instantly straightened his back, his waist no longer sore, and his legs no longer aching. He seemed poised to eat two more bowls of rice for lunch.

Zhuang Qingyan: "..."

He had no choice but to make a detour to the City Defense Department.

The staff there had long recognized Zhuang Qingyan. When they saw him enter, they quickly stood up and greeted, "Good day, Chief Zhuang!"

On the day of the Crow Tide, he had managed the control panel, displaying dazzling and seamlessly coordinated operations, leaving everyone astonished.

Zhuang Qingyan's expression remained cold, "I'm not a chief. Just call me Xiao Zhuang."

"How can that be..."

The employees, being old-timers, loved to observe expressions and guess intentions. Not everyone was qualified to enter the City Defense Department. For example, He Qihong had been the second-in-command for so many years, and she still couldn't make it. She had worked in the City Defense Department since graduation.

Besides Chen Xuerou, who managed for a while, he was the second person in charge. The current young man... was the second person, and the employees secretly glanced at Zhuang Qingyan, murmuring to themselves. It seemed that Ye Zheng had already chosen a successor.

The employee ingratiatingly approached, "Chief Zhuang, I am Old Li responsible for the entry and exit registration..."

"Li Pinggang," Zhuang Qingyan accurately called out his name, with a chilly look in his eyes, "I personally dislike the title 'chief.'"

Chief.

The meaning behind these two words always reminded him of some detestable faces in the upper echelons of the Alliance.

Old Li shot himself in the foot and awkwardly said, "Then... can I call you Mr. Zhuang?"

After coming out, Zhuang Qingyan politely declined the warmly offered assistance from the staff and boarded an unmanned bus alone.

When he approached Ning Rong's laboratory, he suddenly paused.

As an S-level awakener, he was exceptionally sensitive to fluctuations in awakened energy. Zhuang Qingyan felt the gaze of two pairs of eyes on him, scrutinizing and assessing.

The Ling siblings wouldn't be in position so early, so these two people should have been lying in ambush here. It wasn't directed at him; evidently, they didn't know he was an awakener. Relying on their higher A-level status, they audaciously observed him.

Pretending not to know, Zhuang Qingyan continued walking forward as if nothing had happened.

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District E172, Huangyuan.

District E was mostly an ecological landscape area, and Huangyuan was once a dense primitive jungle with complex terrain and rich biodiversity.

The footage transmitted by the drone showed that the land in Huangyuan was now scorched, with everything withered. Giant mutated plants were everywhere, and countless faint red figures wandered and howled among the trees. Even inside the starship, one could feel the harsh environment.

Members of V587, including Song Ke, had all changed into protective suits and isolation masks. Although low-level radiation had almost no effect on her, Zhuang Qingyan insisted that she be cautious until the unknown genes were understood.

The starship descended slowly, and the emitted airflow bent large patches of vegetation. Due to radiation, various indicators on the control panel kept fluctuating.

“Look there!” Fang Zhixu exclaimed.

Under their feet, hundreds of zombies were attracted by the intense movement and came rushing towards them. The group took a sharp breath, staring in awe at the scene before them. It wasn't fear, as V587 was accustomed to storms and challenges; it was just that the appearance of the Huangyuan zombies was beyond their expectations.

Without exception, this batch of approaching zombies all had elongated limbs, entirely blood-red. They were naked, with almost fused facial features, and thin skin revealed clear veins and organ tissues underneath, resembling the “blood zombies” in biochemical movies.

Song Ke estimated that most of these zombies were at level 2 and 3, with particularly strong attacking desires, and no obvious signs of mutant zombies for the moment.

She drew the dual knives from behind and succinctly said, “Clear the area.”

The others jumped down one after another.

Song Ke swiftly maneuvered through the treetops, leaping over the zombies’ heads with the agility of a monkey. With a swift motion, she swung her knife, and blood splattered everywhere.

There were no cameras here, and no other awakeners. There was no need to be cautious; they could kill freely. Even Lu Xiaoyu no longer hid his strength. His six improved mechanical arms danced wildly like snakes, and the integrated spiritual weapons at their ends swiftly harvested the zombies.

Lin Youyou glanced at him, puzzled, “Why haven’t I seen you use your awakened abilities?”

Hackers with awakened abilities had offensive capabilities. For example, they had encountered Lu Xinglan, a hacker whose code could materialize entities with various dazzling and versatile moves. Even Lu Xiaoyu occasionally used his abilities in the lower districts. However, in District B, he seemed to have become completely ordinary, never using his abilities and focusing solely on being a “professional driver.”

Lu Xiaoyu snorted arrogantly as he dispatched the approaching zombies, “Is it necessary?”

Lin Youyou was left speechless and rolled her eyes at him, “Truly a good brother, acting just like Princess Zhuang when showing off.”

These two seemed like they were sealed by a mysterious force. One couldn’t show their face, and the other couldn’t use their awakened abilities.

Song Ke had a thought. She remembered Zhuang Qingyan mentioning that Lu Xiaoyu's awakened ability ultimately revolved around manipulating data. But any data could be traced back, especially in District B where the terminals were connected to the residents' shallow consciousness. Elite hackers like Lu Xiaoyu were highly guarded against this.

Fang Zhixu skillfully dissected a zombie's head and suddenly exclaimed, "Captain, these zombies... don't have crystal cores?!"

V587 looked surprised. The pace of killing monsters slowed, and they checked several bodies, indeed finding no crystal cores.

At that moment, a distant and eerie howl echoed through the woods. The zombies, as if summoned, abandoned their attacks and quickly retreated. Song Ke's heart sank; the only one capable of commanding the zombie horde was the Level 4 Zombie King. Judging from the situation, it had given the order to retreat.

Suddenly, a few figures dashed out from among the trees and, unnoticed by V587, dragged the corpses away.

If V587 was surprised just now, now there's a bit of horror. Group consciousness is not a feature ordinary zombies should have.

"This... Is this also the order of the Zombie King?" Lin Youyou muttered.

Song Ke furrowed her brows. Zombies without crystal cores, a Zombie King that doesn't show itself; what initially seemed like a simple monster-killing mission now appeared more and more mysterious.

"Ah—!!" A heart-wrenching scream echoed from the front in the jungle.

V587 exchanged glances with the team, all a bit surprised. The previous scream clearly came from a human, implying there was another team aside from them.

This kind of challenging and high-risk mission is rarely accepted by teams in District B because of its high permissions and selectivity. They would rather take on tasks with higher returns. However, lower-level awakeners from the lower districts, due to the harsh environment, have a stronger desire for points and sometimes risk their lives to come here.

Surrounding the District E172, C and D districts are prevalent. If nearby awakeners are not familiar with the Zombie King and think it's just a slightly more powerful Level 3 zombie, they might underestimate the task.

"I'll go take a look," Su Cha signaled and blended into the shadows of the trees with his all-black figure.

A moment later, he returned safely, his expression becoming grave. "There are awakeners ahead, around twenty people, with an average level of C. They collided with the retreating zombie horde and got surrounded."

Song Ke raised the back of her knife, tilting her head in thought for a second. "Let's go check it out."

If there's no conflict, they don't mind lending a hand.

V587 quickly approached the scene, hiding in the jungle to observe the battle. Various awakened abilities were chaotically released, strong winds howled, dust flew, and fierce thorns shot through the air. Several awakeners stumbled out, their isolation masks showing faint cracks.

Song Ke focused her gaze at the center and saw a familiar face.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 174.1: Key (17)

Are you sneaking a snack outside?

This was a lower-lying canyon, with waterfalls roaring on both sides and water splashing.

A group of low-level awakeners were trapped in the middle by zombies, frantically dealing with the situation. Bang, bang! Gunshots echoed around, not only failing to deter the monsters but also infuriating them as they retreated. Ferociously, they turned around to attack, and in an instant, three people were knocked down.

Among the more than twenty people, only four didn't look so chaotic. A man in a blue robe manipulated a dozen thorny vines to control the battlefield. Three agile teammates cooperated seamlessly, slashing and killing. Though it wasn't effortless, at least they could protect themselves.

Hidden in the jungle, Song Ke also recognized them. They were their old acquaintance from the Throne Race Competition – “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa.” The figure in blue was Captain Duan Muqi, and the three members were Xiao Chen, Fan Peng, and Qiong Mingcheng.

V587 had dealt with them a few times, and Zhuang Qingyan's original words were, “The whole team is more pragmatic, but Duan Muqi is relatively upright.”

Song Ke's impression of “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” was not bad, and in the end, they were the ones who attracted these zombies. After a moment of contemplation, she signaled her teammates to assist.

“Don't try to trap me with love ~ Let me be trapped in the bone-chilling swamp ~”

Lin Youyou's singing voice began, echoing ethereally in the forest. The ground in the canyon collapsed suddenly, and the zombies involuntarily fell in.

No need for verbal communication, Xu Xing's blizzard followed closely. Under the dual control of two A-levels, the movements of the monster group were forced to slow down. Their blood-red appearance was wrapped in glistening frost, like a bunch of twisted candied haws.

Song Ke and Su Cha jumped into the battlefield, dual blades striking down. Luxuriant giant vegetation collapsed with a roar, carving deep gullies between the swamp and the flat ground.

“Run behind me!” she shouted.

The trapped individuals awakened like from a dream, crawling and scrambling out of the immobile zombie group. Su Cha swiftly cut through the mess, chopping off the tangled roots and branches, piling up numerous obstacles in the gullies. When the swamp and frost lost their effectiveness, seeing the prey had escaped, the zombies lost interest and quickly disappeared into the depths of the jungle.

Song Ke crouched on the huge treetop, watching the backs of the zombies, lost in thought.

Long and slender limbs, agile movements, completely devoid of the stiffness of ordinary zombies, but more like... humans.

She puffed her cheeks, the harder she thought, the more confused she became.

No, she was about to grow a brain. If Zhuang Qingyan were here, it would be great. He was so smart; he would definitely analyze everything immediately.

Song Ke lightly jumped down, and as she turned around, Duan Muqi stared at her intently. "It's you? Thanks for helping."

"You're welcome." Song Ke crossed her hands and sheathed her blades with a casual and graceful move.

Time passed, things changed, and people changed.

Duan Muqi's mood was particularly complex. A year ago, they were evenly matched competitors. Later, V587 won the championship and went to District B. Unexpectedly, when they met again, everything was different. Like an insurmountable barrier, he and his teammates were trapped, but Song Ke effortlessly forced the zombies back. Even though he knew it was wishful thinking, Duan Muqi couldn't help but sigh: If they had been the ones who won back then...

The rescued awakeners gathered around, expressing their gratitude with lingering fear.

"Heroes, thank you! Hey? You guys... look familiar?"

“Uncle, we’re V587. Have you heard of us?” Xu Xing replied with a smiling squint.

“V587? Holy shit, the one who assassinated the Mu City magistrate?”

“I know, the champion of the Ferrara Throne Race Competition!”

“I have a friend in District B who said V587 is famous, able to kill even Level 6 ferocious beasts!”

“Big brother, are you really not looking at the zombie guide and just making things up? Ferocious beasts are at most Level 5!”

The person who was exposed blushed, “I made a mistake, I made a mistake...”

With Zhuang Qingyan absent, Fang Zhixu, who looked “kind,” took the initiative to assume diplomatic responsibilities. He took out several new isolation masks and handed them to the injured.

“Why are you here in the Huangyuan?” he asked.

“To take on that A-level commission. Maybe we’ll get lucky and kill the Zombie King!”

“We’re not after the Zombie King, just hoping to get some loot.” The group spoke in a lively manner.

Fang Zhixu sighed, took the opportunity to enlighten them about the risks of the mission. The survivors, who had just experienced an attack, were already hesitant. After his introduction about the Zombie King and showing past videos, their faces turned pale. They unanimously declared that the A-level commission wasn’t suitable for them, and their lives were more important.

Fortunately, their location was on the outskirts of the jungle, and they could still leave in time. After a while, the crowd dispersed, leaving only Duan Muqi and the other three.

“Aren’t you guys leaving?” Song Ke asked, showing a hint of surprise.

Duan Muqi shook his head, “Not leaving, still a few points short.”

Song Ke asked, “How many points do you need?”

Duan Muqi replied, “A little over 40,000.”

Lu Xiaoyu added quietly, “40,000 points, equivalent to 1200 Level 2 zombies or 200 Level 3 zombies.”

Calculating based on regular monster-killing tasks, reaching 40,000 points seemed distant. It could only be achieved quickly through task rewards. So, despite knowing the immense danger, “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” did not hesitate to come to the Huangyuan after receiving the All-Area Commission.

Ever since Song Ke arrived at Ferrara, this team had been tirelessly climbing the rankings day and night. After a year, their conviction remained unwavering. Even though gaining points in the lower-level districts was more challenging, Duan Muqi and his team were just a step away from the 500,000 threshold to District B.

After careful consideration, Song Ke extended an invitation, “When you have enough points, why don’t you come to the Northern Base?”

Fan Peng, with a round face and a simple appearance, couldn’t help but say, “As long as you’re an awakener, who wouldn’t want to go to the Northern Base? But B10 is the most competitive among the popular districts. Our strength isn’t outstanding, and Aqi said the chances of getting selected are slim.”

Xiao Chen, with a determined face, patted Fan Peng on the shoulder to console him, “Aqi is considering Miao Ying or Baishen, and they’re not bad choices.”

Duan Muqi nodded, “These two areas have relaxed their B-level audits until autumn. We must accumulate enough points by then.”

All members of “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” were at B-level, with Duan Muqi being the highest at B8, and the others ranging from B5 to B7. In the Northern Base, their capabilities might not stand out, especially considering the overcrowded situation in Qianzhan City. Even if they were selected, they would have to wait in line for a long time.

Song Ke turned to exchange glances with her teammates. Everyone more or less guessed what Captain Song wanted to do and nodded silently to show their agreement.

To join the Northern Base, there was another way – a kind of internal recommendation. The success rate would be significantly higher, just like when Yin Xiao invited V587. However, the recommending person had to guarantee the recommended person for five years. Unless the relationship was extremely close or the person had an impeccable character, obtaining a recommendation letter was as difficult as reaching the sky.

“If you really want to come, I’ll write a recommendation letter for you,” Song Ke assured them, patting her chest.

The Throne Race Competition had intense clashes, yet “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” never attacked V587.

Even Zhuang Qingyan praised Duan Muqi for having a “decent character.” The three others also acted with camaraderie – Xiao Chen was steady, Fan Peng was simple, and Qiong Mingcheng, the youngest, had a cheerful personality. Writing a recommendation letter for them wasn’t a big deal, but... she was sure she wouldn’t do a good job. She decided to ask Zhuang Qingyan to do it later.

“Really?” Fan Peng exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with excitement. “It looks like you guys are doing well!”

“Average, just average,” Song Ke waved modestly, then added proudly, “Except for being the top on the Northern Base rankings.”

Duan Muqi and his three companions: “...”

With this newfound friendship, the two teams quickly formed an alliance and proceeded together.

“You guys are too bold, just four people daring to take on an A-level commission?” Lin Youyou casually mentioned on the way.

“Of course not, we’re not stupid. We’re not here to throw our lives away. Aqi has a backup plan.” Qiong Mingcheng’s political savvy wasn’t that deep. He considered them as close friends, and he inadvertently spilled the secret, realizing afterward, “Sorry Aqi, can I say this?”

Duan Muqi sighed. You’ve already said everything. If the other side had malicious intentions, they could easily kill them, and they wouldn’t stand a chance.

However... Duan Muqi glanced at Song Ke’s group. Besides curiosity, there was no greedy expression on their faces.

He didn’t hide anything and took out a device similar to a camping kerosene lamp.

“This is called a Random Anchor Device. I exchanged it from an A6-level anchor-type awakener. After using it, it can randomly teleport up to four people to a specific location, within a range of ten kilometers.”

Random teleportation within ten kilometers was an excellent escape tool. No wonder “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” dared to come to the Huangyuan.

“Good stuff. Any usage restrictions?” Song Ke was quite interested.

“No, but each activation requires adding ‘fuel,’” Duan Muqi pointed to a small groove on top of the lamp, “One Level 4 crystal per use.”

Wow! Using a Level 4 crystal every time, that’s quite extravagant.

Song Ke’s face showed a hint of pain. Even if someone gave her this, she wouldn’t be willing to use it.

Xiao Chen looked serious, “We only have two Level 4 crystals and plan to use it only once.”

Their original plan was to use the Random Anchor Device to escape if they encountered danger, and having a second crystal was just a precaution.

Lu Xiaoyu, on the other hand, showed great curiosity about the Random Anchor Device and asked Duan Muqi to borrow it for studying for a while.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 174.2: Key (17)

Are you sneaking a snack outside?

The desolate jungle of Huangyuan was almost silent, with no birds, no beasts, and even the chirping of insects was sparse. Only the lush mutated plants covered the sky, and after a whole day of searching, Song Ke and the others found nothing. Not to mention the Zombie King, even the previously blood-red zombies seemed to have collectively disappeared.

Qiong Mingcheng couldn't help muttering, “Damn, where did all the zombies go?”

Duanmu Qi thought of something, “It's very similar to the Mirror Lake incident.”

He was referring to the first round of the Throne Race: Finding the “Flag,” where the situation was also like this, with no sign of zombies anywhere.

“But I'm sure this time it's definitely not the City Lord's doing,” Qiong Mingcheng joked.

“Ilya?” Song Ke casually asked, realizing he hadn't heard any news about the super AI for some time.

“Yeah, it seems like he went on a long journey, and now Ferrara is governed by other AIs taking turns.”

On a journey? Song Ke suddenly remembered the time when Ilya insisted on going to Tongwan with them. It seems that this super AI, after acquiring a physical form, has become more and more independent in its actions.

Lu Xiaoyu's wheelchair passed by the talking group smoothly, his tea-colored eyes blinking lightly, his expression unchanged.

It was almost seven o'clock, the narrow sky getting darker. Song Ke and the others gained nothing, and their points did not increase at all. In the end, they found an open space to camp and decided to make do for the night.

"Sister, there are tents over there!" Xu Xing ran down the hill to report.

Song Ke went over to take a look and indeed found many messy tents on the dried riverbed covered with mud and moss. Roughly counting, there were about a hundred tents, resembling a medium-sized team. Everyone looked at each other in surprise. Has someone else been to this radiation-prone area?

Su Cha jumped down to inspect and returned after a moment, saying in a deep voice, "No signs of fire, the tents were not set up temporarily, it's been a while."

He picked up a piece of wood stake with numerous claw marks, "From the construction method, it doesn't look like... normal humans."

If it were humans with wilderness survival experience, they would set up tents in a flat and open windward place. They wouldn't choose a dried riverbed with the risk of rolling stones in nearby canyons. Moreover, the openings faced in all directions without a scientific layout, seemingly just to satisfy the habit of living in groups.

"Not like normal humans? Haha, it can't possibly be zombies, right?" Qiong Mingcheng scratched his head and made a dark joke.

Unfortunately, no one laughed.

“Oh my god! It can’t be, right?” Qiong Mingcheng stared in astonishment. Did zombies really set up these tents?

That night, a blazing campfire lit up the center of the camp, illuminating the camouflage tents. Ghostly shadows lurked in the distant dark woods, and the wind whispered. Everyone was solemn, taking turns on night watch. In the end, the night passed without any incidents.

Oh, there was something – the sound of knocking and banging coming from Lu Xiaoyu’s tent for most of the night. It finally quieted down in the early morning. The pale-faced young man emerged and slipped into Song Ke’s tent next door. They stayed there for several hours, only appearing together at dawn.

When Lu Xiaoyu entered, it was Fan Peng and Duanmu Qi on night watch. Fan Peng, an honest person, didn’t gossip behind their backs despite witnessing the whole thing. He just had a sudden realization about their relationship. Then, he asked in confusion, “Aqi, I remember there were two people in wheelchairs among them?”

Duanmu Qi nodded uncertainly, “They didn’t mention them. Maybe... they sacrificed.”

In the apocalypse, farewells were often commonplace, and Fan Peng made a few remarks without dwelling on it.

Early the next day, Song Ke gathered everyone and issued new instructions, “Continue moving forward. If you encounter zombies, don’t attack. Notify Lu Xiaoyu first.”

Today, their luck seemed better than yesterday. By noon, both Su Cha and Xiao Chen had found wandering zombies.

Lu Xiaoyu spread open his palms, and two mechanical mosquitoes slowly took off, approaching the targets under his control.

A faint mechanical sound arose as the lifelike mosquitoes extended their thin proboscises, “biting” into the translucent skin of the unfortunate zombies. The two unlucky ones paused for a second, looked around in confusion, finding nothing unusual, and lowered their heads again. After wandering around the area, they disappeared again before nightfall.

“What are they doing?” Duanmu Qi asked.

“Locators, with chips inside,” Song Ke said mysteriously. It was an invention they had come up with during a sleepless night, with Lu Xiaoyu handling the practical aspects while she proposed the “mosquito-shaped” design.

Not long after, the moving positions of the two zombies appeared on Lu Xiaoyu’s screen.

“We suspect that these zombies have a tendency to gather,” Song Ke explained seriously. Various signs, such as dragging away the bodies of their kind after death or building tents, indicated that Huangyuan’s zombies had a clear sense of communal living.

“And, they are consciously avoiding humans.”

After Song Ke finished speaking, she paused for a moment. She hadn’t deliberately connected the clues, but when these features were put together... why did it feel a bit familiar?

It wasn’t until nightfall that the two moving zombies finally stopped, surprisingly ending up in the same location. The two teams stealthily navigated through the silent jungle, eventually discovering that the location was a vast, open valley.

Surrounding them was pitch darkness with no light at all, and the group put on night vision goggles. What they saw was an intense green, faces of zombies with indistinct features, countless thin limbs gathered together, forming an endless sea of corpses. Looking from a distance, it seemed like moving ghostly shadows, and the number was impossible to count.

In the center of the zombie sea, there was a distinctively different zombie. Its size was considerably larger than its surrounding counterparts, and although its facial features were uneven, there were clear contours. Judging from its body curves, it appeared to be a female in its past life.

When the other zombies returned, each one would approach it closely, affectionately nuzzling against it before running away in different directions. It was as if the returning children couldn’t wait to be back in their mother’s embrace. What was even more shocking was that there were many small zombies in the

valley, some even shorter than Xu Xing. They were protected by adult zombies, and behind them were tents similar to those seen on the dried riverbed.

Song Ke silently stared at the leading female zombie, gradually understanding. It seemed like this was the zombie king of Huangyuan.

“Are these... really zombies?” Fan Peng’s voice trembled.

The stereotypical image of zombies in the human mind is fierce, grim, constantly craving flesh and blood, irrational monsters. However, the peaceful coexistence of the zombie group before them, an unprecedented scene of tranquility, completely overturned their preconceptions. If this news got out, it would undoubtedly shock the world.

Song Ke sighed silently, a certain intuition gradually becoming a reality, “They are not zombies; they are... the Fallen.”

It wasn’t simply “zombies without crystals.” Due to radiation effects, the humans here didn’t mutate into zombies for some unknown reason. Instead, they became a third species, rejected by both humans and zombies – the Fallen.

Similar to the Braided Head and Dirty Chin that V587 had encountered before, but that time there were only a few scattered individuals, unlike now—

The entire Huangyuan was the headquarters of the Fallen.

Due to the shock, Fan Peng became distracted for a moment, breaking a dry branch underfoot, which rolled down the valley. It was a very faint sound, and considering the hundred-meter distance, it shouldn’t have been noticed.

However, the zombie king in the valley suddenly lifted its head, and its crimson eyes stared straight towards the high ground, emitting a sharp, long howl.

Oh no! Song Ke thought to herself.

Tens of thousands of agile Fallen rushed over, swarming like an endless army of the living dead. In a matter of moments, they surrounded Song Ke and the others, turning them into an isolated island in the sea of zombies.

*

Northern Base.

Zhuang Qingyan didn't see Ning Rong until the next day. He had locked himself in the radiation laboratory for a whole day and night. Despite looking extremely tired, his eyes were bright. As soon as he saw Zhuang Qingyan, he couldn't wait to take off the entire set of isolation suits, "I was just looking for you about the second phase of the clinical plan..."

Zhuang Qingyan raised his hand to stop him, "Dr. Ning, how did you withdraw from the Eternal Life Project?"

Ning Rong was taken aback, "Just... a normal resignation. And all permissions were revoked. Otherwise, my research wouldn't be so difficult. But I didn't sign any contracts to sell myself. You know, when Old Zhuang invited me to join, it was still early, and there was no such thing. If I wanted to leave, they had no reason to stop me."

Zhuang Qingyan took off his gold-rimmed glasses, rubbed his forehead, "So, you voluntarily resigned, and it wasn't He Qihong who recruited you?"

"Of course not. I signed a confidentiality agreement, the kind drafted by the Awakener Department. She didn't know the details of my research."

Ning Rong honestly confessed, "After regaining my freedom, due to financial constraints, I looked for a new place for almost half a year. Originally, I was thinking of going to Baishen. Before applying for an independent laboratory, I happened to see the recruitment notice from the Northern Base. I thought, experimenting where they pay so generously, what's the difference, right? I contacted He Qihong's secretary at that time, what was her name... Ye something Mei."

Zhuang Qingyan tapped his fingertips on the desktop, his eyes sinking into contemplation.

“Is there a problem?” Ning Rong asked in confusion.

Zhuang Qingyan sighed softly, “Dr. Ning, you’re quite old, why are you still so naive?”

Ning Rong: “...” You also know I’m quite old, and now I’m being educated by this younger generation?

Although He Qihong’s personality was not great, she had always been cautious in her actions, with the necessary sense of vigilance.

In the later stages of the Eternal Life Project, the entire project team split into several factions, and the research progress came to a standstill. Many senior scientists were poached by various regions. Zhuang Qingyan originally thought that Ning Rong was also in this situation. If He Qihong had invited him on behalf of the Northern Base, she would surely have cleared any hidden dangers behind Ning Rong.

As a result, Ning Rong turned out to be a freelance scholar who actively offered himself, even idling for half a year. So there was a significant possibility that He Qihong did not realize Ning Rong’s importance. She was probably unaware that he was once a core member of the “Eternal Life Project.” She likely considered him just a renowned biologist. Hence, He Qihong arranged awakener guards for the laboratory to ensure Ning Rong’s safety but didn’t assign anyone to track him. This led to several meetings between him and Ning Rong without any apparent anomalies.

“You’ve been monitored,” Zhuang Qingyan stood straight, speaking in a cold tone.

“Let’s not meet again in the future,” Zhuang Qingyan’s demeanor was icy. “Don’t drag me down.”

His assistant, munching on a piece of bread, walked past, holding a transparent screen, and dropped everything upon hearing Zhuang Qingyan’s scumbag remarks.

Zhuang Qingyan added, “Stay in the laboratory. If there’s anything, contact me online.”

Muttering, Ning Rong said, "I didn't plan to go out. It's you who insisted on calling me..."

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes flickered as he quickly recalled their few meetings. The first time was in this laboratory, amidst chaos, exchanging a few words in haste. Later, they communicated through terminals. The second time was in Qianzhan City, where Ning Rong came and left alone. The third time...

"Ding ding – ding ding."

The temporary terminal, with only communication functions enabled, made a beeping sound, interrupting Zhuang Qingyan's thoughts.

He glanced down at the incoming call, a gentle smile appearing in his eyes.

"Song Keke, has the mission been completed? Are you coming back tomorrow?"

"Uh, about that..." Song Ke's voice sounded a bit uneasy. "It's just... it might take a little longer."

Zhuang Qingyan furrowed his brow. "How much longer? Isn't it three days as agreed?"

"How long will it take?" Song Ke seemed to be consulting someone nearby. Two or three unfamiliar male voices followed, discussing, "District C26, Fenak... quite far. If everything goes smoothly, it'll take around ten days round trip."

"...Ten days," Song Ke felt a bit flustered. "I promise, as soon as possible!"

Zhuang Qingyan's sharp eyebrows slowly lifted, and he casually asked, "Who is talking? Are you sneaking a snack outside?"

Song Ke: "?"

Song Ke was shocked, "No, no."

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 175.1: Key (18)

Kill or Relocate?

The sound of the broken dry branches being stepped on was extremely subtle, but the Zombie King's senses seemed unusually sharp, instantly locking onto Fan Peng's hiding place.

The piercing howl tore through the night sky, and through night vision goggles, countless living dead rushed towards them. The hills were filled with ghostly green shadows, and the terrifying number was enough to engulf Song Ke and the others in a matter of seconds.

Lu Xiaoyu reacted the fastest. Six mechanical arms rotated and extended, sweeping away the first wave.

“Go!” Song Ke took the lead, Su Cha guarded the rear, and the others swiftly retreated. However, as they turned to run, their footsteps suddenly stopped. The movements of these zombies were incredibly fast, and they had already surrounded them from behind.

No way to retreat!

Duanmu Qi raised both hands, and dozens of thick thorns emerged from the ground, not attacking the horde of zombies from all directions, but instead enveloping the group, forming a huge cocoon, temporarily isolating them from external attacks.

The slender hands and feet of the zombies kept hitting, angrily tearing and pulling. After a while, dents appeared on the surface of the cocoon.

“No, there are too many, Aqi cannot hold them alone!” Xiao Chen roared.

Just as he spoke, bang! A bloody hand reached in, wildly grabbing left and right, quickly digging out a bowl-sized hole. Song Ke looked through the faint crack and locked eyes with the Zombie King on high ground.

“Hey! Can we sit down and talk?” Song Ke’s gaze flickered. Based on past experience, fallen ones had a clear consciousness and could communicate with humans.

“We mean no harm!” Lin Youyou also shouted, “Please, give us a chance!”

The Zombie King stared at Song Ke, standing straight at nearly three meters tall, thin and narrow, like a lonely street lamp. Its eyes were full of vigilance and hostility, completely ignoring their negotiation requests, emitting a few short and sharp screams, making the zombie horde even more restless, desperately destroying the thorns.

“No, there’s no way to communicate.” Song Ke sighed, it seemed that the grudge between this Zombie King and humans was deep.

Bang! Duanmu Qi couldn’t bear the pressure, and the cocoon shattered into pieces. The group was exposed under the night sky.

Song Ke reluctantly drew his sword. “Prepare for battle.”

Xu Xing used his ability while moving around, rolling in the mud several times. His famous brand sunglasses and sun hat were long gone. Seeing Fang Zhixu’s leg being grabbed by a zombie and falling to the ground, he rarely didn’t laugh at him, bravely rushing over and using an ice wall to block the fatal blow.

The obstructed zombie’s facial features twisted together, the expression blurry, emitting hoarse howls from its throat.

“Ahhh—?”

Xu Xing was stunned for a moment, as if guided by some inexplicable force, he inexplicably imitated the zombie's appearance, making some strange sounds from his throat. Due to the application of his awakened energy, his clear voice echoed in the dim valley for a long time.

Song Ke sensed that something was wrong and quickly turned her head, "Xiao Xing, what are you—"

She wanted to say, "Didn't you cure your fear of zombies a long time ago? Why are you making such weird noises? And why use awakened energy? Isn't that more stimulating to the zombies?" But the next moment, the scene in front of her left her completely speechless.

As if a spell of stillness had fallen, all the zombies, as if by agreement, stopped attacking, showing a hint of confusion in their movements.

Xu Xing, with a dirty face, persistently continued to shout at the zombies, "Ah ah ah ow!"

Song Ke: "?"

The horde of zombies suddenly woke up, and once again approached. Several small creatures hid behind, showing their teeth, not fierce, but rather cute.

Xu Xing scratched his head and muttered with lack of confidence, "Did I get it wrong?"

He changed his way of shouting, "Ah! Ah ah!"

Song Ke was baffled.

Lin Youyou and the others also looked at each other. After a moment of realization, they suddenly understood. Could this be... the language of the Fallen?

After all, Xu Xing had mastered the strange communication technique with zombies!

The spacious valley fell into complete silence.

The Zombie King propped itself up with both hands, lightly jumping onto a rock. The strange horde respectfully made way for it, and it landed silently. Slowly approaching Xu Xing, its slender figure cast a long shadow, completely covering the petite Xu Xing.

Duanmu Qi and the other three's expressions changed dramatically, just about to defend themselves, but Song Ke stopped them.

She gripped her twin blades, her gaze fixed on the Zombie King, wanting to see what it was going to do.

The Zombie King circled Xu Xing, suddenly leaned its head close, and the uneven facial features pressed against him. It gently sniffed, shook its head, lifted its foot to observe for a second round, looking somewhat uncertain.

Xu Xing pressed his hands against the seams of his pants, nervously frozen, and everyone held their breath.

After a few seconds, Xu Xing gathered courage and tentatively repeated, "Ah ah?"

The Zombie King's hesitant movements abruptly stopped, and then a tearing sound rang out, "Who are you?"

Damn! The zombie can talk!! The expressions on everyone's faces were diverse, revealing their individual thoughts.

Xu Xing struggled to recall and awkwardly called two more times.

This was what Braided Head taught him before they parted in Haimen. It roughly meant "friend."

"Have you seen... our kind?" The Zombie King's every utterance was difficult, with lips barely visible, sounding more like it came from the abdomen.

Xu Xing shook his head first, then hesitated and nodded. Did Braided Head count as one of their kind? But Braided Head looked much better than the zombie in front of him, more human in appearance. However, since they could understand what Braided Head taught him, they should... count?

Explaining the past with Braided Head would be too complicated for Xu Xing, who was just starting to learn “zombie language.” So, he could only switch to human language and enthusiastically recounted the story, using gestures to praise Braided Head and her brother’s “handsome” appearance, particularly the dirty chin.

V587 remained calm, as if this situation was nothing unusual.

“Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” was in shock, and Duanmu Qi’s eyelids twitched. He had almost thought he was on the brink of death just now. He could never have imagined that things would take such a turn, with this kid chatting with zombies. Who would believe it if word got out!

After Xu Xing finished speaking, he looked expectantly at the Zombie King.

“Leave... don’t appear again.” The Zombie King fell silent for a moment, issuing a vague warning. It turned around, uttered a few indistinct sounds, and the surrounding zombie horde shifted, creating a narrow passage.

Including Song Ke, everyone displayed surprise. The Zombie King wasn’t planning to attack? Just letting them go like this?

Under numerous watchful eyes, the group cautiously left the valley.

It wasn’t until they had walked a considerable distance, confirmed that the zombie horde didn’t follow, that Fang Zhixu rubbed Xu Xing’s furry head with a lingering fear, “Stinky kid, not bad, mastering a foreign language.”

“This time, thanks to you, Xiao Xing.” Song Ke also didn’t hesitate to praise.

“Hehe.” Xu Xing proudly straightened his chest.

The group found another open space, set up a campfire, and rested. Song Ke looked at everyone and took the initiative to speak:

“As for whether to continue the commission, let’s vote by raising our hands.”

Xu Xing spoke first, “I object! Ada is not a bad guy!”

Lin Youyou puzzledly exclaimed, “Who is Ada?”

“Ada is the Zombie King,” Xu Xing said matter-of-factly.

“...You’re really casual, giving people nicknames.” Lin Youyou felt speechless. “I also vote against it because of Lin Xiu. I now unconditionally accept the diversity of intelligent species. I can’t treat the fallen ones as just zombies.”

Su Cha glanced at her and succinctly said, “I’m with you.”

Lu Xiaoyu shrugged indifferently, “Abstain.”

Fang Zhixu, having treated his wounds, lowered his pants, “I’m with Xiao Xing.”

V587 had a unanimous opinion. It was just an A-level commission, even if they couldn’t complete it, there were other ways to climb the rankings.

When it came to “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa,” conflicting opinions arose.

Xiao Chen’s tone was low, “I support continuing the commission. Sorry, but the points are too important to us.”

Fan Peng and Qiong Mingcheng expressed, "We'll listen to Aqi."

Duanmu Qi looked at Song Ke, "Even if I vote in favor, it won't change the final result, right?"

Currently, the votes were tied at four to four.

Lu Xiaoyu made a disapproving sound, succumbing to his old habit of disliking losing, "Change my vote, I'm voting against."

Four to five, this time they won, right?

Chapter 175.2 – Key (18)

Kill or Relocate?

However, Duanmu Qi knew that the actual vote count didn't matter. The real decision-maker was Song Ke because their team didn't have the ability to kill the Zombie King.

"Yes," Song Ke nodded solemnly, "I've decided to abandon the commission. When it gets light, we'll leave."

This A-level commission was completely different from what she had originally expected. They could kill the Zombie King, but the one they just encountered was clearly the leader of the Fallen from Huangyuan, likely without crystal in its brain, not really considered a zombie. Moreover, they were let go.

"Understood," Duanmu Qi sighed, "I didn't have much hope to begin with. So, let's... give up."

"Aqi..." Xiao Chen looked at him with concern.

Duanmu Qi held Xiao Chen's shoulder, his gaze firm, "Believe me, we'll think of another way. We'll definitely earn enough points."

The atmosphere fell silent. Suddenly, Song Ke spoke, "I have a question. Why is the mission description about the Zombie King?"

She pulled out the commission description, which clearly stated: "A suspected appearance of a Zombie King in Huangyuan."

"Can the system make a mistake?" she asked.

"No," Lu Xiaoyu said confidently.

The commission system was jointly managed by the artificial intelligence group in District B. Humans might make mistakes, and a single computer might have a chance of error, but dozens or hundreds of super AIs working together would not make such a basic mistake.

"Um, could there be another Zombie King in the Huangyuan?" Fan Peng asked whimsically.

"Not very likely," Duanmu Qi shook his head slowly. "From the layout of the valley, these zombies live in tribal form, keeping to themselves. If there really is another zombie king, there would be a deadly battle between them until one survives."

Duanmu Qi paused at this point. "Actually, I've been wanting to ask since earlier... what do you mean by 'Fallen' that you mentioned?"

Song Ke was startled and suddenly remembered that the Alliance had not publicly acknowledged the existence of the Fallen. Their information came from Zhuang Qingyan, an extraordinary bug. So, the platform's definition of a "suspected zombie king" seemed somewhat understandable.

The articulate Lin Youyou explained the difference between the Fallen and zombies to Duanmu Qi and the others.

Song Ke listened quietly, still feeling strange inside. Why not use “special zombie” or “mutant zombie”? Why insist on calling it a “zombie king”? This artificially raised the threshold and excluded many qualified teams, didn't it?

The awakeners in District B all found the mission a thankless task, but V587, strong and experienced, was willing to take on this challenging task. She was just about to ask her companions when she turned her head and saw Lu Xiaoyu focused on the screen.

“What are you looking at?” Song Ke leaned over to Lu Xiaoyu.

“When Xu Xing was negotiating, I installed a few mobile cameras,” Lu Xiaoyu replied.

On the screen, several zombies huddled together, trembling incessantly. Their skin was as thin as paper, and their grotesque internal organs were exposed. Even without sound, one could hear the painful wails. In just a few minutes, as if a balloon had been popped, the bodies of these zombies turned into a pool of pus and blood before everyone's eyes.

The Fallen leader called “Ada,” along with other zombies, sat together, silently watching the death of their kind.

“How could this happen?” Lin Youyou exclaimed.

“Probably because the radiation in Huangyuan is too high,” Fang Zhixu, with a medical background, pointed to his isolation mask. “Even though the Fallen can endure stronger radiation than humans, there's a limit. If it exceeds that limit and the exposure time is too long, it will inevitably cause catastrophic damage to their bodies.”

“Why don't they leave then?” Fan Peng asked in confusion.

Qiong Mingcheng muttered to himself, “It's not that easy. Leaving would only make it worse, right? At least here in Huangyuan, no one usually comes in, but outside, the attitude towards zombies... is merciless.”

Indeed, for the Fallen, the most suitable living environment was in remote areas away from human activity. Even though the radiation in Huangyuan was intense, outside was the territory of humans, with no place for them to belong. So, they chose to stay here quietly, waiting for death.

Song Ke looked through the screen at the leader, its slender arms embracing a few small peers, a fleeting expression of sadness on its profile.

...

When the sky was faintly bright, Qiong Mingcheng's exclamation shattered the tranquility.

"Aqi, Captain Song, quickly look, the commission has been updated!"

Song Ke, inside the tent, sat up and quickly opened the terminal to confirm. Indeed, the content of that A-level commission had changed.

"A-level Commission: Please kill or relocate the special zombies in Huangyuan (District E172). Remaining total: 13,299."

Depending on different choices, different branches appeared below. Song Ke clicked on the relocation option: "Alternative location: Fenak (District C26)."

She thought for a moment, not fully understanding the intricacies, and decisively lifted the tent flap, "Did you all receive the message?"

Members of V587 nodded, having encountered commission changes before, such as the side mission in the Elderly People's Nation or the city defense mission when the Northern Base upgraded from B to A. So, they were not too surprised.

Only Lu Xiaoyu seemed thoughtful, "Isn't it a coincidence? Captain just decided to leave, and the commission changes?"

“Not a coincidence, it was me,” Duanmu Qi admitted candidly. “I organized the information last night, uploaded it to the system, hoping to see if there’s any turning point.”

The platform could issue private commissions, and it could also collect information provided by the commission recipients, automatically making analysis and adjustments.

Lu Xiaoyu glanced at Duanmu Qi, noncommittal, still frowning and staring at the platform page, tapping his fingertips incessantly.

“Now that the commission has changed, will you still do it?” Duanmu Qi took a deep breath, looking hopefully at Song Ke.

The change from killing to relocating offered two different completion methods. The latter seemed simpler, but Fenak’s location was near the eastern coast. Leading tens of thousands of Fallen, resembling zombies, through almost half of the Alliance territory—wasn’t that too exaggerated?

Song Ke hesitated.

...

“That’s how it is,” Song Ke’s explanation came through the terminal, short of breath.

Zhuang Qingyan slightly lowered his eyes, silent.

“You’re not speaking, do you object?” Song Ke asked cautiously.

“No,” Zhuang Qingyan paused, “I’m thinking... about Fenak.”

Why was Fenak specifically chosen as the alternative location? Compared to its original name, it had another prominent title in the Alliance.

Lozan (District B25) and Fenak (District C26) were collectively known as the Loak Region. It was once prosperous, but fifteen years ago, a severe nuclear explosion occurred, forcing the area to be abandoned due to persistent radiation. It became an ignored ghost district.

Transferring the Fallen from Huangyuan to Fenak seemed reasonable. The radiation in Fenak had diluted over fifteen years, still unsuitable for human habitation but within the Fallen's tolerance range. Compared to Huangyuan, it was practically paradise.

But for Zhuang Qingyan, Fenak held special significance. It was where the Fire Seed Project's laboratory was located, where Ming Zhi escaped with LAK0017, and more importantly... it should be a secret forever buried.

Zhuang Qingyan regained his composure and sighed helplessly, "Song Ke, how do you plan to move tens of thousands of zombies? Will you use a starship with V587's name printed on it to lead the way and then use a loudspeaker to announce, 'Zombies passing through, bystanders please disperse'? Little ancestor, do you want to make a spectacle throughout the entire Alliance?"

Song Ke completely missed the sarcasm in his words and sincerely agreed, "Great idea!"

With V587 leading the way, wouldn't that avoid conflicts? Zhuang Qingyan was truly impressive—he quickly resolved the issue that had been bothering her!

Zhuang Qingyan choked for a moment, "..."

He was defeated by Song Ke's thought process. He loosened his collar with one hand to catch his breath, "Have you asked them? Are they willing to go with you?"

What Song Ke wanted to do couldn't be described as anything less than mind-blowing. If someone with a weaker ability, like an owl or something, tried it, they wouldn't be able to handle it.

"Not yet. I'll negotiate with them later," Song Ke replied.

"...Forget it. Regardless of whether the negotiations succeed or not, wait for me in the same spot."

“You’re coming?!” Song Ke’s eyes sparkled.

“Yeah,” Zhuang Qingyan smiled, “If I don’t, you might pierce through the sky.”

“Where did you get that idea?! I’m consulting everyone’s opinions, it’s very fair, okay... Anyway, I can handle it with my ability.”

“Yes, yes, you can handle it with your ability. It’s my fault for being useless. I missed you,” Zhuang Qingyan interrupted her, the depth of his peach blossom eyes curved with longing.

“Song Ke, I missed you. I’m coming to find you.”

The chirping sparrows suddenly fell silent. After a while, Song Ke stammered, looking around and changing the subject, “Oh, um, I’ll go negotiate with Ada.”

Click. The terminal was hung up.

Song Ke stood still for two seconds, slowly raised her hands, and covered her cheeks.

So hot.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 176.1: Key (19)

“History’s strongest zombie tide is coming”

Before setting off for Huangyuan, Zhuang Qingyan paid a visit to the official residence of the magistrate and had a closed-door conversation with Ye Zheng for a long time.

No one knew what they talked about, but in the end, Ye Zheng nodded and granted a few days off to this “new appointee” who was the subject of many rumors.

A silver-white starship zoomed by, with the dark night outside the porthole. In the cabin, under the bright yellow reading light, Zhuang Qingyan’s profile looked like a meticulously crafted perfect work of art. He was focused, fingers moving non-stop, and in his hands was a small precision instrument connected to a light screen, with the top bearing the logo of Qinglan, resembling a white egg.

This was retrieved from Wu Yarou’s spatial necklace, a basic model, not connected to the internet, with average functionality, but excellent confidentiality that could only be unlocked with Qinglan’s internal special methods.

Ling Yan sat across from him, staring at him for a long time, and took the initiative to speak, “Are you sure you just need to deliver it to Huangyuan?”

Ling Yue, after checking the autopilot route, sat down next to his twin brother and tossed him a bottle of special drink. Then, she glanced at Zhuang Qingyan, “We don’t have any missions recently. For safety reasons, we can continue to protect you.”

Although they were not clear about the abilities of the man in front of them, allowing two S6-level top-tier personal guards showed that it was Ye Zheng’s direct order, so they had to be extremely attentive in carrying it out.

“No need,” Zhuang Qingyan didn’t look up, his thin lips curved slightly, “The safest place in the world is by Song Ke’s side.”

The Ling siblings, caught off guard by this unexpected statement, exchanged glances.

Ling Yue, feeling uncomfortable, touched the chicken skin bumps on her arm. She was straightforward and said what was on her mind, “Handsome guy, with your, um, relationship with Song Ke... can you say a few good words for us? Anyway, that kidnapping was just following orders. My brother and I don’t want to be on bad terms with her.”

As the crisis at the Northern Base came to an end, the reputation of V587 soared. Now, the Ling siblings' visits to the Awakener Department were particularly awkward, but they were not affiliated with He Qihong. They had merely naturalized and wanted to integrate quickly, following the leadership's task assignments and executing them step by step.

"It's possible, but the decision is up to her," Zhuang Qingyan said indifferently.

Ling Yue, with her mixed-race appearance, smiled and whispered to her brother, "How about that? I told you 'The Anecdotes' was true, right?"

Zhuang Qingyan turned off the light screen, giving a final glance at the small central unit that stored research data on organ regeneration and some Fire Seed projects. Of course, the experimental subjects were excluded, and he set permissions so that only Ning Rong could activate it.

"Give this to Dr. Ning."

Zhuang Qingyan looked quietly out the porthole, with six hours remaining until they reached Huangyuan, expected to arrive before midnight.

These past two days, whether at the Northern Base or on the eve of departure, he no longer felt the scrutiny. The two prying gazes outside the laboratory, perhaps intended for Ning Rong, had coincidentally implicated him.

Navigation alert: they were passing through a dark cloud with lightning, thunder, howling winds, and countless hailstones pounding down, causing the starship to sway slightly.

In the flash of lightning, Zhuang Qingyan's expression became obscure and unclear.

The future was uncertain.

...

Six hours later.

A strong airflow rushed past Song Ke's ears, blowing her shoulder-length hair into the air. The resilient isolation suit clung to her body. With one hand, Song Ke held onto the shaking face mask, looking up at the starship hovering down.

The cabin door opened, and a tall and straight figure appeared against the backlight. He, too, was wearing an isolation suit and face mask. Instead of choosing a stylish free fall, he descended steadily down the soft ladder.

Song Ke, with a faint dimple, unconsciously wore a bright smile and thought to herself: Princess Zhuang is truly something, even descending needs a ladder.

Zhuang Qingyan, with swift steps, had eyes only for Song Ke. Unable to restrain himself, he opened his arms and walked towards her with long strides, ready to embrace the slender figure he had missed for days. Just as he was about to hug her, someone in the crowd exclaimed:

"Oh, here he comes." Lu Xiaoyu raised a mechanical arm and naturally shook Zhuang Qingyan's left hand, swinging it up and down.

Su Cha glanced at his open arms, a hint of confusion flashing across his face. He was not used to Zhuang Qingyan's sudden warmth, but he still pursed his lips and gave his right hand a high-five.

"Pfft! Hahahaha!" Lin Youyou, who witnessed the entire scene, had her mouth twisted, laughing heartily until she couldn't straighten her waist.

Zhuang Qingyan: "... Who wants to shake hands and exchange pleasantries with you guys? Can't you have a bit of situational awareness?"

He stiffened for a moment, then quickly composed himself, as if nothing had happened, and stood in front of Song Ke. His fingertips itched, and considering the occasion, Zhuang Qingyan refrained from any overly affectionate gestures. Instead, he simply helped Song Ke brush away the dried leaves from her hair.

“How did the negotiations go?” he asked.

Song Ke’s cheerful little face instantly wrinkled into a frown. “Not well at all. Complete failure.”

The upgraded A-level mission seemed very simple on the surface, with only three steps to complete: first, persuade the fallen ones led by Ada to leave; second, escort the fallen to migrate to Fenak; and third, submit the task.

Song Ke never expected to get stuck on the first step.

The first negotiation was attempted by Song Ke alone. Choosing the wrong moment, losing members of her kind made Ada in a bad mood. As soon as Song Ke reached the valley and hadn’t said a word, Ada discovered her, angrily roared, and then a horde of zombies rushed over to beat her up. It was a genuine “beating.” They didn’t intend to kill her, just drove her away with balls made of mud and plant leaves. Song Ke, feeling embarrassed, ran away with a dirty face.

In the second attempt, having learned her lesson, she sneakily hid in the treetops, opened a loudspeaker, and earnestly advised:

“Ada, how about changing your place of residence?”

“Have you heard of Fenak? It has less radiation, no people, especially safe. Come with me.”

“There, you won’t encounter... uh, won’t encounter zombies, so you won’t have to feel sad anymore.”

“Ada...”

Feeling tired of talking, Song Ke picked up a row of drinks, took a sip, crossed her legs, and assumed a posture for a serious discussion.

Rustling sounds came from all directions, and Song Ke suddenly turned her head. Amidst the vast canopy, numerous pairs of bright red eyes stared viciously at her, emitting low, hoarse roars from their

throats. Oh dear! These zombies can climb trees! Song Ke slipped on the ground, nearly falling, and after a series of leaps, she clumsily escaped by grabbing vines.

The zombies left behind in the area curiously picked up the drink bottles and took a sip. Excitedly, they communicated with their fellow zombies.

On the third attempt, Song Ke, with the help of translator Xu Xing, finally explained their intentions. Ada stared at them without speaking, and Song Ke keenly sensed that she seemed hesitant. There might be hope! However, before the excitement could fade, Ada let out a low growl, and dozens of small blood zombies swarmed over, similar to wild monkeys in Rainbow Cloud City. They pinned Xu Xing to the ground, grabbing everything, leaving only a pitiful pair of yellow duck shorts.

Experienced in escape, Song Ke slipped away quickly. Ten minutes later, when she returned, she faced Xu Xing's reproachful and resentful gaze.

"Sister, why did you run away by yourself?"

Song Ke stuttered, "I'll go back and buy you new clothes, again."

Xu Xing, teary-eyed, felt that Song Ke had changed. She must have been influenced by that person surnamed Zhuang. In the past, her sister would have definitely saved him!

On the fourth attempt, both teams mobilized, taking turns to persuade, yet they returned without success.

Ada looked at them warily and shook her head. "Humans... don't trust."

After hearing her pitiful recounting, Zhuang Qingyan calmly rolled up his sleeves and chuckled, "Understood, leave it to me next."

His deep gaze swept over the four people from Duanmu Qi, recognizing them as the "food thieves." Showing no outward reaction, he nodded reservedly.

However, Duanmu Qi did not recognize him. The Zhuang Qingyan they had encountered before was weak, pale, and entirely dependent on a wheelchair. He had no presence within V587. But the man before them was tall, upright, full of vitality, wearing a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, speaking with a cold and arrogant tone. They heard that he was a “foreign aid” from the Northern Base. The moment he appeared, he brought immense pressure, making it impossible for them to underestimate him.

After understanding the current situation, Zhuang Qingyan made a decisive decision, “I will discuss a plan with Song Ke. We’ll set out at six in the morning after dawn.”

“Go where?” Duanmu Qi was momentarily confused, but he saw V587 on the opposite side looking perfectly natural, and even Song Ke nodded in satisfaction.

“Sorry, I didn’t make it clear. I forgot you might not keep up with the train of thought,” Zhuang Qingyan said with the aroma of tea filling the air. “We’re heading to Fenak.”

“...,” Duanmu Qi was speechless. Were people from District B always so infuriating when they spoke?

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 176.2: Key (19)

“History’s strongest zombie tide is coming”

Zhuang Qingyan briskly walked towards Song Ke’s tent, but before entering, he thought of something and lifted his chin towards Lu Xiaoyu. “Hey, come in by yourself. Do we have to wait for you?”

Lu Xiaoyu snorted lightly and followed him in.

Lin Youyou extended her finger, waving it in front of Fan Peng’s eyes. “What are you looking at?”

The honest Fan Peng’s face instantly turned red. “Nothing... nothing...”

He quickly got up, turned around, and almost bumped into Duanmu Qi.

Lin Youyou followed his gaze and happened to see two men and a woman entering the same tent. She shook her head with a wry smile, "Well, the gossip in our team is getting more and more absurd."

...

Inside the tent, Zhuang Qingyan took out a brand-new light screen and threw it to Lu Xiaoyu. With a serious tone, he said, "Currently, it seems that the fallen leader is very distrustful of humans. So, when your focus is on 'taking them away,' the plan is difficult to execute."

Song Ke tilted her head, thinking. It did seem that way. Every time she mentioned taking them away, Ada would become hostile.

"So, what should we do?" she asked.

"We don't need to intervene directly. We'll present the advantages and disadvantages, let her take the initiative," Zhuang Qingyan replied.

Song Ke's puzzled expression finally earned Zhuang Qingyan's long-awaited chance. He lightly poked her cheek, "You said she has a strong sense of kinship and high intelligence. I believe she can make the best choice for her group."

*

In the quiet valley, the melancholic atmosphere lingered. On this night, eight more zombies exploded due to excessive radiation, adding to the somberness. Countless burying their own kind gathered together, some with numb expressions, not yet understanding what death meant, while others wailed and roared in frustration. Their lives were like flowing sand in an hourglass, visible to the end at a glance. When the countdown ended, no one could resist the arrival of fate.

In the slight commotion, a drone wobbled its way closer to the sky. "Snap!" The flickering light screen landed on the ground, and the zombies roared in vigilance, circling around the unidentified object, occasionally reaching out their claws to scratch it. Ada gave two low calls, and one of the zombies picked up the light screen and brought it to her.

After observing for a moment, Ada carefully opened it. Suddenly, the sound came from the light screen, causing the surrounding zombies to retreat in fear. A holographic projection lit up, and the Alliance map slowly unfolded before their eyes. A deep and pleasant male voice, reminiscent of a news broadcaster, clearly explained, "Currently, the radiation in Huangyuan exceeds 21%, and it is rapidly increasing at a rate of 2% per year. In a year, it will reach 23%, at which point all life will cease to exist."

Without warning, a grim scene appeared: countless animals and plants lying on the ground turned into ashes. The small zombies cowered in fear.

"Huangyuan has lush vegetation and a flat terrain, but District B is overcrowded. According to the latest information, the Alliance is considering a large-scale cleanup operation and plans to deploy a weather simulation system here in the future as the new homeland for survivors."

In isolation suits, the exploration team, accompanied by heavy excavators, brutishly entered the jungle, destroying the ecosystem. The zombies howled angrily.

"In comparison, District C26, Fenak, has been abandoned for fifteen years due to its harsh environment, located in the remote east, with no attention for years. The radiation value is expected to stabilize around 17% in the next five years."

Representations of Fenak slowly appeared, with vast gray expanses everywhere, dust-filled air, and an absence of birds and beasts.

The zombies stared blankly at the deserted area, and their fused facial features made it hard to discern their expressions.

"After daybreak, we will leave for Fenak." The pleasant male voice spoke with determination.

The last image was a clear route map and a massive countdown, with red flashing dots representing the current location of the light screen.

Ada extended her fingertip, swiped the light screen, and the program automatically played in a loop. When it reached the end, the route map and countdown appeared again.

She pressed the light screen face down on the ground, finally shielding herself from the distressing images. However, it seemed that there was still an illusion in front of her. The small red dot on the map blinked, connecting to a place called hope.

*

At exactly five o'clock, the sun gradually rose. The morning mist retreated from the forest, the first rays of golden dawn spilled down, illuminating the overshadowed Huangyuan.

A brightly painted starship was slowly ascending.

"Will they really be able to keep up?" Fan Peng asked anxiously.

"I don't know." Lin Youyou lazily yawned and leaned against Su Cha's back to catch some sleep.

"Aren't you worried at all?" Duanmu Qi glanced at her.

"Of course, I'm not worried." Lin Youyou's red lips curved slightly, and she pointed casually with her eyes closed. "See, in our team, we have a top-tier intellect, a top-tier warrior, and, well, myself, a top-tier beauty. Even if this plan fails, we can think of something else."

Duanmu Qi fell silent without words.

"Here they come," said Lu Xiaoyu, who was at the helm.

Duanmu Qi's group stood up and crowded by the porthole to look.

Behind the starship, at a distant and endless distance, a blood-red tide rolled towards them. The radiance behind them even surpassed the rising sun on the horizon.

With slender limbs, entirely blood-red, hideously ugly monsters, adult agile zombies carrying small ones on their backs, vigorously chased the starship. The leader running at the front occasionally took out a light screen to confirm, and the red dot on it kept moving towards the destination.

“They really... are coming,” Duanmu Qi felt a mix of emotions, and for some reason, tears welled up in his eyes. This awe-inspiring scene far exceeded the significance brought by the points, and he might not forget it for the rest of his life.

Song Ke clapped her hands proudly, “Get ready! Clear the way! Remember our slogan!”

“V587! Safeguarding your travels!” The team members, giving a face, answered in unison.

In the open wilderness, a dozen or so awakeners were driving away zombies. Overhead, a starship flew by, and a nimble figure flipped to the top, raising a large megaphone and pressing the pre-recorded dissuasion message Lin Youyou had prepared:

“Attention, people on the ground! Fallen ones are passing through. Please do not attack, drop your weapons, be cautious, our friends from afar are very friendly, please do not be afraid. If you have any questions, feedback to our V587! We are here to coordinate!”

“What’s going on?” Someone shouted in confusion.

Following that, the ground rumbled, and the group of awakeners changed their expressions drastically, panicking as they ran to the top of the hill. Then they watched helplessly as thousands of blood-red creatures passed by, completely submerging the zombies they hadn’t had time to kill.

After a moment, the dust settled, and the monsters disappeared, leaving behind several zombie corpses.

The blaring megaphone faded into the distance, “Our friends from afar say they’re sending you a little gift as a gesture of goodwill!”

The awakeners on the hill were bewildered:

“What the heck is that?”

“V587.”

“What?”

“Oh, I said, it’s written on the starship, V587.”

Within a day, the news of “V587” leading a legion of monsters spread throughout the lower-level districts, and various sensational reports emerged:

[“History’s strongest zombie tide is coming, human shelters may be destroyed at any moment!”]
[“Traitors! V587 leads thieves in, betraying all of humanity!”] [“Entering the Study of Zombies: Exploring the possibility of humans commanding zombies using V587 as an example.”] [“Two or three things that must be said about V587 and the fallen ones.”]

Most cities were in confusion and chaos, unable to come up with effective countermeasures. Fortunately, Song Ke had evacuated and was commanding in real-time, preventing any malicious incidents. Ada, with her kind, focused solely on the journey, remained indifferent to the external rumors.

By the second day, the public opinion shifted, and there were fewer denunciations against V587. People turned their attention to the peculiar red zombies and wondered about their origins.

The migration route happened to pass through Haimen. Lu Xiaoyu contacted the municipal hall in advance, explained the situation, and the magistrate, Yan Biao, who had a good relationship with V587, immediately issued a city lockdown order, forbidding residents from wandering outside.

However, the fierce people of Haimen couldn’t sit still. If they weren’t allowed to go out, they brought out stools, guarding the first line of defense, cracking sunflower seeds and gossiping, “Heard today there’s some fallen people passing through.”

“They’re called the Fallen.”

“Don’t know, what’s that? Won’t they come in?”

“Don’t worry, we’ve strengthened all three defense lines.”

“This bunch of clueless guys, if they dare to come in, see how I handle them!” Wang Hu, holding a beer bottle, his big gold chain shining brightly, waved his hand with great spirit. They had long moved into a large 500-square-meter apartment, and each of them had a spiritual weapon, with a formidable aura that no one dared to provoke.

“They’re coming, they’re coming!”

With the exclamation of the guards, residents of Haimen stretched their necks to look. Overhead, a cool starship swiftly passed, and the massive fallen ones crossed the plains, congesting the cross-river bridge. Astonishingly, they didn’t even glance at the city gate and disappeared in the dust in an instant.

“Oh my god, is this shooting a movie...” muttered someone from another area.

The people of Haimen suddenly realized the situation. They threw sunflower seeds away, took out their terminals, crazily filmed the scene, and uploaded it to the star network, making a good profit from the traffic.

The human species is inherently diverse. Along the way, there were people from Haimen who joined just for the excitement, and others with malicious intentions hoping to take advantage. Ignoring the warnings from the megaphone, they secretly followed behind the fallen ones, intending to kill a few stragglers for some points.

Unexpectedly, as soon as the attackers released their abilities, the group of monsters didn’t scatter like ordinary zombies. At the front, Ada suddenly turned around, emitting a piercing scream. Thousands of fierce blood zombies swiftly changed direction, cooperating seamlessly, and instantly devoured the attackers mercilessly.

Song Ke hung on the cabin door with one hand. Before she could jump down to assist, the crisis had already been resolved. She curved her eyes, shouting loudly, "Ada!"

Ada seemed to know that Song Ke was calling her. Running cautiously, she looked up with vigilance. Song Ke gave her a bright smile and a thumbs-up.

Ada didn't respond, but her closed nostrils moved slightly.

So, Song Ke saw a clear expression of "snorting" on her uneven face.

Song Ke: "???"

What does that mean? Was she being mocked by Ada?

Five days later, District C26, Fenak, was just around the corner.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 177.1: Key (20)

Never bully dogs

On the vast wilderness, the vast and mighty blood-red Fallen howled and swept across, stirring up rolling dust.

Duanmu Qi and his three companions each drove off-road vehicles, maintaining order in the rear of the strange group, preventing any Fallen from falling behind midway.

Song Ke, with a coat cushioning her bottom, sat at the cabin door scolding, sounding like she was quarreling with someone. Occasionally, when her voice rose, she unconsciously straightened her posture, even curling her toes.

Zhuang Qing Yan sat not far behind, a few strands of loose bangs on his forehead blown messy by the wind. The thick eyelashes covered a pair of smiling eyes as he quietly watched Song Ke's back, watching her inflate like a pufferfish due to her own anger.

Alone in the Northern Base for a few days, Zhuang Qingyan appeared outwardly composed but harbored growing darkness within. He seemed to have returned to the state before the apocalypse, living aimlessly without purpose, walking without a soul, maintaining perfect social interactions with false enthusiasm. However, he couldn't experience the emotions of the people around him. He displayed a strong maladaptation to normal social life and interpersonal relationships, like an out-of-control car bumping along the edge of steep cliffs, ready to derail at any moment.

When Zhuang Qingyan stood at the highest point of the City Defense Department and looked down at the multitude, the control center was within arm's reach. For a moment, a pathological personality floated in the air, cold and disdainful, looking down at the countless figures below, constantly questioning him: Why should you save them? What connection do you have with these people? You are not him, you cannot be a savior! Now, just input a simple command, and let this city be destroyed in your hands!

His fingertips unconsciously typed out a letter. Fortunately, his rationality returned in the next second. He decisively pressed the delete key and turned around to leave.

Psychopath, Zhuang Qingyan silently uttered a word.

This was the diagnosis he received during his youth. He had suppressed it well since awakening his ability. However, after a sudden and unexpected upheaval, he buried all emotions in his heart, always wearing a smile on his face that no one could see through. Over the years, his behavior and actions were no different from those of normal people, but unexpectedly, in just a few days, they deteriorated abruptly.

Zhuang Qingyan calmly explained to Ye Zheng that his current condition was very bad and he couldn't continue with the work. He needed to go in search of the "calming agent." Ye Zheng stared at him for a long time, perhaps having heard something from Xie Lan, ultimately agreed.

The moment he saw Song Ke, the destructive desire and weariness in Zhuang Qingyan's heart were miraculously smoothed out. Sacred hymns echoed in his ears, and his soul felt fulfilled, calming down after a long time. In his eyes, the sun high in the sky was not the true one; it was the backlit Song Ke.

He opened a bottle of water and handed it to Song Ke's lips, speaking gently and tenderly, "Are you tired? Do you want to take a rest?"

Song Ke took a couple of sips following his hand, shook her head, and lifted the horn with deep meaning, "Ada, even as a fallen, one should be grateful..."

Ada, running swiftly, was irritated. Amidst her busyness, she raised her head angrily, baring her teeth, "Ah—!!"

A light tapping sound came from the cabin wall. Zhuang Qingyan turned around, and Lu Xiaoyu gestured at him.

Understanding that he had something to discuss privately, Zhuang Qingyan nodded silently. The two of them walked to the front cabin one after another.

Lu Xiaoyu opened the little bee terminal of Song Ke, skillfully infiltrating the commission platform. In the vast sea of data, Trojan programs were quietly operating, attempting to bypass the supervision of District B's artificial intelligence and steal backend information. Although it took some time, Lu Xiaoyu, being a top-notch hacker, did it perfectly and covertly.

"I've checked. The second time is a targeted release," Lu Xiaoyu pointed to the top-level A-level commission and affirmed.

Zhuang Qingyan contemplated with narrowed eyes. Changing from a whole territory commission to a targeted distribution near Huangyuan for awakeners? This way, not only were there multiple completion methods to choose from, but the connected regions were also restricted, eliminating 99% of the awakeners in the process.

"What about traces?" He wanted to know if there had been any tampering.

"None," Lu Xiaoyu said.

Zhuang Qingyan chuckled, "Is it that you didn't find anything, or there really are no traces?"

Lu Xiaoyu expressionlessly replied, "Of course, there are no traces. Do you think I'm you? Even repairing the T014 takes fourteen days."

Zhuang Qingyan: "...". Is it interesting to say it over and over again?

"After that idiot (specifically referring to Duanmu Qi) uploaded the data, the system adjusted the task content. Both the analysis process and processing paths align with the thinking pattern of artificial intelligence, with no abnormal data whatsoever," Lu Xiaoyu's tone remained steady.

But Zhuang Qingyan knew him too well, "Your expression seems to suggest otherwise."

A slight snort escaped from Lu Xiaoyu's nostrils, "Even if the idiot didn't act on his own, this commission will eventually point to District C26."

"How so?"

"Because even if all the data is normal, there's still a possibility. Suppose the artificial intelligence handling the commission has no 'thinking' process at all, but is directly given commands."

Zhuang Qingyan suddenly raised his eyes.

Lu Xiaoyu spoke each word distinctly, "—I think 'she' is involved."

Zhuang Qingyan neither agreed nor disagreed, "Do you have evidence?"

"None, just intuition," Lu Xiaoyu's response was firm.

Zhuang Qingyan rhythmically tapped his fingers, not responding with his usual retorts, "Where does your intuition come from?"

“From Huangyuan to Fenak, the number of commissions along the way decreased by two-thirds, including the most common private commissions,” Lu Xiaoyu’s expression was unusually serious, “It’s like someone deliberately clearing obstacles. The entire task, from the beginning of the release, the Zombie King, the Fallen, killing or relocating... it all connects. Each step is a carefully designed trap. Only by stepping into it can you understand the true purpose of the other party.”

Zhuang Qingyan’s fingertips moved slightly, and he wrote down a series of words in the air. Lu Xiaoyu quickly recognized it as “Mother.”

“Coming after you? Didn’t hide your tail well, got discovered?”

During the time when Song Ke was kidnapped by He Qihong, Lu Xiaoyu connected to District B’s terminal using S-level ability for data tracking. Although he immediately hid and erased all information in the consciousness of the super AI, the fact that he was fully exposed still inevitably got confirmed.

“Hiding like this all the time isn’t a solution. Why not find some time to go back to Erjia and get rid of her?”

Zhuang Qingyan’s demeanor was casual, as if he was talking about something inconsequential.

“‘Difficult the first time, easy the second’. You can’t miss this time, can you?”

Lu Xiaoyu glanced at him. It was rare to hear such ruthless words from Zhuang Qingyan’s mouth, but upon second thought, this was his true nature.

He vaguely said, “...Soon.”

In the only failure of his life, he paid a painful price, rendering him unable to walk independently. He was willing to lie in wait, only seeking a single, lethal strike.

“Just now, those were just my speculations. If the other party comes for me, I am confident I can handle it, but in case the target is you...”

A true friend is a true friend. The friendly atmosphere lasted less than five minutes. Turning around, they began bantering with each other.

Lu Xiaoyu asked lightly, "Can you handle it?"

Zhuang Qingyan's lips tightened into a straight line. For some reason, those two agents who were following Ning Rong left a faint haze in his heart.

"You have six legs, right? If they come for me, you should be the first one to run."

Lu Xiaoyu looked surprised. "No way, did you really get discovered? Did you learn nothing from your elective courses?"

Zhuang Qingyan shook his head slowly. "Not sure."

After so many days, everything around him remained calm. If the target was him, wouldn't it be better to strike when he was alone at the Northern Base or even on the way, rather than allowing him to return to Song Ke's side?

Lu Xiaoyu understood and said knowingly, "So you were scared and hid behind the captain, begging her to protect you, a notorious wanted criminal."

Zhuang Qingyan glanced at him faintly. "Song Ke... still doesn't know."

To explain his identity, he couldn't avoid the past of the Fire Seed Project. Song Ke had already forgotten those painful memories, living carefree until now. Zhuang Qingyan never made up his mind on whether to tell her the cruel truth because Song Ke was his son, and he didn't want to take away her innocence and happiness.

Or maybe, let it go for now, he sighed in his heart, adding casually, "Don't talk nonsense in front of her."

Lu Xiaoyu paused, and a suspicious dissociation flashed in his eyes.

“You’re hiding something from me,” Zhuang Qingyan narrowed his eyes. This unusual behavior from him wasn’t a rare occurrence.

“No, dear friend,” Lu Xiaoyu said with an unchanged expression. “Is your trust in me so fragile?”

“I don’t have that kind of trust in you. Mental ability can also extract memories. Do you want to be the first to try?”

“My firewall tells me it doesn’t want to.”

Cold awakened energy surged forth, colliding head-on with the silver code wall. Two formidable S-level forces clashed in the air.

Bang—!

The cabin door was forcefully pulled open, and Lin Youyou, with a charming face, led three people behind her, all with angry expressions.

“Argue if you want, make noise if you must, but don’t joke about awakened energy. I’m telling you guys, be considerate to us A-levels. It’s a headache!”

“That’s right! It’s so uncomfortable!” Xu Xing huffed.

“Fight, go ahead and fight. I refuse to treat any injuries caused by internal disputes,” Fang Zhixu mocked.

“Continue fighting when we get back. We’ve reached Fenak.” Even Su Cha showed disapproval.

Song Ke put away the horn, clapped her knees, stood up, and turned to see her team members gathered together, staring at each other. Concerned, she asked, “What’s going on? Are you fighting again?”

Zhuang Qingyan gave a deep look at Lu Xiaoyu, pointed at him with his finger, silently threatening, "You wait for me."

Lu Xiaoyu, unperturbed like a dead pig not fearing boiling water, shrugged his shoulders in a proud manner.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 177.2: Key (20)

Never bully dogs

Ten minutes later, the starship was the first to enter the Fenak city area, and a navigation prompt appeared.

"You have entered the radiation-affected area. Please be cautious, do not stay for an extended period."

The sky was filled with thick gray fog, murky dust particles penetrated into the respiratory tract. The visibility around was very low, abandoned buildings loomed indistinctly. Lu Xiaoyu switched to manual control, slowing down the starship in the city to avoid accidentally colliding with skyscrapers.

"My awakened energy is more abundant now." Lin Youyou clenched her fist, sensing changes in the magnetic field within her body.

Low-level radiation could stimulate abilities to some extent. For awakeners A-level and above, Fenak's current concentration was just right. However, they were still not suitable for prolonged exposure to the air.

The starship landed on the rooftop, V587 changed into isolation suits and masks, jumping onto the main road, patiently waiting.

Duanmu Qi and his group parked the off-road vehicle on the side of the road. After a while, Ada led her kind to arrive. Separated by a hundred meters, the blood-red horde stopped abruptly, filling the streets and alleys, establishing a clear boundary between them and Song Ke's group.

Ada growled softly, and two small zombies ran towards Song Ke, like cheerful little monkeys.

Xu Xing's eyes widened. These two zombies, one wearing a small yellow duck sun hat and the other in a brand-name T-shirt, not to mention being quite well-fitted, were both taken from him! The memory of that night when he almost ended up naked was vivid in Xu Xing's mind.

Thud! The light screen was thrown back in front of Song Ke.

"Ah ah ah ah." The little zombies squealed and gestured wildly, then turned back to stand beside Ada.

"No need to return it, consider it a gift," Song Ke generously tossed it back. A screen was something she could afford; Ada was too polite.

Ada's bright red eyes glanced around, and she did not accept Song Ke's kindness. With a "snap," she raised her hand and threw it back. Song Ke wasn't prepared to catch it, so the screen, having experienced a tumultuous journey, flew backward and landed on the ground with a crack! The screen displayed a spiderweb of cracks.

Song Ke picked it up with a heartache and scolded, "Ada, this is expensive!"

Ada's uneven facial features moved, vividly rolling her eyes.

Zhuang Qingyan cleared his throat, "Song Ke, there's a locator in the screen."

Song Ke was puzzled, "Huh?"

Immediately, she was rendered speechless, "I forgot."

Ada, worthy of being the leader with intelligence comparable to the Zombie King, was indeed very smart. Keeping this screen would expose their group's location to humans. Therefore, after reaching their destination, she decisively returned it to Song Ke.

Ada looked up into the distance. There were no towering jungles here, no giant mutated plants. The vast expanse was filled with the ruins of the city, and the air quality was poor. However, her kind seemed fascinated and excited. The constant tingling sensation in their skin, present due to prolonged radiation exposure, diminished. Even the zombies, who were afflicted with radiation sickness and on the verge of death, stood up, marveling at their own veins and limbs.

Undoubtedly, Fenak's environment was suitable for the Fallen to survive, and humans didn't deceive them.

It was a new home, a source of hope.

Ada gracefully leaped to the top of an abandoned building, emitting a distant and long howl. All the zombies looked up at her.

Then, as if understanding her command, they dispersed in all directions, blending like droplets into the ocean, disappearing into the depths of the gray mist in an instant.

Treacherous and cunning humans and zombies without intelligence were not their companions.

The remaining journey could only be walked by the Fallen themselves.

"Tha... thank...you" Ada looked deeply at Song Ke and the others, then hoarsely said.

Then, with a leap, her slender figure melted into the thick fog.

"Goodbye, Ada." Song Ke waved sadly, feeling a sense of loss.

The red dot on the screen stayed in place, and Song Ke lost track of Ada's location. However, she believed that Ada could lead her kind to survive.

After the last zombie disappeared from their field of vision, Song Ke clicked to complete the mission.

This A-level mission was almost entirely taken care of by V587, and the rewards were astonishing. Their ranking instantly surged to the first place in the entire Alliance.

"Three Grandsons and One Grandpa" also had some soup and earned 110,000 points, far exceeding the threshold of 500,000, securing their place in District B with ease.

"We're first!" Song Ke happily bounced around, hugging each team member one by one. Finally, she jumped into the arms of Zhuang Qingyan, who held her tightly.

The terminals of Lin Youyou and others started beeping: there were changes in the top ten rankings. An announcement would be made on the mission platform. Now, proudly hanging at the top of the New Asia Alliance leaderboard was "V587," with a substantial lead in points.

In the Northern Base's mission group, there was a lively discussion.

Yin Xiao was the first to speak up:

"Please Call Me S Xiao: @Song Ke, the best in the world. Congratulations, Captain Song."

"Does anyone have plum blossom hairpins in stock? Will pay a high price: @Youyourap trainee, you're amazing!"

"Zhao Yuqing: Congratulations, congratulations, bringing glory to the Northern Base."

"Moon.Lin: Congratulations, from me and my brother."

“Thank you all.”

While Song Ke was replying to each message, Duanmu Qi stepped in front of her. Xiao Chen, Fan Peng, and Qiong Mingcheng also followed, expressing their sincere thanks. If it weren't for Song Ke leading them on missions and a bit of luck, they might not have reached the required points before the arrival of autumn.

Song Ke remembered something, “By the way, the recommendation letters...”

“Someone is here,” Su Cha frowned slightly.

Dozens of strong-figured awakeners emerged from the corner, surrounding them. The leading man, in his thirties, with a piercing at the corner of his eye, looked fierce. After glancing around, he whistled provocatively at Duanmu Qi.

“Brother, just finished a mission, right? We're here too, part of the achievement. How about sharing some points with us?”

Points could be circulated in two ways: signing a transfer agreement witnessed by the platform, with the system extracting a certain intermediary fee, or converting them into rewards through private missions. However, the latter couldn't specify the beneficiary and relied on completing tasks to obtain points.

After V587 had been pushing for the leaderboard for so long, it was the first time they encountered someone directly trying to snatch points from them.

“...Who are you guys?” Song Ke blinked, bewildered and speechless.

The group opposite had varying strengths, from A to D levels. They all seemed to be from the lower-level districts, displaying an unfounded confidence as they brazenly attempted a robbery.

“They are bounty hunters,” Duanmu Qi said solemnly.

Bounty hunters sounded glamorous, but in reality, it wasn't a favorable term. This label specifically referred to a group of bandits who took risks for points or Alliance coins after the apocalypse. They were ruthless, disregarding any means, and their sole driving factor in all actions was profit.

There was an information gap between B and C districts, and these bounty hunters clearly didn't recognize V587, who had just risen to prominence. Instead, they arrogantly shouted at Duanmu Qi because he had casually mentioned the words "500,000 points" earlier.

The leading bounty hunter greedily sniffed the air, his expression intoxicated, "I smell the scent of gold."

Lin Youyou shook her head and chuckled, "Have you guys not been keeping up with the news lately? Even as bandits, you should stay informed about current events."

"Sorry to have made you laugh. We'll take care of this," Duanmu Qi said.

As soon as he spoke, thick thorns snaked towards the group, instantly trapping more than ten people, including the boastful leader.

"Xiao Xing, lend a hand. We're in a hurry," Zhuang Qingyan urged softly.

A1-level Xu Xing was quite formidable against this group of novices. He lifted his right hand, and a hailstorm descended. The bounty hunters' limbs turned icy, and their movements gradually slowed down. Some were pierced by the fierce thorns, while others were swiftly dealt with by Xiao Chen and others, targeting their throats.

In less than ten minutes, dozens of bodies lay on the ground, none left alive.

Fang Zhixu searched around but couldn't find even a valuable 3rd-level crystal. He sighed in disappointment, taking off his gloves. As he was about to say something, he saw everyone's expressions change dramatically, prompting a quick retreat.

Fang Zhixu looked puzzled, "What are you guys hiding from?"

The next moment, he suddenly turned around, and the bodies on the ground were rapidly expanding, bursting into a fountain of blood in an instant!

Bang! Bang! Fragments of flesh and organs sprayed out like a fountain, and the strong smell of blood hit them. Song Ke pinched her nose and approached, handing Fang Zhixu a towel because he had unknown intestines hanging on his head.

“You guys are heartless...” Fang Zhixu stared at her for a while before reluctantly taking it.

Just as Song Ke offered a comforting smile, her expression suddenly froze. She turned back, staring in a certain direction with a serious look.

Thump, thump, the clear sound of footsteps came from the depths of the gray mist, echoing in everyone’s ears.

Who could it be this time? Another new bounty hunter?

Amidst the attention of the crowd, on the rooftop of a building across, a middle-aged man with a suit, mixed-race features, and a hooked nose slowly appeared. His eyelids were drooping, and he looked proud as he gazed down on everyone, speaking, “Are you Song Ke? The S7-level strong attack-type awakener.”

Song Ke replied politely, “Yes, that’s me. And you are?”

“Half a year ago, you killed my favorite dog,” the man said.

The man’s shiny leather shoes stepped over the blood pool, leaving half a clear footprint. “I’ve been looking for you for a long time.”

Zhuang Qingyan and Lu Xiaoyu exchanged hidden glances, both frowning.

He came for Song Ke? Could it be that all their speculations were wrong?

Song Ke looked innocent, “How is that possible? I never bully dogs.”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 178.1: Key (21)

Long time no see, Uncle

Ten days ago.

District A1, Central Court.

In the spacious conference room, empty and void of any person, several holographic projections sat or stood on both sides of a long table, engaged in hushed conversations:

“S7 level is rare, but not unique.”

“As far as I know, besides the publicly known Song Ke and former Special Operations Unit member Punk, both Azure Phoenix and Vulture have two internally known figures each, right?”

Xie Lan, the leader of Azure Phoenix, was not invited to today’s secret meeting. Everyone turned their gaze towards the end of the table, where the highest-ranking officer of the Sixth Division of Fuerche.

He didn’t activate his holographic projection and spoke with a hoarse voice, “It’s a tradition in Vulture that only death can reveal the code names.”

In other words, he wouldn’t disclose any information as long as those two S7 levels were alive.

Others exchanged glances, tacitly understanding, and no longer pursued the matter. Unlike Azure Phoenix, a regular military force, the Sixth Division of Fuerche (Vulture Unit) specialized in intelligence

and assassinations. Offending these rats in the sewer could lead to a grim fate, and one might not even be aware if their throat was silently slit one day.

“There are indeed many S7 levels, but as for S-level dual attribute, so far, only one has appeared in the entire Alliance, and that is the Bloody Hunter, Punk.”

Park Jae-woo gazed towards the main seat, a fleeting desire for supreme power flickering in his eyes: “Mr. Gu, after Punk was expelled from the special operations team, he sought refuge under Commander Simon and has been a loyal dog under his command... serving diligently and wholeheartedly.”

“This is the recording of Punk’s death, and the one who killed him is Song Ke.”

The participants sat up straight, their attention fully focused on the screen. The video provided by Park Jae-woo came from the miniature camera inside Punk’s confinement collar, cutting off any “irrelevant” parts and leaving only the final scene.

As the image lit up, it was filled with the impact and shock of a first-person perspective. Song Ke, wielding the Overlord Spear, aggressively advanced with a deathly expression. The two clashed with powerful abilities, and Punk, unable to withstand, retreated. Song Ke first pierced his intact right eye, then severed his hands and feet, ultimately forcing Punk to self-destruct.

The brutal combat prowess left everyone in a bone-chilling silence, sinking into a prolonged contemplation.

“For this person, is there a possibility of surrender?” Mr. Gu, the head of the meeting, asked calmly.

A profound silence followed, and no one dared to answer.

After a while, a certain official nervously said, “This S7 level comes from a low-level district, and I’m afraid... it may be challenging to control.”

Punk’s death might not be of great significance, but it proved one thing: Song Ke’s strength far surpassed everyone’s imagination. Intelligence indicated that she came from the impoverished digital

area, shrouded in mystery, with unknown parents, and had never received any favors from the Alliance. Yet, she was inseparable from the Key, making it challenging to persuade her.

Song Ke was like a ticking time bomb, ready to become the greatest obstacle to the Reboot Plan at any moment.

Mr. Gu sighed deeply, "What a pity."

The attendees fell silent and bowed their heads. This former leader had already made a decision, and unfortunately, the Alliance was about to lose an S7.

"The only one who can kill a dual ability is another dual ability."

Simon, with a hooked nose, stood up with a gloomy expression. He noticed that Song Ke's right arm had been blown off before but quickly regained combat capability. Simon coldly glanced at the smug Park Jae-woo, a despicable and shameless person who deliberately brought up the "only S-level dual ability in the Alliance." He had long sensed something was amiss and dared to hide such important footage until now, building his own ladder to success.

Simon chuckled inwardly. Let it come; let's see who will be the ultimate winner. He respectfully bowed to the main seat, "Mr. Gu, no one understands S-level dual ability better than me. I am willing to personally confirm the opponent's second ability."

*

Fenak City.

Simon, dressed sharply in a suit, stopped walking forward and couldn't appreciate Song Ke's cold humor.

He aimed at the bounty hunter's body and, without warning, it exploded several times. Deep red blood sprayed into the air like a fountain and showered down.

“Do you remember now?” Simon “kindly” reminded.

In Song Ke’s pupils, the fireworks-like bloodlight reflected, and the familiar scene gradually made her realize.

—Blood explosion, Punk’s ability.

Oh, it’s really a dog. She killed a dog, and the owner came for revenge?

Simon’s gaze swept over Zhuang Qingyan and then returned to Song Ke. “You’ve caused me a lot of trouble.”

After Punk’s sudden death, Simon lost his “executioner,” and with no one to handle the dirty work, he was tied up and oppressed everywhere. His political rival, Park Jae-woo, took advantage of the situation and rose steadily.

“Is it you who led us here?” Song Ke frowned and asked, “The fallen of Huangyuan, did you release the bait?”

Simon smirked sinisterly but didn’t answer.

Swoosh, swoosh—slight sounds of breaking air.

Su Cha reacted quickly, pushed Lin Youyou aside, and swiftly rushed forward like a whirlwind. He turned around and delivered a fierce side kick, and with a clatter, the chain with high-voltage electricity was kicked away.

“Damn, have some shame, launching a sneak attack!” Lin Youyou cursed loudly.

Since he was discovered, Simon gave up the pretense. He raised his hand, and more than ten figures jumped down from the rooftops on all sides, three of them S-level, and the rest A-level.

The entire street was covered with the bright light of abilities, and mixed awakened energies, under the influence of radiation, collided and roamed recklessly.

The V587, all S+A level, managed to endure, but the “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” were on the verge of collapsing, their vision darkening, cold sweat flowing. The four of them resisted the overwhelming pressure with all their might.

“Step back,” Song Ke helped them block and said, “This has nothing to do with you; we’ll handle it.”

She slowly drew the twin blades from her back, the cold blades pointing forward, aiming at those three S-level individuals.

At first glance, Simon had the numerical advantage, but V587 showed no fear. Lin Youyou took the initiative, and an ethereal singing voice resounded. The chaotic mist of the blade descended, thickening the surrounding fog. Both sides lost sight, unable to see each other.

Indeed, the opponents lost track of Song Ke and the others, but V587 could “see” them clearly because they had an S-level mental awakener in their ranks with exceptionally keen senses. While Zhuang Qingyan directed, Xu Xing laid down ice rings, and Su Cha released poison.

Despite the assailants being quite cautious, under Zhuang Qingyan’s calculations, they still stumbled like headless flies, willingly walking into traps. Legs frozen and unable to move, they then convulsed and fell to the ground, pierced by sharp ice blades.

Rumble, rumble—!!

Continuous gunfire erupted, prompting Fang Zhixu to sprint desperately. Tall office buildings collapsed around him; anyone a fraction of a second slower would be crushed into pulp.

An awakener carrying a mortar cannon maneuvered for support. Lu Xiaoyu, who had disappeared since the start of the battle, suddenly peeked his head out from the thick fog. His six mechanical arms, like claws, swiftly dismantled the core components, rendering the cannon silent in an instant.

The agile Lu Xiaoyu spun around, waved his sleeve, and took away crucial parts from the enemy.

Su Cha appeared mysteriously, constantly reaping lives. Once injured, he vanished into the mist of blades, only to reappear with wounds already healed, thanks to Fang Zhixu's treatment. Under Zhuang Qingyan's directing gaze, the infiltrators' every move was exposed, and V587 collaborated seamlessly, effortlessly dealing with the A-level opponents.

With the odds against them, it was a crushing victory. V587, the team ranking first on the Alliance scoreboard, lived up to its reputation.

The three S-level individuals gained no advantage. Even when working together, they couldn't withstand Song Ke. Amid the chaotic intervals of abilities, Song Ke resisted their attacks and, with a kick, toppled the first person. She then kicked the opponent's chest, causing it to collapse. The twin blades crossed, and the second person's head was chopped into a gory mess. Flames erupted, burning Song Ke's shoulder, but she seemed impervious to pain, silently grabbing the last person by the neck and snapping it with a crunch.

A piercing roar echoed, and Song Ke abruptly turned around. The awakener with the concave chest staggered to his feet, blood vessels bulging all over, veins popping. He charged towards the fog where Zhuang Qingyan and others were located. Song Ke realized he intended to self-destruct and hurriedly rushed to stop him.

Simon closely watched the actions of the two, his eyes bursting with a dazzling light.

In the nick of time, the dying S-level twisted his body, the rapidly swelling blood sphere abruptly shrinking, changing direction eerily. Song Ke's pupils contracted. This person wasn't going to self-destruct! It was too late for any reaction; she could only dodge to the extreme. The ball of light grazed her abdomen, splashing blood.

Song Ke thrust a knife through the back of the opponent. The person's mouth curled into a cold smile as he slowly and hoarsely said, "For the future of Utopia..."

"For your ghostly future," Song Ke coldly interrupted, beheading him with a backhand swing.

She touched the wound on her abdomen, blood flowing incessantly, staining her hands crimson.

All of Simon's men brought in had fallen, but he remained unfazed. His gaze remained fixed on Song Ke.

"Your life will end today. I will sing a dirge for you in advance," he declared.

"So much nonsense." Song Ke raised her hand and threw a blue blade, piercing Simon's heart. However, the expected scene of flesh and blood flying did not happen. Simon's figure swayed as if shattered glass, disappearing on the spot.

Song Ke was momentarily stunned, then realized that because of the fog's concealment, she hadn't noticed. This person wasn't a physical entity; he only appeared through illusion ability. No wonder he didn't dare to approach for fear of revealing himself.

But... wasn't he seeking revenge for the dog? Did he just run away like that?

Song Ke pursed her lips. Even the "favorite dog" was just saying nice words.

Zhuang Qingyan hurried over and knocked on her forehead. Thump! With a stern expression, he pulled out a bandage to stop the bleeding.

Despite the cut on her abdomen, Song Ke acted as if nothing happened. However, when her head was knocked, she complained with a hint of grievance, "That really hurts!"

Zhuang Qingyan carefully wiped away the blood splatter on her cheek. "Go back and whine. Let's leave this place first."

As Fang Zhixu swiftly cleaned up the battlefield, Lu Xiaoyu had already activated the starship.

After a moment of thought, Song Ke turned to Duanmu Qi and the others, "Originally, I wanted to give you a ride, but now, it's better to go your separate ways."

She wasn't sure if the crisis was over, and she didn't want to involve Duanmu Qi and the others.

"See you at the Northern Base," Song Ke nodded at them before leaving.

After the two teams hastily departed, the bodies of over ten awakeners, like the bounty hunters', suddenly burst into blood fireworks. Faint fluctuations of awakened ability dissipated in the air.

...

Inside the starship, the injured Song Ke was firmly pressed onto her seat to receive treatment. She spread her hands and feet, revealing her injured abdomen. While petting Xu Xing's furry head, she drank water from Zhuang Qingyan's hand. She even rested her lower legs on Lin Youyou's knees, enjoying a massage from the beautiful older sister.

She waved her hand casually, "I'm really fine, not hurting much."

"Don't move around." Fang Zhixu pressed down her eager head, swiftly cleaning the wound. A clear, white ability flowed in, but it seemed to be sucked into a bottomless pit, having no effect. It was the first time he encountered a situation where his healing ability was ineffective, and his brows furrowed tighter and tighter, "Why isn't it working?"

Fang Zhixu brought another injured person, Su Cha, and treated him effortlessly, even healing the minor scratches on the back of his hand. He muttered to himself, "This works pretty well, doesn't it?"

Perplexed, he looked at Song Ke. The gruesome wound inflicted by the S-level was like a stagnant pool of water, resisting any external treatment.

"I've seen this kind of injury before," Su Cha unexpectedly spoke, "The last time was... during a mission in the Rainforest. Special bullets were used, causing non-stop bleeding from the wounds, and they couldn't heal no matter what."

During that mission, everyone except him died. Su Cha clenched his fists tightly, his spine slightly trembling.

Lin Youyou held the back of his neck, stroking it in a comforting manner, and Su Cha gradually loosened his clenched fists, returning to calmness.

“The ability that wounded the captain is probably similar to those special bullets, making all healing ineffective.”

“The heart is dark enough,” Fang Zhixu spat.

If Song Ke were an ordinary awakener, there would be no solution to this situation; she could only bleed to death.

Fortunately, Song Ke’s second ability kicked in just in time. The originally deeply visible wound slowly healed, and it was estimated that it would scar over in a few hours.

Zhuang Qingyan lowered his eyes, pinching Song Ke’s finger bones, lost in thought.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 178.2: Key (21)

Long time no see, Uncle

Suddenly, from the cockpit, Lu Xiaoyu clicked his tongue, “We’ve got trouble.”

Everyone looked up and was surprised to find that, through the thin fog, they had unexpectedly returned to the location where they had just fought.

“Navigation malfunctioned?” Zhuang Qingyan frowned.

“No,” Lu Xiaoyu quickly checked, “the device is working fine.”

He thought for a moment, then turned off the automatic mode. "I'll drive manually, you guide."

Zhuang Qingyan had seen the map before; his memory was almost photographic. Upon hearing this, he sat in the passenger seat, acting as the manual navigator.

An hour later, V587 returned to the starting point.

"Could it be a ghost wall?" Lin Youyou exclaimed.

"It's an awakened ability," Zhuang Qingyan said in a deep voice.

He opened the hatch, and bodies lay scattered on the ground. In the distance, the abandoned city's horizon stood oddly, like a mirage in the desert. The skyscrapers on the edge were half normal, while the other half were pieced together with elevated walkways.

"S-level territorial ability, 'Blood-Red Building Blocks.' The wielder can control the blocks within the territory, stitching different scenes together by changing their positions. However, activating the ability requires life force as a sacrifice," Zhuang Qingyan explained slowly.

"Do you still remember those bounty hunter bodies? They should be the driving medium; the more people die, the larger the range of the building blocks."

"I have a question," Lin Youyou turned around and glanced. Song Ke had expended some awakened energy due to injuries and was now sleeping soundly with closed eyes and slightly open mouth. She lowered her voice, "The person just now, did he really come for Song Ke?"

The more Lin Youyou thought about it, the more strange it seemed. "Even if he didn't know that Song Ke had already advanced, trying to kill an S7 with those people is just a joke, right?"

"What's the point of trapping us here?"

Zhuang Qingyan looked at her without saying anything.

Lin Youyou looked embarrassed and scratched her cheek. “We heard your conversation with Lu Xiaoyu. Actually, we all heard it.”

Zhuang Qingyan was not surprised. Entrusting trust was a difficult thing for him. As teammates, they didn’t deliberately avoid Lin Youyou and the others when talking, but there were many things he didn’t plan to disclose proactively.

“If there’s danger, you guys can run first.”

Zhuang Qingyan smiled as if bathing in a spring breeze. “No one will blame you. Anyway... it’s not the first time.”

It took Lin Youyou a while to react. “Hey, you!”

Always touching the sore spots, poking knives into people’s hearts, the betrayal at Mirror Lake was like a thorn stuck in Lin Youyou’s heart. Even if no one mentioned it, it didn’t mean she didn’t care.

*

Fenak’s outskirts.

Qiong Mingcheng, with his arm around Duanmu Qi, envisioned the future, his eyes filled with longing: “What do you guys think District B will be like? I heard it’s similar to before the apocalypse, no zombies, no fierce beasts, and no need to live in fear every day.”

Fan Peng squeezed in between the two, “When we get rooms, Aqi and I will share one.”

“Go away,” Qiong Mingcheng pushed away Fan Peng’s head, “You go live with Brother Chen, Aqi is mine.”

The four of them grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same school, worked in the same company, even awakened their abilities around the same time. Although they often bickered, their friendship was deep, and they were all willing to listen to Duanmu Qi.

Xiao Chen, the calmest among them, said calmly, "There's no need to discuss this; I'll live with Aqi."

Fan Peng and Qiong Mingcheng instantly changed their expressions, rolling up their sleeves ready to fight him.

Duanmu Qi helplessly rubbed his forehead, "The matter hasn't even been settled, and you're already celebrating halfway."

Qiong Mingcheng grinned, "Why hasn't it been settled? Didn't Song Ke say she would write a recommendation letter for us?"

They were moving forward at a not-so-slow pace, just a few hundred meters away from leaving Fenak. Fan Peng even took off his isolation mask ahead of time.

Due to the weakening radiation, occasionally, fierce beasts would dart across the road, and busy ability users followed behind to capture them.

Duanmu Qi sighed lightly, "They helped us even though we're not close, we can't just accept it without giving anything in return, right? We need to think about what gift to send."

Qiong Mingcheng added, "But I don't see them lacking anything."

As Duanmu Qi was about to speak, the sky darkened suddenly as ominous clouds covered it. He raised his head, sensing something. A massive spatial tunnel cracked open, and a fully armed fleet jumped in. These starships were pitch black, different from any style they had seen before.

The turbulent air scared away zombies and fierce beasts. Everyone stopped in their tracks, looking up in astonishment.

A group of figures in black uniforms descended from the sky.

“We have eyewitnesses on the scene.”

“Roger, eliminate them all.”

Like a grim reaper wielding a scythe, before anyone could react, the passing awakeners had already fallen. Their legs went weak, minds blank, utterly unable to resist. A terrifying pressure overwhelmed them, and in their moments of death, the despair in their pupils reflected the pattern on the ruthless vulture emblem on their assailants’ uniforms.

—It was the emblem of a merciless vulture.

Duanmu Qi felt a chill in his heart, his face filled with horror. These people, astonishingly, were all S-rank!

The black-clad woman in the crowd noticed them. She slightly raised her right hand, and an invisible kite string flew out, cutting off the heads of awakeners along the way. Due to inertia, the headless bodies stumbled forward a few steps until they collapsed with a resounding crash, and blood slowly gushed out.

Next, the kite string flew towards Fan Peng and Xiao Chen.

“Get out of the way!” Xiao Chen roared.

The two rolled on the ground, and Xiao Chen managed to avoid it with some difficulty. However, Fan Peng wasn’t as lucky. He happened to be in the same straight line as the person in front of him. As a B-level, he felt powerless against the S-level ability. Although he avoided a fatal blow, his entire arm was still severed.

“Ahhh!” A scream rang out, and Xiao Chen and Qiong Mingcheng quickly helped Fan Peng up.

People around them fell one after another. Duanmu Qi cursed under his breath, no longer hesitating. He took out a camping lamp, inserted a bright red crystal, then pulled his companions. The four shadows flickered and disappeared in an instant.

After the leading man slaughtered the awakeners on the scene, he looked towards a certain direction. "Blood Bat, you made a mistake; four of them escaped."

"The other party has a spatial teleportation device," the black-clad woman said. "The domain has already been activated; they can't escape. Wolf Spider, as instructed from above, there can be no witnesses this time."

The man with the code name "Wolf Spider" nodded. "Understood."

He turned around, his tone cold and emotionless. "Find them, and kill them."

*

At an abandoned school.

Duanmu Qi and his three companions appeared out of nowhere, the glow of the level 4 crystal faded, turning into an ordinary stone.

Fan Peng lost an arm, his breath was like gossamer, and his face was as pale as gold leaf.

Xiao Chen gritted his teeth, bandaging him. "Fan Peng, listen carefully. You're not allowed to sleep no matter how tired you are."

Fan Peng, covered in cold sweat, managed to force a smile. "I... won't sleep. Aqi is right. How can we celebrate halfway... opening champagne?"

"Who are those people?" Qiong Mingcheng's eyes were bloodshot. "Why do they casually kill people?"

Duanmu Qi's face turned pale, forcing himself to calm down. "I'll contact Song Ke immediately; they have healing-type awakener!"

He took out his terminal, but his actions suddenly froze. "...No signal."

The random teleportation range was only ten kilometers. Waiting in the same place was equivalent to waiting to die; the enemy would catch up soon.

"First, figure out how to get out." Xiao Chen carried Fan Peng on his back, and the four helped each other leave.

Duanmu Qi tightly gripped the last level 4 crystal in his hand.

*

Three hours had passed since V587 left the trapped street.

Zhuang Qingyan's original words were, "Take Taotao, for example. Territorial abilities are not flawless. As long as you continuously attack the weak points, you can determine the location of the initiator." So, relying on careful calculations, he finally found the approximate location of the territorial awakener.

Only by killing the owner of "Blood-Red Building Blocks" could they leave.

Zhuang Qingyan drew a cross on the map, eliminating incorrect options. "It's a 50-50 chance. Song Ke, come and draw lots."

Song Ke, wearing spiritual weapon knuckles on the top of the starship, took a deep breath and threw a punch towards the distorted boundary.

Boom!

The earth shook, rocks shattered, and the heavy iron fist ruthlessly smashed the weak point of the territory, forcefully disrupting the stability of the magnetic field.

The scene changed, "Blood-Red Building Blocks" reassembled, and V587 was teleported back to the previous checkpoint.

Zhuang Qingyan sighed helplessly. "Even with a 50-50 chance, we can still be wrong."

Song Ke: "... " Wasn't it you who asked me to choose?

However, thanks to Song Ke's relentless attacks, the territorial awakener was probably spitting blood at the moment, experiencing fluctuations in his awakened energy.

Zhuang Qingyan drew another cross on the map. Although they wasted some time due to bad luck, they were getting closer to the target.

In the outskirts of Fenak, in the desolate radiation pit, V587 found the owner of "Blood-Red Building Blocks."

The opponent was not alone; a row of pure black starships was parked in the distance, and over a hundred awakeners were staring intently, as if waiting for a long time.

Song Ke noticed that besides the middle-aged man leading the group, there was also a thin and weak young man with a pale face and bloodstains around the collar, staring fiercely at them. It seemed to be the unfortunate territorial awakener.

"Long time no see." The sickly middle-aged man took the initiative to speak. He carefully examined Zhuang Qingyan's face, from facial features to every detail, couldn't help but sigh, "So alike, really alike. No wonder for so many years, no one could find you."

Lin Youyou and Fang Zhixu had puzzled expressions on their faces. What was the old man muttering about?

Zhuang Qingyan's face remained cold, silently looking at him.

The man coughed twice, his face waxen. "What? Your appearance has changed, and the etiquette you have had since elementary school has been lost? I came all the way from Utopia, and you're not even willing to call me Uncle?"

Song Ke slightly widened her eyes. This person claimed to be from Utopia, the floating city that countless people admired?

Zhuang Qingyan's lips curled up, casually speaking, "Long time no see, Uncle."

Is he really a relative? Lin Youyou thought inwardly, but judging by the situation, it didn't seem like a reunion between relatives.

"Since you still acknowledge me as your uncle, then do what you should do." The man breathed heavily, as if he might not catch his breath in the next second. He struggled to lift his hand.

One of the starship's rear compartments opened, revealing a giant apparatus with the logo of Qinglan on it.

"This thing has been sealed for thirteen years. If you unlock it, I'll let you go."

"What is that?" Song Ke secretly asked the mechanical expert, Lu Xiaoyu.

Lu Xiaoyu answered, "Obviously, it's a storage hub."

Song Ke exclaimed in surprise, "So big?"

Zhuang Qingyan looked at the familiar hub, and his smile gradually disappeared, his eyes deepening.

Seeing that Zhuang Qingyan was still not making a move, the man looked up at the sky. Anxious and excited, his voice trembled as he urged, "Hurry up, unlock the hub before they arrive!"

"Uncle, don't bother," Zhuang Qingyan mocked with a smirk. "You're so afraid of death, but aren't you living quite well?"

"I remember you like philosophy, right? Life is just an illusion; death is the only truth. Don't believe those rumors. Dying early or dying late, you'll still die. Why not retire peacefully in Utopia and stay away from these matters..."

The man couldn't contain his anger and shouted his name in utter frustration, "Xie Zhuo!!"

Xie Zhuo.

These two words were like a spell, casting a momentary silence over the entire scene.

Zhuang Qingyan's heart skipped a beat, and he reflexively looked at Song Ke.

But soon, he froze.

Song Ke was surprisingly the calmest among everyone. There was no hint of surprise on her face, as if she hadn't heard those two forbidden words. She waved the blade threateningly at the territorial awakener.

Xie Ping trembled all over, his face turning purple. He was on the verge of fainting, and his assistant quickly handed over a respirator.

"Do you... do you... after thirteen years, have you never felt any guilt?!" he exclaimed.

"The Eternal Life Project has stagnated because of you. The entire Beijun has remained secluded because of you. Are you so selfish and indifferent, disregarding your father's wishes, insisting on going your own way, and watching humanity march towards destruction?"

“Uncle, please step aside.”

Song Ke spoke softly, and a burst of blue light flashed in her palm. The blade flew out of her hand, the threat of piercing through the heart of the initiator of “Blood-Red Building Blocks.” At the critical moment, another awakener used his body to block the attack.

Song Ke smiled innocently, her dimples showing. “Hurry up, go home.”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 179.1: Key (22)

500 years of imprisonment.

Xie Ping’s fingers trembled as he pressed down on the face mask, taking a deep breath.

The exhaled hot breath blurred the sight, and Song Ke’s figure alternated between clarity and fuzziness. In both appearance and temperament, she didn’t seem like a powerful S7 level. Song Ke had slender shoulders, a small face, and large, round eyes with a standard almond shape. Her smooth chin was tucked into the collar, and her jet-black shoulder-length hair was casually scattered, with a few mischievous strands sticking up.

She looked like an innocent girl who was unfamiliar with the ways of the world, rather than a ruthless killer who could snap an enemy’s neck with a single move.

However, she was indeed the biggest obstacle, standing in front of Zhuang Qingyan. The fingertips that had just thrown a deadly knife still emitted a chilling murderous intent.

Xie Ping took a deep breath, his tone somewhat nostalgic: “You and your father both know how to cozy up to powerful figures.”

Zhuang Qingyan's graceful thin lips curved slightly, as if he couldn't hear the sarcasm: "Thanks for the compliment, Uncle has a discerning eye."

He never felt ashamed of clinging to Song Ke's thighs; instead, he considered it an honor.

Xie Ping slowly shook his head, his sickly eyes staring at the familiar face in front of him: "It's a pity that even if you cozy up to powerful figures, the result is still the same. Your father, until death... no, even after death, can't find peace."

Zhuang Qingyan stopped smiling, and his cold eyes were as calm as a deep pool.

"What time is it?" Xie Ping didn't look at him again, turning his head to ask softly.

"17:58, it's almost dark," the attendant answered considerately.

Xie Ping breathed heavily, lifting his eyelids to glance at the sky. Nightfall was imminent, and the radiation concentration continued to increase. Accustomed to the fresh air of Utopia, the pollution and dust in Fenak were too heavy for him.

"I waited here to persuade you in advance, but now... it seems unnecessary."

Xie Ping let out a sigh and turned back to the starship: "Take action."

Dozens of agile figures rushed towards V587 like tigers descending a mountain, their sharp eyebrows lowered. They pulled out tri-edge military daggers from their back waist and charged forward with Song Ke.

In the melee, Song Ke noticed that the giant central hub was still in place, unable to be retracted into the rear compartment in time. She stared at it directly, contemplating for a moment.

The goal of this group of people seemed to be getting Zhuang Qingyan to use his authority to open the central hub. Even at the cost of a significant price, they brought this massive machine from afar. If they

didn't want them to succeed, there was actually a simple solution, like... what if the central hub accidentally got damaged?

Song Ke tightened her waist and abdomen, her back muscles taut. Suddenly, she stepped on the head of a pursuer, leaped high, and the long knife in her palm was about to slash down towards the central hub.

Xie Yinqi, who had long since hidden in the starship and was the user of "Blood-Red Building Blocks," made eye contact with Song Ke through the porthole, his mouth quirked strangely.

Song Ke's eyelids twitched slightly, and she abruptly turned around.

She had rushed too fast and had distanced herself from Zhuang Qingyan and the others, but turning back would only take three or four seconds.

However, at this moment, there was a drastic upheaval in the surrounding scene, like disassembled scattered building blocks swiftly moving and reassembling. In the next second, the central hub disappeared, Xie Ping and the others disappeared, Zhuang Qingyan... also disappeared.

It was as if different layers of a Rubik's Cube were turning, and everyone was moved to the front, leaving her alone at the back.

Xie Ping's final words, "Take action," were not meant to kill Zhuang Qingyan at all. It was an order to the "Blood-Red Building Blocks." No wonder the awakeners who blocked the knife just now was willing to sacrifice himself to protect Xie Yinqi.

In the vast desolate crater, only Song Ke remained, holding her knife and looking around with a bewildered heart.

"Xiao Xing? Old Fang? Youyou! Su Cha!" She called out the names of her teammates one by one, but the surroundings were empty, and there was no response.

"Zhuang Qingyan..."

Song Ke looked to the left, where a tilted skyscraper hung in mid-air with dust falling. Looking to the right, a half-cut ship rushed up a rugged mountain top, and rocks rolled down. The scenes were surreal and disjointed.

Song Ke took out the small bee terminal, opened the group chat for V587, but there was no signal. Communication in C26 Fenak, and even B25 Lozan, the entire Loak region, was cut off.

She closed her eyes, forcing herself to calm down. Suddenly, she thought of something and without hesitation, pulled down the zipper, dragging the jacket along with the shirt to her shoulders. On the inner side of her left arm, a lifelike mechanical ladybug embedded in the skin tissue, its protruding compound eyes turning slightly.

It works, Song Ke sighed in relief. She then reached for the black collar around her neck and found the microphone, pressing it down. "Lu Xiaoyu!"

Rustle, rustle—

After a chaotic wave of sound, a familiar voice came through, "Captain?"

"Where are you guys?" Song Ke asked urgently.

Lu Xiaoyu's response was intermittent, and his tone was not as casual as usual, instead filled with seriousness. "I've located your position, 30 kilometers away from us. Zhuang Qingyan speculates that the cooling time for the Blood-Red Building Blocks is around ten minutes. The longer it takes, the farther you might be teleported. Listen to my directions, try to meet up with us as soon as possible."

"Alright, you guys hold on, I'll be there soon!"

Song Ke was anxious, running in a certain direction. In just two seconds, in the midst of Lu Xiaoyu's series of "reversed, reversed," she swiftly turned around.

...

Taking a lesson from Ye Zheng's assassination, which couldn't be reported in time, Lu Xiaoyu had taken precautions and improved their communication devices. Each person had a modified tracking and positioning ladybug implanted in their bodies. This new device he tinkered with used an independent communication frequency, unaffected by terminals, ensuring that V587 could contact each other even in the absence of signals.

The scene changed, and Zhuang Qingyan's group of six was teleported elsewhere.

At the same time, a deep spatial crack was torn open in the surrounding "building blocks", and hundreds of black starships teleported in.

"What's that?" Lin Youyou's eyelids twitched incessantly, and the addressing system was temporarily confused, "You, you, Xie Zhuang... What kind of trouble did you cause?"

"What, are you scared?" Zhuang Qingyan chuckled.

Lin Youyou choked in her throat, "Not really, it's not like I haven't seen the world."

Zhuang Qingyan's expression was surprisingly calm, "I told you that you could run anytime, but it's not safe now. Hold on until the captain arrives."

The standard starships of the Alliance were uniformly silver-white, while the black starships were reassigned after the retrieval by Yiyu, the exclusive symbol of S-level city like Utopia.

"Why do you always say such pessimistic words? Are you deliberately trying to provoke me!" Lin Youyou stomped her foot in annoyance.

"Not pessimistic words," Zhuang Qingyan's eyes gradually darkened. "Be mentally prepared for the worst. The opponent won't come empty-handed."

As soon as he finished speaking, nearly a hundred awakeners jumped down from the sky.

“Prepare for battle,” Zhuang Qingyan said coldly.

...

Due to the randomness of the blocks, Xu Xing happened to be standing at the edge, facing a young man in a white sportswear with hands in his pockets.

Xu Xing didn't dare to be careless. His awakened energy formed into a blizzard, blocking the opponent's way.

A cold-blooded assassin would naturally not show mercy to a child.

“Oh? Ice element?” The young man glanced at Xu Xing with interest and then swiftly made his move.

Rocks shattered, hail the size of cannonballs poured like a torrential rain. Xu Xing condensed an ice shield to withstand the damage, maneuvering and dodging amidst the loud cracking sounds.

This young man turned out to be an ice-element awakener too, and an S-level one at that.

Xu Xing treated him as a formidable enemy, his lips turning pale from the pressure.

...

Su Cha was blocked by a group of all A-level awakeners. Their faces were unfamiliar, but their aura was very familiar – the cruelty of mercenaries.

The leading middle-aged woman glanced at the black snake tattoo on Su Cha's neck and snorted coldly, “Are you a deserter? The Rainforest is ashamed of you.”

“I'm not,” Su Cha said, his spine straight, each word enunciated.

“People who legally leave the Rainforest will have their tattoos erased. Do you have the face to say you’re not?” Another person looked at him disdainfully.

“Doesn’t matter. Consider it cleaning up a traitor. Our mission this time is to kill you.”

Veins bulged on Su Cha’s hand as he swiftly swung his knife.

...

“Nice to see you again.”

A familiar young man surrounded by the ability “Prism” greeted them. Lu Xiaoyu’s gaze fell on his special operations uniform, and after a moment of thought, he suddenly realized, “I don’t remember. Who are you?”

Roy, who had clashed with V587 in Mu City before, fell into silence. Then, he spoke in a deep voice, “I’ve checked you, Lu Xiaoyu. The genius rarely seen in a century, from the Erjia’s Lu family, the first successful modification of the initial genetic selection plan. The last test record was six years ago when you were S5 level. What about now?”

“Been in prison for too long, forgot, why don’t you take a guess?” Lu Xiaoyu replied nonchalantly.

His jet-black hair receded like a tide, revealing a defiant silver glow. His tea-colored eyes turned into inorganic ice blue pupils, as if a dormant withered tree had awakened. Behind Lu Xiaoyu, a towering network of data branches, with a code flood of 101010, emerged.

Roy, a mere S3 level awakener, was utterly powerless to resist. The prism shattered with a thunderous noise, and he fell to the ground, spitting out blood.

...

“Corta,” Zhuang Qingyan looked at the approaching awakener and calmly spoke.

V587 members moved their palms simultaneously, showing a well-coordinated action. Each of them pulled out a large-sized loudspeaker that resembled a sound system, standing apart from each other.

The six of them acted in unison, first quickly inserting something into their own ears, then pressing the play button.

The mysterious Corta wave was triggered. The six loudspeakers played simultaneously, making it difficult even for an S-level awakener to resist. Their consciousness gradually dispersed into nothingness, and their steps became stiff, resembling the walking dead. The one in the front clutched their head in pain and stumbled down in an instant.

The six surrounded individuals finally had a moment to catch their breath.

Squeak—Clang!!

The ear-piercing noise abruptly stopped. Smoke rose from the six loudspeakers, and the playback program was completely destroyed.

A person walked slowly from the distant landing starship, or rather, it shouldn't be called a “person” because he was just a clear holographic projection.

A man with silver hair, ice blue eyes, wearing frameless glasses, appearing to be around forty years old. He exuded an elegant temperament, but at this moment, his brow was furrowed, and his face was filled with anger. “You evildoer, why don't you come back with me and confess your sins!”

Lu Xiaoyu's movements halted, and he sneered mockingly, lifting the corner of his mouth, “Hey, Mr. Patriarch.”

The person who arrived was none other than the magistrate of District B8 Erjia, Lu Qiusuo.

Lu Qiusuo no longer had a physical body. He could manifest as a solid projection here, and there was only one possibility. Lu Xiaoyu thought of this and looked up at the starship he came out of. There was a chilling gaze through Lu Qiusuo's eyes, accurately locking onto him.

"I see you."

A sigh seemed to resonate from the depths of the soul.

Clearly gentle, yet it made Lu Xiaoyu's hair stand on end.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 179.2: Key (22)

500 years of imprisonment

Xu Xing rolled backward, trying to evade, but he didn't manage to completely dodge it. A sharp pain surged like an electric shock to his ankle. With a thud, he fell awkwardly to the ground.

His entire lower leg was frozen in place, and due to the freezing effect, he didn't feel anything at first. Until a clear "crack" sound came, Xu Xing knew that his lower leg was broken.

Like a young lion resisting stubbornly despite numerous wounds, Xu Xing struggled to climb up. Without shouting or crying, his big eyes held tears. He knew it wasn't the time to cry now, enduring the urge to drop golden beans. He just stared fiercely at the white-clad youth.

"Not bad, stronger than I was at your age. Give you another ten years, maybe you can reach S-level."

"Unfortunately, not all children are fortunate enough to grow up," the white-clad youth squatted in front of him, gripping Xu Xing's chin. His words were venomous, like snake hisses. "You can only live until today."

Sharp ice blades condensed into a massive pair of scissors, aiming at Xu Xing's tender neck. It was about to fall when...

"Thinking of you, every day is sunny~ Casting warmth into my heart~"

At a critical moment, an ethereal voice rang out, and a golden sun rose in the area where the two were, growing increasingly hot. In an instant, it melted the scissor made of ice and snow. The scene of a sun rising in the dark night was already incredibly strange. With the glaring light becoming more and more dazzling, the white-clad youth sweated profusely and instinctively raised his hand to shield his eyes.

It was then that Fang Zhixu rushed over, scooped up Xu Xing, and ran away with him in his arms.

Xu Xing hugged his shoulders, unable to hold back his sobs. "I can't beat him... I'm so useless..."

Fang Zhixu awkwardly patted Xu Xing's head, and when he touched his dislocated leg, he quickly fixed it with a click.

...

"Xie Zuo... Xie Zuo... I'm here... I'm here..."

Someone was calling his name.

Across the distant space, Zhuang Qingyan met the gaze of a brown-haired, green-eyed woman holding a slowly swinging clock in her hand. In that instant of eye contact, ripples appeared in Zhuang Qingyan's pupils, and his gaze couldn't move away.

Gentle mental power, like a tiny brush, resonated in his mind.

The other party should be an S-level awakener of the mental ability. Ability: "Hypnosis."

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes were clear, and he smiled at her. The corner of his mouth was cold. In the next moment, the cold and merciless mental power entered her mind, crushing everything ruthlessly. No one noticed that two mental awakeners were engaged in a life-and-death battle. The brown-haired woman on the starship had her pupils shrink, gradually turning into a straight line, and she fell backward stiffly.

The clock in her hand hit the ground, stopping its ticking.

Zhuang Qingyan's blood surged, suppressing the bloody air in his throat.

...

"Mr. Gu! Sophia is dead!"

The scene was transmitted back to a seemingly inconspicuous starship in the fleet. The shadow silently waved his hand, and the guards took away the body of the deceased hypnotist.

The communication interface sounded: "The Key has participated in the Genetic Optimization Plan. The registration information at that time was 'unsuccessful.' Now, it seems that he should be an early awakener."

"Mental awakeners lack effective attack methods. They only gain the ability to deliver a fatal blow when condensing their abilities to a certain degree."

Sophia, the deceased hypnotist, was an S5-level awakener in Utopia.

The fact that the Key was an awakener had already surprised them, but no one expected his level to be above S5.

"Mr. Gu, do you need me to take action..."

The shadow interrupted the person on the other end of the communication: "No, extracting memories from him will result in loss. I need complete information."

“I want to clearly understand what the core secrets of the Fire Seed were back then.”

“Yes.”

“What about the storage hub of the Xie family?”

“Arrival in two minutes and fifteen seconds.” Every time the “Blood-Red Building Block” was activated, it required a ten-minute cooldown. After the next recombination, Xie Yinji would teleport the hub.

Two minutes later, the space twisted again, and more than a dozen starships appeared in the sky. Another secret communication connected.

“Mr. Gu, Xie Ping has made some moves behind the scenes. He wants to contact the Key privately.”

Mr. Gu’s voice was calm: “Let him be. Xie Ping doesn’t understand his nephew, and even less so his niece. Even if they have blood ties, the other party won’t surrender peacefully.”

...

Another recombination occurred, and five S-level awakens descended from the sky, rushing towards Zhuang Qingyan. Their hair and eyes varied, but without exception, they were powerful attack-type awakens, with levels ranging from S5 to S6.

In the dim light, half of Zhuang Qingyan’s face was shrouded in shadow, and a handsome smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

“Are you all international mercenaries? Let me guess, you received a commission from Utopia? Why are you meddling in the internal affairs of the New Asia Alliance? This mission is tough and unrewarding. Be careful, there might be no return, and the reward might be your life. Think about it carefully. If it were really easy, why wouldn’t the Alliance take it, and instead it falls to you?”

His words seemed to carry an inexplicable fascination. Those who heard them felt their minds confused, their thoughts swaying as if... there was a twisted logic?

Zhuang Qingyan observed the surrounding environment intently, preparing to find an opening to escape when his pupils suddenly contracted.

A metal cable pierced through the air, moving at an extremely fast speed with no escape possible.

At the critical moment, Lin Youyou applied a speed boost buff, and Zhuang Qingyan rolled in a distressed manner, his shirt stained with blood and stains. The fierce iron chain brushed past his ear, turning sharply and stabbing straight at him. Golden-rimmed glasses fell to the ground, shattered in the chaos, and Su Cha emerged from the shadows, blocking with a sword. His six-foot tall figure flew out like a cannonball, rolling dozens of meters away and crashing heavily to the ground.

The iron chain gradually condensed into a human shape, and a teenager wearing a vulture uniform appeared before everyone.

“Don’t be fooled; he’s just a smooth talker,” a voice warned.

The teenager’s eyes showed no emotion, his skin pale, and the emblem on his chest so dark it seemed to have absorbed much blood.

Zhuang Qingyan frowned deeply; he couldn’t sense the teenager’s awakened energy, and a chill climbed up his spine.

—This is an S7.

Fang Zhixu helped up the fallen Su Cha and quickly treated him.

“Kill the healer,” the teenager said coldly.

Surrounding awakeners woke up like from a dream, launching attacks without hesitation.

The short Xu Xing suddenly rushed over, desperately creating an ice wall to block the attacks. However, being only A1 level, even if he exerted all his strength, how could he withstand a group of S-level individuals? The ice wall shattered into debris in less than a second, and both Xu Xing and Fang Zhixu were sent flying.

The S-level ice-element awakener's eyes erupted with cruel light. "Little brat, die."

Swish—

A dark blue spear descended from above, piercing through the heart of the white-clad youth, pinning him in midair.

The fierce force dragged him for over ten meters, finally deeply embedding him into the soil.

The man looked in shock at his chest, gasping in pain. Before he could catch his breath, his breathing was cut off.

Dead.

The whole scene was shocking.

A slender figure appeared at the edge of the building blocks, with two huge spiritual weapons originally crossed on her back, one now missing.

She had already taken off her coat, drenched in sweat, her jet-black hair sticking to her fair neck, showing signs of exhaustion from a long journey.

It was Song Ke.

The building blocks had a sequence of movement, and Xie Yinquan couldn't assemble all the blocks to the desired positions at once. He had exhausted all his efforts to minimize the time, but Song Ke's pursuit speed far exceeded his imagination.

Awakeners on the scene stared at the panting S7 level in disbelief, involuntarily taking a step back.

Song Ke helped up Su Cha, Fang Zhixu, and Xu Xing, then turned her head and gave Zhuang Qingyan a seemingly indifferent glance.

Zhuang Qingyan: "You know..."

Song Ke raised her hand to interrupt him, "Hoo... hoo... I know."

Zhuang Qingyan paused, shook his head with a smile, "When did you know?"

"Uh," Song Ke tilted her head, "Well, that someone, Lu Xiaoyu, told me."

Lu Xiaoyu, who finally arrived and saw the captain: "???"

The air seemed to freeze as Song Ke casually walked to the side of the ice-element awakener's corpse, slowly pulling out the dark blue spear.

"1, 2, 3..." she even earnestly counted a circle, creating a more imposing scene than when she fought against Ye Zheng's assassins.

The "Blood-Red Building Blocks" refresh time arrived, and another scene was pieced together, with a dozen or so awakeners jumping down.

Real Simon sat in one of the starships, eagerly watching Song Ke.

Because she wasn't wearing a coat, the wound on her abdomen was clearly visible, with only a gruesome scar and no bleeding.

Strange lights flickered in Simon's eyes as he muttered to himself, "I know, I know what her second ability is."

Simon had conducted a thorough study on dual ability awakeners, including his subordinate Punk, and the diviner Veronica.

Dual abilities, one manifest and one hidden, would not be of the same type due to magnetic field relationships. If the manifest ability is an attacking type, then the hidden ability could only be support, control, or body enhancement.

Based on existing evidence, Song Ke couldn't have awakened two powerful attack abilities. It was deduced that her hidden ability was the body enhancement ability "Body Healing." This meant that their originally planned conventional methods couldn't kill her!

However, Punk had almost killed Song Ke before, and Simon's fingers spasmed with excitement.

The other person present at that time was Azure Phoenix. With strict military discipline, Azure Phoenix hadn't disclosed the secret, meaning he was the only one here who knew how to kill Song Ke.

Simon's hooked nose twitched rapidly, his legs shaking on the seat.

"Commander, do you want to contact Mr. Gu for communication?" the secretary beside him asked softly.

"No, wait for a while," Simon subconsciously stopped her, "Wait for the best opportunity."

Approaching quarter past six, the sky had turned completely dark, and a resonant synthesized voice echoed through the loudspeakers for everyone to hear:

“As per the approval of the Supreme Prosecutor’s Office of the New Asia Alliance, the first-level wanted criminal Xie Zhuo, male, 28 years old, biological ID: NOC1100520, native of Beijun, born on September 15th, New Calendar year 19, is now under arrest.”

“Xie Zhuo, thirteen years ago, illicitly fled with classified information. With conclusive evidence, based on legal standards, you are charged with crimes against humanity, anti-social crimes, illegally exploiting state secrets for personal gain, with extremely heinous circumstances never seen before. You will be arrested and sentenced to 500 years of imprisonment.”

The sky was filled with black starships, and below was the abandoned city of Loak. This place was far from the mainland, remote and desolate, devoid of any signs of life.

Seven figures stood within the encirclement, destined for a confrontation with a vast difference in strength.

Song Ke regained her composure, wiped the blood off the long spear, and chuckled softly, “500 years, that’s a bit much.”

She turned her head, clear eyes looking at Zhuang Qingyan, with a small dimple forming on her cheek.

“There’s something I lied about.”

“Sorry.”

Zhuang Qingyan raised his gaze to meet hers, his handsome features deep and profound. His voice was husky, and facing Song Ke, he found it difficult to speak, “What is it?”

Song Ke didn’t answer immediately; she turned her head to stretch her shoulders, muttering continuously, “Blame you, I rarely lie, but because of you, I’ve been corrupted.”

A year ago, that night they returned from the U-Lab laboratory.

The two who hadn't yet become close sat side by side at the end of the apartment bed, looking at the hazy night outside. Zhuang Qingyan asked her:

"If one day, the entire Alliance is after me, everyone wants me dead, what would you do?"

"..."

"Would you save me?"

"..."

"Hmm? Would you?"

At that time, Song Ke looked into his eyes and shook her head firmly:

"No."

A year later, Song Ke slowly removed her isolation mask. The slight radiation stimulation caused her blood vessels to burn, and her awakened energy kept surging. The environment here faintly brought back a familiar feeling.

Her eyes glowed with a blue light. Song Ke no longer restrained herself. The terrifying pressure erupted like an explosion, magnificent and vast. The world changed its colors, the instruments inside hundreds of starships went haywire, lights flickered, and the awakeners paled.

"This is... S8?!"

For a while, terrified shouts echoed through the sky.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 180.1: Key (23)

I can activate the central hub

As night fell, with dim moonlight, District C26 Fenak fell into a silent stillness.

“Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” dashed along the border but always inexplicably shifted, unable to leave for a long time.

Fan Peng was alternately carried on the back by Xiao Chen and Qiong Mingcheng, and the straight back of Duanmu Qi appeared intermittently in front of them.

Although he had lost his right arm, Fan Peng could still feel the phantom limb’s piercing pain. Fan Peng sweated profusely and smiled reassuringly at his companions, “I remember... when the apocalypse just arrived, you guys carried me like this.”

At the beginning of the apocalypse, Fan Peng lay in bed with a high fever. His mother went out to find medicine and never came back. Outside the bedroom were zombies banging on the door. When he was desperate and ready to die, his childhood friend Duanmu Qi, with Xiao Chen and Qiong Mingcheng, smashed the anti-theft window and broke in.

The three of them were also feverish, but without saying a word, they picked him up and escaped. Xiao Chen’s legs were shaking when he carried him, and Qiong Mingcheng even held a rolling pin. Fan Peng lived in a densely populated old city area, and looking down from the window was full of zombies. They supported each other and fought their way out.

After finally finding a shelter, the four of them collapsed on the ground, each more miserable than the other. The roar of zombies echoed in their ears, and Fan Peng, who still had a persistent fever, thought in a daze, “This damn life is too bitter. If I can survive this, I’ll definitely find a quiet place to sleep.”

However, the world is tough, and even such a simple wish is hard to fulfill. Even though they awakened supernatural abilities, they were not omnipotent. The refuge they found soon fell victim to the zombie tide, forcing Fan Peng to wander, but fortunately, the four of them always stayed together.

Qiong Mingcheng clenched his teeth, patted Fan Peng's back, and said hoarsely, "Pengzi, you are not allowed to sleep!"

They had been on the run for more than half an hour, experiencing three scene changes. Because he didn't receive any treatment, Fan Peng's breath became weaker and weaker.

Fan Peng mumbled, "Brother Chen, let's discuss something. When we get to District B, let me... share a room with Aqi."

Xiao Chen suddenly lowered his head, his voice choked, "Okay, I'll let you."

Fan Peng's consciousness was already hazy. District B, ah, after a year of struggle, they finally accumulated enough points to go to District B.

In a vague hallucination, Fan Peng saw the bonfire burning on that night in Huangyuan, and heard Song Ke vividly narrating. She said that people could sunbathe in the sunshine at the Northern Base, the Garden Apartments were given for free, big and beautiful, the three-dimensional subway was easy to get dizzy on, it's best to sit in the back row for the first time.

What else was there? Oh, remembered... there's also an underground entertainment space specifically for activities of awakeners, but you have to follow the rules, or else an organization called the "Awakener Department" will take you away and lock you up.

Fan Peng silently grinned, he was sure to follow the rules. In the "Three Grandsons and One Grandpa," he was the most rule-abiding.

Approaching the Fenak border once again, triggered by an unknown factor, the surrounding scenes rearranged like building blocks, and the four were transported to an unfamiliar place.

"Oh, damn it!" Duanmu Qi abruptly stopped, cursing with red eyes because in front of them, there were pursuers dressed in vulture uniforms.

The black-clad woman with the codename “Blood Bat” squinted her slender eyes, without a word, an invisible kite string slipped from her hand.

“Remember... go to District B for me.”

No one expected that Fan Peng would suddenly slide down from Qiong Mingcheng’s back and forcefully push the three of them, saying, “Go quickly!”

His awakened energy erupted, bravely rushing towards the opponent. Blood Bat raised her wrist, pulled inwards, the kite string tightened, instantly cutting through the skin, severing veins, embedding deeply into flesh and blood. Fan Peng’s robust body was dismembered inch by inch, and the pieces of flesh fell like flower petals.

Those kite strings were finally dyed a blood-like crimson, the attack trajectory revealing no escape.

Fan Peng used death to exchange a glimmer of hope for his companions.

Xiao Chen and Qiong Mingcheng dodged with difficulty, their eyes almost tearing apart, “Pengzi!!”

Duanmu Qi’s heart was twisted like a knife, but he still gritted his teeth and took out the last crystal quickly, swiftly inserting it into the groove.

A flash of light, the camping lamp came into play, and the three were about to escape. The Wolf Spider’s gaze turned cold, lips moving, a phantom of a patterned spider shrouded the camping lamp, spitting out a strong corrosive secretion from its silk sac. Tiny cracks appeared on the surface of the level 4 crystal, and spatial ability faintly fluctuated.

Qiong Mingcheng’s pupils contracted, swinging his knife to shatter the patterned spider. The phantom screamed in agony, and its pincers pierced through his fingernails.

Random teleportation took effect, and the three disappeared on the spot.

The Wolf Spider reported hoarsely, "Two left, continue the pursuit."

He nonchalantly considered Qiong Mingcheng as good as dead, having been affected by the corrosive toxin of the patterned spider, that guy wouldn't survive.

Blood Bat retracted her ability, her expression indifferent. "The activation condition for that device is a level 4 crystal. They won't escape many times."

Just an ordinary B-level team, how many precious level 4 crystals could they possibly have? They were destined to die sooner or later.

Gazing coldly at Fan Peng's mutilated corpse, Gustav, who was observing from the sidelines, couldn't help but frown. The special task force was also mobilized to participate in this siege, and he wasn't clear about the full details of the mission. However, he felt sincere disgust at working alongside the vultures. These people were cold-blooded and selfish, resorting to any means necessary. Compared to the highly esteemed Azure Phoenix, they were like rats in a gutter, always criticized and despised.

In the "Three Grandsons and One Grandpa," they fell into an abandoned radiation sinkhole, quickly getting back on their feet.

"No more crystals," Duanmu Qi said with a solemn expression. "Don't head towards the border. There's a domain-type awakener here, we must figure out a way to break through first."

Xiao Chen wiped his face and saw Qiong Mingcheng on the opposite side seemingly lost in thought. "Mingcheng, what's wrong?"

"Ah? Nothing," Qiong Mingcheng replied, clenching his fist behind his back.

After investigating separately, Xiao Chen and Duanmu Qi reunited. "Aqi, there are signs of a battle nearby, like those left by V587."

Duanmu Qi thought for a moment. "The land should be randomly shifting. Let's try to stay at the edge; maybe we'll run into them."

Xiao Chen nodded. "No time to waste, let's go."

Just as the two were about to find Qiong Mingcheng, someone softly called their names from behind, "Aqi, Brother Chen..."

Qiong Mingcheng half of his body melted into the shadows, unmoving, his face unusually pale.

"Mingcheng, come over quickly; let's leave this place," Duanmu Qi urged.

Qiong Mingcheng grinned, looking worse than crying. "I might, like Pengzi, not be able to go to District B either."

Duanmu Qi and Xiao Chen's expressions froze. "What nonsense are you talking about?"

Qiong Mingcheng took a step forward, revealing his entire figure, and in a short time, half of his body had turned into corpse water.

What was initially just a minor wound from piercing his fingernail, the intense corrosion had taken away his life.

Qiong Mingcheng, with tears in his eyes, looked at his dear friends with a smile. "It's better now. No need to argue. The two of you can share a room."

"You must, you must strive... to survive."

The corrosion speed increased rapidly, and the two helplessly watched as Qiong Mingcheng turned into a puddle of corpse water before their eyes.

"No—!!!"

With companions dying one after another, the instantaneous despair overwhelmed Duanmu Qi. He screamed, and thorns uncontrollably slammed into the ground.

Xiao Chen's chest heaved, tightly holding onto Duanmu Qi's shoulders. "Aqi, don't let them down..."

Duanmu Qi clutched the camping lamp, his fingertips trembling. After a long silence, he said, "Let's go."

*

Song Ke stood in front of Zhuang Qingyan, facing the siege of five S5 to S6 awakeners alone. She carried two enormous weapons on her back, standing still like a trapped beast. However, her expression remained calm, and although the trapped beast trembled, the awakeners were shocked and speechless.

—S8.

—S8, the powerful attack-type awakener.

—This would be an unprecedented fierce battle.

They were all foreign mercenaries, well aware that, not only the New Asia Alliance but the person in front of them probably represented the world's highest combat power.

No one dared to take it lightly. The five simultaneously launched their strongest attack abilities, deadly attacks aimed at Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan. The overlapping brilliance of their abilities made it impossible to open their eyes, instantly engulfing Song Ke's slender figure.

Five super attacks, a surging tide of energy, enough to level everything, even the strongest defense type awakener would likely be crushed into pieces.

Boom—Boom—!!

The collision of multiple attacks produced an earth-shattering explosion, and dense black smoke rose into the night sky.

“It... it worked!” The awakeners rejoiced, blurting out.

The world’s first S8 level, killed so easily by them?

But in the next second, a faint blue light streaked through the rolling thick smoke. A massive shield appeared out of thin air, rotating rapidly, absorbing all the damage in an instant. The violent explosion subsided abruptly, and the remaining awakened energy crackled.

Then, a fair and beautiful hand extended from the edge, snapped its fingers, and the shield split into numerous arrow feathers, sweeping forward. The five awakeners retreated in a panic, looking at her in disbelief, exclaiming in shock, “How is this possible, no medium transformation?!”

Metal manipulation was universally recognized as a powerful attack-type ability. They had seen awakeners who could transform objects into weapons, but without exception, they required a medium. However, Song Ke was different. It was as if she had transcended this limitation, exhibiting a mesmerizing control over awakened energy. Even without direct contact with objects, the surrounding radiation could be utilized by her to condense into any weapon according to her will.

The smoke cleared, and Song Ke stood in place. She casually patted Zhuang Qingyan’s dusty shirt. “It’s going to get messy; stay back a bit.”

Zhuang Qingyan rubbed Song Ke’s burned back with his fingertips, his eyes darkened. Still, he obediently responded, “I’ll listen to you. Be careful.”

Song Ke moved forward slowly, adjusting her neck and wrists as she walked. “It’s my turn now.”

As soon as she spoke, she effortlessly pulled out a long spear with one hand. Like a cheetah, she swiftly pounced forward. With extreme speed and strength, the opponent had no time to react. The sharp spear had already pierced through the enemy’s throat, blood splattering.

“First one,” Song Ke counted.

A yellow earth ring rose from under her feet, firmly imprisoning her arms, making her unable to move. Song Ke’s foot tapped lightly, quickly stepping forward, and with the explosive power of her waist and abdomen, she bent her knee! Kicked the opponent’s chin! “Crack”—the crisp sound of bones breaking echoed, and broken teeth mixed with half of the tongue fell. The lower half of the person’s face instantly became a bloody mess.

Although Song Ke’s arms were bound, it did not affect her movements. She pivoted on her foot, performing a quick turnaround like a swallow. She leaped into the air and executed a spinning kick! The third person was kicked away, and the sole of her foot suddenly revealed a shiny wolf-tooth knife. She fiercely chopped down! The opponent was cut off from bottom to top, the spine severed, blood and internal organs spurted into the air, dripping down in a mist of blood.

In the blood mist, Song Ke’s expression was icy, her face like a fierce demon.

“Second one,” she continued to count.

Her feet never stopped, and her hands were not idle either. She held a blue blade between her fingertips, cutting back and forth, skillfully carving out a small opening with her powerful ability. Then, she freed up her hand, drew a cold and elegant jagged blade, and with a swift motion, the blade glittered with cold light. Overwhelming with absolute force, the sturdy earth ring crumbled. The earth-element awakener spat out blood from his mouth, and Song Ke, with a swift motion, cut off his head.

“Third one.”

The desperate mercenary turned the surroundings into mud. Song Ke lifted her leg to sweep away the mud, covering everyone’s vision. She hooked the dropped long spear with her toes, kicked it up, and grabbed the collar of one person with her hand. Head down, she pressed it into the muddy ground. The spear tip pierced through his chest.

“Fourth one.”

The awakener with the mangled chin tried to turn and run, but suddenly his mind went blank. Zhuang Qingyan remained calm, and with one stroke, he stabbed into his head.

Blood soaked through the light-colored shirt, and the handsome face revealed a hint of cold ruthlessness.

“Fifth one.” Zhuang Qingyan followed Song Ke in counting.

Shaking off the mud, Song Ke looked at Zhuang Qingyan with a playful smile, as if to say, “You’re dirty too.”

With bodies strewn about and blood forming a river, the five top-level awakeners died on the spot. Who was the hunter? Who was the prey?

Just as a slight smile appeared on Song Ke’s lips, her expression froze in an instant.

A deadly iron chain swooped down, its chilling murderous intent almost tangible. Song Ke shifted her body to dodge, and the chain quickly turned back, heading towards Zhuang Qingyan. Hindered by the heavy mud, Song Ke jumped out without hesitation, throwing herself to protect Zhuang Qingyan. The spikes on the chain grazed her left shoulder, tearing off a layer of flesh.

The S7 teenager from Vulture appeared in place, his emotionless gaze fixed on Song Ke. In standard Alliance language, he said, “You have weaknesses, and those with weaknesses are destined to lose.”

The blood from her shoulder dripped onto Zhuang Qingyan’s jade-like face. Song Ke smiled at him and used her sleeve to wipe away the blood.

She rolled over and stood up. “I won’t lose.”

In the high-altitude starship fleet, an impromptu command meeting was underway.

“At the moment, it seems that Song Ke’s desire to protect the Key is too strong. It’s challenging to interrogate her by bypassing this.”

“She registered as an S7 not long ago. How could she rise so quickly?”

“Could there be a breakthrough in Ning Rong’s research?” someone murmured.

The promotion of S-level awakeners not only relied on accumulated strength but also on opportunities. The average time for each level from S1 to S5 required three to five years. S6 and above levels were even more unpredictable. Song Ke, not being an early awakener, started at S7. Yet, who could easily ascend from S7 to S8 within just a year?

The shadowy figure, “Mr. Gu,” gazed at the ever-changing spiritual weapons in Song Ke’s hands through the screen.

“We can’t let her freely transform. ‘Iron Chain’ will be used to restrain her first. Is ‘Flame’ on its way?”

“It’s on the way and expected to arrive in seventeen minutes and thirty-one seconds.”

Seventeen minutes and thirty-one seconds, roughly the gap between two activations of “Blood-Red Building Blocks.”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 180.2: Key (23)

I can activate the central hub

Bang, bang—!

The bodies on the ground constantly exploded with blood blossoms, and the sharp edges of the surrounding scenes diminished, becoming more rounded.

Zhuang Qingyan's expression became solemn. As long as the "Blood-Red Building Blocks" existed, everything happening here would remain unknown, and they had to find a way to decipher it.

The teenager, Iron Chain, stared darkly at Song Ke, and a strange smile curled on his lips. "Is that so? But your teammates have already lost."

Song Ke abruptly turned her head.

The situation of Lin Youyou and others was indeed not very good. It turned out that Fang Zhixu and Xu Xing were like little white rabbits in a pack of wolves, huddling together trembling.

A group of fierce awakeners rushed over. Lu Xiaoyu wielded the mechanical arm, while Zhuang Qingyan attacked with mental power to both attack and rescue.

Iron Chain spoke and transformed into a weapon again, entangling her like a shadow. She could only defend while saving others.

Song Ke rushed in front of Xu Xing like lightning using a horizontal slash to force the enemy back. However, in a moment of distraction, the dark tip pierced through her right forearm. Ignoring the injury, she swung the cold and jagged blade steadily, cutting through the chains with a deafening roar, and both of them retreated.

Song Ke looked down, and Xu Xing's fair arms were covered in scars, dripping with blood.

"Does it hurt?" she asked softly.

"No, it doesn't hurt!" Xu Xing replied resolutely.

"Can you still walk on your legs?"

Xu Xing's lower leg had just been dislocated by the ice ability, even though Fang Zhixu helped to set it back, he couldn't use it forcefully for a while. It hurt when he tried to stand.

"Sister, I'm fine!" Xu Xing shouted loudly. He knew the situation was critical, so he comforted Song Ke in return.

Song Ke patted his fluffy head, looked up at Fang Zhixu. His face was somewhat pale due to excessive use of abilities.

"You're injured, let me treat you," Fang Zhixu said hastily.

"No need, save some energy," Song Ke pressed down his hand.

The small wounds on her back had already healed. She placed the two of them next to Zhuang Qingyan and Lu Xiaoyu, turned around to support Lin Youyou.

At this moment, Lin Youyou was too busy to take care of herself. Her face was full of shock and anger. There was actually a sound-type awakener specifically countering her. Her ability relied on lyrics, but as soon as she sang a few words, the opponent wailed like ghosts and howled like wolves. Lin Youyou's lips were forcibly sealed, and she struggled to speak.

Without support, Su Cha struggled alone against A-level and S-level opponents, covered in wounds. Fang Zhixu couldn't treat him in time.

Song Ke descended from the sky, kicking away the strongest S-level with one foot. As soon as she landed, she pressed the face of the middle-aged woman targeting Su Cha into the ground, snapped her neck, and then with a quick turn of her hand, thousands of plum blossom darts condensed out of thin air, piercing through the opponents instantly.

"(1215, 675, 988), (771, 1008, 321)."

In the earpiece, Zhuang Qingyan suddenly reported two coordinates. These were the calculated coordinates of the "Blood-Red Building Blocks" linked core. Once one set of coordinates moved, the

other set would be next. If they wanted to escape, they just needed to wait for the “blocks” to move and seize the opportunity to step into another edge, immediately teleporting away.

Song Ke turned her head to meet his gaze. Apart from the two coordinates, Zhuang Qingyan didn't say anything else.

Lin Youyou and others looked confused, but Song Ke instantly understood his intention.

Perhaps during this trip, Zhuang Qingyan had already sensed something, which was why he repeatedly reminded his teammates, “If there's danger, you can escape.” Even in dire situations, he would find a way to create opportunities.

At a distance neither too far nor too near, Song Ke nodded firmly at him.

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes softened, and he smiled beautifully.

Crash! The ruins underfoot collapsed. Song Ke blocked a fatal blow for Su Cha, but her thigh was grazed by an iron chain, tearing off a large piece of flesh.

“Captain!”

“Song Ke!!”

“Song Ke?!”

Three different exclamations sounded simultaneously.

Clatter, the “Blood-Red Building Blocks” reconfigured.

Following the sound, Song Ke looked toward the third voice and coincidentally locked eyes with the dazed Duanmu Qi and Xiao Chen. In an instant, she understood their situation.

Duanmu Qi suddenly realized that the mission target of these people was V587, which is why they were treated as “witnesses” and eliminated.

Song Ke also understood. Once a domain-type ability descended, it would form an independent space. “Three Grandsons and One Grandpa” failed to escape in time and were implicated by them.

Suddenly, she thought of something and looked at Duanmu Qi again.

Duanmu Qi tightly held the camping lantern in his arms, covered in cutting wounds all over his body, with pursuers vaguely visible behind him.

Originally, he was silently screaming, “Save... save...” But upon seeing the scene before him, he suddenly fell silent, his eyes revealing despair.

V587’s situation was not much better, no, even worse.

In less than a fraction of a second, Song Ke made a decision.

She raised her hand, conjuring a giant fan. With a heavy sweep, dust and smoke filled the air, further blurring the already chaotic vision.

Song Ke gripped Lin Youyou’s hand and quickly said, “Next teleportation, go to the coordinates and leave.”

“Song Ke’er? Why are you like this too?” Lin Youyou’s cheeks flushed. “No, I won’t go. What is this? This is... betrayal.”

With Su Cha’s talent for hiding, blending into the environment was not a problem. He could keep Lin Youyou safe for a while, and as soon as the user of the “Blood-Red Building Blocks” died, they could escape.

Song Ke looked at her calmly, shaking her head earnestly. "The Mirror Lake matter has been settled; you don't owe me."

"We are teammates."

Lin Youyou's tears blurred instantly. Song Ke knew, even after so long, there had always been a knot in her heart.

"I can't protect everyone."

"Listen to the captain and leave first." Song Ke smiled at Lin Youyou, like the adorable appearance she had when they first met. "Find a way to send a message."

Su Cha wanted to say something, but Song Ke slapped him on the forehead and pushed him to Lin Youyou's side. "Wait for me outside."

Watching the two run towards the coordinates, Song Ke turned to find Lu Xiaoyu. "Lu—"

"I'm not going," Lu Xiaoyu spoke first. "I have something I must do. Don't stop me."

His gaze was incredibly calm, faintly revealing an extreme madness.

As the dust settled, endless attacks continued to approach. Song Ke no longer insisted, pressing down on Fang Zhixu and Xu Xing's wrists. In their moment of distraction, she lifted one with each hand.

Pass!

Two people were thrown into Duanmu Qi and Xiao Chen's arms, subconsciously catching them.

Blood Bat and Wolf Spider chased after them. Without a second thought, Song Ke's upper arm muscles surged, and the cold and jagged blade flew into the air, sweeping through the enemy. Faced with

absolutely domineering awakened ability, the kite string and corrosive spider were nothing, all shattered to pieces.

Reaching into the space, Song Ke pulled out a tightly sealed hemp bag, tossing it to Duanmu Qi. "Take them and leave."

The crimson light almost pierced through the surface, shocking Duanmu Qi into a daze. It was clearly—at least two hundred or more Level 4 crystals.

As they proudly displayed the life-saving treasure, Song Ke wrinkled her small face, tightly clutching her own purse, and grumbled, "Too expensive! I won't use even one of them!!"

The penny-pinching captain, without hesitation, emptied all of her resources to ensure the escape of her teammates.

"Run first... I will take care of the domain-type awakener," Song Ke said to Duanmu Qi with a serious expression.

Duanmu Qi choked up and nodded, "Alright."

Xu Xing realized what was happening, flailing his limbs, tears and snot smearing his face. "No! I won't go! I want to be with my sister!"

"Xiao Xing, be good," Song Ke smiled. "Sister is strong. Go outside and wait for me, okay?"

"No... I don't want to..." The child refused to listen, struggling incessantly and being tightly held by Xiao Chen.

Duanmu Qi inserted crystals into a groove, activating random teleportation. The four of them disappeared on the spot.

Click, the "Blood-Red Building Blocks" moved again.

Zhuang Qingyan's calculations were correct; Su Cha and Lin Youyou, standing on the edge, were smoothly teleported away.

Two unfamiliar starships appeared, and the doors opened. S-levels, extending endlessly into the distance, stared menacingly below.

The previous attack was indeed just a probe. With the final puzzle piece in place, the entire pursuing team revealed themselves.

Zhuang Qingyan's heart sank gradually. This quantity... Did they transport all the S-levels from Utopia here?

On the starship hovering in the sky, cold commands were issued one after another.

"Prepare for a total assault, prioritize killing the S8."

"Six people are escaping; Vulture team, clear them immediately, no witnesses."

"Mr. Gu, 'Flame' is here."

The chaotic scene now only had three people left: one S8 and two S6.

Song Ke's skin was covered with dreadful lacerations, crisscrossing all over. Only her left leg remained intact.

Having spent too much awakened energy in the recent rescue, Song Ke reached into her pocket, pinched something inside, and looked ahead.

The second S7.

A stunning woman sat at the door of the starship, around twenty years old, wearing Vulture uniform, with a flame totem on her forehead. Her gaze firmly locked onto Song Ke. She was the highest-ranking awakener among the opponents, codenamed "Flame."

The awakener codenamed "Flame" lightly opened her crimson lips, chanting a requiem for the departed souls.

Before this operation, they carefully studied the report of the assassination attempt on Ye Zheng. Even when Song Ke was still S7, she could single-handedly take on hundreds of opponents. Surrounding her with a crowd tactic would not work unless... her ability was severed.

But maintaining the severance of the ability of an S8 continuously was far beyond her ability.

With the chant of Flame, a continuous stream of crimson crystals was delivered into her hands, providing her with a source of energy.

Song Ke raised the cold and jagged blade to the level of her eyebrows, confronting the opponent head-on.

Flame's ability was very simple, just "Flame." She didn't even have an offensive means, only serving as a support. However, with the most basic fire ability, she reached the level of S7, making her strength something that no one could underestimate.

Boom!

A towering flame engulfed Song Ke. Jennifer's intense fire was nowhere near comparable. This was a fire attached deep within the soul, capable of burning away the source of all evils in the magnetic field. When it blazed, it could incinerate everything.

Blisters formed on Song Ke's hands, and she quickly realized that she couldn't condense the spiritual weapon into shape. Worse still, after the surrounding air burned away, it formed a vacuum-like area, isolating radiation. For a moment, Song Ke couldn't even sense her own awakened energy.

Fire overcomes metal. When an ability is refined to the extreme, even facing an S8, it can temporarily suppress it.

In terms of strength, Flame was not Song Ke's match, but her role was only to restrain and prevent Song Ke's ability from taking effect.

Losing the formidable spiritual weapon and the domineering awakened energy, Song Ke was just an ordinary person with bare hands.

Song Ke's pause was only a moment, but it was enough. Hundreds of S-levels rushed over like wolves.

She shattered the abdomen of the opponent in front of her with a punch, cleanly killing a dozen people. However, without weapons, she gradually fell into a disadvantage.

Iron Chain pierced through the wheelchair of Lu Xiaoyu, the dense code wall disappeared, and Lu Xiaoyu fell to the ground in a sorry state. The frail young man, who had lost his legs, couldn't stand on his own and could only crawl on all fours.

Like a slow-motion scene from a movie, Song Ke rolled on the ground, the clear sounds of every rib breaking in her body echoing distinctly.

A foot stepped on her head, applying force downward. The sharp iron chain pierced through her shoulder blades. It was Iron Chain. His shapeshifting ability could transform any part of his body. The youth coldly said, "You've lost."

As the iron chain was about to pierce through Song Ke, a bony and slender hand gripped the middle section, preventing it from taking the next step. Blood flowed down the chain, hot liquid dripping onto Song Ke's eyelashes, turning her vision crimson.

It was Zhuang Qingyan.

He knelt in front of Song Ke, holding the wound that pierced through her, and said heavily, "Stop."

Zhuang Qingyan looked towards the sky, his voice light and steady, "I can activate the central hub, but the condition is, release her first."

As this statement was uttered, countless people in the starship instantly sat up straight.

Iron Chain received the order and reluctantly retracted the chain.

The central hub with the Qinglan logo quickly appeared and smoothly stopped in front.

Zhuang Qingyan took out a new wheelchair from the space and helped Lu Xiaoyu sit back.

Then he returned to the battered Song Ke, gently holding her and whispering by her ear like a lover, "Song Ke, at three o'clock direction, the third ship from the right, the user of the 'Blood-Red Building Blocks' is there. I'll control Flame. You have thirty seconds to kill him."

Song Ke nodded silently.

Zhuang Qingyan lifted her face, lightly kissed her forehead, and then stood up, striding towards the central hub.

"My father, the father of the Alliance's genetic engineering, the founder of the Qinglan Research Institute, Vincent Zhuang, sealed all his life's efforts and research results in this central hub. The core of the 'Eternal Life Plan' that you want," Zhuang Qingyan lightly tapped the shell with his fingertip, and the small sound echoed in the entire open space, "...along with permanent life, powerful abilities, and clear consciousness, everything you desire."

"—It's all inside here."

Zhuang Qingyan actually disclosed the secrets of the central hub.

The awakeners' expressions on the scene changed in an instant. Many of them were not clear about the true purpose of this operation. Now that the mystery was revealed, greedy eyes stared closely at his every move.

Meanwhile, Song Ke and Lu Xiaoyu in the back row were being ignored.

Zhuang Qingyan calmly scanned his iris, fingerprint, and entered the authorization password.

The giant central hub that had been silent for thirteen years, under his operation, successfully rebooted. Two lines of text appeared successively:

“Recognition Successful”

“ROOT”

Soft white light illuminated, and after the startup music, the central hub entered the main page.

Someone couldn't restrain themselves and stood up, that was the secret about eternal life!

The awakeners, each harboring their own intentions, were restless, eager to take advantage and sneak a peek.

Xie Ping's voice trembled, “Quick, quickly connect, copy everything!”

Even “Mr. Gu” was no longer calm, “Synchronize the main page immediately.”

The artificial intelligence operated rapidly, extracting relevant data.

At the same time, Song Ke took something out of her pocket, bit open a vial, and injected herself with a sealing agent into her neck.

This was a miraculous potion developed by an A5-level healing awakener, capable of revitalizing the combat capabilities of disabled individuals.

After the loading of the page was complete, the entire area was filled with endless silence.

“How... how is this possible!!” Xie Ping’s hoarse exclamation cut through the night sky.

In Vincent’s preserved central hub, there were no files whatsoever.

An empty space.

“Was it deleted? It can be restored, it must be restorable!”

Amidst the chaotic background noise, Flame suddenly experienced a splitting headache, and her feet slipped, falling into mid-air.

At the same time, an agile figure leaped high.

Song Ke pounced towards the third starship on the right, a huge hammer appearing in her hand, and with terrifying strength, she shattered the porthole.

Boom! Xie Yinqi met a pair of cold eyes.