

Doomsday 28

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 28.1: Rainy Night in Hua City (20)

It was better to say goodbye (End of Hua City Arc)

The next day, Zhuang Qingyan broke through the final security measures of T014 and accessed the control port.

After a total of fourteen days, he finally managed to shut down the malfunctioning weather simulation system.

Witnessed by everyone, the clouds and mist that had been hanging over the city gradually thinned and disappeared. Then, the sun broke through the clouds, pouring down its radiant light, instantly sweeping away the days of gloom.

The high squad members looked at Zhuang Qingyan with visibly different expressions. "You, young man, are quite capable! Did you really fix it?"

"We finally freaking see the sun. It's either zombies or stink bugs every day. It's almost driving me emo!"

"Hey Ouyang, want to sunbathe together?"

Amidst the lively atmosphere, a team member rushed in, approaching Wu Juemin and Maeda Jiu, saying hurriedly, "Eyewitness... District 72... Unable to confirm... Suspected appearance of the key."

Wu Juemin's expression turned serious, and he immediately issued orders, "Everyone! Speed up, clear the roads out of the city by tomorrow at the latest."

The team members who were just talking about sunbathing stood at attention in an instant, responding in unison, "Yes, Captain!"

Song Ke leaned on the back of Zhuang Qingyan's wheelchair, holding a small, skinny pear in her hand. She claimed to be supervising his coding (even though she couldn't understand a word of it), but she noticed that his typing speed was getting slower and couldn't help but look down.

Zhuang Qingyan's gaze stopped in the direction of the people who were talking, his expression oddly hard to describe.

"What's, wrong with you?" Song Ke took a bite of the pear. Oh, it's so sour!

Zhuang Qingyan withdrew his gaze, pointing to the gigantic terminal in front of him.

"What's this?"

"T, T014."

"No, this isn't T014. The real T014 is still above us. This is its control center."

"Huh?" Is there a difference?

"This control center has always been stored near the Qinglan Research Institute near Hua City."

"Oh, I see." Wasn't this something everyone knew from the beginning?

"But you mentioned before that Wu Juemin and the others came from F177 District."

If we were to compare it to a line segment, the positions of Qinglan and F177 District were like the endpoints of the line segment, while Hua City was roughly the midpoint.

“Wu Juemin left Hua City before the heavy rain, so it’s clear that he just happened to bring T014 back with him.”

“Well, that’s interesting. You’re saying that Azure Phoenix’s people took such a big detour, just to go to the Qinglan Research Institute. What are they trying to do?”

“Or rather, what compelling reason do they have to go there?”

Song Ke was puzzled; how would she know?

Zhuang Qingyan started talking in terms she couldn’t understand again.

Seeing Song Ke looking utterly confused, Zhuang Qingyan patted her head with a meaningful expression, “Go on and eat your pear.”

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On that evening, Wu Juemin officially announced that once the roads were open tomorrow morning, their group would depart from Hua City. Due to the nature of their upcoming mission, logistics personnel wouldn’t be able to participate, which meant that after reaching the next destination, the twelve members of Azure Phoenix squad would part ways with them.

Dinner was like a farewell feast. Everyone set up makeshift stoves in the courtyard, and those with culinary skills took matters into their own hands, cooking something to eat.

Holding an unlit cigarette, An Qiwen brushed sauce onto eggplants, asking Song Ke, “Little sister, now that T014 has also been repaired, what are your plans for the future?”

Song Ke stared at the sizzling, oil-covered eggplants without blinking, absentmindedly shaking her head. She didn’t have any particular place she wanted to go; she needed to check with Zhuang Qingyan first.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a familiar figure. Xu Xing was wearing a light yellow sweater, his soft little face tilted as he listened to Ouyang Pei speak. He looked exceptionally docile. Song Ke waved at him, wanting to invite him over to eat.

However, when the little guy saw her, he first looked happy, but then his expression changed as if he had seen a ghost, and he scampered away.

Song Ke: ?

A familiar casual voice came from behind, "Hey, everyone's here?"

Song Ke turned around and saw two figures slowly approaching. It was Zhuang Qingyan and Wu Juemin.

After spending this period of time together, although Wu Juemin hadn't completely let down his guard against Song Ke, she had kept a low profile these days, playing the role of a "law-abiding citizen." She hadn't caused any trouble, so Wu Juemin's attitude was slightly less hostile. He didn't threaten to detain her at every turn.

"Commander Wu, do you have any sensible suggestions about our next destination?" Zhuang Qingyan deliberately ignored a certain figure that had fled, chuckling softly.

Wu Juemin glanced at Song Ke and spoke coldly, "The Alliance has regulations for the management of awakeners. Since you've awakened, you should register as soon as possible. Registered awakeners are recognized by the Alliance. Otherwise, you'll forever remain a black household."

Song Ke, who had eighteen years of experience being a black household, felt like a knife had stabbed her in the back.

However, would registering as an awakener grant her an official identity? Song Ke felt a bit intrigued.

"Where can, can I register?"

“All the C-District cities are fine. C District has had awakener bases before, but they weren’t open to the public,” An Qiwen flipped the eggplants, then continued in a carefree manner, “But with the current situation, starships are out of service, and it’s difficult to travel anywhere. Oh, by the way, we’re headed to District C72. You can ask the captain to give you a lift.”

“C72 District? Ferrara, the city of music and art?” Zhuang Qingyan suddenly spoke.

“Yeah, you know about it?” An Qiwen seemed surprised. To accurately mention a city’s name just by its number, either this person had exceptional memory and was well-versed in the Alliance’s regional information, or they had been there or heard about it before, making it familiar to them.

“Not exactly, I’ve just heard a bit about it,” Zhuang Qingyan nodded with a touch of reserve.

In the first year of the New Calendar, the Alliance officially divided the territory into 180 districts, graded from A to F based on overall development levels.

Among them, District E was developed into various functional areas due to its unique ecological environment (E166-E175). District F only had numbers without names because it was too backward (F176-F180). The remaining districts ABCD formed a pyramid distribution. Apart from the distant and mysterious District A (A1-A5), the opulent District B (B6-B25) where the privileged gathered, and the most numerous but unremarkable District D (D76-D165), the technologically advanced and well-managed District C (C26-C75) became the sought-after “ideal country” for the majority.

District C consisted of 50 cities, each with its own irreplaceable uniqueness.

—Like District C72, Ferrara.

Ferrara not only had nearly a thousand large and small retro opera houses but had also achieved a state of mastery in the application of holographic projection technology. In this land where floating and leaping musical notes and imaginative ideas were everywhere, singers, poets, painters, playwrights from all over the world gathered together, hoping that one day they could step onto the brilliantly shining stage of the stars and fulfill their lifelong pursuits.

In addition, Ferrara had a governing official who was the most “free” in the entire Alliance.

“Do you want to go to Ferrara?” Zhuang Qingyan asked Song Ke.

Song Ke nodded. Becoming an officially registered awakener with a formal identity was too attractive a proposition. This way, she wouldn't have to hide for her entire life, and she could proudly say to others: “Look! This is my ID.”

Zhuang Qingyan easily understood Song Ke's thoughts, smiled, and turned to Wu Juemin. “I don't have any objections. It depends on Captain Wu's agreement.”

Though Wu Juemin's demeanor was cold and tough, as an excellent military personnel, he inherently possessed a sense of duty and compassion. Otherwise, when they were in District F177, he wouldn't have allocated half of the starships to transport civilians.

“Okay,” Wu Juemin nodded coldly, “but I'm only responsible for taking you to District C72.”

It meant that after reaching District C72, they would have to find their own way, just like the logistics team members.

Zhuang Qingyan expressed his understanding, “Of course, thank you, Captain Wu.”

“Little sister, are you willing to come with us this time? Here, have a skewer!” An Qiwen's roasted eggplant was finally ready. After being politely declined by both Wu Juemin and Zhuang Qingyan, it was Song Ke who took one skewer.

She stared at the reddish surface for a while and then took a bite.

Oh! It's so spicy!

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The day of departure arrived quickly.

As the light of dawn was just breaking, Song Ke was awakened by a faint rustling sound – footsteps! Though the footsteps were numerous, they weren't chaotic. They were well-trained, landing softly. If it weren't for her keen supernatural senses, she might have easily overlooked them.

She rubbed her eyes, sat up from the bed, and all traces of drowsiness vanished. However, upon a quick glance, she realized the single bed across from hers was empty – Zhuang Qingyan was nowhere to be seen. It was only at the second look that she noticed he was seated by the window, lifting the curtain to look outside.

Song Ke felt a touch of surprise; she hadn't expected Zhuang Qingyan to be so alert, waking up earlier than she did.

“Who is it?”

“Azure Phoenix's people.”

Song Ke immediately became anxious, “Are they trying to, to sneak away?”

Wasn't it agreed that they would be taken to District C72? Could they really just renege on that after a night's sleep?

Zhuang Qingyan was speechless and choked up, defeated by her unexpectedly circuitous thought process.

“No, it's not that,” his expression turned serious, “come over and see, the formation is activated.”

Song Ke jumped up in shock and hurried to the window.

In the faint morning light, that familiar floating mall appeared once again. However, the former grandeur was no longer present. The massive architectural structure lay in ruins, leaning against the ground near the sinkhole. Shadows gathered around it, as if a fair number of people had congregated.

Song Ke put on her coat, "Let's go and take a look."

The two of them reached a nearby hilltop. From the elevated position, they saw people emerging from various entrances.

Unlike the day the formation contracted and people fled in panic, those coming out now were dispirited and silent. Their demeanor was so quiet that it bordered on eerie.

Some had looks of confusion, others were mournful and anguished. There were those with bloodshot eyes, their spirits distant and distracted. Homes were gone, the city was in ruins, and even the last refuge had fallen. From this day on, these individuals had become rootless wanderers.

Apart from the people, there was also a significant number of zombies that had fled the area, and even half-human, half-zombie creatures in the midst of mutation. Song Ke didn't know what had transpired inside, but the scene was undeniably shocking. She had a foreboding feeling that this city might have to coexist with zombies in the future.

Their position was quite conspicuous, and after a while, a hoarse voice called out behind her, "Song Ke."

Song Ke turned around, her oversized coat fluttering in the night breeze.

Jiang Rui stared at her intently, feeling like eons had passed. It had been less than half a month since they last saw each other, yet seeing Song Ke again felt like a world away.

She was still alive, and that was wonderful.

But what about him? Was he really still considered alive in his current state?

The experiences of this period had been like the cruelest purgatory, shattering Jiang Rui's innocence completely.

**TN

Black Household – a person with no household registration

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 28.2: Rainy Night in Hua City (20)

It was better to say goodbye (End of Hua City Arc)

If Jiang Rui could have foreseen how things would develop, he would definitely not have chosen to enter the formation.

The descent of Hua City's Bagua Formation was filled with extreme chaos from beginning to end.

[Day One]

The landmark mall at the heart of Hua City had eleven floors, with an atrium in the center and rows of shops and restaurants on either side. The crucial control center was located on the lower level, separate from the main structure. As one ascended, the available living space grew larger.

When the gangway entrance closed, all the survivors fought over territory, engaging in physical altercations. Jiang Rui and his group managed to secure a small shop, mostly due to the intimidating presence of his supernatural ability. If Jiang Rui hadn't been there, they might not even have been able to hold onto this tiny space.

"I'm so stupid, how could I be this stupid..."

Zhang Qi's death had a significant impact on Zhou Anqi. She had lost her former vigor and spent her days crying.

"Jiang Rui, whether you believe it or not, three years ago, I really didn't initiate bullying Song Ke," Zhou Anqi's eyes were red, as she revealed the truth behind that massive brawl, "It was Cao Yiyi who kept

telling me. She said she was pretending and deliberately leading you on ambiguously. My mind got clouded, and I just wanted to teach her a lesson. Putting dead mice in her bag, tossing her uniform, test papers, and even splashing her with food – all of those ideas came from Cao Yiyi.”

“Even your intimate photos were sent to me by her. I always thought of her as a friend...” Zhou Anqi’s regret was overwhelming, and she covered her face and sobbed. Although she was domineering and spoiled, she never intended to harm her classmates. She really hadn’t expected Cao Yiyi to be so heartless.

“She told you to do something, and you just did it? You really are an obedient tool, pointing wherever she tells you to strike.” A surviving person who was still alive couldn’t bear it, and he mocked with a cold gaze.

“Now you regret it? Who knows if you’re just pretending,” even the usually easygoing Tian Yi couldn’t help but feel upset for Song Ke, “You! You’re just shifting blame!”

Cao Yiyi’s betrayal filled them with a deep hatred. At the mention of her, each of them wished they could devour her flesh.

“Bullying? Wasn’t it just a little disagreement...”

Jiang Rui suddenly halted, a realization striking him, “a little disagreement” was also a term Cao Yiyi had used.

“...”

So that’s how it was.

So he had been kept in the dark all this time. So he was just as foolish as Zhou Anqi, an utter idiot.

Back when Jiang Rui’s brow bone was injured, he had felt a bit resentful towards Song Ke. He resented her for being so reckless, for not understanding the gravity of her actions. So when the school wanted to hold her accountable, he had asked his family to intervene and smooth things over. But soon after, he

learned from Cao Yiyi that Song Ke had been expelled. After that, he felt disheartened and didn't bother seeking the truth. He even didn't contact her out of frustration.

Because of one sentence from Song Ke, he had held onto that grudge for so long.

In your eyes, am I the same as everyone else? So you can just attack me mercilessly.

Jiang Rui closed his eyes and sighed bitterly. He thought about Song Ke, who had stayed outside to save them. Now it was all too late.

[Day Three]

The conflicts were still intensifying.

Within a mere half-day, waves of disputes erupted on the third, seventh, and ninth floors. Wherever people were present, conflicts arose. In such a confined and stifling space, even the tiniest matters could be amplified into explosive triggers. The survivors pushed and shoved, and verbal disagreements quickly escalated into physical conflicts.

The piercing screams reached Jiang Rui and the others on the eighth floor, and they learned some bad news—a person had mutated into a zombie.

[Day Four]

Chaos, chaos, chaos.

No one knew why zombies had infiltrated, only that impending doom was unavoidable. The number of mutants increased, and the situation worsened. Zhang Hao and his group locked the doors of their shop and guarded the entrance to prevent anyone from forcing their way in.

[Day Five]

Even worse news: the staff responsible for distributing supplies had died.

They had been murdered, and the stored supplies had been looted. Those items that were difficult to preserve or carry were trampled underfoot and crushed into pieces. The previously designated safe zone had turned into an absurd killing hell.

[Day Seven]

Zombies continued to multiply.

Tian Yi unexpectedly discovered traces of Xu Liren, or rather, he discovered the “Zombie Xu Liren.”

At that time, he had already told Jiang Rui and the others about Xu Liren’s actions. Cao Yiyi’s betrayal had numbed everyone, but even so, upon learning that their respected teacher had turned out to be a heartless villain, Zhang Hao and the others punched the wall in anger.

“Xu Liren” blended in with a group of zombies, its head twitching neurotically. It slowly passed by the shop, and when it turned around, Tian Yi noticed a festering wound on its shoulder—a clear bite mark.

Tian Yi thought of those classmates he had pushed out to their deaths, he thought of Kongzi Qi, his best friend.

Tears streamed down his face, and he silently muttered, “Serves him right! They bit him well!”

[Day Eight]

Jiang Rui and the others finally broke through to the first floor, following the route provided by Kongzi Qi to find the “secret door.” However, the situation did not go smoothly. The secret door required both a password and biometric recognition. The personnel within the formation had mostly been injured or killed, and the rest were nowhere to be found.

[Day Ten]

No one expected that they would encounter Cao Yiyi again.

Those who abandoned their companions would eventually be abandoned by them.

Cao Yiyi wasn't faring well inside. Her petty schemes were utterly useless in the face of complete madness.

When Jiang Rui and the others found her, her hair was disheveled, her clothes were torn, and she was being held down by a few repugnant-looking men. As soon as she saw them, her eyes lit up, and she struggled with all her might to break free from their grasp and crawled over laboriously.

"Jiang Rui, Anqi, save me! Save me!"

The group stopped in their tracks, looking at her with indifference.

About four or five men stared at them with unease, especially at the fire whip in Jiang Rui's hand. They hesitated to make a move.

Cao Yiyi didn't receive the rescue she hoped for. The light in her eyes gradually faded, and she hysterically shouted, "We're companions! How can you do this! How can you stand by and watch someone die!"

—Then she was dragged away.

"You won't die well!"

"I won't spare you! Jiang Rui, Zhou Anqi, all of you deserve to die!"

The curses from behind were incessant and increasingly venomous.

“What... will happen to her?”

Lin Xia averted her gaze, tightly holding Zhou Anqi’s hand. If she didn’t hold her back, Zhou Anqi might have lunged to tear Cao Yiyi’s mouth apart.

“The person who was pulling her has bite marks on his leg,” Zhang Hao said.

Everyone fell silent.

[Day Thirteen]

Jiang Rui attempted once again to break through the secret door, to no avail.

On their way back to the eighth floor, they unexpectedly rescued a clerk from the Hua City Hall who was besieged by zombies. He was emaciated and on the brink of death. Tian Yi gave him water and food, barely keeping him conscious.

In the evening, the man finally woke up. They learned from him that he had been the designer of the Bagua Formation project, responsible for the entire structure of the formation.

“...The Bagua Formation is the best shelter in Hua City, the best!”

“Why? Why can it withstand natural disasters but not human nature?”

“...I don’t want to die here.”

“...This place is already hell.”

The clerk named Li Tong spoke to himself in a vacant murmur.

[Day Fourteen]

After regaining consciousness, Li Tong led them into the main control room.

Even though they all knew that opening the formation might very well lead to an endless wave of zombies and insects, Li Tong resolutely pressed the button.

...

Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan listened quietly to their story.

They hadn't anticipated that even within the formation, such unforeseen tragedies would occur.

Zhou Anqi summoned her courage and walked up to Song Ke. This once haughty little princess had learned to bow her head after experiencing so much. "Although I still really dislike you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

She apologized to Song Ke, repeating "I'm sorry" over and over, trembling all over, unable to speak through her tears.

In the end, she wiped her tears away and stubbornly said, "I'm not forcing you, and you don't have to forgive me."

Song Ke sighed deeply in her heart and responded, "Okay."

Zhuang Qingyan asked, "What's your plan now?"

Jiang Rui said, "We're planning to head north with Brother Li."

Li Tong had internal channels and knew the locations of various small and large Alliance shelters. Jiang Rui felt responsible. Zhang Hao, Lin Xia, Tian Yi... he had to lead these people to survive.

They might stop at a certain shelter or perhaps continue to wander until they find a place that would accept them.

“What about you?” Jiang Rui looked at Song Ke.

“We...” Song Ke lowered her head, and coincidentally, Zhuang Qingyan was also looking at her.

“We, are going to District C, C72.”

From the slope behind them, An Qiwen’s loud voice echoed, “Little sister, get ready to leave~”

His booming voice startled the surrounding zombies, and they swarmed toward him like compass needles.

An Qiwen exclaimed, “Here I go,” and his purple light flickered as he started cleaning up with grumbling.

It was time to say goodbye.

Tian Yi and Lin Xia looked at her with teary eyes. Song Ke nodded at them, “Goodbye, hope to see, see you again.”

Then she turned to Jiang Rui, “Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Song Ke,” Jiang Rui’s voice was hoarse, but his eyes held a kind of resolute core. “Take care.”

Song Ke turned and walked away.

Zhuang Qingyan said something that made her stomp her foot in annoyance, then she chased after him and kicked his wheelchair. Their figures merged into another group of tall figures, quickly disappearing into the night.

Song Ke was carefree, open-minded, and graceful in her comings and goings, like the wind that couldn't be grasped in one's hands.

And Jiang Rui, once naive and full of confidence, ignorant and foolish.

At this moment, he finally understood.

They were never meant to travel the same path, just like a lighthouse and drifting ships. Even if they temporarily crossed paths, they were destined for permanent separation.

It was better to say goodbye.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 29 – Bloody Ferrara (1)

Ilya knows everything

“Are you sad?”

“What?”

Zhuang Qingyan observed Song Ke's expression and asked again, “Are you sad?”

Song Ke shook her head. She and Jiang Rui, Tian Yi, and the others were always destined to be apart. She had been mentally prepared for it from the beginning.

Zhuang Qingyan 'tsk tsk'ed' and hinted, "I think... he's quite sad."

This "he" didn't need to be explicitly mentioned; it naturally referred to Jiang Rui.

Song Ke slightly furrowed her brow, looking puzzled.

"He is an, an awakener. He can protect himself, no, no need to be sad."

They were talking past each other; what they said was fundamentally different.

Zhuang Qingyan found it amusing in his mind, "Well, it's good that you're not sad. It's just a pity... Fallen flowers have intentions, flowing water is heartless..."

Song Ke kicked the wheelchair, saying, "Don't be so cryptic."

Zhuang Qingyan hissed, "Song Keke, I'm warning you officially, we only have this one wheelchair!"

Song Ke stomped her foot, "Don't call me Song Keke!"

Playfully returning to the base, there were already two military pickups parked at the entrance. Wu Juemin had given everyone just ten minutes to pack up, and they were set to depart on time.

Song Ke only had a backpack with her belongings, travelling light. She saw logistics personnel moving things around, there were several large and small suitcases. Worth noting, the people from Azure Phoenix military squad were just like her, empty-handed, walking in a carefree manner. She suddenly recalled the powerful mobile artillery she had seen near the formation point before, the ones used to bombard zombies. She quickly went to ask Zhuang Qingyan.

Zhuang Qingyan gave a concise answer, "Spatial abilities."

The fact that the military possessed spatial containers wasn't much of a secret, and Song Ke would know sooner or later.

Song Ke suddenly gained a new piece of knowledge and was greatly surprised. She bombarded him with questions, nearly leaving herself breathless. Zhuang Qingyan simply handed her the necklace he had obtained from Wu Yarou. After pondering for a while, she learned how to activate it with her mental power. She became completely absorbed in it, walking slowly and absentmindedly. She was still playing with it, opening and closing it repeatedly, even when they were about to board the vehicle.

Zhuang Qingyan: "..."

You must have too much mental power to spare, right?

Wu Juemin and An Qiwen were in the first pickup truck. Because Song Ke had delayed a bit while playing with the necklace, when she arrived, it was already full. So, she and Zhuang Qingyan turned towards the second truck.

The back compartment of the second truck was spacious. Someone had turned on the radio, and melodious songs occasionally played.

Song Ke unintentionally noticed that Maeda Jiu, sitting across from her, had a slight smile at the corner of his mouth. It was a rare and joyful expression. This was the first time she had seen Maeda Jiu smile. A tiny flame of curiosity ignited in her heart. She discreetly tugged at Zhuang Qingyan's sleeve, urging him to look as well.

As the pleasant melody gradually came to an end, the person sitting next to the radio was about to switch the song. A young team member named Xiong Ping spoke up, "Hey, don't change it. Vice Captain loves this song. It's his goddess!"

"Pfft—! Whose goddess?" Ouyang Pei sprayed out a mouthful of water, realizing he was being too loud. He quickly lowered his voice, "No way, right? Someone like Vice Captain Maeda, who's usually so stern and serious, actually chasing after a celebrity?"

Maeda Jiu's esper ability was an air barrier. He was usually strict and reserved, rarely smiling or speaking much. He held a reputation in the team second only to Wu Juemin. Ouyang Pei couldn't believe that someone as stiff as him, always looking like he was scolding others, would actually be a fan of a celebrity. And even claim that celebrity as his goddess?

"Who's Vice Captain's goddess?" Ouyang Pei suddenly seemed to uncover a great secret, his expression excited and eager.

"Do you guys know Lin Youyou? The sweetest songstress in Ferrara, the superstar who's famous throughout District C."

"Ahh~ I've heard of her!" Wang Qiang joined in on the excitement, and the three of them huddled close together, murmuring to each other, "Isn't she the one who sang 'Thank You for Loving Me'? That song's been a hit for so long, with over a billion views on the star network."

"I thank you~ for your honeyed~ words! Sweet words, I thank you~ for your honey~ed lips! A sword in the belly~"

"Get lost, that's not how it goes!"

"That's not how it goes? That's exactly how it goes! Let me sing it for you, so you can listen carefully."

"I thank yooou~ for your honeyyy—!!!"

"Bang!"

Maeda Jiu's fist struck the compartment wall, his voice sharp, "Shut up."

His face darkened, and he said something very fast in his hometown's dialect, sounding like he was cursing someone.

Wang Qiang's face turned bright red, while Ouyang Pei and Xiong Ping beside him struggled not to burst into laughter. Their facial features twisted in an oddly pained manner, holding back their mirth with great effort.

Aside from this somewhat discordant little incident, the atmosphere in the compartment remained quite relaxed.

Song Ke saw several members of Azure Phoenix handing torn uniforms to a middle-aged man in a corner. She vaguely remembered him because An Qiwen, with his booming voice, had once exclaimed incredulously, "What? A grown man's supernatural ability is actually embroidery?!"

It was said that he was an E-level awakener named Wu Xianghai. His ability was extremely rare – something like "stitching." He could mend two different things together. Since Azure Phoenix military squad had a limited supply of uniforms and they were frequently damaged, they would seek him out whenever there was a tear. His repairs were so well done that the mended parts looked as good as new.

However, Wu Xianghai was small in stature, with sparse eyebrows and restless eyes that constantly darted around, as if he was plotting something. In Zhuang Qingyan's words, he was described as "shifty-eyed and sneaky." Though he indeed had a sharp tongue, the description was spot on. After encountering Wu Xianghai, Song Ke had to believe that a person's awakened supernatural ability was truly entirely random.

On the horizon outside the window, the sun was slowly rising, and the two pickup trucks raced forward as if chasing after the afterglow of dawn. This was the most relaxed morning Song Ke had experienced since the apocalypse.

No zombies, no insect swarms, and no endless slaughter.

Her entire face was bathed in sunlight, and she silently exclaimed, 'Let's go, District C72!'

...

After three days and two nights of travel, Wu Juemin's group safely arrived on the outskirts of Ferrara.

Song Ke eagerly stuck her head out of the window, feeling the cool breeze on her face, causing her shoulder-length black hair to flutter and fly.

At a distance, they could already catch a glimpse of a corner of Ferrara.

Massive neon signs floated in the air, and the dreamy Ferris wheel gleamed like a diamond ring. High-frequency searchlights, balloons, and ribbons all shimmered, while high-tech holographic billboards continually changed images. Steam-powered flower boats weaved between countless skyscrapers.

Ferrara truly lived up to its status as a C-level city, with its technological advancement vastly surpassing that of Hua City.

As the pickup trucks entered the city through the main road, the path was smooth and unobstructed. A wandering musician playing the guitar leaned against the city gate and upon seeing them, smiled brightly. He warmly sang while dancing around the vehicles, "Ferrara~ the free Ferrara, it's the dream you linger in~"

Their exaggerated performance startled Song Ke, and she silently withdrew her head.

After a while, she whispered to Zhuang Qingyan, "Aren't there safety checks here?"

After all, this was District C. Wasn't this too lax? Even their District F had sentries stationed!

Zhuang Qingyan, also gazing outside, had the blurry lights reflecting on his profile, making his expression all the more intriguing.

"Ferrara prides itself on freedom and art, welcoming every traveler from afar."

"However, while they may welcome you, it's not guaranteed they'll let you stay."

Indeed, Ferrara's security was indeed good. The city was bustling with constant foot traffic, but not a single zombie could be seen along the way. It was as if the apocalypse Song Ke and her group had experienced in Hua City was just an illusion.

The two pickup trucks eventually parked on the outskirts of the square. Going further into the inner streets was impossible due to their narrowness and heavy pedestrian traffic.

When Song Ke got out of the truck, dozens of cool motorbikes zoomed past her, creating a chaotic scene. The convoy had barely moved about ten meters when the intense music continued pounding in her eardrums.

Song Ke raised her head, and the surrounding streets were adorned with colorful lights, constantly flashing in a blingbling manner. She stared for a few seconds, only to find herself dazzled. Looking upwards, she saw towering skyscrapers that seemed to reach the clouds. Their steel and concrete exteriors emitted an intangible sense of pressure in the night. The whole city was enveloped in a light purple, dream-like haze.

As Wu Juemin and his team got off the truck and walked only a few steps, the time struck exactly eight o'clock. Suddenly, the massive clock high in the air of Ferrara chimed.

"Dang-dang-dang."

After three chimes, everyone on the streets and within the skyscrapers stopped their actions and looked up.

Amidst numerous flower boats, between two towering towers, a giant searchlight projected a holographic image. A slender figure gradually emerged and became clearer. He had a brilliant and dazzling head of golden hair, a flawless face, and was dressed in a sharp, pure white suit. From an exterior perspective, he was beautiful and ethereal, so much so that it was difficult to determine his gender at first glance.

The man placed one hand in front of his chest and executed an incredibly graceful gentleman's bow. "I'm pleased that new travelers have come to Ferrara today."

His lustrous eyes surveyed the crowd, and a slight smile graced his lips. "Let's welcome them to the true paradise!"

"Hm... let's sing 'Paradise' once."

Cheers, whistles, and deafening applause erupted. The atmosphere in the square was exceptionally fervent.

The man extended his right hand and casually gestured. The surroundings seemed to blur, and suddenly Song Ke saw countless flowers blooming, and heard the enchanting voices reminiscent of sea nymphs, and the super stereo sound lingered in everyone's ears, completely immersing the city in a wave of music.

The crowd descended into madness, their eyes filled with obsession as they elevated the man to the highest pedestal of idolization, shouting their hearts out.

"Ilya! Ilya! Ilya!"

"Alright~ The carnival is over. Let me reveal a little secret: the Throne Race Competition is currently accepting registrations. Ilya has prepared generous rewards, so everyone must remember to participate~" Ilya playfully blinked, setting off another wave of cheers.

As the spotlight dimmed, the holographic projection vanished, and Ilya's figure disappeared along with it. However, the impact he brought lingered for a long time. The citizens of Ferrara gazed towards the direction of the towers, only regretting that time passed too quickly.

Song Ke was left stunned. Who was this person, a superstar?

"Captain Wu, who is that?" someone from the logistics team couldn't help but ask.

Wu Juemin stared in the direction where the man had disappeared for a few seconds before saying solemnly, "Ilya, the magistrate of District C72, the Lord of Ferrara."

“Is he ve-very impressive?” Otherwise, why were so many people going crazy for him?

“It’s not ‘he,’ it’s ‘it’,” Zhuang Qingyan corrected, using a gender-neutral term in the common language of the Alliance.

“Ilya is an artificial intelligence.”

Song Ke: “!!!!”

...

District C72, Ferrara, the City of Art and Freedom, was also the sole city within the Alliance entirely governed by artificial intelligence.

The Lord of Ferrara was elected by its citizens.

Initially, Ilya was the most beloved virtual idol in Ferrara. However, in one of the city’s elections for Lord, for some unknown reason, Ilya’s name appeared in the final list of five candidates, alongside a group of insincere and calculating politicians, making it seem entirely out of place.

After all, it was merely a heap of data, even if it had a bit of popularity, could it really replace humans?

The competing candidates scoffed at this idea, considering Ilya the biggest joke of the year. Yet, they still ordered the error to be rectified quickly. However, the final voting results left everyone dumbfounded. Ilya was elected as the Lord with an astonishing 90% support rate.

The defeated politicians were initially in disbelief, then they cursed continuously, “Damn it, have all these artists in Ferrara gone crazy?”

It was too absurd! What a joke!!

How could a machine possibly govern a city?

But the reality turned out to be quite the opposite. After Ilya's election, Ferrara flourished, and even the crime rate steadily decreased.

In Ferrara, everyone had heard a saying: "Ilya knows everything."

No matter what you had done, you were under the surveillance of artificial intelligence.

**TN

honeyed words, a sword in the belly (idiom); fig. hypocritical and murderous

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 30: Bloody Ferrara (2)

Did you bring money?

With tasks at hand, Wu Juemin gave a simple explanation and prepared to take Azure Phoenix's people away.

He left casually, but the logistics team members had tears in their eyes, reluctant to part. Wu Juemin had rescued them from a perilous situation and led them in a retreat, guiding them all the way to the peaceful District C. They couldn't greedily ask for more; it was clearly not his obligation. Even if Wu Juemin had left them today, it could be said that he had fulfilled his duty to the utmost.

After parting ways with Azure Phoenix's people, Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan didn't travel with the remaining group; they chose to act separately.

Ferrara was an open and inclusive city. Capsule sleeping pods for wandering travelers could be found everywhere on the streets. Not only were they free to use, but they were also easy to access—just a

facial scan away. As it wasn't early anymore, Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan each booked a room and went to sleep.

The next morning, after a quick tidying up, the two of them headed straight to the Awakener Base.

Ferrara's Special Affairs Agency (Awakener Base) was located in a concealed alley on the west side of the square. Its architectural style was consistent with the city's flamboyant and colorful aesthetics. The only difference was that its sign seemed a bit aged.

Upon entering, the first thing that caught the eye was a spacious mezzanine. A few individuals were scattered around, and the winding staircase led up to the elevated central desk. A glasses-wearing female staff member was busy there.

As Song Ke approached, she faintly heard a melodious tune. Looking down, she was left speechless.

On the desk was a small transparent screen, and the holographic projection on it was familiar. Wasn't that Ilya from before? But now Ilya was dressed in elegant clothing, obviously from an early performance video. The girl on the desk was staring at it with rapt attention, wearing an enamored smile.

Song Ke: "Hello, I'd like to, to register as an awakener."

The girl swiftly pressed down on the screen, her expression turning formal. She pushed a booklet over: "Start by filling out the form. Complete every item on the first three pages, the rest is optional. Then go to the first room on the left for a photograph, turn right to the second room for genetic testing, and proceed to the second floor for an on-site awakener evaluation. Once you've completed everything, come back to me. Oh, and remember to bring all the receipts."

The instructions came in a rapid succession, and the pace was quite fast. Song Ke was getting dizzy, half-remembering and half-forgetting. Fortunately, she had Zhuang Qingyan with her, who had a good memory, or else it would have been a mess.

Following the staff's guidance, Song Ke obediently filled out the form, then hurriedly went to take a photograph. She became nervous as soon as she had to take a picture. Her posture was unnaturally stiff,

her lips pressed together, radiating a pitiful look. Luckily, there was no photographer in the room, only a mechanical arm controlling the camera. The emotionless electronic synthesized voice kept prompting with errors: “Ding—please tilt your head to the right.”

“Ding—Detected that the person’s expression is too stiff. Please relax and tilt your head to the right.”

“Ding—Unable to detect the photographer. Please return to the center of the frame.”

Song Ke turned her head to the side, then accidentally tilted it too much and fell out of the chair.

Zhuang Qingyan couldn’t help but laugh beside her. “Song Ke, just take a proper photo. Why are you bullying the machine?”

Song Ke glared at him angrily, shook her hand, took a deep breath, and managed to force a fake smile.

The final photo turned out to be quite odd, and Zhuang Qingyan laughed for a full two minutes.

After taking the photo, she went to the second room for blood drawing and genetic testing. Ferrara had specialized awakener assessment equipment, much better than the inferior one Wu Juemin had. It could not only test ability levels but was also said to calculate the upper limit of potential that could be unlocked in the future using artificial intelligence.

The testing room was also fully automated. Blood was drawn first, then she lay down in a box of unknown purpose, getting scanned from top to bottom.

Next was the awakener verification room on the second floor. Its main purpose was on-site verification to establish local records for easy reference later.

Song Ke finally encountered people again. Inside the room were three verification officers, two men and one woman, all sitting in a row. After the person in front of her came out, it wasn’t long before they called out, “Next!”

Song Ke pushed the door open and entered. She was in a closed isolation room with glass only in front, and the speaker on the wall lit up with a green light. The voice of a verification officer came through, "Please demonstrate your ability. Don't worry, we have top-notch security measures, so please release your ability to the fullest extent to facilitate our judgment."

Song Ke's hand touched the edge of the table. Two seconds later, the table disappeared, and she was holding a long spear in her hand, standing obediently in place.

The verification officers were a bit taken aback. "That's it?"

Song Ke nodded.

If it was just a display of her ability, this was enough.

"It's a bit... crude, isn't it? Doesn't feel particularly special."

"Well, can you change the shape of objects? This could be considered... support ability? Maybe you could help the engineering department with waste material cleanup?"

"I have quite a lot of furniture at home that I don't use. Was just wondering who could tidy it up."

"If you put it that way, this ability is pretty useful, huh?"

"A practical garbage collector, hahaha!"

"To be honest, if she's an E-level, I might consider hiring an awakener to help me with daily trash disposal. Doesn't sound bad, does it?"

The two male verification officers exchanged a glance and found themselves quite humorous as they burst into laughter.

These people weren't as formidable as Zhuang Qingyan, who could immediately determine her ability type with just a glance.

Song Ke absentmindedly conjured a spear, and the long spear emitted a faint blue light as it traced through the air.

The corner of the female evaluator's eyes seemed to catch something. She lifted her head and carefully examined the spiritual weapon.

"This thing in your hand seems to be an ancient civilization cold weapon, right? Does it have any offensive capabilities, or is it only suitable as a craft?"

Holding the spear with one hand, Song Ke didn't bother to use any techniques. She simply thrust it straight ahead.

"Stab—"

A deeply-seated crack appeared on the so-called wall with top-notch security, and a powerful shockwave surged over the wall, overturning the evaluation forms the officers had on the table. The next moment, the entire glass window shattered with a loud boom, and fragments rained down.

Oops, used too much force.

Song Ke felt a bit guilty.

The three verification officers: "..."

What damn handicraft, what cursed support ability. She was obviously a living star of disaster! They had actually thought about having her clean up garbage; were they eager for their lives to be shorter?

“Cough...,” the male evaluator sitting in the middle awkwardly coughed twice. “That’s enough. It’s confirmed to be a strong offensive ability. The specific level will have to wait for the results of the genetic test.”

“Oh.” Song Ke shook off her spear, took two steps forward, and tried to step over the broken glass to retrieve her registration form.

“Don’t come out!!”

“The door, the door is at the back!”

The two male evaluators yelled in panic, rapidly retreating their chairs while hurriedly jotting down a few notes on Song Ke’s form. Treating it like a hot potato, they handed it over to a mechanical arm, which returned it to the isolation room: “Submit, submit it, leave it to the central desk.”

When Song Ke went back, the girl on the desk was once again engrossed in playing around on her device, sneakily watching Ilya’s treasured old footage. Song Ke placed the form on the table and gave it a glance before continuing in a formulaic tone, “The results of the genetic test will be out within three working days. You can come to pick up your awakener certificate then. For now, please make the payment. It’s a total of 10,000 Alliance coins.”

“Huh?” Song Ke dumbly inquired, “10,000, what?”

“10,000 Alliance coins, your registration fee,” the girl said somewhat impatiently.

Song Ke was dumbfounded: Oh my goodness! How come no one told her that registering as an awakener also required money?

The girl probably hadn’t encountered someone as clueless as her, and she became a little flustered herself. “Of course it costs money. The machines for ability testing, the algorithm fees for AI, and the daily maintenance—all require expenses. We’re not a charity!”

Song Ke: ... What should she do if she doesn’t have money?

She turned to Zhuang Qingyan with a perplexed look, her eyes seeming to ask: Did you bring money?

For the first time, Zhuang Qingyan couldn't answer Song Ke's question.

—He didn't have money either.

But that's not his fault. First, given his upbringing, having lived for almost thirty years, he had never needed to worry about money. Secondly, among the people he knew, there was no one as poor as Song Ke.

The two paupers were in a similar situation, both lost in thought.

The girl, perhaps feeling sorry for her, offered an idea: "Well, since you're an awakener, you can take on missions as a contractor. Just join any team and do some miscellaneous tasks. When you have money, come back and register."

"Mis, missions?"

"Yes, go out and turn left at the second intersection, walk straight for 100 meters, and you'll find the Special Affairs Commission Center."

...

Ferrara, Special Affairs Commission Center.

This was a more impressive building, and it was evident that the people coming and going possessed strong auras, the majority being awakeners.

A bald man with an arm as thick as Song Ke's waist sat atop a sculpture at the entrance, his legs spread wide, arms crossed over his chest. The black bean-like eyes sized up Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan as

they passed by, radiating disdain and scorn. “Little brat and cripple, you really dare enter anywhere. You treat this place like a nursery?”

The bald man was muscular, probably a muscular-type awakener.

He spoke loudly, intentionally for them to hear.

Zhuang Qingyan’s smile turned icy, his gaze shifting to the bald man with chilling precision.

Song Ke felt a shiver down her spine. Whenever Zhuang Qingyan displayed this kind of supervillain smile, someone was bound to suffer.

However, before they could make any move, several thick vines suddenly descended from above. “Smack, smack, smack—” they slapped the bald man’s face several times, and then one of the vines bound him and flung him away, headfirst, into a fountain.

A woman with red hair dashed out from the hall, her anger evident.

“You bastard, how dare you put your filthy ass on my idol’s head!!!”

The tough guy had lost two front teeth due to the surprise attack, his mouth was full of blood, and he viciously charged toward the woman. Their abilities clashed, their supernatural powers erupting. They ended up fighting fiercely in the square in front of the commission hall.

Others weren’t even surprised by the scene. Some even specifically came out to watch and clap their hands.

“What happened to that baldy? Did he provoke that crazy woman, Chihori?”

“Don’t you know Crazy Chihori yet? Isn’t there just one thing that can make her mad?”

“What happened?”

“See that statue? Looks familiar? It’s one of Ferrara’s top ten rising stars, virtual idol Luo Qinghe. Word has it he’s got a lot of female fans. Crazy Chihori is his super loyal fan. The rich women’s fan club sponsored this. They specially commissioned a famous master to make a life-sized statue of him.”

“Why is that bald guy like this? Acting like he can just sit on it. It’s about the same as pulling shit on Crazy Chihori’s head. She’ll definitely rip him apart.”

“...The entertainment circle is truly terrifying.”

As Crazy Chihori and the bald man continued to fight, the commotion grew louder, leaves flying and dust swirling. Even the fountain’s stone wall had been broken in several places. In no time, a man in uniform came out from the hall. A quick glance, veins popping on his forehead, he angrily started frantically pressing buttons on his computer.

“Maintenance fee totaling 124,000 Alliance coins. Should I deduct it directly through your terminals or deduct it from both of your mission scores?”

“Why should I pay? She attacked me!” The bald head was not only beaten but also had to pay, his whole body was in a mess, and his eyes were as big as copper bells.

...

The commotion at the entrance came to an end, and Song Ke finally managed to squeeze into the lobby.

Truly befitting the Commission Center of District C, the interior was brimming with technology. As soon as she entered, she saw an enormous floating screen divided into three sections—left, center, and right—scrolling through various commission requests. Above the screen, holographic projections occasionally flashed with colorful announcements like, “Congratulations to Team ‘Three Grandsons and a Grandpa’ for completing B-grade commission xxxx!”

Song Ke: “...”

Three grandsons and a grandpa? What kind of random names were these?

Around the lobby, there were over a hundred self-service terminals. By swiping their awakener identification cards, people could search for, accept, or submit missions. Furthermore, the commissions posted here weren't limited to awakeners. If ordinary people had the strength and courage, they could also join teams with awakeners for missions.

Song Ke looked up for a moment. The displayed missions were incredibly diverse. For example, the simplest E-grade mission was to help buy groceries and deliver them to a nearby resident in District D, but the reward was quite meager—300 Alliance coins.

D and C-grade missions were a bit more challenging, involving tasks like finding missing relatives, hiring bodyguards to escort someone to a certain location, or completing specific awakener-related tasks, such as “Need an earth-type awakener skilled in engineering to help rebuild a collapsed house” and so on.

Looking further up, she saw a B-grade mission: clearing out zombies in the municipal hall of Luli Port (District D150). This one suited her well and came with a reward of a whopping 2,000 Alliance coins. With five such missions, she could easily cover the registration fee!

Feeling motivated, Song Ke cracked her knuckles. She was determined to take on this mission.

First, she needed to assemble a team.

However, a problem arose. The people in the lobby were in a hurry, each focused on their own matters, and nobody stopped to talk. How was she supposed to form a team? She couldn't just shout out, “I want to form a team!”—she had a stutter, so she couldn't even manage it.

Zhuang Qingyan came up with an idea: she could write down her strengths on a signboard and try to attract compatible teammates.

Staring at the blank paper for a while, Song Ke wrote three words in the most straightforward and simple language: “I'm very strong.”

Zhuang Qingyan: "...” Alright, if it makes you happy.

Unfortunately, this tactic didn't yield much result. Most awakeners ignored it entirely, not even giving her a glance. Occasionally, a person with nothing better to do would pass by, read the three words, and burst out laughing. Song Ke was quite annoyed. If she were more eloquent, she would probably confront them and ask, "Why are you laughing? I really am strong. Don't believe it? Let's spar."

She had been squatting there for nearly an afternoon, and her corner remained completely ignored.

Song Ke also began to see the pattern. Most of the awakeners coming and going here already had established teams with fixed benefit-sharing arrangements. They were cautious about admitting newcomers and leaned more towards physically strong males. Not only did she appear thin and frail, but she was also accompanied by a wheelchair-bound companion—a combination that, at first glance, indeed lacked competitiveness.

Song Ke wasn't willing to accept defeat. If no one wanted her, she would form her own team herself!

She tore apart the "I'm very strong" sign and strode confidently to the manned counter, ready to submit her team formation application. However, she received a devastating blow: in order to create a team on her own, she needed at least two awakeners.

Now Song Ke was trapped in a vicious cycle: to register as an awakener, she needed money; to earn money, she needed a job; to get a job, she needed a team; to form a team, she needed at least two awakeners... It formed a perfect Möbius loop, endlessly repeating with no way out.

After running around all day accomplishing nothing, Song Ke sat on the ground with a dejected expression, wondering if she was destined to be a nobody forever.

Zhuang Qingyan had accompanied her through the whole ordeal, and now he consoled her with a helpless smile, "Don't be so disheartened, it's just forming a team."

Song Ke's voice was full of grievances, "No one wants to, to be on my team."

“How can that be? Isn't there a ready-made candidate?”

Song Ke's eyes lit up as she quickly looked up, “Who?”

Zhuang Qingyan gave a cryptic smile, “This person does not have much brains, quite fiery in temper, but could be reluctantly used to make up the numbers.”