

Doomsday 41

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 41.1: Bloody Ferrara (13)

Battle Royale Action!

One month later, the 420th round of qualifiers came to an end, and from this point on, the Throne Race would no longer accept new registrations.

The ultimate champion would emerge from the 200 teams that had made it through to the finals.

From the abandoned mine 200 kilometers away from Ferrara, the rumbling sounds continued to echo.

Xu Xing had a red headband tied to his forehead, with the words “must win” boldly written on it, flapping in the wind. He wore a thick hoodie and took brisk steps with his short legs. At one moment, he sprinted to the left, sharp ice spikes falling behind him, pinning the crowded zombies like bullets in a circle. Then, he extended his arms and ran to the right, using a blizzard in tandem with the mechanical arm of a transport vehicle to sweep the frozen zombies into iron cages.

The red band fluttered behind his head, giving him a somewhat peerless master’s demeanor.

In less than twenty minutes, Xu Xing completed a C-level mission all by himself.

Song Ke stood on a high platform, watching from afar. This scene had become the norm for almost a month. Xu Xing had undergone Zhuang Qingyan’s devilish training, starting from tears and sobbing, often hiccuping while fighting zombies, and frequently needing her help to clean up afterward. But now, he had made rapid progress. Not only could he single-handedly take down dozens of zombies, but he also maintained cleanliness, remembering to blow the area clean and tidying up the battlefield as a matter of course.

Song Ke’s thoughts wandered, and she couldn’t help but think of Aming’s favorite lines from that classic palace intrigue drama of the old civilization.

The old Xiaoxing was already dead. Now, standing before them was Niu Hulu... no, it was the Mecha Tyrannosaurus Xiaoxing.

“You’re really amazing,” Song Ke murmured.

“It’s still a long way to go,” Zhuang Qingyan replied calmly.

“No, I mean you, you’re really amazing.”

Being able to transform Xu Xing from a slacker who only wanted to lie down every day into the current edgy teenager was entirely Zhuang Qingyan’s achievement.

Zhuang Qingyan’s lips curved into a faint smile, acknowledging Song Ke’s praise.

“Since he wants to follow you, he can’t hold you back.”

The commotion in front gradually subsided, and Xu Xing ran over, his eyes sparkling.

“Sister, am I amazing?”

“Amazing,” Song Ke praised sincerely, giving him two thumbs up.

Xu Xing scratched his chin, smiling brightly like the sun.

During this period, they mainly accepted C-level missions, with a small number of B-level missions completed together by Song Ke and Xu Xing. Therefore, their points were increasing steadily, although not very fast. Even though the rankings were hidden, V587 had actually entered the top ten in the Ferrara points standings.

The first place was still held by “Three Grandsons and One Grandfather,” their points skyrocketing, already surpassing ten thousand.

“It’s about time. Let’s pack up and head back to Ferrara,” Zhuang Qingyan said.

The main competition of the Throne Race was about to begin, and it was time to go back and prepare.

...

“What is this?”

The day before the competition, during the player registration, Song Ke and Xu Xing each received a wristwatch-like tracking device.

“This is the new tracking device introduced by the competition organizers,” the AI in front of them explained meticulously. “It’s used in conjunction with a small unmanned camera that follows each player one-on-one throughout the race, capturing every exciting moment.”

“Isn’t this just an electronic ankle monitor...” Xu Xing muttered softly.

The synthesized voice of the AI remained calm and unaffected, “I apologize for any inconvenience. I can confirm that due to perspective issues during the previous qualifiers, there was a severe broadcasting incident that resulted in complaints from viewers. We’ve learned from that experience and have upgraded our filming methods to ensure a comprehensive, multi-angle, immersive experience, with no blind spots.”

“In addition, each player has their own private live broadcast room that viewers can unlock and watch for a fee.”

Qualifiers... broadcasting incident... could it have been because of her?

Song Ke nervously rubbed her ear.

Due to the unique nature of the main competition venue, there were no on-site seats, and the audience could only watch through terminals. Tickets for the competition had been sold at exorbitant prices, and the number of reservations for popular superhumans' live broadcast rooms had surpassed several hundred thousand, far exceeding the peak of any previous concert, setting a new historical record.

“Please draw lots.”

The AI swiped a panel, and suddenly, a brilliant galaxy appeared before Song Ke's eyes. Hundreds of sparkling stars slowly flowed within, emitting a gentle glow.

The AI reminded her methodically, “The size of the number will determine the team's order of appearance.”

Song Ke casually picked a star, and a number appeared on it: 161.

“Congratulations, you've drawn number 161, starting from the northwest corner at 20:20.”

With a total of 200 teams, they started at staggered times and the earlier the better, as it allowed teams to familiarize themselves with the terrain in advance and even set ambushes to take advantage of others. Unfortunately, Song Ke and Xu Xing not only had a late draw but also a terrible starting point. The northwest corner was the most desolate starting point, requiring them to cross the Mirror Lake in the central area to reach the endpoint located at the eastern mountaintop. It seemed like a definite disadvantage.

Song Ke was shocked by her own choice, thinking she should have let Xu Xing draw instead.

But Xu Xing was surprisingly happy, saying, “Great! It's not the last number!”

Song Ke patiently explained, “The, the higher the number, the later you, you start. It's not good. I should have let, let you draw.”

Xu Xing blinked his eyes, “But I've never won anything in my life, not even a bag of chips.”

“If I had drawn, it would probably have been number 199.”

Song Ke sighed, “Alright.”

Well, in that case, 161 isn't so bad. It's actually quite good.

After returning to the hotel, their number 161 drew merciless laughter from Zhuang Qingyan.

Despite Zhuang Qingyan's early lessons, when it came to the actual competition, they could only rely on themselves. Song Ke wore Wu Yarou's space necklace and concealed various spiritual weapons in her oversized coat. Her primary weapon was still the dual swords she had been using recently.

Before leaving, Song Ke looked at Zhuang Qingyan and asked, “Is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Just like that day in Hua City, Zhuang Qingyan lazily leaned on his wheelchair and waved at her, his magnetic voice seductive and captivating, “Come back early.”

Song Ke nodded earnestly, “Alright.”

...

On the night of the competition, at Mirror Lake.

At exactly 20:00, all the floating screens in the Ferrara city area simultaneously projected the Throne Race, and the official live broadcast room began on time.

“Good evening, dear viewers! The exciting moment has finally arrived. Welcome to the live broadcast of the Top 64 Qualifying Round of the Throne Race. I am your host, Ah K, and the gentleman beside me is none other than your heartthrob, Luo Qinghe!”

Ah K, a virtual AI, was a renowned figure in Ferrara, known for his exceptional hosting skills. It was said that his language and art module in his central memory had gone through numerous iterations, making him one of the top-tier self-learning AI.

As for Luo Qinghe, the official reason for inviting him was quite obvious. When his gentle and jade-like face was enlarged on the screen, even without speaking, the viewership ratings soared.

“Ahem,” Ah K cleared his throat excitedly. “Next, I will explain the rules of the competition.”

“This competition follows the Battle Royale format, and this time, we’ve prepared some truly terrifying monsters.”

He intentionally made an exaggerated spooky face, and the live chat was immediately filled with laughter.

“Isn’t it just zombies? We guessed that ages ago.”

“Can we see the legendary water monster today? Can’t wait.”

“Hahaha, Ah K making that expression is really silly.”

“Who wants to see you? I want to watch my Qinghe. Please switch the camera, thank you.”

“Can the guy upstairs with dreams roll out? Can’t you go crazy in your own private live room?”

“Is the ugly guy upstairs triggered?”

The competition hadn’t even started yet, and the live chat was already buzzing with activity. Colorful fonts kept scrolling across the screen, and the official live chat room became chaotic. AI moderators immediately took action, banning IP addresses that were inciting trouble.

“According to the rules, there are special items called ‘flags’ hidden in the field. The team that finds a flag first and delivers it to the endpoint will qualify. Please note that the number of flags is limited, and as long as they haven’t reached the endpoint, ownership can transfer at any time. What does that mean? Hehe, it means that even if you haven’t found a flag, you can snatch it from someone else!”

Ah K was completely unaffected by the live chat and playfully made a grabbing motion.

“For fairness, once a flag is picked up, the player who possesses it will have their location automatically exposed, and others can lock onto their coordinates using the tracking device. How about that? Isn’t it interesting?”

Limited flags, public coordinates... this clearly encouraged awakeners to fight and potentially kill each other!

Some quick-thinking viewers quickly understood the key point and became even more excited.

“Alright, alright, I see that some viewers are asking what the flags are. I can’t reveal that information yet. You’ll have to wait until the competition begins for Ah K to unveil it for everyone.”

“Let’s take a look at the viewership ratings for our contestants. Currently in the lead is 52-1 player Duanmu Qi, followed by 105-4, known as the ‘Wild Rose,’ Irene. And 114-3 is our local contestant from Ferrara, Feng Duona. Hey? They’re all handsome men and beautiful women. So, it turns out everyone goes for looks, huh?”

“Haha, just kidding. The skills of these contestants should not be underestimated. You can also pay to unlock your favorite player’s live room and enjoy an immersive experience throughout the game.”

“Want to see Qinghe? Of course, you can. Let’s get the camera on Qinghe. Qinghe, do you have any words for the contestants?”

Facing the camera, Luo Qinghe maintained impeccable manners with not a single fault, but a hint of solemnity was evident in his warm and unearthly eyes.

“In this game of life and death, I urge all contestants to give it their all.”

...

At 20:20, at the northwest corner of Mirror Lake, the last group of teams set off.

Song Ke and Xu Xing stepped into the forbidden forest, and the trackers on their wrists blinked brightly. Two drones followed closely beside them.

No vehicles were allowed inside Mirror Lake, so the participants had to proceed on foot. Looking up, the sky was mostly obscured by the tangled branches of trees. The dim light of the night made it difficult to see, and even if they stretched their necks, they could only faintly glimpse the neon lights of Ferrara in the distance.

Before long, the two of them reached the edge of a swamp.

“Sister, where do you think the flag will be? It can’t just be stuck in the ground, right?”

“Could it be buried in the soil, and we have to dig it up ourselves?” Xu Xing actively used his little brain and shared his guess.

“Whoosh!” A group of dark shadows darted past them from behind.

Song Ke and Xu Xing immediately fell silent, turning their heads vigilantly. Across the dark swamp, over a dozen bizarre-looking creatures were staring at them from the branches. Their eyes emitted a green glow, their heads looked like mice, but their limbs and abdomen were as robust as rabbits. They had thick, black fur on their backs. In the blink of an eye, they swiftly flew to the other side.

Xu Xing swallowed hard, suppressing his fear, and his voice trembled slightly, “They seem to be mutated... rats.”

They looked a lot like the cockroaches they encountered in Hua City. They were zombie rats!

Song Ke lowered her voice to avoid alarming them, "Xiaoxing, take control."

Xu Xing opened his hand, and a fine snowstorm flowed out from his palm, causing the surface of the swamp to freeze.

His move was quite effective, covering the path of the approaching zombie rats. Since it was a widespread area of effect, they couldn't avoid it. The claws of those rats were frozen, and their flight speed significantly slowed down as they tumbled from low altitude.

The swamp and the ground were intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish the edge. Song Ke didn't rashly charge forward. With a slight movement of her fingertips, several bright crescent-shaped throwing knives were released towards the group of rats, hitting them squarely in the head and harvesting a large number of them.

She cautiously took two steps forward, intending to examine the situation, but suddenly, a large net fell from the sky towards her head.

Song Ke reacted swiftly, rolling close to the ground, quickly moving out of the net's range. However, the bodies of those rats were collected into a bag on the opposite side.

The other side's goal was clearly to snatch their gains!

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Chapter 41.2: Bloody Ferrara (13)

Battle Royale Action!

Song Ke suddenly raised her head.

On the opposite side of the swamp, there was a five-person team in full formation. The short-haired woman among them had just retracted a soft net, which she had likely used as her ability. She was accompanied by four others, two burly men holding steel knives, and another two who seemed to be twins, bearing a striking resemblance to each other, with blood-red ropes tied around their arms. They didn't seem friendly.

“Hey, this spot is taken by us. You should go elsewhere,” the short-haired woman arrogantly said, lifting her chin.

In the livestream room of Team 172, viewers who were watching the match were reveling in the situation.

“No way? These two are so unlucky, they encounter the ‘Bloodthirsty Duo’ at the beginning.”

“The ‘Bloodthirsty Duo’ consists of Ren Ting and Ren Li, both C-level awakeners in the weapon category. Do you think they’ll set the record for the quickest elimination? Light a candle in silence...”

“Yu Hong is quite strong in the D-level category too, her net is really hard to break.”

Team 172, known as “Lock, Lock, Lock You Up,” had a decent support rate in the preliminaries, at 76%, thanks to the team’s composition of an awakener with a net and two with ropes, earning them the nickname “Binding Combo.”

Song Ke kept her eyes on them but didn't move.

She puffed her cheeks, trying to think of a suitable comeback.

Xu Xing knew that Song Ke wasn't good at verbal confrontations and would definitely lose if asked to argue. So, he confidently stepped forward, serving as Song Ke's mouthpiece.

“Why should we leave, are your names written here?”

“We’re the ones who killed those rats. Give them back to us!”

“So many adults like you, can’t you fend for yourselves? Always looking for a free meal, lazy and shameless!”

Although those zombie rats were not high-level creatures, it still felt unpleasant to have them snatched away by someone else. Also, maybe due to spending time with Zhuang Qingyan, Xu Xing’s ability to sarcastically taunt people had become increasingly sharp.

“You little brat!”

“Little brat, you haven’t even weaned yet, and you’ve come here to die?”

The twin siblings, not caring that Xu Xing was just a child, didn’t hesitate and immediately took action. Their crimson ropes snaked like venomous serpents, entwining and aiming directly for his neck, seemingly intent on strangling him.

The two burly men wielding steel knives also circumvented the swamp and headed toward Xu Xing.

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Yu Hong swung her soft net once more, unleashing four consecutive strikes. Although she didn’t capture Song Ke, she managed to block her path, trapping her in place.

The group had a clear target—eliminate the mouthy kid first.

Xu Xing darted and dodged among the trees, occasionally rolling close to the ground. His special training had not been in vain. Despite looking a bit disheveled, his small stature and snake-like movements allowed him to evade the ropes.

Ren Ting sneered, showing disdain, and scoffed, “Oh, so you’re a king of words, huh? I thought you had some talent. Is rolling on the ground your only skill?”

Xu Xing kept his mouth shut and focused on escaping. At this moment, he wasn't going to exchange words.

Song Ke smirked within the encircling soft net.

In the post-apocalyptic world, never underestimate any awakener.

They would soon learn the cost of underestimating Xu Xing.

Xu Xing led the two men wielding steel knives toward the vicinity of the swamp. Being lightweight, he easily leaped to the other side, while the two burly men were less fortunate. They sank into the swamp, and the black muck submerged their lower legs.

Ren Ting and Ren Li's vision blurred for a moment as a sudden flurry of heavy snow descended around them. Sharp black ice shards shot out from beneath the swamp, slicing through their ropes, splattering mud all over them.

"Ugh!!" The twins spat out the mud from their mouths, their faces as black as coal.

The next second, both of them paled.

Xu Xing had disappeared.

Yu Hong anxiously shouted from behind, "He's gone!"

Ren Li responded irritably, "I'm not blind, I saw!"

"No, the girl's gone too!"

The twins were taken aback and turned to look in the direction of the soft net.

Sure enough, Song Ke had vanished as well.

Suddenly, a fierce snowstorm engulfed the surroundings, and the biting cold wind made it impossible to keep their eyes open.

Gone? Gone?! The members of “Lock, Lock, Lock You Up” checked all four directions within their line of sight and found no trace of anyone.

Where did they go?

“Whoosh!” A blue light illuminated the sky.

A slender figure swiftly moved among the treetops, leaping into the air and somersaulting downward. Song Ke drew a pair of long and short spirit blades from her back and unleashed two consecutive strikes.

“Clang!” Yu Hong’s soft net snapped like paper, too fragile to withstand a single blow. With her ability destroyed, her mental strength suffered a heavy blow, leaving her brain in chaos. She slumped to the ground, falling into unconsciousness.

Arrogant, right in front of me, bullying us at range? Think I don’t exist?

Song Ke leaped to the other side, her blade relentlessly striking toward the twins. The azure dual blades met the crimson long rope head-on. Unexpectedly, the rope wound around the blade’s edge. Song Ke raised the tip of her blade, a glint of darkness passed, and the rope immediately shattered into pieces. She switched from backhand to forehand, attacking relentlessly, balancing her strikes between left and right, overwhelming the twins with a flurry of blade attacks.

Ren Ting and Ren Li had no way to counter this close-range assault. After taking several strikes head-on, they were heavily injured, sent flying seven to eight meters away, and collided harshly with a large tree.

Almost simultaneously with Song Ke’s attack, in another direction, several ice shards flew out from behind the trees, accurately targeting the swamp. “Plop!” Two burly men had their backs pierced.

Song Ke in a 1-vs-3 situation, and Xu Xing in a 1-vs-2 situation, wiped out “Lock, Lock, Lock You Up”!

All of them were incapacitated. Song Ke picked up their trackers and sent out the elimination signal. Soon, robots would come to clean up the battlefield.

“What the heck?! Who are these people?” The people in the 172 livestream room couldn’t help but curse. Who were these two? So powerful? They took down the Bloodthirsty Duo at first sight? Why didn’t we hear anything about them before? Some curious individuals checked the pre-selection support rate for V587 and were surprised to find it was only 61%. They barely made it through the preliminary rounds; this didn’t make sense!

After “Lock, Lock, Lock You Up” was eliminated, their five individual livestream rooms were simultaneously closed. Those who had previously supported them couldn’t stand the loneliness and switched sides, paying to unlock V587’s livestream room with the thought of, “I want to see how these two will die.”

However, when they entered and took a look, they were in for a surprise. The livestream rooms 161-1 and 161-2 were probably the most pathetic among all the participants. They had no sponsors, no popularity, and had less than 300 viewers.

What the heck? Those latecomer viewers, with a strange and unexplainable mix of emotions, settled into this cold and empty livestream room.

...

Song Ke used the tip of her blade to inspect the bodies of the zombie rats, but she didn’t find anything unusual. She walked back to Xu Xing and exchanged a high-five.

“Xiaoxing, you did great.”

“You’re amazing too, sister.”

Another round of mutual compliments was exchanged, and then Song Ke said seriously, "First, let's leave this place. The commotion was too loud."

In case another team heard the commotion and decided to converge on them, it would be troublesome. Song Ke wasn't afraid of a fight, but she didn't want to waste time. Their top priority was still to find the flag and ensure their advancement.

In the official livestream room, Ah K was enthusiastically commentating on another conflict.

At 20:22, in the eastern part of Mirror Lake, two of the favorites in this competition, "Three Grandsons and One Grandfather," encountered "Shunxing Teahouse."

The two teams of ability users faced each other at a distance, their expressions tense, and neither side made any hasty moves.

Duanmu Qi was the first to speak, "Old Xiang, the match is still long. There's no need to have a few casualties here, right?"

Mr. Xiang's eyes sparkled as he glanced around and diverted the topic, "Young Duan, how did I hear that you got injured?"

He snorted, "Since you're already injured, why don't you rest at home instead of coming out and running around? Be careful not to develop any other problems."

Behind Mr. Xiang, a shadow hovered in the air, with a pair of ominous eyes fixed firmly on Duanmu Qi. Faint black mist drifted toward him, gradually closing in on the area around Duanmu Qi.

"Plop!" Thick thorns erupted from the ground, breaking through the soil. With a snap, they dispelled the black mist. Duanmu Qi laughed, "Mr. Xiang, you're underestimating me."

He raised his hand gently, and countless thorns grew wildly, surrounding the members of Shunxing Teahouse and pointing threateningly at them.

Duanmu Qi's ability was at its peak, even more so than before.

Mr. Xiang stared at him for a couple of seconds, then chuckled, "Young Duan, you've misunderstood. This old man was just concerned about you. We're heading north. Hopefully, we won't encounter any unpleasant situations along the way. We'll see you at the finish line."

"That's perfect; we're heading south. We'll see you at the finish line."

Duanmu Qi understood the implied message in his words and smiled as he closed his hands, the thorns also retracted.

The two teams, one heading north and the other south, parted ways and continued their journey.

"Oh, they didn't start a fight," Ah K clicked his tongue, looking somewhat disappointed.

"It's a wise decision," Luo Qinghe commented. "The flag hasn't appeared yet. Starting a conflict now would only deplete their strength, which wouldn't bode well for the rest of the competition."

"Qinghe is right," Ah K agreed. "But we also see that rational leaders like Duanmu Qi and Mr. Xiang are in the minority. We're 25 minutes into the game, and there's no sign of the flag. There have been small-scale disputes and skirmishes among awakeners."

"So far, 5 teams have miserably been eliminated."

In the brutal format of the battle royale, being eliminated meant either death or severe injury.

"Let's take a look at some highlights."

The director cut to several exciting moments. Because there were too many teams erupting into conflicts, the footage of Song Ke taking down "Lock, Lock, Lock You Up" was mixed in and went unnoticed for less than two seconds, not attracting much attention.

...

In the depths of Mirror Lake, Song Ke and Xu Xing continued forward for another five to six minutes without encountering any other teams.

The night breeze rustled through the branches, causing leaves to brush against each other, creating a sound like a child's whimpering.

Song Ke's steps gradually slowed down until she came to a stop.

"Sister, did you find something?"

"Did you feel, feel anything strange?"

"What's strange?"

Song Ke couldn't pinpoint what was strange, but her intuition told her something was off.

If Zhuang Qingyan were here, he probably would have noticed by now. Song Ke recalled his calm attitude along the way. Although he seemed a bit unconventional, he was always quick to identify key problems, whether it was the insect swarm in Hua City or the later commission mission in Ferrara...

Wait, Song Ke's train of thought abruptly stopped. She knew what was wrong.

"Where did, did the zombies go?"

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Chapter 42: Bloody Ferrara (14)

Water Monster!

At 20:56, in the central area of Mirror Lake.

Close to halfway up the hill, the temperature noticeably dropped, thin snow-covered pine branches, and dry leaves scattered the deserted path, making a rustling sound when stepped on.

A team of three, after enduring countless hardships, finally managed to kill a zombie that had a bluish hue on its surface.

“Phew, this monster is really tricky. It was obviously dying, yet it resurrected at full health. Looks like it has mutated. Luckily, I acted quickly and landed another blow. Hey, what’s this?”

The man bent down and plucked a pure white, perfectly octahedral transparent crystal from the zombie’s head.

“It’s quite unique, I never expected to find diamonds inside a zombie’s head. Haha!” he joked, thinking himself witty.

“Liangzi, you, your... your tracker is turning red!”

His companions pointed at him in terror, their voices trembling.

At 20:57, all the supernatural beings within Mirror Lake received a notification.

“The Flag Appears”

“Broadcasting remaining flag coordinates: (452, 671, 109)”

The first flag had appeared!

At first, everyone was puzzled, but the teams closest to the coordinates reacted the fastest and immediately rushed towards the location.

...

“Sister, it’s the flag!”

In the dim forest, Xu Xing, after reading the announcement, whispered to alert his sister.

Song Ke lowered her head to check her tracker; the coordinates weren’t far from their location, and there was even a route displayed. If they went all out, it would only take about ten minutes. They had just searched the area nearby, not even spotting a zombie. This was their only clue, and she immediately made a decision: “Let’s go, check it out.”

...

When Song Ke and Xu Xing arrived at the center of Mirror Lake, the flag’s coordinates had already been reached by another team.

Rather than rushing in recklessly, the two found a concealed large tree and observed the situation.

In the center of the encirclement were three disheveled awakeners, their legs trembling as they knelt on the ground, clearly suffering from severe injuries.

“I say, don’t be so stingy. Let us see what the flag is?”

In front of the three, a muscular supernatural being crossed his arms and casually remarked.

“Do you really have to maintain civility in a battle royale like this? Just kill him, and we’ll know.”

His impatient teammate attacked immediately, turning his palm into a fist and striking towards the three.

“Bang!”

The awakener named Liangzi was instantly killed, blood splattered everywhere, and a transparent object rolled out from his body onto the ground.

The person who threw the punch reacted swiftly, picking it up and holding it high. Through the dim night, the perfectly octahedral crystal emitted a faint glow.

He exclaimed in surprise, “It’s a crystal! So, the flag is...”

Before he could finish speaking, a red light flashed, and the person who had just been talking had his head and neck separated, falling to the ground with a thud.

More awakeners arrived, this time numbering in the dozens.

The newcomers grabbed the crystal, excitedly shouting, “I got it!”

“Flag coordinates refreshed.”

“Broadcasting remaining flag coordinates: (486, 597, 88)”

“Flag coordinates refreshed.”

“Broadcasting remaining flag coordinates: (402, 553, 87)”

In just a few seconds, ownership of the crystal shifted twice, and the tracker displayed four notifications.

“Brothers, the crystal is the flag! Hurry up and grab it! Deliver it to the finish line to win!”

In a chaotic environment, someone shouted loudly, fearing that the world would not be in chaos. The people around suddenly woke up, and various supernatural abilities lit up, and they fought recklessly, attempting to kill and loot.

Song Ke pulled Xu Xing back to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

Suddenly, her psychic senses picked up something and she looked straight in a certain direction.

Just as everyone was engaged in a fierce battle, a deep roar erupted from behind them. In the shadows noticed by Song Ke, three entirely greenish-blue zombies sprang from the woods, pounding the ground with their fists, sending sand, soil, and stones flying as if the earth itself was trembling.

They were mutated zombies!

The awakeners in the chaotic battle fell silent for a moment.

“Hurry, charge! Crystals come from the mutated zombies!”

“Kill the zombies, get the crystals, and go to the next round!”

The voice that had been stirring the pot earlier resurfaced, adding fuel to the fire.

Several messy wind blades shaved away the branches and leaves concealing Song Ke, forcing her to retreat again.

The battle zone was in complete chaos, with the awakeners no longer distinguishing between friend and foe, using their area-of-effect attacks.

Song Ke focused her gaze on the young man who had been inciting others to fight while standing on the sidelines as if watching a show. He had ice-blue eyes and seemed quite young. He deliberately egged others on to fight while enjoying the spectacle himself, standing outside the circle as if he were an innocent bystander.

This person was not simple.

The destructive power of the three mutated zombies was astonishing, and the awakeners, each with their own agenda, were unable to defeat them in a short time and were instead being suppressed.

A month ago, killing mutated zombies had been an A-level mission, but now it had become the sustenance for the Throne Race.

Song Ke suddenly realized why they hadn't encountered ordinary zombies on their journey. The real stars of this competition were the mutated zombies with crystals!

···What did that Ilya want to do? According to the rules, "the number of flags is limited." How many mutated zombies had he brought?

By the lakeside, several mutated zombies suddenly rose up, their fists smashing into the ground with a resounding thud. Powerful shockwaves rippled outward in concentric circles, causing the innermost row of people to lose their balance as the oncoming gusts of air sent them tumbling uncontrollably towards the center of the lake.

As they were about to fall into the water, the surface of Mirror Lake rippled with layer upon layer of waves.

A massive creature leaped out of the water, its gaping maw opening wide to devour those few awakeners in a single gulp!

In front of the crowd stood a gigantic water monster, its head small and almost devoid of eyes. At first glance, it resembled a sleek deep-sea eel, but its back was covered in tough scales. After its hearty meal, the water creature's elephant-like trunk twitched slightly, and it silently submerged back into the depths.

“Ahhhhh! Ahhhhhh!” In the official live broadcast room, Ah K screamed dramatically, holding his face with both hands.

Dozens of drones aimed at the central area of Mirror Lake. Ah K had been passionately commentating on the chaotic battle, but suddenly witnessing this terrifying scene, he let out a loud cry to enhance the live atmosphere, instantly pushing the viewership data to its peak.

Not only Ah K but also the millions of viewers immersed in the immersive broadcast were nearly scared to death by the sudden appearance of the water monster.

Three mutated zombies were finally beaten to death haphazardly, one after another falling to the ground. The crystals in their heads were quickly harvested, and the team that had captured the flag wasted no time and bolted. Others, unwilling to leave empty-handed, gnashed their teeth and chased after them.

There was still another water monster lurking nearby, and the awakeners dared not linger. They fled in panic through the woods, desperate to escape the danger zone.

On the surface of Mirror Lake, countless tiny bubbles bubbled up, and in the next moment, the water monster leaped once again.

Its neck, over ten meters long, stretched forward, and it snapped up several awakeners who hadn't made it to the shore in time.

The panicked crowd scattered like headless flies, with several charging towards the large trees where they had taken cover.

Song Ke's brow furrowed slightly as she assessed the situation and made a decision.

“Xiaoxing, let's retreat first.”

“Yeah.”

The two of them were still some distance from the shore, relatively safe for the moment. Xu Xing jumped down from a tree trunk and took a few steps forward, preparing to follow Song Ke and leave.

Just then—

One of the awakeners that the water monster had seized suddenly had their pupils darken, their ability surging. The space around them distorted, and the person disappeared on the spot, only to reappear dozens of meters away.

Meanwhile, Xu Xing, who had been in that spot, was unexpectedly lifted into the air, and the water monster swallowed him with a single gulp, its massive jaws closing around him.

“Xiaoxing!!” Song Ke exclaimed in shock and anger, turning without hesitation and rushing towards the lakeside.

The awakener with the dark trick up his sleeve was still gloating, thinking he had narrowly escaped. “That was close! Luckily, I can switch quickly and found a scapegoat. Hahaha!”

A blue-hued throwing knife sliced through the dark, piercing his throat.

The man’s ecstatic expression hadn’t even had time to settle when his awakened energy dissipated, and he instantly died!

Song Ke chased the water monster with all her might, but its speed in the water was too fast, and it was about to submerge again.

“Xiaoxing!!”

Song Ke made a leaping dash through the air, landing on the creature’s back like a shooting star. She thrust a short knife into its head!

The water monster howled in pain, its body contorted, and its massive tail swung fiercely, knocking Song Ke off with a “thud.” She momentarily lost her footing, sliding down its wet and slippery back.

However, her physical abilities and reflexes were extraordinary. Almost as she descended, Song Ke pulled out a three-edged dagger, viciously stabbing it into the creature’s cheek, twisting it left and right. She then hooked her leg and flipped back up.

In the official live broadcast room, all the cameras were focused on the Mirror Lake monster and Song Ke, who had suddenly returned to the scene. Real-time data monitoring detected a surge in viewership and immediately switched to the dedicated drone broadcasting Song Ke’s perspective.

The viewership in Room 161-1 was also steadily increasing: 10,000, 50,000, 100,000... quickly surpassing 150,000.

The scene was just too exciting, and the viewers at their screens were in awe, unable to look away.

When Song Ke fell, countless viewers’ hearts tightened. When she reappeared, their expressions relaxed, but then they tensed up again—

The once calm lake surface suddenly erupted with waves, and torrents of water turned into sharp arrows, heading straight for Song Ke.

This was a zombie water monster, or rather, a mutated zombie water monster!

The drone’s camera was also splashed with water droplets, providing an immersive first-person experience that made the viewers outside the camera feel an inexplicable chill.

In the pouring rain, no one noticed the inconspicuous frost forming around the water monster.

Facing the rain arrows that were about to pierce her, Song Ke’s hand trembled, and the spiritual weapon umbrella, once famous in Hua City, made a comeback.

The enormous umbrella acted like an indestructible shield, blocking all the arrows. Then, she swiftly closed the umbrella, transforming it into a cold and elegant jagged blade, over two meters long. The blade pointed downward, and with brute force, she cut through the water monster's head and neck, just like cutting a sack of grain from front to back, one cut after another.

The zombie water monster's flesh and skin separated, and bright red muscles and thick black blood splattered, turning the entire Mirror Lake into a dark red hue.

Its long neck fell heavily on the shore.

“Ugh—!”

Ah K seemed to feel that heart-wrenching pain, and his expression contorted as he clung tightly to Luo Qinghe... No, he could only cling tightly to himself.

The barrage in the live chat was flooded with comments like “Holy crap,” “666,” and “Unbelievable.”

As black blood splattered around, Song Ke peeled the skin off the water monster while anxiously shouting, “Xiaoxing, where are you?”

“Sister, I'm here...” a weak voice came, “I'm okay...”

Perhaps due to the habit of being repeatedly thrown by Zhuang Qingyan, thanks to him, Xu Xing had developed a reflex. Whenever his feet left the ground uncontrollably, he would instinctively release ice spurs to protect himself. This reflex saved him from being crushed by the monster's sharp teeth. Instead, he slid down its throat, narrowly escaping.

Song Ke looked down and finally found Xu Xing in the shredded digestive tract. Xu Xing had displayed incredible resilience. After getting stuck in the esophagus, he deliberately released several long ice spurs to block the passage. Currently, he was lying on the icy surface, covered in foul saliva and mucus, but surprisingly uninjured.

Moreover, during Song Ke's battle with the water monster, he had been attempting to save himself by continuously using his ability, trying to cut his way out through the monster's abdomen.

"Come on, get out." Song Ke also slid in and reached out to him.

"En!" Xu Xing climbed out gracefully, using the ice steps.

After emerging, he didn't smell fresh air but was instead overwhelmed by the foul odor, causing him to feel dizzy. He leaned over the lake and vomited.

Several seconds later, Song Ke crawled out, her entire face and head covered in slime.

Xu Xing, with teary eyes from vomiting, looked at her with a puzzled expression. Had his sister fallen into the monster's stomach? Why was she dirtier than him?

Song Ke wiped her face. "Let's, let's get out of here and find, find a place to talk."

"Okay."

Song Ke's dedicated drone had been too close earlier and was splattered with the monster's flesh and blood. Its signal short-circuited and burned out. Viewers who had been watching the terminal didn't feel any better. The gore and shredded flesh came rushing at them, causing strong feelings of nausea, dizziness, and a desire to vomit that they couldn't resist. Many people turned off their projections and bent over, retching.

Ugh... It was unbearable. Immersive perspective was indeed too intense.

The drone was damaged, and Song Ke's live stream momentarily went offline.

In the control room, the AI director immediately ordered, "Quickly locate the position of 161-1 and send a backup drone over. Cut all the nearby fixed camera feeds to this team... What's it called? Show the V587 feed."

“Wait a moment,” this artificial intelligence suddenly froze for a few seconds as its central code calculated frantically. “Send several backup drones.”

The sight of that familiar spiritual weapon umbrella reminded it of some dark memories. It was her, of all people! As a top AI director, Song Ke was an absolute stain on its professional career. Such a serious mistake as in the 178th round of qualifiers must absolutely not happen again!

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 43.1: Bloody Ferrara (15)

The Big Star and the Little Bodyguard

“Flag coordinates refresh.”

“Here are the remaining flag coordinates: (324, 865, 101), (779, 1023, 55), (1356, 954, 321).”

“Flag coordinates refresh.”

“Here are the remaining...”

···21:12, outside Mirror Lake.

After the appearance of the first flag, in just a moment, it seemed as though a battle horn had been sounded within Mirror Lake. The smell of gunpowder grew stronger, and the system announcements kept refreshing. All areas were in full bloom, with one team killing mutant zombies only to be killed and have their flag taken by the next. Similar atrocities repeated continuously, and flag ownership changed hands frequently.

Some crystals even changed ownership more than a dozen times in just a few minutes.

Song Ke and Xu Xing continued running without a break, stopping at a distance from Mirror Lake. The backup drone closely followed, circling around her, afraid of losing her again.

Both of them were covered in dirt, desperately in need of cleaning, but the only nearby water source was Mirror Lake, which had already been completely contaminated by the water monster's corpse. Song Ke had no intention of turning back, so she thought for a moment and took out an empty bucket from her necklace space.

"Xiaoxing, release some, powers."

"Huh? Okay."

Xu Xing scratched his head, responding with confusion. Thud, thud, several ice shards as thick as small arms fell directly through the bottom of the bucket.

Song Ke: "..."

Xu Xing innocently blinked his eyes. He didn't do it on purpose, and he wasn't a water-based awakener, so he definitely couldn't release a drop.

"No, release some, snow," Song Ke said helplessly.

"Oh, I see!" Xu Xing suddenly realized.

This time, he carefully controlled his powers and piled a neat little snow mountain in the bucket. The two of them used the cool ice and snow to wipe their faces and bodies, finally getting rid of the disgusting slime.

"Sister, thank you for saving me." Xu Xing still had lingering fear from the moment he was almost swallowed by the water monster. His tone was soft, and his gaze was affectionate as he thanked Song Ke. His sister was really good; in that situation just now, she didn't leave him behind and run away.

“You’re a com, companion, it’s what I should do.” Song Ke patted his head.

“By the way, I...” Song Ke thought of something, but before she could continue, her expression froze.

There were faint footsteps coming from the woods; someone was approaching.

The newcomer didn’t hide or conceal themselves and boldly appeared from behind them.

“Chatting in a place like this isn’t a good choice, you know~”

A gracefully proportioned woman gradually took shape. She wore a half black mask that covered the upper half of her face, leaving only her rosy and plump lips and her beautifully curved chin visible. Her chestnut-colored wavy hair was tied into a ponytail, piled loosely behind her head. Even if her face couldn’t be clearly seen, her overall demeanor exuded an irresistible charm.

Behind the woman, a tall man in an all-black combat suit, like a ghostly knight, silently acted as her shadow, protecting her.

The moment Song Ke recognized her, she immediately reacted—this woman was Lin Youyou!

“We meet again,” Lin Youyou greeted first.

Song Ke didn’t respond. Under the brutal rules of the Battle Royale, she wouldn’t easily trust anyone unless they were her companions.

Lin Youyou smiled and said, “Don’t be nervous. Since neither of us has a flag now, can’t we have a peaceful conversation?”

Song Ke hesitated for a while and then asked, “What, what do you want, want to talk about?”

“Are you interested in cooperating with us?”

Song Ke was taken aback. Cooperation again?

During the incident at Luli Port, Lin Youyou didn't gain much advantage because of the presence of Zhuang Qingyan, who was very cunning. She only exchanged for the "useless" crystal. However, from Lin Youyou's perspective, she had come for the crystal in the first place, so she didn't actually suffer a loss. Now, with only herself and Xu Xing, Song Ke was very self-aware that she must be the one who'd suffer.

She shook her head vigorously, saying, "I'm, I'm not interested."

"Don't reject so quickly. How about you hear the conditions first?"

Lin Youyou dangled a tempting offer, "We team up to snatch two crystals, and then we each take one. How does that sound?"

Because of her guarded stance, Song Ke was particularly clever at this moment and countered with a clear thought, "Why should, should I team up with, with you?"

"You've seen it yourself. Both our teams only have two people, and compared to those fully formed teams, our combat power is seriously lacking. Even if we can kill mutant zombies, we'll soon be hunted down, surrounded. The risk is just too great."

Lin Youyou wasn't making empty promises. She was purely a support-type awakener. Although her awakener level was high, she could only rely on Su Cha to make moves in crystal snatching. On the other hand, Song Ke and Xu Xing were both highly offensive awakeners, one specializing in close combat and the other in long-range attacks. Their attack methods were vastly different, and if they were dispersed and besieged, they would be at a disadvantage.

The best solution was for the two teams to form an alliance, join forces to seize the crystals, and in terms of both numbers and combat power, it would be a qualitative leap.

Song Ke still shook her head, saying, "Crys, crystals are very, very important to you."

Lin Youyou had once abandoned an A-level mission for the sake of a crystal. Why should Song Ke believe that she wouldn't turn against her for crystals in the future?

Lin Youyou's eyes dimmed slightly, and some obscure emotions flickered across her gaze. "Yes, but I want to advance. Winning is more important to me."

Lin Youyou's captivating eyes looked at Song Ke. "I thought we had some basis of trust due to our previous interactions?"

Song Ke didn't show anything on her face, but inside, she had her doubts and reservations.

What basis of trust? With a big liar like Zhuang Qingyan in front of her, how could she dare to trust others casually?

Lin Youyou observed her expression and then dropped a bombshell, "How about this? You take the crystal first. Does that work for you?"

"That's it, little sister. I'm really sincere, and with so many drones watching, you don't have to worry about me deceiving you."

Song Ke struggled and hesitated for a while, then turned to Xu Xing to discuss. Finally, she reluctantly nodded, "Alright."

As Lin Youyou had suggested, the success rate of four people working together was evidently higher, and she could take the crystal first. It seemed like she couldn't lose... She hoped she wouldn't lose. She decided to trust the beautiful sister one more time.

After reaching a preliminary agreement for cooperation, the four of them moved together, but Song Ke and Xu Xing still maintained a certain distance from the other two.

Su Cha took the initiative to take on the role of scouting. He was extremely skilled at concealing himself, like a chameleon. If one wasn't careful, he could completely disappear into the darkness, blending in

with the surroundings. Even if Song Ke kept a close eye on his whereabouts, it took her a while to locate his true position.

Stealth, concealment, assassination, poisoning... Su Cha was truly in his element in the Mirror Lake environment. However, Song Ke had a new doubt. Why would someone like Su Cha team up with the famous star Lin Youyou and obediently follow her orders?

Whether it was snatching A-level missions or killing the zombie Zhang Lei, Su Cha didn't hesitate to do whatever Lin Youyou told him to do.

Song Ke couldn't help but be curious and, with little hope, she asked, "Why did you team, team up?"

"Hmm? Are you talking about Su Cha?" Lin Youyou's lips curled slightly. "Strictly speaking, he's my bodyguard."

Song Ke's eyes widened, and she couldn't help but exclaim in amazement in her mind. Wow, a bodyguard! So, the big star from District C actually travels with a bodyguard?

"Are you surprised?" Lin Youyou teased her with interest. "Have you not secretly looked up my name after that day?"

Lin Youyou's current appearance and disguise were completely different from what she showed in public. She had donned an anti-snooping mask, and even with drones around, someone like her, who wasn't a popular player, wouldn't be exposed as long as she didn't foolishly shout, "I'm Lin Youyou."

A faint blush spread across Song Ke's cheeks, and she thought to herself: Not only did I look you up, but I also listened to your famous song "Thank You for Loving Me" many, many times. I almost know the lyrics by heart.

Lin Youyou seemed to find her reaction exceptionally cute and giggled.

“It’s okay to tell you,” Lin Youyou said casually, “To put it simply, Su Cha was in a very desperate situation for a while, as pitiful as a stray little dog. Since I’m kind-hearted, I took him in and even paid him a salary. Naturally, he’s responsible for protecting me.”

Song Ke’s voice was small as she asked, “But, but he listens to, to you so obediently.”

Lin Youyou casually twirled her ponytail with her finger and said, “Isn’t it normal for a stray little dog that’s been picked up to be loyal to its owner?”

Little dog... owner...

Song Ke choked and was left speechless. What kind of simple and bizarre metaphors did Lin Youyou come up with?

Up ahead in the shadows, Su Cha’s steps momentarily paused as he glanced in their direction. It was evident that he had heard the famous star’s description of him. However, his expression remained unchanged as he calmly accepted his new nickname.

Lin Youyou stifled a laugh, lightly tapping Xu Xing’s head with her delicate fingertips. “And you, you like clinging to your sister, don’t you?”

Xu Xing subconsciously nodded on the side. Yes, he did like sticking close to his sister.

Wait a minute, was this lady calling him a little dog too?! Annoying, just like Zhuang Qingyan! Xu Xing dared not voice his anger but secretly clenched his little canine teeth.

“Flag coordinates refresh.”

“Here are the remaining flag coordinates: (195, 773, 218)...”

Song Ke and Lin Youyou halted their conversation, their expressions startled. This newly refreshed flag was exceptionally close to them, almost right in front of their faces.

As this announcement appeared, there came a hoarse roar from the mountainside ahead. Could it be that the mutant zombie guarding the crystal flag was still alive?

Lin Youyou and Song Ke exchanged a glance and made a quick decision, "Quick, we might still be able to grab it!"

The four of them sprinted at full speed towards the flag coordinates.

Upon arriving at the mountainside, they indeed found a fierce battle still ongoing. Roughly estimating, there were three different groups of people present.

There was already one mutant zombie lying on the ground with its skull split open, and the crystal inside had been taken. However, there was still one alive, although it was barely hanging on, teetering on the brink of death.

"Quick, take action!" Lin Youyou urgently called out.

Now was not the time to be concerned about who got there first. Song Ke and Su Cha leaped into action almost simultaneously, rushing towards the center of the battle.

Xu Xing took the opportunity to release several ice shards to disrupt the other superpower users in the vicinity.

Song Ke drew her dual blades, and Su Cha's dagger gleamed with a dark green light as they both aimed for the mutant zombie's head.

All the awakeners were racing against time, bombarding the mutant zombie with their strongest attacks. Its condition rapidly deteriorated. Just at that moment, the stubborn zombie trembled all over, its body expanding several tens of times in size, and then it exploded with a "bang."

"Get down!"

After the body exploded, body parts scattered in all directions, and a few sporadic pieces hit some of the awakeners. Shortly afterward, an unbearable stench filled the air, and a blood mist rose, enveloping everyone.

Song Ke's line of sight was obstructed, so she had to rely on her memory to aim at the zombie's head. Her long knife pierced the skull, and she twisted it. Huh, it was empty! The crystal had already been taken!

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 43.2: Bloody Ferrara (15)

The Big Star and the Little Bodyguard

A few seconds later, the blood mist gradually dissipated. None of the awakeners present were harmed physically, but they all had disgusted expressions on their faces.

Song Ke turned back and glanced in the direction where Lin Youyou was. She shook her head slightly, indicating that they hadn't managed to grab it.

Then she looked at Su Cha beside her, who was empty-handed and had a disappointed expression.

Su Cha hadn't managed to get it either?

So, the crystal was in someone else's hands... Song Ke focused her attention on the group of awakeners.

Three groups of people, and you could tell a lot from their positions.

One group was a full team of five, all males. Their bodies showed signs of mechanical modifications—mechanical arms, mechanical legs, and one even had a mechanical head! His facial features were still natural, but it looked like he had a layer of mechanical skin on the outside. When he turned his neck, it made a creaking sound. It was both eerie and horrifying.

Song Ke recalled the lessons Zhuang Qingyan had given her. A team with such a distinctive style could only be one of the top contenders: Team 88, the “Anna Knights.”

The second team consisted of four women, all with slightly darker skin. They were dressed in provocative and sexy outfits, all of them tall with long legs. They had new-generation hot weapons strapped to their legs and arms. Unfortunately, Song Ke wasn’t familiar with these weapons. If Zhuang Qingyan were here, he could quickly identify them: the Super Red Eagle, the Gaboon Viper pistol, and the Barrett M82A1 large-caliber sniper rifle. These weapons were all devastatingly powerful.

The tall woman leading this team was even more exaggerated. Short boots, hot pants, tanned skin, and she was carrying a particle Gatling cannon on her shoulder. If she didn’t like someone, she could send them to the heavens.

This team was also in Zhuang Qingyan’s information: Team 105, the “Guns and Roses.”

As for the third team, they looked the most normal based on appearance. The members included both men and women, and they all had thick, smoky eye makeup. However, when compared to the first two teams, they seemed less impressive. Furthermore, their faces were unfamiliar to Song Ke, and she was sure they weren’t part of Zhuang Qingyan’s “be on high alert” list.

Now the question was, which team had taken advantage of the chaos to grab the crystal?

As Song Ke contemplated, the system announcement appeared once again.

“Flag coordinates refresh.”

“Here are the remaining flag coordinates: (195, 773, 218), (195, 773, 218)...”

Song Ke was puzzled. The coordinates provided by the tracker were sorted based on the nearest recipient, so how could they be repeated?

Did the announcement have an error? No, she immediately realized that the announcement was not wrong. There had originally been one flag here, and with the recent killing of the second superpower zombie, there were now two crystals and two flags!

“Hey! Who took the crystals? Dare to admit it?” Other people had evidently received the same announcement. From the third team, a sweet-faced girl with a melodic voice stepped forward.

Song Ke was puzzled. Who is this person?

A barely audible enchanting voice wormed its way into her ear: “Her name is Feng Duona, from Team 114, ‘Ferrara Star.’”

Song Ke jumped in surprise, her hand instinctively reaching for her ear. No one else seemed to have noticed, making it seem like only she could hear the voice.

Song Ke discreetly glanced at Lin Youyou, and indeed, the other woman blinked at her.

“Do you know each other?” Song Ke mumbled to herself, unsure of how to communicate with Lin Youyou, speaking softly into the air.

Lin Youyou, seemingly able to hear her, continued to speak in a hushed voice near her ear. “Feng Duona is just a nobody; no need to know her. As for Irene, it’s just a nodding acquaintance.”

“Oh,” Song Kei replied, still unable to fathom the social circle of a top celebrity and nodded in innocence.

On the other side, Feng Duona, realizing no one was paying attention to her, swiftly changed her strategy and prepared to dismantle them one by one.

She first looked at the “Anna Knights”, pointing at the first dead zombie on the ground. “If I’m not mistaken, you’ve already taken the crystal from this zombie, haven’t you?”

When they arrived earlier, this barbaric group of mechanical people had just killed the first zombie. Subsequently, the system issued an announcement. Feng Duona was one hundred percent certain that they had the loot.

“Why are you still fighting over it? With one crystal, you can advance!” Feng Duona scolded, displeased.

On the side of the “Anna Knights,” the most menacing one, Mechanical Head, sneered, “Who do you think you are? You’re teaching me how to do things?”

“You!” Feng Duona was taken aback.

The attitude of another one, Mechanical Leg, wasn’t much better. He looked down on her and said, “You already know we have a crystal, and you’re still asking? We didn’t snatch the one earlier, but we won’t give up this one. If you want to fight, then fight, stop whining.”

Feng Duona stared at them for a few seconds and turned to the “Guns and Roses.”

“Not in our possession.” Feng Duona heard the reply from Irene before she could speak.

All eyes shifted to Song Ke and the others.

Song Ke: “?” What do they mean? We don’t have it either!

Feng Duona shouted sternly, “Hand over the crystal!”

“Who, who, who do you think y-” Song Ke wanted to mimic the arrogant tone of Mechanical Head, but before she could finish saying “you,” Feng Duona’s next sentence came: “If you don’t hand over the crystal don’t even think about leaving!”

Song Kei: Ugh! Hateful! She won’t even let me finish my tough talk.

A pair of soft jade hands rested on Song Ke's shoulders, and Lin Youyou leaned over her, facing the rude and overbearing Feng Duona.

She deliberately adjusted her vocal position, disguising her voice as mature and authoritative, saying, "It's a pity that your gun is pointed at the wrong person, we didn't steal the crystal either."

Now things were getting interesting. At the scene, with four teams present, three of them claimed they didn't steal anything. The remaining team, represented by Feng Duona, was everywhere, pressuring others. Unfortunately, the flag coordinates were right near them. Even the children could tell someone was lying.

Feng Duona seemed to have narrowed down her suspicions and no longer paid attention to the group of robots. Her gaze shifted back and forth between two women, Irene and Lin Youyou, saying, "I advise you to be honest, or don't blame me for taking action."

Irene chuckled, pointing the Gatling gun at Feng Duona, showing no concern for her threat.

Lin Youyou burst into laughter and said, "Are you mentally ill? What's with all this female rivalry? You believe the men who said they didn't steal it? Why are you so naive?"

"Besides, whoever steals the crystal gets to keep it, why should we give it to you?"

"Yeah, this beautiful lady is right," chimed in Mechanical Leg sarcastically. "Even if we did steal it, just because you say so, we have to obediently hand it over? Miss Feng, are you overestimating yourself? Do you think the whole world revolves around you?"

Mechanical Head made a creaking sound as it turned its neck, its nostrils pointed skyward, and it exaggeratedly said, "An unknown little internet celebrity who thinks she's a star just because she sings a few lines? Do you think you're Lin Youyou? If you were Lin Youyou, I might consider it."

Song Ke and Xu Xing took a sharp breath, their eyes shifting towards the masked woman.

This Mechanical Head was actually a fan of Lin Youyou. It was too... terrifying.

Lin Youyou gave them a glare, and the two of them quickly turned away.

“Since none of you stole the crystal, then shut up!” Feng Duona became furious, nearly exploding in anger.

‘Lin Youyou, it was Lin Youyou again. This woman’s name was her nightmare! Both of them debuted with a sweet and lovely image. Why was it that Lin Youyou could become one of the top ten rising stars, while she was only fit to be an obscure internet celebrity?’

‘That damned Mechanical Head dared to bring up Lin Youyou.’ Feng Duona’s anger flared, and since that was the case, she wouldn’t hesitate to be ruthless.

“Kill them all!”

Her four teammates immediately took action, removing the long cases from their backs and revealing musical instruments. It turned out to be an awakeners band!

The electric guitar started with a soaring sound, followed by the bass’s low and angry roar, the electric piano’s rapid and furious notes, and the jazz drum’s lively beats. With each instrument playing, people’s heads felt like they were exploding. When Feng Duona spoke again, the live performance was practically a sonic assault, and Irene and the others couldn’t take it anymore, resorting to particle cannon fire!

“Bam bam—”

“Clang clang—”

Noise and gunfire filled the air, and the scene descended into chaos once again.

Song Ke wished she could cover her ears. Oh my God, Feng Duona's ability was no longer just mental; it was a physical attack. Everyone who heard it suffered excruciating headaches, feeling like they had been run over by a car.

In the official live broadcast room, Ah K was commentating on the battle.

"Ahh!" he suddenly exclaimed, his expression filled with indescribable emotions. Few artificial intelligences exhibited emotions as rich as his. "I strongly recommend, folks in front of your terminals, you might want to temporarily mute the volume. Listening to this kind of singing too much can damage your brain."

The barrage of comments immediately flooded with laughter and remarks like, "Hahaha," "Thanks, already muted," and "As long as Nana doesn't sing, everything's fine..."

"Qinghe, what do you think? I'm really curious. Do you also agree with what Player Seo said, that Feng Duona can't compare to Lin Youyou?" Amidst his busy commentary, Ah K didn't forget to cue in Luo Qinghe.

Luo Qinghe's long eyelashes fluttered like butterflies, and his every movement remained as graceful as a young nobleman. However, his words showed no mercy.

"There's no comparison."

"Hahaha, I'm dying! Why is Luo Qinghe so straightforward?"

"I feel bad; it seems Feng Duona is still his fan, right?"

"Light a candle for Nana."

"But Lin Youyou is genuinely naturally sweet, not pretending at all. Feng Duona, this kind of imitation can never match!"

Inside the Mirror Lake Arena:

“You’re the spring breeze~ blowing away the haze in my heart~”

A refreshing voice rang in the ears of Song Ke, Su Cha, and Xu Xing, instantly dispelling the auditory disaster brought by Feng Duona and her band.

Song Ke was deeply moved.

Zhuang Qingyan had guessed it right again. Lin Youyou’s ability could indeed affect her allies!

Whispers in her ears resurfaced, “Ke’er, go and check Irene. See if she has the crystal.”

Song Ke wanted to argue with Lin Youyou for giving her a nickname, but now was not the time to quibble. She nodded and leaped into the battlefield like a swallow, heading straight for Irene. She swung her sword, striking Irene’s Gatling gun, and demanded, “Crystal, hand it, over!”

Irene suddenly found herself in trouble, struggling to block with her gun. “No!”

But Song Ke’s strength was too great. Even though she blocked a part of it, she still experienced a tremendous recoil, sliding back over ten meters with her heavy gun before barely stopping.

At the same time, on the other side, Mechanical Head punched the guitarist of the “Ferrara Star,” the creator of the noise. He grunted and flew backward, his electric guitar escaping his grip and soaring into the sky. Then, it spun and descended straight towards Irene.

Irene had just stabilized her stance and couldn’t intercept it with her gun.

Seeing her about to meet her demise, Lin Youyou suddenly spoke, shouting to Song Ke, “Ke’er, save her!”

Song Ke stepped on a tree trunk, using it to propel himself into the air. His lower leg struck the electric guitar with force.

The massive electric guitar instantly changed direction, wobbling as it descended towards the “Anna Knights.” Upon impact with the ground, it exploded with a deafening roar, filling the air with smoke.

“Cough, cough!”

After the choking gun smoke dissipated, the crowd was surprised to find that the “Anna Knights” had disappeared!

Shortly after, the coordinates of both flags began moving rapidly, quickly getting several kilometers away from them.

A haughty laughter echoed in the air from Mechanical Head, “Goodbye, folks. I won’t serve you. I just love taking two crystals to complete a mission! One to keep and one to throw away. Ah, it’s all for fun!”

Feng Duona clenched her teeth in anger. “Chase!”

The “Ferrara Star” closely followed the “Anna Knights” and left the area.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 43.3: Bloody Ferrara (15)

The Big Star and the Little Bodyguard

Irene was helped up by her companions. This time, she had narrowly escaped death. She looked at Song Ke and Lin Youyou and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Irene could tell that Song Ke’s earlier attack was just a test, and the falling electric guitar was purely accidental. If she hadn’t intervened in time, she might not have survived.

“You’re welcome,” Lin Youyou smiled lightly from a distance. “Girls help girls.”

Irene glanced at her for a moment and felt that the person’s smile seemed familiar.

“I owe you a favor, and I’ll remember it.”

Irene said sincerely before turning and joining her companions in the pursuit.

“Shouldn’t we chase, chase them?” Song Ke asked with confusion.

“We can’t catch up. It’s clear that the opposite side has someone skilled at escaping. The four of us can’t split up, can we?” Among the four of them, only Song Ke and Su Cha could catch up to the mechanical team. If they both went to chase, the situation for Lin Youyou and Xu Xing would become extremely dangerous.

Indeed, in just a few seconds, the priority of those two coordinates had dropped to fifth place, and they were more than ten kilometers away.

Moreover, even if they could catch up, trying to snatch the crystals from the “Anna Knights” while dealing with Feng Duona and Irene would likely lead to an endless and brutal battle.

“So, what should we do?”

“Let’s keep looking. There should be more selfish people like this. The number of crystals is decreasing, and we need to hurry.”

“Flag coordinates refreshed.”

“Reporting the remaining flag coordinates...”

“The current number of advancing teams: 41.”

“This isn’t good. There are fewer and fewer flags.”

Lin Youyou glanced at the tracker, her eyebrows furrowing.

It was 21:40, exactly 100 minutes since the start of the competition.

Song Ke and her group had been searching for nearly half an hour, almost turning the entire restricted forest upside down. However, their luck had been extremely poor. The flags that refreshed later were either diagonally far away from them or on the opposite side of Mirror Lake, requiring a detour to reach. By the time they arrived, the flags had already moved for the second time, and as for the mutant zombies, they couldn’t even catch a glimpse of them.

This is impossible. Lin Youyou lowered her gaze, puzzled. She wasn’t usually this unlucky. Could it be... could it be that someone had incredibly bad luck and was single-handedly jinxing them? A bizarre speculation emerged in her mind, and Lin Youyou couldn’t help but look at Song Ke and Xu Xing ahead. These two had become distracted while walking, one teaching the other to curse and scold people.

Xu Xing: “Sis, it can’t separate. You have to say it together to have the impact.”

Song Ke: “Who do you think you are?”

Xu Xing cheerfully replied, “Right, it’s like that!”

Lin Youyou thought to herself, they really have big hearts.

In a different livestream room, Ah K switched to room 161-1 and happened to witness this scene. He chuckled and teased, “V587, as one of the wild cards in this competition, although they are very strong, it seems luck isn’t on their side. They’ve missed the flag several times already.”

“Now that the competition is heating up, with two-thirds of the teams advancing, our Player Song is still maintaining her composure. Will she be disappointed with this result, or will she manage to create some unexpected surprises? Audience, feel free to place your bets!”

The viewership in room 161-1 reached its peak as Song Ke single-handedly took down a mutant zombie water monster. It crossed the 200,000 mark, almost on par with other popular streamers like Irene and Feng Duona. However, a drone was damaged, causing a brief blackout, and in the half-hour she spent aimlessly wandering, she lost some viewers but stabilized at around 80,000.

Lin Youyou sighed, “You two, are you still in the mood to play? Didn’t you hear the recent announcement? There are less than ten spots left for advancement.”

Just a moment ago, the system updated the current situation, revealing that 52 teams had successfully advanced, leaving them with limited opportunities.

Song Ke and Xu Xing stopped their private conversation, standing up straight with a serious attitude.

“Shall we go and seize, seize them?” Song Ke proposed a plan.

Currently, there were only two remaining coordinates for the moving flags, both quite far from them. If they couldn’t find any mutant zombies soon, their only option was to go for the flags.

A few meters away, Su Cha, who was scouting the area, suddenly spoke up, “Something is approaching.”

Song Ke’s expression turned serious as she vigilantly surveyed her surroundings. Up ahead, there was a river with calm water, and a little further was the mountainside. The forest was peaceful, with no signs of anything unusual.

Everything appeared normal, except... Wait! The flow of the river seemed to be accelerating.

Xu Xing stood by the riverbank, staring intently at the water’s movements. Small bubbles surfaced one after another, churning and bubbling. He swallowed nervously, could it be? Could it be another water monster?

Xu Xing clenched his fists tightly, his ability, ice blade, ready to be unleashed.

Splash! A grotesque-looking, blue-skinned mutant zombie suddenly leaped out of the river.

At that moment, water mist filled the area, and the humid air forcefully deprived everyone of their breath, making it hard to breathe. This was a zombie with water-type abilities!

Lin Youyou reacted swiftly, taking a step back, while Su Cha and Song Ke, both close combat fighters, advanced to the front, slashing fiercely at the zombie.

Clang! Song Ke's dual blades struck, but they met a soft water membrane, which immediately absorbed all their force, leaving the water-type mutant zombie unharmed.

Su Cha's situation was similar. He had poisoned his dagger, but the water sprayed by the mutant zombie washed it all into the river.

Use softness to overcome hardness and dissolve all things with water!

Song Ke immediately transformed her blade into a three-edged spike and aimed for the mutant zombie's head, preparing to attack its weak point.

Just then, the water in the river suddenly spun rapidly, forming several whirlpools of varying sizes. The zombie sensed danger, buried its head inside, and was smoothly swept away. It reappeared in another vortex, spraying a jet of water at them.

Song Ke and Su Cha dodged to the side, avoiding the attack.

This zombie was tricky. Not only did it possess challenging water abilities, but it was also extremely cunning.

On the riverbank, Xu Xing had been staring blankly at the sudden appearance of the creature. After some thought, he raised his palm with a lack of confidence, and a blizzard poured forth.

The water-type mutant zombie, which had been shuttling back and forth in the whirlpools, was frozen in place.

Frozen... solidly frozen, from head to toe, every inch of skin, every sharp tooth, all frozen like ice.

Song Ke, Su Cha, and Lin Youyou: "..."

Xu Xing, 10 years old, Competition Number 161-2, Team V587, B-level ice-type awakener, the chosen one, resolved a water-type mutant zombie with one move.

Xu Xing realized he had unintentionally become the center of attention and scratched his head sheepishly, smiling shyly.

Su Cha smashed the zombie's head expressionlessly, and ice shards and frozen brain matter scattered on the ground, revealing a crystal as clear as day from within.

The atmosphere among the group became subtly tense the moment the crystal appeared.

Song Ke instinctively looked at Lin Youyou.

Lin Youyou calmly nodded. "You pick it up first, as we agreed."

Song Ke replied and jogged over to pick it up. After rinsing it in the river water and cleaning it carefully, she gingerly placed it in his coat pocket. She also ruffled Xu Xing's head, giving him credit for this accomplishment.

In Room 161-2 of the live broadcast, although the audience wasn't numerous, their gender preference was quite evident, and their style was decidedly unique.

“Ahhhh, what a cute kid! I want to ruffle his hair!”

“It’s Xu Xing, right? So cute and obedient. Help, help me! I really want to be his mommy!”

“Damn it... nobody should even think of fooling me into having kids—except Xu Xing.”

“He’s still an awakener. Be careful, or he’ll freeze you!”

The moment Song Ke picked up the crystal, Su Cha’s body was covered in bulging veins. His eyes turned dark and menacing. He stood still for a few seconds, then silently returned to Lin Youyou’s side. He lowered his head and stared at her, puzzled. “There’s no time. Why did you let them have it?”

He didn’t care about contracts or promises. He only knew that Lin Youyou couldn’t lose, and he didn’t want her to lose. If possible, he would go and kill these two right now and snatch the crystal.

Even if he wasn’t a match for Song Ke, in a life-or-death struggle, there might still be a slim chance of winning.

“Su Cha, don’t act impulsively,” Lin Youyou sensed the burning anger in the man in front of her. She tiptoed, one hand pressing down on his tense shoulder, and the other slid down the back of his neck, as if taming a wild beast about to run amok. “Behave.”

After a while, Su Cha’s raging murderous intent gradually subsided, and his tightly wound muscles slowly relaxed.

He controlled his aura and reverted back to the silent shadow he usually was.

The tracker beeped, and a new announcement was made.

“Flag coordinates refreshed.”

“Reporting the remaining flag coordinates: (886, 543, 1079).”

“The current number of advancing teams: 54.”

After the regular announcements, unexpectedly, there was a new one.

“Please note that the competition organizing committee is kindly reminding you that the number of flags remaining in the field is: 1. All contestants, please do your best.”

Song Ke was momentarily stunned, and the joy of obtaining the crystal was dampened by a large margin.

In such a short time, the two coordinates from earlier had disappeared, and the number of advancing teams had changed from 52 to 54. Now, there was only one flag left in the arena, and that was... the crystal in her hand?

Lin Youyou’s expression also grew somber. There were no extra flags left, which meant the crystal in Song Ke’s hand was the only ticket to advance.

She lowered her gaze, concealing all her emotions.

For the vast majority of awakeners, the Throne Race was an astonishing source of points, a never-ending stream of wealth, the satisfaction of power and ambition, and even a ladder to District B. However, for Lin Youyou, none of these mattered.

The sole purpose of Lin Youyou’s participation in the competition was to save her loved one’s life.

Even if this choice would stain her hands with blood, ruin her reputation, and make everyone despise her, she was resolute and unwavering.

“Su Cha, do you have confidence in killing them?” Lin Youyou used her ability to transmit her thoughts.

“I don’t,” Su Cha replied honestly.

“Understood... then next, follow my orders.”

“Let them be... live targets for a while.”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 44: Bloody Ferrara (16)

Betrayal

“The current number of teams advancing: 54”

“The remaining flags in the arena: 1”

Out of 10 spots for advancement, only 1 flag remained.

If the previous announcement had left a glimmer of hope in the teams within Mirror Lake, thinking they still had a chance to find a mutant zombie, seize the crystal, then the subsequent announcement directly pronounced their death sentence.

There were no surviving mutant zombies left in Mirror Lake, and among the 100-plus teams in the arena, there was only one choice left: kill and seize the flag!

The person holding the flag at this moment would undoubtedly become the target of everyone’s arrows.

“Sister, are we in danger?” Xu Xing held Song Ke’s hand, his tone filled with worry.

Song Ke didn’t immediately respond but instead cast her gaze on the other two.

Being chased was secondary; what she cared about most now was what Lin Youyou was thinking.

The precondition for their four-person cooperation was based on a sufficient number of crystals, but now that premise no longer existed. Two teams would definitely be unable to advance. Faced with such a situation, was there still a possibility of continued cooperation?

Would Lin Youyou turn against them on the spot, just like everyone else, trying to kill her to seize the flag?

Song Ke held the crystals in her pocket, her fingers releasing and tightening, unsure of what to say.

Lin Youyou remained silent for a while, noticing Song Ke's tense expression. She sighed softly, showing unexpected calmness, "You're really unlucky. This is the last crystal. Well, now you're the center of attention. Quickly take it to the finish line."

Song Ke didn't feel good about this, "How, how do you advance?"

Lin Youyou's lips curled into a faint smile, and her slender fingertips poked Song Ke's shoulder. Song Ke didn't dodge. "Worried about me? Since the competition specifies 64 spots for advancement, there will always be another way for those remaining."

Although she said so, the outlook wasn't optimistic. The original rules were already so cruel; if it dragged on to the end, she didn't know what awaited them.

"Don't worry, I keep my word."

"Oh my, judging by your expression, are you going to give the crystal to me?"

Even in such circumstances, Lin Youyou still had the mood to tease her.

Song Ke's fingertips touched the pearl necklace, her tone hesitant, "Actually, I—"

Before she could finish her sentence, she was abruptly interrupted. Leaves around them rustled, and a snake-like black shadow lunged toward them.

The first wave of pursuers had arrived!

Su Cha reacted extremely quickly, leaping into the woods. Muffled sounds came from the darkness, and the ambushing extraordinary individual was instantly eliminated.

"Run!" Lin Youyou urged aloud.

The four of them sprinted towards the mountain summit, encountering a few more ambushes along the way, but luckily, they escaped unharmed.

In no time, they reached the foot of the mountain, and a few more kilometers forward from here was the finish line for submitting the flag.

"Something's not right; the pursuers have decreased."

The wind seemed to slow down here, and the surroundings were eerily quiet, with snowflakes falling gently.

"Crunch!" Song Ke's ears caught the sound of dry leaves being crushed.

She stopped in her tracks, alertly looking around, and in the next second, a large number of awakeners surged from all directions!

They were surrounded, on the essential path leading to the finish line, where numerous bloodthirsty and desperate awakeners had already laid an ambush.

“Boom!” A deafening cannon blast marked the beginning of the looting.

The firepower was too intense, and Song Ke had to step back. On the periphery of her vision, a familiar Gatling particle cannon was set up, the “Guns and Roses”!

Rising extraordinary fire rings enclosed them, trapping the four of them inside, and the scorching flames nearly burned their skin.

After Irene finished her cannon shot and saw the faces of several people within the encirclement, she was momentarily stunned. How could it be them?

They had at least saved her once, and a hint of hesitation flashed in her eyes, slowing down her actions.

In the official live broadcast room, all the cameras once again switched to the 161-1 drone.

Facing the camera, Ah K analyzed rationally, “The situation for V587 doesn’t look great. On one side, there’s a continuous onslaught of pursuers, and on the other, it’s just a makeshift team put together temporarily, plus Team 121...”

Lin Youyou and Su Cha didn’t really stand out, and Ah K searched through the corners of his memory for information, “This team is called ‘Named Randomly,’ and in terms of combat capability, they seem quite casual. Su Cha from 121-1 disappears from the screen frequently, and the audience has a high complaint rate about him. As for Amy from 121-2, she hasn’t shown any outstanding performance since the qualifiers and even earned the nickname ‘Fish Queen.’ I wonder how they plan to deal with this?”

As Ah K finished speaking, a seismic change occurred in the arena.

Even though the four surrounded individuals hadn’t communicated in any way, their movements were oddly synchronized.

Xu Xing took a step back, and a chaotic snowstorm began falling from the heavily clouded sky. The temperature plummeted, and those burning fire rings instantly extinguished, leaving behind only black char.

Lin Youyou's red lips twitched slightly, and without any visible movement, the four's speed suddenly doubled.

Su Cha disappeared in place, concealed in the darkness. When he reappeared, he had already moved behind one of the besiegers. With a swift strike, a cold green light flashed by, and the opponent didn't even have time to utter a sound before meeting their demise on the spot.

After a successful assassination, he once again concealed himself in the shadows, waiting for the right moment, like a reaper harvesting souls, seeking the next unfortunate victim.

Song Ke wielded two knives like a nimble cheetah, charging directly into the encirclement. She was a one-woman army, and all sorts of awakened abilities crumbled into nothingness in the face of her absolute force. Those who confronted her head-on couldn't withstand three moves, and their awakened energy was shaken, sending them flying. The tightly sealed encirclement was torn open by her.

"Hoh!!! Unexpectedly, a ragtag army can stage a comeback like this. This coordinated assault is quite impressive," Ah K exclaimed.

Luo Qinghe, rarely speaking, offered an objective assessment, "Though outnumbered, if you didn't know in advance, you wouldn't be able to tell that this is a makeshift team. Long-range control, melee attacks, everyone's roles are clear, and their reactions are fast."

"Qinghe is right. In competitions, there are always surprises. Nevertheless, the situation is still not optimistic. We can see that another group of pursuers is heading this way."

Song Ke had just opened a path for a breakout when, in the next moment, numerous awakeners surged from behind once again. Were they planning to use a strategy of overwhelming numbers to wear them down?

With a flick of her fingertips, she hurled more than a dozen throwing knives with great force. Due to the short distance, the leading awakeners didn't even have time to dodge, they all fell lifeless!

An opportunity! Song Ke's eyes lit up, and she was about to charge forward.

A familiar, carefree voice suddenly sounded from behind the crowd, "Hey, guys, someone's trying to escape here! Anyone with control abilities, stop her!"

Song Ke followed the voice and indeed saw the young man with ice-blue eyes and silver-streaked hair again!

She scolded him inwardly. This guy is so annoying! He's like a troublemaker!

A violent tornado swept in, blocking the hard-won escape route, forcing Song Ke to step back reluctantly.

The man with ice-blue eyes attacked at this moment. As he moved, a dense wall of binary code suddenly appeared in front of Song Ke. It made her dizzy. Why was this guy's ability so irritating?

The man used the code as a path, and as he got closer to her, Song Ke suddenly found herself surrounded by a multitude of 101010 codes. It left her feeling disoriented. How could this guy's ability be so vexing!

The man used the code to pave the way and, as he approached her, he taunted and acted arrogant, "Nice weapons, can I take a look?"

Song Ke retaliated with a backhand slash, shattering the code wall, and she attempted to strike the man's forehead with her throwing knives.

The man promptly stepped back and used his ability to intercept them, stopping her attack. The throwing knives were left suspended in mid-air, trembling slightly.

He carefully examined them for a moment, touching his chin while muttering to himself, "Not actual objects, but a manifestation of abilities? Quite interesting."

Before he could finish speaking, the throwing knives broke through the code wall, turning into shooting stars aimed at his eyes. The man panicked and dodged, but his face was still cut, blood flowing.

He shrugged nonchalantly and suddenly turned to the people behind him, inciting the awakeners who were surrounding them, "Hey, guys, this isn't the way to do it. First, let's figure out who has the flag before we take action!"

Everyone realized it made sense. Grabbing the one with the flag was the way to go.

A chaotic tornado rose into the air, scattering the formation of Song Ke and her three companions. Xu Xing, being lightweight, was blown away about ten meters before finally hanging from a tree branch. Lin Youyou was also pushed back by the strong wind, looking quite disheveled.

Their positions had slightly changed, and the ambushers quickly discerned who was truly holding the flag.

"It's on the girl!"

"Kill her!"

In an instant, Song Ke found herself in a fierce battle.

The pressure on Lin Youyou and Xu Xing suddenly decreased. These people had completely disregarded them and were only focused on Song Ke.

Hidden in the shadows, Su Cha suddenly received a secret message.

"Su Cha, get ready to intervene."

"The crystal is in her pocket. After grabbing it, don't worry about anything else, just deliver it straight to the finish line."

In the official live broadcast room, Ah K was completely engrossed, as if he wanted to become the king of haste, muttering to himself, "The situation doesn't look good. Will Player Song's two allies choose to support her or make a run for it? Oh? They're charging forward! True love exists among mortals after all. They're truly trustworthy... Wait!"

"Please, Qingfeng~ I offer our sincere wishes, never-ending blessings for you~"

A melodious song rang in Song Ke's ears. After just two lines of lyrics, she felt energized and fully revitalized. It was Lin Youyou's ability, an enhancement buff!

Su Cha also joined the fray. Song Ke gave up her position to him, and he circled around the frontline awakeners, passing by her. With a flash of a dagger in his hand, he cut through her pocket.

Song Ke was stunned.

She held her attack posture for two seconds.

"Oh dear! Player Song's ally has turned on her!" Ah K lamented.

Su Cha successfully made his move, then quickly disappeared into the mountains, rushing towards the finish line.

Song Ke stared angrily at Lin Youyou, accusing her with her eyes: You deceived me!

Lin Youyou averted her gaze and sighed softly in her ear, "I'm sorry, but I also said that winning is more important to me."

Taking advantage of no one's attention, she also withdrew from the battlefield.

Now, Song Ke was left in a state of full energy, but she was trapped in a dense encirclement.

The others were still unaware of what had happened, and they continued to unleash their skills on her until the latest announcement rang out.

“Flag Coordinates Refreshed.”

“Here are the coordinates of the remaining flags: (1108, 453, 339).”

“Damn! The flag has been moved!”

These coordinates were already very close to the finish line. The awakeners who had surrounded her were in shock and immediately abandoned Song Ke, rushing toward the mountaintop.

It was too late.

“Current number of advancing teams: 55.”

“Please note, there are currently zero flags remaining in the arena, and a new competition format will soon begin.”

“Sister!” Xu Xing had finally managed to jump down from the tree branch, and he received the announcement. His eyes blinked rapidly, and at first, he didn’t understand what was happening. When he finally realized the key point, he became infuriated, jumping up and down in anger. “Ah!! This wicked woman!”

Lin Youyou and Su Cha... had advanced.

She had deceived them... and advanced by taking the only crystal from her own hands.

Song Ke tightly gripped her twin knives, her joints cracking.

“Xiaoxing, let’s go... to the finish line,” Song Ke said softly.

“Huh?” Xu Xing didn’t understand. Was his sister so angry that she wanted to chase Lin Youyou and Su Cha to the finish line?

Without time to explain, Song Ke accelerated, taking Xu Xing to the mountaintop. There was a floating verification platform here, and ahead was an invisible barrier blocking their path.

“Please submit the flag,” said an artificial intelligence in a mechanical tone from the window.

Song Ke took a step forward, and a dazzling surge of electricity, tens of thousands of volts, suddenly emitted, as if warning anyone who dared to trespass. She looked back at the post-match resting area behind her, where figures abounded, but she couldn’t see Lin Youyou and Su Cha anywhere.

Song Ke retracted her gaze and looked up at the artificial intelligence who had spoken.

“The flag is, is crystal, right?”

“Yes.”

“As, as long as it’s a crystal, it counts, counts for passing the level?”

“…Yes.” The artificial intelligence paused for a moment and gave an affirmative response.

Song Ke’s hand moved slightly, and a green octagonal crystal, dripping with a lush hue and radiating brilliance, suddenly appeared in her palm.

“Does this one count?”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 45: Bloody Ferrara (17)

Did someone bully you?

“Yooooo! Surprising! Tonight’s match is full of surprises indeed. Player Song has once again revealed a flag!”

Ah K was extremely excited, grabbing the microphone and shouting hoarsely, “When did she hide it? And, dear audience, this is a flag that didn’t appear in the system announcement!”

The barrage was filled with question marks.

“Am I seeing things? A green crystal, is it real?”

“It must be fake, there was no hint in the announcement.”

“Why would she show it if it’s fake? Does she think we’re all fools?”

In the post-match lounge, the holographic projection was broadcasting the match inside the arena. As they saw Song Ke take out the green crystal, some of the well-informed extraordinary individuals were in shock and disbelief. They stood up, their eyes fixed on the screen.

Mr. Xiang remained calm, leisurely sipping his tea, and said, “I didn’t expect to see a level 2 crystal here. This old man’s horizons have widened!”

Crystals had gradually become a strategic resource that gained popularity after the apocalypse. Awakeners had varying channels and timeliness for obtaining information about them. Some were completely unaware, while others considered themselves clever for obtaining firsthand information early, like Mr. Xiang.

The Alliance officially announced four levels of crystals: Level 1 white crystals, Level 2 green crystals, Level 3 blue crystals, and Level 4 red crystals. It was said that the deeper the color, the purer the quality, and the higher the success rate for awakening and evolution.

As things stood, Level 1 crystals were already rare, and Level 2 crystals had appeared only a few times in District B. After all, the probability of mutant zombie encounters was extremely low, and the stronger the mutant zombie, the more challenging it was to hunt.

Mr. Xiang's eagle-like eyes were fixed on Song Ke in the holographic projection. Despite his age, he was not senile, and he had recognized the little girl as the arrogant thief who had stolen their A-level mission in Luli Port.

Hmph, she was lucky last time. Not only did she get away with it, but she also escaped from a tight encirclement, causing them to work in vain.

Zhang Lei was nothing more than an ordinary D-level zombie, so he couldn't have produced a Level 2 crystal. Since the other party dared to reveal it, it must have been obtained within the arena. It seemed that there was a lot of information worth digging into about this Song Ke. Mr. Xiang instructed his subordinate, "Find out who she is, and also, get a copy of her entire match recording as soon as possible."

On the other side, Duanmu Qi was also watching Song Ke with a deep gaze.

The wound the opponent had inflicted last time still throbbed when touched, and this person would be the opponent he needed to pay the most attention to.

Mr. Xiang noticed his distraction and teased, "Young Duan, it seems you care a lot about this player."

Duanmu Qi smiled disdainfully. "Mr. Xiang, you don't need to test me. I'll say it again; no matter who the opponent is, the winner will only be me."

At the gathering place of the "Anna Knights," Mecha-Head, Sai Ang, tossed two crystals up and down, and suddenly exclaimed, "Huh, the green crystal is actually prettier than the white one. My two crystals don't seem so appealing now."

Sai Ang's mechanical head leaned forward, closely watching Song Ke's crystal in her hand, his gaze greedy and menacing.

...

At the verification platform, the AI scanned the crystal provided by Song Ke and stated in a flat, emotionless tone, "I'm sorry, verification failed. Only crystals produced within Mirror Lake can be submitted as flags."

Song Ke stubbornly explained, "It's from, from Mirror Lake, I swear."

The barrage was filled with skeptical comments.

"Such a scammer!"

"Is she lying with her eyes open? I've been watching the livestream in Room 161-1 since the Lock, Lock, Lock You Up battle. I didn't see her get a green crystal."

"She's audacious and not very bright. Daring to tell such a lie, doesn't she know the entire match is being recorded?"

There were a few faint voices defending Song Ke.

"Maybe you just missed it. This player is very talented."

A few sporadic fair comments were quickly drowned out by various insults.

"So many of us didn't see it, does that mean I'm blind? Did everyone collectively go blind?"

"Do you think AI directors are fools? With such a large crystal dropping, wouldn't they cut to that scene?"

“She’s just a scammer. Why are people defending her?”

Outside the screen, Old Zhang, who was typing furiously, was furious. He had bet his entire fortune on Song Ke’s victory. No, he couldn’t accept elimination like this. Old Zhang rolled up his sleeves, got energized as if he had taken some kind of stimulant, and engaged in a heated debate with those who criticized Song Ke.

In the official live broadcast room, Ah K, with great passion, stirred up the atmosphere, “Player Song still insists that she obtained this crystal from Mirror Lake. So, where did this unique green flag really come from? Qinghe, what do you think?”

Lu Qinghe cooperated very well, lowered his eyes in thought for a moment, and then with slightly parted lips, he gave his answer, “Water monster.”

Almost at the same time, Song Ke, who was confronting the AI, said exactly the same words, “Water monster, prod, produced the crystal.”

“Yooooo! As expected of Qinghe, he guessed it right away. Let’s take a look at the replay.”

Ah K raised his left hand, and the backstage director immediately played the video of Song Ke single-handedly defeating the Mirror Lake water monster.

“From the footage at the time, it is indeed a mutant water monster. Everyone, look here, pause! The water monster released rain arrow attacks, and only mutants can achieve such an attack.”

The video paused, and the water monster’s flat head faced Song Ke, its ferocity far exceeding that of ordinary mutant zombies. Countless fine rain arrows struck the enormous spiritual weapon umbrella, creating a dazzling white light.

“Huh? After Player Song saved Player Xu, she stayed inside the water monster for a while. Hmm... the exact time is 2 minutes and 48 seconds. Could it be that she accidentally discovered the crystal at this moment?”

“Okay, I’ve received a message from the backstage. Staff members are currently conducting an energy test on the water monster’s corpse. Any place where a crystal is produced will undoubtedly leave behind strong radiation. The answer will be revealed soon!”

At the verification platform, the old-fashioned AI’s eyes lit up with a line of code, as if receiving some kind of instruction.

“Congratulations, you have successfully advanced.”

Meanwhile, Ah K’s enthusiastic voice echoed through the terminals of all the viewers, “The green crystal has been confirmed to come from the Mirror Lake water monster. Congratulations to Player Song, congratulations to Player Xu, congratulations to V587 for becoming the dark horse of this match and successfully advancing to the top 64!”

The particle electric barrier slowly opened, and Song Ke and Xu Xing walked into the rest area, exhausted.

Under the curious, scrutinizing, and questioning gazes of many, she walked calmly with her back straight. When she passed by Lin Youyou and Su Cha, Lin Youyou seemed to want to call out to her, but before she could, Song Ke had already walked far away.

“Current number of advancing teams: 56.”

“Remaining flags in the field: 0.”

“New format initiated.”

Ah K received a prompt from the earpiece and nodded. His expression became serious as he announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, we will now start the Endless Slaughter mode. Let me briefly explain the rules: only 8 teams that survive will advance, and the rest will be eliminated!”

The awakeners left in the field also received the same announcement.

Endless Slaughter mode, with over 100 teams and more than 300 participants, competing for 8 spots, and counting based on the final survivors. This also meant that those who failed wouldn't be able to leave Mirror Lake at all. The real Battle Royale had begun!

The teams that had already advanced patted their chests in relief. "Thank goodness we grabbed the flag; otherwise, it would have been really frustrating."

In the arena, Irene plucked a strand of hair in frustration. At this point, they had no choice but to fight to the death.

"Sisters, we live and die together, never betray, charge out with me!!"

In another corner, the man with ice-blue eyes murmured, "Oh, I accidentally made it too big."

Endless slaughter began, and all the awakeners, as if mad, started hacking at those around them, who had just been fighting alongside them.

Those bloodshot madmen who had just killed their enemies one second ago now lay on the ground, killed by someone else in the blink of an eye.

Screams, wails, agonizing moans... this was a bloody purgatory, the most brutal arena.

Even the air was filled with a heavy smell of blood.

Irene blasted away an approaching awakener, and suddenly heard a painful cry behind her. "Ah—!!" She turned around in horror and saw her companion lying in a pool of blood.

Irene bit her lip, tears streaming down her face, and shouted, "Hold on, get closer to me, we can survive together!"

Outside the arena, the viewership ratings for the Throne Race soared once again.

Blood and brutality were the hormones that stimulated the Ferrara people the most. The betting pool kept refreshing, and countless fortunes flowed like a river to the backstage authorities.

The bloody massacre lasted for a full half-hour, and finally, eight teams fought bloody battles and crawled out of hell.

“Guns and Roses” lost two members...

“White Radish Carrot” lost three members...

“Black Jack” lost four members, and only the man with ice-blue eyes survived...

...

The remaining teams were completely wiped out.

The top 64 for the Throne Race had been determined.

As described in its promotional s, it was born after stepping over the fiery trials and thorns, treading on the blood and lives of countless people.

...

After the Mirror Lake competition, Song Ke and Xu Xing left through the player’s passage in silence.

Midway, Xu Xing stole several glances at Song Ke, wanting to say something comforting but not knowing where to start.

Blame that wicked woman! His sister seemed very unhappy.

After leaving the restricted area and walking a distance, Song Ke suddenly stopped.

On the main road ahead, under the dim streetlights, a very familiar silver-white wheelchair was parked there.

A handsome man leaned lazily on it, supporting his chin with one hand, casually watching the dry leaves dancing in the wind.

Hearing the noise, the man seemed to have sensed it long ago and raised his gaze, smiling suddenly.

“What’s wrong? Why is your face so puffed up? Did someone bully you?”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 46.1: Bloody Ferrara (18)

Lying Low

This area was specially designated as the post-race waiting area, where many friends and family groups gathered, eagerly awaiting the emergence of the competitors.

Zhuang Qingyan’s wheelchair was positioned at a distance from the others, his solitary figure stretched out by the streetlight.

A faint smile graced his lips as he asked, “Why is your face so puffy? Did someone bully you?”

“No.” Song Ke pursed her lips.

Still saying no even though she felt wronged almost to the point of showing it on her face. But Zhuang Qingyan kindly didn’t expose her, saying, “Alright, if you say there isn’t, then there isn’t.”

He paused, wearing an expectant expression, then continued, "But if you ever say there is, I'll think of a way to help you get back at them."

"Anyway, you're my golden thigh. Bullying you is like slapping my own face, isn't it?"

Song Ke's mood was a mix of speechlessness and complexity.

It was hard to describe her true feelings in this moment: surprise? happiness? gratitude? unexpectedness? None seemed entirely accurate.

It was like when she and Xu Xing, as the family's hopes, confidently went out, only to be splashed with mud by other kids and end up rolling in the mud, dirty all over. Yet, when she returned home, the parents asked if she wanted them to seek revenge for her.

Such thoughts were surreal, and Song Ke herself found them outlandish. She shook her head to clear her mind and quickly brushed them aside.

She didn't take Zhuang Qingyan's words seriously. After all, all the power-enhanced awakeners who survived today's competition were experts in their own right. Zhuang Qingyan was just an ordinary person in a wheelchair. How could he stand up for her and seek revenge on someone else?

Song Ke changed the subject, asking, "Why, why are you here?"

Zhuang Qingyan replied, "I came to pick you up since the competition is almost over."

In truth, Zhuang Qingyan had set off long before Song Ke's qualification was confirmed. As he said, he came here for two reasons: to pick up the two lost children and to confirm another matter.

Song Ke lowered her gaze and noticed slight wear and tear around the joints of Zhuang Qingyan's wheelchair. However, overall, it still looked clean and neat. She had found this wheelchair in the Qingsong Biotech, and although it was a top-of-the-line model with all the features, the distance from

the hotel to Mirror Lake wasn't that far, it was just that on such a cold day, him going out alone and running such a distance to pick them up was quite a feat.

Song Ke considerately jogged up to him, grasping the wheelchair's handles, ready to push him back.

"Wait," Zhuang Qingyan lightly pressed her hand back.

His gaze shifted to the other side of the passageway, and Song Ke and Xu Xing followed his gaze.

A young man with ice-blue eyes was slowly emerging from the passageway. He looked like a blood-soaked demon, leaving crimson imprints wherever he walked. People around him avoided him as if they feared being tainted by his presence.

"Lu Xinglan!" a clear voice rang out, and a clean towel was thrown through the air, caught by the man with one hand.

A person slowly emerged from the crowd, holding his nose in disgust. He poured water from a bottle while complaining, "You must be really free, not content with just watching. You had to participate in the competition yourself and end up in this sorry state."

Lu Xinglan's face was covered in blood, someone else's blood. He casually wiped it off a few times with the white towel, quickly turning it crimson.

"Xie Ningyu, that's enough. Stop chattering. I didn't drag you into this," Lu Xinglan retorted.

"You want to drag me into it? Lu Xinglan, do you have any conscience at all?"

Zhuang Qingyan's hand tightened suddenly.

The night breeze tousled his hair, and the slight curve of his smile slowly faded away as he gazed unblinkingly at the man not far away, the one with a teardrop-shaped mole at the corner of his eye. His expression seemed to drift off for a moment.

This change was too apparent, especially considering that Zhuang Qingyan had never lost his composure before. Song Ke noticed it almost immediately, and for the first time, she realized that when Zhuang Qingyan stopped smiling altogether, his expression looked terrifying.

She asked him in a low voice, "Do you know, know them?"

Those ice-blue eyes had caused her quite some trouble in the arena, and if Zhuang Qingyan knew them, she needed to find out who they were.

The two men on the other side soon noticed the lingering gaze on them. They turned their heads towards Song Ke's direction. Lu Xinglan still had wounds from a spirit weapon on his face, but his eyes were clear, and he appeared very composed, indicating that the trouble in Mirror Lake was intentional.

Xie Ningyu's gaze passed over Xu Xing, Song Ke, and Zhuang Qingyan one by one before losing interest and shifting to his companion. He continued, "When are we going back to Erjia? I don't want to stay here; it's so boring."

Upon closer inspection, Xie Ningyu's appearance was indeed striking. He had an intensity that was neither too pronounced nor too subtle, embodying an aloof air of youthful arrogance along with a touch of vibrant charm. Especially that teardrop-shaped mole at the corner of his eye, it was like the finishing touch that brought his entire expression to life.

"...I don't know them," it took quite a while before Zhuang Qingyan withdrew his gaze, his tone indifferent. "Let's go."

You don't know them, but you stared at them for so long?

Song Ke became suspicious. Although the man was quite good-looking, when did Zhuang Qingyan become so concerned about appearances?

When no one was paying attention, she sneakily assessed the man in the wheelchair: well, thin lips, straight nose, dark eyes. He's not inferior anywhere, is he?

Song Ke comforted him with a sincere tone, "You, you're handsome too, no need, need to envy anyone else."

"Hmm?" Zhuang Qingyan took a few seconds to understand her convoluted train of thought and couldn't help but smile, "Thank you for the compliment."

"You're welcome," Song Ke replied calmly.

The three of them hadn't walked more than a few steps when Xu Xing suddenly tugged at her sleeve. "Sister, look over there..."

Following his pointed direction, Song Ke unexpectedly spotted someone who shouldn't be here under any circumstances. "Wu... Wu Xianghai?"

Wu Xianghai looked furtive and constantly glanced around as he took a few steps. When he unexpectedly ran into them, his expression was as if he had seen a ghost. He didn't even greet them and quickly turned a corner to flee.

He was participating in the Throne Race Competition too, and he advanced? That's incredible, isn't it? Didn't they say only D-level or higher could sign up? Song Ke distinctly remembered that when she was with the Azure Phoenix squad, An Qiwen had said that Wu Xianghai was an E-level awakener.

She exchanged a glance with Xu Xing, both of them sharing the same bewilderment.

"I think I know why he can participate," Zhuang Qingyan spoke up at the right moment.

"Why?" Song Ke asked.

"We don't need to rush into it; let's discuss it when we get back," he said, his eyelashes twitching slightly, as he discreetly glanced towards a dark corner and lowered his voice to caution, "Song Ke, take a detour. There are some unwanted followers behind us."

Song Ke shivered and released her psychic power to investigate, indeed finding several lurking figures tailing them.

“Someone is tracking, tracking us?” She whispered to confirm.

“Not just that. Many of the participants who left this place are being watched,” Zhuang Qingyan replied.

“Greedy people always try to take advantage, and right now, Mirror Lake is a treasure trove of crystals,” he continued.

The Throne Race Competition’s organizing committee was wealthy, and the crystals earned by the participants in the arena didn’t have to be handed over. They could take them directly. Song Ke had also taken that Level 2 crystal with her, and she hadn’t expected to be targeted as soon as she left.

On second thought, these people were too audacious. Which of the teams that advanced to the top 64 was easy to deal with? Trying to snatch crystals from them? They’d probably lose their lives before they could lay their hands on the goods.

However, it was best to avoid trouble if possible. Song Ke didn’t look back and silently increased her pace. Following Zhuang Qingyan’s guidance, they took some intricate side paths, finally managing to shake off those pursuers...

...

After returning to the hotel, Zhuang Qingyan tried to calm down and persuade the overly excited Song Ke and Xu Xing, who were eager to watch the projection together all night, by saying, “It’s quite late now, let’s go rest first. We can discuss the competition later after I review it thoroughly tomorrow.”

Song Ke reluctantly agreed, “Alright...”

Zhuang Qingyan had gone to pick someone up after watching the competition. He hadn't had the chance to review the last Endless Slaughter mode and the true abilities displayed by other teams. Moreover, he had only received half the answers to what he wanted to confirm, so he needed to watch several more match recordings.

As for how Song Ke had been "bullied," even if she didn't want to talk about it, he could easily figure it out, right? If he wanted to know all the details, it wasn't difficult, especially since there was a mobile informant inside the arena.

In the living room, Zhuang Qingyan called out to Xu Xing, who was about to return to his room, "Xiaoxing~"

"What, what, what do you want?!" As soon as Xu Xing heard his voice, he immediately felt a shiver down his spine. The painful memories of the month of devilish special training came rushing back. "Don't call me like that; it's disgusting!"

Facing Zhuang Qingyan's cunning eyes, Xu Xing swallowed hard, feeling more nervous than when facing the water monster.

"I did my best today!" Xu Xing protested.

Zhuang Qingyan smiled gently, "You did well today. I called you for something else."

Xu Xing secretly sighed in relief, "What is it?"

"Come closer, and tell me how Lin Youyou managed to deceive you all."

Watching the competition in a first-person perspective had its limitations, and Song Ke's drone often lost connection, leaving some details unclear to Zhuang Qingyan. It was better to directly question another involved party.

Xu Xing's eyes lit up at the opportunity. Lin Youyou has now risen to the top of his most hated people list (formerly occupied by Zhuang Qingyan). At this moment, he and Zhuang Qingyan put aside their past grievances, united against a common enemy, and angrily condemned Lin Youyou's evil deeds.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 46.2: Bloody Ferrara (18)

Lying Low

The next day, Song Ke opened her eyes and saw Zhuang Qingyan's back. He was sitting in her room, playing a silent projection repeatedly, freezing the image of the man with icy blue eyes, with a cold expression.

Song Ke pulled the blanket up to her chin, lying in bed without moving, blinking her eyes silently while observing Zhuang Qingyan. In fact, she knew that Zhuang Qingyan had many secrets, and his words were sometimes true and sometimes false, but she often couldn't tell the difference. After knowing each other for so long, Song Ke, despite her foolishness, slowly realized that Zhuang Qingyan could not possibly be just an ordinary researcher, as he claimed.

But why, even though she had been deceived just like last night, she had never been as angry as she was yesterday? Song Ke pinched the lump in the blanket, probably because their goals and interests were aligned, in a way. They could be considered as part of the same fate community, and Zhuang Qingyan's lies were mostly not directed at her and wouldn't cause her any substantial harm. Is this the special treatment of Golden Thighs?

Song Ke's gaze became unfocused, gradually drifting away.

"Have you seen enough?" Zhuang Qingyan seemed to have eyes in the back of his head and asked calmly.

"Enough, enough," Song Ke was caught off guard, not feeling embarrassed at all. She lifted the blanket and got out of bed.

Fifteen minutes later, the three of them were sitting in her room for a meeting. The projection still froze on the man with ice-blue eyes.

Song Ke took a bite of her bread and said with her mouth full, "This per, person is not in your data."

"That's right," Zhuang Qingyan admitted. "Just like Wu Xianghai we saw last night, both of them entered the main competition through unconventional means."

"What do you mean by unconventional means?" Xu Xing took two bottles of milk and handed one to Song Ke. They both drank it down.

"The normal process is that D-level or higher awakeners sign up for the preliminary competition, succeed in the challenge, and meet the popularity criteria to advance to the main competition. Only teams that enter the main competition can make personnel adjustments. But they only need to buy a spot from the teams that have already advanced."

"Buy a spot? Didn't they say the championship rewards are attractive to everyone? Why would someone be willing to give it up?"

"Because there is only one champion, and some people know that they can't reach that level."

Zhuang Qingyan's tone was meaningful. "So, as long as the other party's offer is high enough, they won't hesitate."

"Leaving aside the other one, does Wu Xianghai have the money to buy a spot?" Xu Xing expressed doubts about this. "When he followed Wu's team, he had to sew clothes to make extra money. How come he can afford to buy a spot now?"

"Wu Xianghai is indeed suspicious. I watched his recording, and although the footage was limited, his ability is definitely not something decorative; it's a dark-type ability with offensive capabilities."

"Evolved?" Song Ke proposed a conjecture.

“Impossible,” Zhuang Qingyan shook his head. “Evolution only goes in the same direction as the original, it wouldn’t change as drastically as his. Next time if you encounter him, be more cautious.”

Xu Xing asked again, “What is his purpose for participating in the competition? Is it also to make a wish to Ilya?”

“I don’t know about Wu Xianghai’s purpose, but as for this person,” Zhuang Qingyan’s fingertip drew a circle in the air, and a red mark appeared on the head of the man with ice-blue eyes in the projection, “his name is Lu Xinglan, he’s from District B.”

“Pfft—cough, cough, cough!” Song Ke choked on her food, coughing loudly, and Xu Xing hurriedly patted her back.

Someone from District B participating in a competition in District C? This was too absurd. How bored could this person be?

“Not only from District B, but he’s from District B8, Erjia,” Zhuang Qingyan said nonchalantly. “However, this participation in the competition should be his personal action.”

“How do you even know which district he’s from?” Xu Xing widened his eyes in amazement.

Zhuang Qingyan explained calmly, “Erjia is the stronghold of the Lu family. The Lu family is known for their dominant characteristic of ice-blue irises. The lighter the eye color, the purer the bloodline, and the higher the status within the family.”

Lu family? The images of hundreds of starships crashing in the port of Hua City were still vivid in her mind.

Song Ke asked hesitantly, “Is it the, the Lu family’s star, starship, that Lu?”

“That’s right,” Zhuang Qingyan nodded.

Xu Xing's eyes turned red, and he almost lost his temper. "Their family's starships are all in such a terrible state, and instead of thinking about how to repair them, he has the audacity to come and participate in the competition?"

Xu Weiguo had bought tickets early on, planning to take him out of District F. If it weren't for the drastic reduction in the number of starships after the apocalypse, they wouldn't have been separated, and his father might not have become a zombie.

Xu Xing knew he shouldn't hate Wu Juemin, and he shouldn't hate the guards who couldn't protect the food factory, but he would always remember the starship that was temporarily canceled right in front of them because of "energy issues" just seconds before boarding.

"Lu Xinglan's eye color is clearly impure, even within the Lu family, he has no say. Don't expect anything from him," Zhuang Qingyan said calmly.

"Hmph," Xu Xing grumbled, "And there's another guy? His eyes definitely aren't ice-blue."

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes flickered slightly, and he didn't respond immediately.

Xu Xing couldn't read the signals and pointed to the corner of his own eye, saying, "Yes, the one with a mole here, you haven't mentioned him yet."

Song Ke reacted quickly, rubbing his head, "Xiaoxing, I'm hungry! Go order, order some food."

Xu Xing was pushed away in a daze, completely forgetting that not long ago, he had used the same excuse to dismiss Song Ke.

"Shouldn't we let him keep asking?" Zhuang Qingyan sneered.

"Hehe," Song Ke tried to force a smile, and the dimples on her cheeks appeared and disappeared, forming a gentle wave. "If, if you don't want, want to say, that's fine, you don't have, have to."

Zhuang Qingyan stared at those dimples for a moment, then his tone returned to normal. "It's not a matter of wanting to say or not. I just accidentally remembered some unpleasant people. It's okay to tell you; I'm not that petty."

"Mm-hmm," Song Ke nodded solemnly.

Ah, right, you're not petty at all. You never seek revenge.

"They are from the Xie family."

"The Xie family?"

"Yeah, when I say the Xie family, you might not have a concept."

"The Supreme Marshal of Azure Phoenix, named Xie Lan."

Although Song Ke was mentally prepared, she was still surprised. The Supreme Marshal of Azure Phoenix, isn't that Wu Juemin's immediate superior, the leader of those powerful awakener soldiers? He sounded like an impressive figure.

"Song Ke, I watched recordings from different angles," Zhuang Qingyan focused on her as he spoke slowly, "After killing that water-type zombie, did you want to give the crystal to Lin Youyou?"

Zhuang Qingyan's observational skills were indeed terrifying; he even captured her momentary hesitation.

Song Ke nodded slightly and then shook her head quickly. "At first, I, I thought about it, but later, I couldn't."

"Why?"

“Because of Xu Xing.”

Lin Youyou’s desire to win was far more urgent than hers. If it were just Song Ke, she might have really handed over the crystal, as she had said; there would always be other ways to advance, and even in the face of endless slaughter mode, Song Ke could carve out a path.

But she wasn’t alone; she had Xu Xing. Sending Xiaoxing into a melee battle was too risky.

At that time, Song Ke wasn’t sure if the green crystal counted as a flag, so even if she had a moment of hesitation, she wouldn’t have handed over the crystal.

After a good night’s sleep, her anger towards Lin Youyou had diminished. They both had no other choice at that time; they were just unlucky.

Zhuang Qingyan looked at her for two seconds and nodded approvingly. “Well done, you’ve grown.”

...

Xu Xing returned with a pile of food, and after a simple breakfast, Zhuang Qingyan’s expression became serious. “Let’s talk about some real matters now.”

“Ferrara is very dangerous right now.”

Rather than appearing as calm and peaceful as it seemed on the surface, Ferrara was more like a simmering pot of hidden turmoil.

Zhuang Qingyan’s wheelchair stopped by the floor-to-ceiling window, and he looked down at the mist-shrouded city center outside.

“The most obvious evidence lies in two aspects: first, the abysmally low employment rate for the general population in Ferrara. Finding a job here is extremely difficult, as ordinary people simply cannot compete with the vast number of artificial intelligences. AI is better suited for all job positions than humans.”

Since their arrival in Ferrara, they had encountered artificial intelligence in various fields. Almost 90% of job positions were controlled by these synthetic life forms. Occasionally, when they did encounter a non-AI human worker, it was a rare sight.

No, not all, right? Song Ke paused. At least in the Awakeners’ base, there was the girl who watched videos and the woman at the commission center window, and they were both regular humans.

She raised her question.

“Yeah, that’s right. Those three annoying auditors were also human,” Xu Xing added.

Zhuang Qingyan slowly shook his head. “What you’re talking about all belong to organizations under the Alliance.”

These directly affiliated organizations had their personnel assigned by the Alliance and naturally didn’t compete with artificial intelligence for jobs. Apart from these special cases, Ferrara was a completely autonomous city.

For ordinary people who couldn’t find work and had no fixed income, they had nothing to do all day and idled away their time. The city held various large-scale entertainment events every so often, from concerts to Throne Race Competitions. All of these required significant expenses. Gradually, a culture of gambling flourished, with some people getting rich overnight and others losing their entire fortunes. Some ended up taking on commissions, doing dangerous tasks for others, and not knowing when or where they would meet their demise.

The wealth of this neon city was concentrated in the hands of the top 1% of major conglomerates, or rather, in the hands of those who held power behind the scenes.

Outside the window, dark clouds loomed, and steel and concrete structures intersected, cutting the city into layers. When viewed from a high-rise, the people below looked as tiny as ants.

“But... what if there are fewer and fewer people, and they all die off?” Xu Xing couldn’t help but murmur.

“It won’t happen,” Zhuang Qingyan said with a chilly smile. “Don’t forget, Ferrara is an open and inclusive city with no entry restrictions. New people arrive every day.”

Song Ke and Xu Xing fell into silence, feeling a chill creeping up their spines.

Ferrara welcomes everyone.

Looking back on that statement now, it sent shivers down their spines.

After Song Ke and Xu Xing had processed this information, Zhuang Qingyan pointed to the needles placed on the table.

“Secondly, I accessed the dark web using your terminal and found some interesting information.”

“What is it?”

“Some of the previous candidates for ruling officials are conspiring to unite and resist Ilya’s rule. There may be significant actions taking place in the near future.”

This news was even more explosive than the previous one. Could they still stay here and make money in peace?

Song Ke was amazed. “So, what should we do?”

Zhuang Qingyan narrowed his eyes in contemplation. “In yesterday’s competition, you attracted quite a bit of attention, and the news about having a Level 2 crystal in your possession has already been made public along with the recordings. In the coming days, there may be more unscrupulous individuals coming your way.”

Song Ke furrowed her brow.

Being greedy and wanting it all, the crystals were still scarce commodities. Combined with the false information released by the Alliance, the number of people coveting the crystal in her possession was undoubtedly going to increase.

Zhuang Qingyan accessed the V587 points system backend and thought that making money would be the same with a different approach.

“There’s still some time before the next match. I suggest that we leave Ferrara for a while to avoid trouble.”

Chapter 47 – Tongwan Hospital (1)

Zombie Cleaner

“Excuse me, don’t block the aisle!”

Another medical stretcher bed sped past, and Song Ke, wearing a khaki vest, shrank back, trying to reduce her presence in the corridor. Her back was almost glued to the wall.

A crack opened in the door opposite, and inside, a patient with a bright red face, in a coma due to a high fever, was being surrounded by doctors, trying to save them.

“Patient’s heart rate?”

“150 beats per minute.”

“Have the condition of the eyes and skin been checked?”

“Yes, for now, the radiation levels are basically within the manageable range, and no mutations have been detected so far.”

“Transfer to intensive care first, keep the patient for observation tonight. If the quantum field inside the body remains stable, there’s a high possibility the patient will awaken with abilities.”

“Where are the new volunteers? Patient in bed 94 has completely turned into a zombie, hurry up and take them away!”

A deafening shout suddenly came from the next room.

“Here, coming!”

Song Ke quickly ran over, holding a short shovel in her hand, “Bang Bang,” two hits on the zombie’s head, skillfully knocked out the zombie that was biting everywhere, then picked it up by the waist, ran out, and threw it into the incinerator through a dedicated stairwell.

After finishing, she ran back “thump thump thump,” stood against the wall, amidst the coming and going stretchers, continuing to be a quiet guardian.

This was Song Ke’s second day volunteering, or more precisely, her second day as a “Zombie Cleaner.”

The place they were in right now was a top-tier hospital in the C60 District, Tongwan. Song Ke worked as a cleaner in the “Radiation Mutation Diagnosis and Treatment Research Center” on the thirteenth floor, Xu Xing worked as a runner in the pharmacy on the eighth floor, and Zhuang Qingyan was a clerk in the archive room of the adjacent comprehensive building.

As for the mysterious part-time job of Team V587, it all traces back to an internal meeting three days ago.

...

Three days ago, Zhuang Qingyan suggested that they temporarily leave the trouble-ridden Ferrara and go somewhere to lay low. So Song Ke flipped through the terminal's commission list and found a large-scale multiplayer B-class commission that piqued her interest.

B-Class Mission (Multiplayer Mission): Support Tongwan Medical

Mission Description: Tongwan (C60 District) has established a key discipline for radiation mutation research, providing comprehensive treatment for various types of zombie-like patients and offering complete guidance services for pre-awakened individuals with abilities. Due to a severe shortage of medical staff, volunteers with abilities are now being recruited from the entire alliance to overcome this challenge.

Mission Deadline: Indefinite

Mission Reward: 0-1000 Alliance Coins

Note: Volunteers who successfully apply will gain access to C60 District within the validity period of their identity.

After Zhuang Qingyan finished reading, he immediately made a decision: "Let's go to Tongwan."

If Ferrara was the capital of music and freedom, then Tongwan was undoubtedly the city of medicine and life. After the apocalypse, as one of the very few cities where order had not collapsed, the local governing officials and security forces had put in great effort.

Of course, this was also related to Tongwan's excellent medical resources. There were thousands of top-tier hospitals here, with over ten thousand practicing doctors in various fields. Almost every native resident had some medical knowledge. Tongwan's medical standards had been renowned throughout the entire Alliance even before, representing the highest levels of technological expertise and comprehensive capabilities.

There used to be a joke about Tongwan: no matter what critical condition, emergency, or rare disease you had, as long as a doctor from Tongwan nodded and said they could save you, even if you had just half a breath left, they could pull you back from the clutches of the King of Hell. On the other hand, if even Tongwan shook its head and said there was no hope, then there was no use struggling, and you better prepare for the inevitable.

In the early days of the apocalypse, the D-grade cities around Tongwan quickly fell, and a large number of zombies poured in madly. Despite this, Tongwan only remained in chaos for less than a week. After clearing out the zombies, the doctors picked up their scalpels again, doing their best to slow down the mutation process for patients who had either suffered from excessive radiation or had been bitten by zombies.

Tongwan, along with the three large shelters nearby, carried the heavy burden forward. Instead of being overwhelmed by the tide of corpses, it shone like a polished pearl. It was not only a graveyard of death but also a place of rebirth for those with abilities. Every day, some people died due to radiation outbreaks, but others survived high fevers and awakened their abilities, coming back to life.

In the emergency room on the thirteenth floor, paramedics wheeled in a young patient.

“Doctor, am I going to turn into a zombie?” The girl clutched a doll tightly in her arms, her voice choked with tears.

There was a noticeable claw mark on her calf, and blackish blood had started oozing from the edges.

“Little sister, you need to stay strong,” a nurse beside her comforted in a low voice. “Trust us for everything else and leave it to the doctors, okay?”

“Okay, thank you, Doctor.”

“How long ago was she bitten?” Dr. Lu Ning, with short hair, hurried over from the next room, bent down to examine the girl’s condition, and asked the parents beside her.

“She was just bitten. We rushed her to the hospital immediately, less than twenty minutes ago,” the girl’s mother said, her voice trembling.

Lu Ning's expression remained unchanged. She gestured for the couple to step outside before saying coldly, "The wound has already started to deform. We need to amputate immediately to stop the zombie transformation process. Perhaps we can save her life, but time is of the essence. You need to make a decision quickly."

The girl's mother, upon hearing this dreadful news, almost fainted, but fortunately, the girl's father remained composed. After a moment of grieving, he gritted his teeth and agreed.

"Listen to Dr. Lu. We... we agree to the amputation."

"Sign the consent form, prepare for surgery," Lu Ning turned and was about to head to the operating room.

"Dr. Lu!" A colleague blocked her path, looking concerned. "Don't forget the regulations. No surgeries involving suspected mutants can be performed without an awakener on guard. It's too dangerous."

"Then find an awakener!" Lu Ning frowned.

"All the volunteers outside are helping with 'clean-up' now. It may take some time to find someone available..."

"It's a matter of life and death. I'll find someone myself."

Lu Ning pushed him aside and quickly walked out of the emergency room. When she looked outside, she saw people running back and forth in the corridor, and it was chaotic. Only a girl in a khaki vest was standing idly in the corner.

"Hey, you!" Lu Ning shouted.

Song Ke noticed a doctor in a white gown in front of her who seemed to be talking to her. She pointed to herself, saying, "Me?"

“Yes, come here!”

“Ah? Oh.”

She hurried over to the doctor in the white gown. Lu Ning quickly scanned her and noticed the words “Medical Support” on her vest, which had a unique ugliness to it.

“Are you a person with abilities?”

“Yeah.”

“Perfect, I need surgery right now, and I need a guardian. It’s you.”

A guardian was another layer of protection for surgeries on suspected mutants. If a patient’s zombification accelerated during the surgery, causing them to lose consciousness and attack the medical staff, the guardian had to deal with the threat immediately.

“Oh,” Song Ke replied. She had only worked as a cleaner for two days, dealing with dirty and tiring tasks and confronting zombies. This was her first time entering an operating room.

She put on a sterile radiation-proof suit and, after entering the operating room, was directed to stand in a corner, serving as a guardian in a different location.

Lu Ning was also fully equipped. She took the surgical knife with a solemn expression. There was a touch of sternness on her face that belonged to a doctor. The scalpel in her hand could save a life, but it could also swiftly end one when it was confirmed that the patient had turned into a zombie.

An hour later, the indicator lights went out, and Lu Ning came out, walking over to the couple.

“The surgery went smoothly,” she said, her demeanor unusually calm.

“Thank you, thank you, Dr. Lu!” The girl’s parents were deeply grateful.

After the couple walked away, Lu Ning stood in place, looking down at her own hands as if lost in thought.

Several colleagues passed by and curiously asked, “Dr. Lu, you saved a life, why don’t you seem happy?”

Lu Ning remained silent. “My original plan was to amputate just the lower leg, but the radiation spread too quickly, and I couldn’t keep up. I had to remove her entire leg...”

A colleague tried to console her. “Lu Ning, don’t blame yourself. You did an amazing job.”

Lu Ning shook her head. “If it were Director Fang performing this surgery today, he would have definitely done better, a thousand times better than me.”

Others sighed, “Director Fang...”

The other doctors quickly dispersed, busy with treating other patients, and Lu Ning also needed to leave. However, she noticed Song Ke still standing in the corner.

“We’re done here. You can go back now.”

“Okay.”

Song Ke removed the mask from her face, having worn it for over an hour, her black hair was soaked with sweat. It was just too hot. She used the back of her hand to fan herself.

Lu Ning gave her another glance and thanked her, saying, “Thank you for today.”

“You’re, you’re welcome.”

In the current world, nobody had it easy. A young girl like Song Ke coming to such a dangerous place to volunteer probably meant her family was facing some difficulties. Moreover, she was doing the dirty and tiring work of cleaning up zombies, earning less than 200 Alliance coins a day. Only lower-level awakeners were willing to do such work.

Even though Lu Ning had witnessed life and death countless times, she still felt a twinge of sympathy and sighed, saying, “You’ve worked hard.”

Song Ke blinked. She had only stood there for a while because of the heat. How could Doctor Lu, who had been performing surgeries, think she had worked hard?

...

After a busy day, Song Ke finally received her compensation and left work. Tongwan had become somewhat desolate compared to the past, but it was still a functioning city. The majority of zombies had been concentrated in the incinerators of major hospitals, making the streets relatively peaceful.

As Song Ke left the hospital, she passed by a central park. Flocks of white pigeons were pecking at rice on the ground. Children in new clothes were running around, and a scruffy-looking homeless man with a newspaper-covered head was sleeping on a bench. Passersby sprinkled breadcrumbs into the air, attracting the pigeons to feed. The homeless man, smelling the aroma of baking, half-rolled off the bench and reached out to grab some food, competing with the pigeons.

The person who had thrown the breadcrumbs had a disdainful look and quickly moved away.

The homeless man, oblivious to this, leaned on the ground with stubble on his face and desperately stuffed his mouth with food. His voraciousness might have choked his throat accidentally, and he started coughing violently, causing crumbs to scatter all over. The pigeons were startled and flew away in a flutter.

Song Ke had initially walked past, but when she heard the man's severe coughing, her steps gradually slowed down. She paused for a couple of seconds and then retraced her steps, taking out an unopened loaf of bread from her pocket and placing it in front of the man.

It was the hospital's lunch, which she hadn't eaten. It even had the Medical Support logo printed on it.

Before her grandfather had settled them in District F, there was a time when they had been wandering like this, struggling to find food. This homeless man reminded her of herself when she was a child.

The homeless man hesitated for a moment when he saw the extra bread in front of him, then quickly grabbed it and ate it ravenously.

Song Ke walked away, thinking as she went. She wondered how much money Zhuang Qingyan and Xiaoxing had earned today.

Chapter 48 – Tongwan Hospital (2)

Who is Tao Tao?

As the sun set, hardworking laborers finished their day's work and returned home with a sense of accomplishment.

That was the ideal situation, though.

In reality, when the three of them, V587's trio, returned to their temporary residence, their faces didn't look very cheerful.

"I'm so tired~" Xu Xing stuck out his tongue, his two thin arms hanging in front of him like a small octopus. "Sister, are you tired?"

"Well, not too much." In terms of physical exhaustion, Song Ke was doing okay. It was just that she felt dirty and immediately rushed into the bathroom to shower.

Among the three of them, only Zhuang Qingyan seemed refreshed. He was dressed in a gray administrative officer uniform, and at a glance, he exuded an air of elegance fit for an office worker. However, at this moment, he was massaging his wrist, with a furrowed brow, displaying signs of patience.

Sigh, Song Ke sighed. Life was not easy, and making money was hard work.

Speaking of which, cleaning up zombies was typically a job for lower-level awakeners. Yet here was Song Ke, an A-level awakener, not out there bravely slaying zombies but doing this. It was truly surprising.

Their choice of Tongwan for their multi-person mission had a reason.

The other available missions were either too far away or one-time gigs, where you finished the job and had to find the next one. They also didn't provide access permissions. After accepting a mission, you had to return to Ferrara. Only Tongwan's medical support, despite its low pay, offered a variety of positions and was a rare long-term task. So, Song Ke didn't mind. After all, earning money was earning money, and work didn't have a hierarchy of prestige. Cleaning work was cleaning work. They did it happily.

The three of them sat down in a row and calculated their earnings for the day: Xu Xing had 80 Alliance coins, Song Ke had 180 Alliance coins, and surprisingly, Zhuang Qingyan had the most, with a whopping 300 Alliance coins! Technical positions were in demand.

Their total income for the day reached 560 Alliance coins. When combined with the bonus from the pre-qualifying matches and the top 64, they were now a well-off family!

Song Ke counted the numbers in her account and felt quite pleased.

"Ferrara's news this morning mentioned that a top 64 team was assassinated at home, and their crystal disappeared," Zhuang Qingyan calmly dropped a bombshell.

"Which team?"

“The Mystical Heroes team. Their strength was average, with only the team captain being a C-level awakener, while the rest were all D-level.”

“They must have advanced purely by luck. Shortly after the competition began, they encountered a heavily injured mutant zombie, a gift that fell into their lap. They picked up a crystal for free, but now they’re the first ones targeted. The other side knew they were easy prey.”

Song Ke frowned. Leaving Ferrara was indeed the right choice.

The hidden whirlpool was escalating, and the first step was the assassination of contestants. Who knew what else would happen in the future?

Xu Xing looked left and right, feeling inadequate for earning the least. The little boy’s male pride came up again: “I want to go to the 13th floor tomorrow.”

If he couldn’t earn 300, at least 180 would do, right? 80 was just too little.

Thinking about facing an endless pile of patient records tomorrow, Zhuang Qingyan’s wrist started to ache again.

“None of you are going to the 13th Floor tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“We have two missions here that I think we can take.”

He projected the mission interface, and Song Ke and Xu Xing leaned in to take a look.

The first one was a C-level mission, and the requester was an owner in the Golden House Community. According to him, he hadn’t been able to return home for several days. Every time he reached the front of the building, whether he wanted to take the stairs or the elevator, it felt like hitting a brick wall. So, he wanted an awakener’s help to investigate and see if they could resolve the issue.

Zhuang Qingyan analyzed it logically, “The Central has rated it as a C-level mission, which means the big data calculations aren’t that complex. The Golden House Community is also close to us, considering the processing time, a round trip in a day should be sufficient. Most importantly...”

His clearly defined fingers slid across the screen, reaching the last line of the mission description, “This, you should like.”

The mission reward prominently displayed: 1000 Alliance coins.

Wow, this homeowner must be wealthy!

Song Ke’s eyes lit up.

Zhuang Qingyan smiled, seemingly anticipating her reaction, “Take a look at the second one.”

The difficulty of the second mission was only D-level, and the requester was in a hurry. She mentioned that her child, Tao Tao, had been running a fever for several days. However, there were zombies roaming the floor, and she couldn’t open the door at home, making it impossible to leave. She suspected it was a supernatural event and wanted an awakener to lend a hand and help take her child to a nearby hospital.

“Huh?” Song Ke noticed the connection between the two missions. “The address is the same.”

“That’s right, both in the Golden House Community. The requester for the second mission lives in Apartment 1507 of Building G.”

This was interesting. In the same residential complex, one owner said they couldn’t get in, while the other said they couldn’t get out. Who was telling the truth? They’d probably only find out by going to the scene.

“The problem likely lies in Building G. We can handle both missions together; it shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Tomorrow, we’ll go together,” Song Ke decided.

...

Early the next morning, Song Ke first activated the terminal at the Tongwan mission hall and successfully accepted the missions. Then, the three of them headed to the Golden House Community.

The Golden House Community was a high-end residential complex, and from the outside, it seemed to have been minimally affected by the apocalypse, with greenery and public facilities largely intact.

The property management was quite responsible. After confirming their awakener identities, they registered them before allowing entry.

The security guard leading the way jingled his keys, the crisp sound echoing noticeably in the quiet environment.

“This is the building. There hasn’t been any activity here for the past few days.”

The group stopped at the entrance of the building, and the security guard was about to leave.

“If you can get in and find zombies inside, just call the security team. Don’t come looking for me.”

“If there are patients with a fever, I can help you contact the nearby Fifth Hospital. They’ll send an ambulance.”

The security guard was just an ordinary person, and fearing zombies was understandable. Song Ke didn’t want to pressure him, “Okay, thank you.”

Once the group moved away, she carefully examined the situation in front of her. The entrance to the building was open, so why couldn’t they get in?

Song Ke was puzzled. She took a step forward, everything seemed normal. She took another step, still normal. She lifted her foot to step onto the stairs, preparing to enter the entrance, and then... she couldn't move.

There seemed to be an invisible wall in front of her, keeping her outside, and trying to move forward became exceptionally difficult.

Xu Xing tried to break through with his ice spikes. The sharp ice shards pierced the invisible barrier, and it seemed they were just inches away from the entrance. However, with a "ding" sound, they were bounced back and fell into the grassy lawn behind them, shattering into pieces.

"It's a domain-type ability," Zhuang Qingyan said.

"It's somewhat similar to Maeda Jiu's air barrier, but with a larger range and longer duration. It's been active for at least three to five days."

"I have a guess, but it's better to confirm the opponent's location first."

Were there awakeners inside the building? Were they releasing powers indiscriminately?

Song Ke took a few steps back, looked up, and released her psychic power, trying to pinpoint the awakener's location.

The other party's energy field seemed very weak, fading to just a faint hint. She could only roughly determine it was around the 15th floor.

"Approximately, on the 15th floor," Song Ke reported her findings.

After saying it, she froze for a moment. The 15th floor, why did it sound so familiar? Could it be?

"Could it be—"

“I know, I know! Is it the feverish kid from the mission?”

Xu Xing answered a split second before her.

Song Ke: “...” She was slow again, not even able to keep up with Xiaoxing.

Zhuang Qingyan suppressed a smile, “Very likely. The person is disoriented, unable to control their powers, involuntarily creating a domain. Because of this, the people inside their home can’t leave.”

He gently patted a certain dejected head, “The child’s psychic power isn’t strong, so when they spread their ability over such a wide area, there must be weak points. It’s up to you to find them.”

“Once we breach the weak point, there should be a few seconds of a vacuum period, enough for us to get inside.”

Song Ke gathered her focus, circled around Building G, and manifested a spear-like object in her hand, nearly five meters in length. She prodded here and tapped there until she finally detected a weaker point on the outside of the 5th floor.

Backing away to the flowerbed outside, she aimed at the weak spot, took a running start, and sprinted forward. With a flick of her right hand, she traced a half-arc in the air.

“Swish!” The spear flew forward with thunderous force, piercing something in mid-air. Invisible ripples spread out, momentarily disrupting the psychic power surrounding Building G.

“Quick, let’s get in!” Zhuang Qingyan shouted.

The three of them seized the opportunity and rushed into the building.

Two seconds later, the absolute domain rebounded, returning to its original state.

Zhuang Qingyan glanced back and said, "Domain-type abilities are not easy to break through. We can only locate the awakener responsible and persuade them to remove it."

"But the child is feverish and not cooperative," Song Ke expressed some concern.

"Okay, I'll handle the communication when the time comes," Zhuang Qingyan said.

While they were talking, Xu Xing, being quite responsible, went to press the elevator button. He tiptoed, pressed the "up" button, and with a "ding," the elevator slowly arrived at the ground floor, sliding open on both sides.

Several stiff-limbed zombies appeared in front of him.

Xu Xing gasped, and behind him, a multitude of ice spikes shot out, skewering the monsters before them. The zombies hadn't even had the chance to roar before collapsing limply to the ground.

Xu Xing turned back, frightened and apprehensive. He opened his mouth, intending to alert the other two, but Zhuang Qingyan and Song Ke were still engrossed in their conversation, not giving this side a single glance.

Xu Xing: "..."

He sighed melodramatically, realizing he was the one who had to deal with everything on his own.

Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan finally came over, noticing the fallen zombies inside the elevator. They praised, "Well done, Xiaoxing."

Xu Xing, acting a bit spoiled, simply nodded his head, keeping his accomplishments and fame to himself.

The group cleared the zombies out of the elevator, piled them up on the ground floor, and then proceeded to the 15th floor.

Sure enough, there were quite a few zombies wandering on the 15th floor. Song Ke and Xu Xing worked together to eliminate the threat.

Zhuang Qingyan pressed the doorbell of 1507, saying, "Hello, we're the awakeners who received the mission. Is it your child who needs to be taken to the hospital?"

There was no response, so he pressed it again.

"Hello..."

This time, before he could finish speaking, the door to 1507 was abruptly pulled open. A woman with disheveled long hair and glasses appeared, tears of excitement in her eyes. "Finally, I can open the door! Hurry, Tao Tao has a high fever, please take her to the hospital!"

Zhuang Qingyan reassured her, saying, "Don't worry, first bring your child out, and I'll talk to her. We've already cleared the outside."

He tried to comfort the young and flustered mother while simultaneously having Xu Xing contact an ambulance from the Fifth Hospital.

The woman cradled a small figure wrapped in a blanket and brought her out. As she passed by, Song Ke glanced at the bundle and instinctively felt that something was off.

Before she could fully process it, the corners of the blanket moved, and a small head poked out. A corgi with a drooping ear emerged, grinned at them, its nose moist, and let out a weak "woof."

Song Ke: "..."

Wait, could someone please explain why Tao Tao was a dog??

An awakener dog???

Chapter 49.1 – Tongwan Hospital (3)

We Kidnapped a Big Star!

Song Ke's language system was in disarray.

She and Tao Tao, who was curled up in a blanket, stared at each other in silence. Tao Tao's big eyes met her gaze for a moment, and then she turned her head away, disdainfully blowing a bubble of snot.

Oh! This dog, why is it still looking down on people?

Song Ke was furious.

Zhuang Qingyan was also unusually speechless. His original plan was to communicate with this child named Tao Tao and persuade her to temporarily suppress her abilities. Now it seemed that this task was even more challenging than he had imagined.

No, it should be said that this task had already surpassed the scope of what humans could accomplish.

"In your request, you mentioned that it's your child who has a fever..." Zhuang Qingyan took a deep breath, carefully choosing his words.

"That's right, Tao Tao is my child!" the woman responded confidently. "She has a fever, please hurry and take her to the hospital."

Take a dog with a fever to a pet hospital? But was Tao Tao's condition due to her awakened abilities, or should she be taken to a specialized radiation center?

Zhuang Qingyan rubbed his forehead. "Your... child, from our preliminary assessment, seems to have awakened her abilities. She sensed danger outside and created a protective field on her own, which is why you haven't been able to leave your home for the past few days."

“Really?” The woman was quite carefree and didn’t find anything unusual about her dog awakening abilities. She lifted Tao Tao affectionately and nuzzled her nose. “So, Tao Tao was protecting mommy? That’s amazing!”

“Woof, woof,” Tao Tao barked twice in cooperation.

V587’s three members watched the woman and the small dog perform their touching mother-daughter act without expression.

Zhuang Qingyan cleared his throat, interrupting this warm scene. “Now, Tao Tao needs to suppress her abilities before you can leave.”

“How do we do that?” The woman was cooperative and immediately asked, “What do I need to do?”

“You’re her mother, don’t you have some special way of communicating with her?” Xu Xing muttered.

“Tao Tao is usually quite obedient. Tao Tao, can we please suppress that thing?” The woman asked hopefully.

“Woof!”

“Is it done? Can we leave now?” The woman looked at them with anticipation.

Song Ke shook her head; the protective field was still in place.

“Let me try.”

Xu Xing volunteered and extended two small paws towards Tao Tao’s head, glaring menacingly. “Little dog, suppress your abilities!”

Tao Tao sneezed and sprayed him with saliva, her tiny dog face showing a hint of disdain.

“You do it!” Xu Xing wiped his face in annoyance and handed the problem over to Zhuang Qingyan.
“Aren’t you usually good at this?”

Zhuang Qingyan was speechless. He could easily deal with this Corgi, but trying to reason with a dog—wasn’t that a bit too much for him?

The four people and one dog remained deadlocked for a while, unable to find a solution to make Tao Tao suppress her abilities.

Suddenly, there was a rustling noise in the stairwell, and a zombie crawled up from below, swaying unsteadily as it appeared in the corridor.

“Oh, a zombie!” Tao Tao’s mother turned pale with fright, clutching Tao Tao tightly and attempting to hide inside the room.

“Auntie, it’s alright. We’ll take care of it,” Xu Xing quickly stopped her, patting his chest to guarantee.

Song Ke turned around, her right hand flipped, a slightly thicker in the middle and slightly thinner at both ends, diamond shaped spiked cone appeared at her fingertips. She slid the ring onto her middle finger and, with a quick flick of her wrist, started spinning it rapidly. The zombie in the corridor had also noticed the living people and lunged at them ferociously.

Song Ke’s spiritual weapon, emei thorn, shot out from her hand, and with a twist of her fingers, she deftly intercepted the zombie. In one go, she thrust it, and the entire skull of the zombie was lifted off, rolling on the ground like a soccer ball.

The zombie, now headless, took two more steps due to momentum before crashing heavily.

“Sister is amazing,” Xu Xing, the cheerleader, applauded.

“Wow, that’s impressive,” Tao Tao’s mother was also quite impressed and followed with admiration.

Tao Tao peeked out from the blanket, her round eyes staring at Song Ke. She barked twice, “Woof, woof.”

“What, what is it saying?” Song Ke turned to Zhuang Qingyan.

Zhuang Qingyan: “...” She didn’t need to trust him so much; he couldn’t understand dog language.

However, he soon had a change in expression. “The protective field has been lifted.”

Tao Tao looked very excited, her short tail wagging rapidly. She propped up half of her dog body, placed her front paws on her mother’s arm, perked up her ears in high spirits, and barked at Song Ke again, “Woof!”

What did that mean? Song Ke had won the approval of a dog through sheer force?

It felt a bit strange.

...

At the Fifth Hospital, the doctor in charge of receiving patients looked at Tao Tao wrapped in a blanket on the counter with a troubled expression. “We’re not veterinarians, you know?”

“This dog has awakened its abilities,” Zhuang Qingyan sighed and had to explain again.

From stepping into the hospital gate to the triage desk, and then to the examination room, he had repeated it countless times and received countless strange looks.

“What? A dog with awakened abilities?!” The doctor’s tone changed.

The doctor who had just claimed “we’re not veterinarians” suddenly had a gleam in his eyes. He seemed to see his own shining future research paper. He took out his glasses from his pocket, put them on, and turned to say a few words to someone inside. Soon, a group of interns also rushed out with eager expressions.

“Come on, it’s called Tao Tao, right? Oh, you’re such a good dog. We’ll make you better, don’t be scared, okay?”

A group of doctors in white coats surrounded Tao Tao like they were observing precious research material, afraid that it might have a headache or fever.

Song Ke witnessed their dramatic change in attitude, her mouth agape.

The doctor looked at them, cleared his throat twice, and said seriously, “Let Tao Tao stay in the hospital for now. I will establish a specialized medical team to take care of her. As for the ward, you can apply for a single room.”

Tao Tao’s mother happily agreed. After leaving the examination room, Song Ke, Tao Tao, and Tao Tao’s mother said their goodbyes, and their mission here was considered successfully completed.

However, Song Ke still couldn’t understand, “Can dogs also awaken?”

This kind of thing sounded magical just by listening to it. Zhuang Qingyan tried to explain it to her in a simple and understandable way, “There are always exceptions in everything. Radiation is indiscriminate. In theory, animals can also potentially awaken, but compared to humans, there are clear deficiencies in terms of both the capacity to endure and genetic sequences. Animals like Tao Tao are just a rare occurrence.”

They didn’t expect such an explosive surprise hidden in a D-level mission. A few more missions like this would be enough to test their mentality.

Having completed their part-time work for the day, the three members of V587 relaxed and leaned against the corridor to enjoy the breeze.

The Fifth Hospital was quite different from the 119 Hospital where Song Ke had worked a few days ago. The 119 Hospital was always racing against time, with doctors in the emergency department and resuscitation constantly busy, and the 13th floor, the Radiation Specialist Department, was even more of a disaster area. Radiation outbreaks often resulted in patients becoming more zombie-like and a threat to the safety of ordinary people. Volunteers had to maintain strict vigilance and be ready to “clean” at any time.

But the Fifth Hospital seemed much calmer. In the small park below, there were lush trees, and hospitalized patients were chatting and walking. The overall atmosphere was peaceful and healing.

“According to the introduction, this is more of a therapeutic hospital,” Zhuang Qingyan said.

Tongwan Hospital had many branches, and perhaps different hospitals had different roles. Song Ke found this calm atmosphere quite pleasant. She lay on the railing in the middle of the atrium, enjoying the breeze, her gaze casually scanning the surroundings.

—Then, she spotted an extremely familiar figure.

The person was wearing black sunglasses, a high-end gray overcoat, and her long wavy hair was not tied up this time but fell smoothly on her shoulders, snugly pressed down by a woolen hat.

The woman moved gracefully, her expression cheerful, and after getting off a private steamship, she walked slowly towards the entrance of the Fifth Hospital.

The tall man silently following her must have received instructions. He nodded and took a detour to the hospital’s self-service supermarket.

Lin. You. You!

In her heart, Song Ke gritted her teeth as she pronounced the name. She recognized that figure even when it turned into ashes!

She paid no heed to the railing and was about to jump over it to confront Lin Youyou.

“Wait!” Zhuang Qingyan grabbed her coat and prevented Song Ke from getting her way. Her legs were caught on the railing, and she almost ended up falling headfirst.

She pouted and looked at the person stopping her, accusingly saying, “She, she cheated me out of crystal!”

Zhuang Qingyan was both annoyed and amused. He lowered his voice and said, “I didn’t say you couldn’t go confront her, but if you go down there so openly, what if she calls for reinforcements, and Su Cha comes back? By then, if you two have a brawl, and there’s a crowd watching, won’t that attract the Tongwan security team? We’ve finally obtained the admission permit; don’t mess it up.”

“But... But...” Song Ke felt so wronged, but she couldn’t swallow this anger!

Zhuang Qingyan stopped teasing her and quickly came up with an idea. “Don’t worry; I have a way to catch her. I guarantee it will help you vent your frustration.”

Emei Thorn –

Chapter 49.2 – Tongwan Hospital (3)

We Kidnapped a Big Star!

Humming a tune, Lin Youyou entered the Fifth Hospital with a graceful stride. She passed through the spacious lobby, navigated through the crowded people, and arrived at the exclusive elevator for VIP wards, pressing the button to go up.

The elevator doors opened, and she found herself alone inside. She stood confidently, pressed the floor button.

The metallic double doors slowly closed, and while waiting, Lin Youyou adjusted her hair in front of the one-way mirror. As she moved, her fingertips suddenly stopped, and through the gap in her sunglasses, a sparkling snowflake slowly landed on her nose.

At this time of the year, in such a sealed space, where could snowflakes come from?

Lin Youyou realized something was wrong!

She desperately pressed all the floor buttons, but it was too late. The running elevator froze suddenly, coming to a slow stop, stuck halfway between floors. The space inside her car was encased in a layer of thick frost.

Ka-chunk!

The metal sliding doors were forcibly pried open. Outside was pitch black, and in some mezzanine of an unknown floor, Song Ke, with her bare hands, forced open the elevator door. She squatted on the ground and gave Lin Youyou a sinister smile.

Lin Youyou quickly took off her sunglasses, her eyes wide with shock, and her red lips were about to speak.

Song Ke didn't give her a chance to speak. She delivered a swift knife-hand strike to the back of Lin Youyou's neck.

Although this celebrity was an awakener, she was a pure support type and had almost zero close combat experience. Struck by Song Ke like this, her body went limp, and she fainted on the spot. Song Ke extended her arm, grabbed her by the waist, and pulled her out of the elevator.

Then, she shouted up through the elevator shaft to Xu Xing above, "Xiaoxing, it's a success!"

Xu Xing's furry little head appeared on the top floor. This time, his ability had turned into ice blades. He knocked on the frozen elevator and peeled away the layers of ice and snow. In no time, the elevator returned to normal operation as if nothing had happened.

Song Ke carried Lin Youyou like a sack and met up with her two "accomplices" in the corridor.

“We, we kidnapped a big, big star!” She exclaimed in disbelief in a hushed voice.

“We kidnapped a big star!” Xu Xing repeated like a tape recorder.

The two of them jumped up and twirled around in joy.

“Don’t celebrate too soon,” Zhuang Qingyan poured cold water on their excitement. “We still need to find a place to hide her. Otherwise, with Rainforest’s tracking methods, it won’t take more than ten minutes for Su Cha to locate her.”

“Whe-where should we hide, hide her?” Song Ke asked nervously.

Zhuang Qingyan brushed non-existent dust off the blanket and smiled, “I have a place in mind. It should be just right.”

...

When Lin Youyou woke up, she found herself in a spacious hospital room, her hands and feet tightly bound.

There was a dull pain in the back of her neck, and her head throbbed with dizziness. Her vision started as a blurry white expanse but gradually became clear, revealing two familiar figures. She lifted her head abruptly, only to see a teenage girl and a child sitting back-to-back on a chair, both glaring at her fiercely.

“...Song Ke? Xu Xing?” she said in surprise.

“Hmph,” the two of them responded in unison, clearly not pleased.

“Why have you kidnapped me? Release me immediately!” Lin Youyou demanded angrily.

“We won’t release you, won’t release you. I’ll piss you off to death!” Xu Xing cheerfully gloated.

“Not releasing you,” Song Ke also followed, adding fire.

“Su Cha? Su Cha!”

Lin Youyou couldn’t be bothered to argue with the two of them and called out for Su Cha using her psychic power. However, there seemed to be an invisible barrier around her, trapping her psychic power within the room, preventing it from escaping.

Observing her puzzled expression, Song Ke coldly huffed and said, “It’s useless.”

“What do you mean?” Lin Youyou asked.

“Even if you scream your throat hoarse, no one will come to rescue you!” Xu Xing helped her understand.

“Yeah!” Song Ke nodded vigorously.

“Woof!” From the corner came a barking sound, as if echoing the conversation between the two.

Lin Youyou raised an eyebrow in confusion. What kind of kidnappers were these?

However, Song Ke had intentionally chosen this room. It was a highly confidential double-ward VIP room. To obtain this, she not only voluntarily covered Tao Tao’s medical expenses but also spent a lot of contingency funds, buying a bunch of high-end dog snacks. Only then did she capture Tao Tao’s heart and ask it to help release a little bit of its domain.

After handing her child over to the hospital, Tao Tao’s mother didn’t have much to do at home and was getting bored staying indoors for a few days. Just then, Song Ke took the initiative to offer help and promised to take care of Tao Tao today. So she happily made plans for afternoon tea with her

girlfriends. Now, this ward has become a natural prison, with Tao Tao's domain covering it. Even if Su Cha tries, he won't be able to find it.

Lin Youyou's heart was pounding fast. The two humans and one dog were making a ruckus, and it was really getting on her nerves. However, she guessed that something must have been done to the room, as her psychic powers were cut off, and it was pointless to continue trying.

Lin Youyou refused to communicate with these strange beings and turned to the only normal person in the room.

"What exactly do you want from me?" Lin Youyou asked.

"I don't want to do anything, I just want to have a good chat with Miss Lin." Zhuang Qingyan leaned against the window, his smile as cool as the cold wind, devoid of any warmth.

Lin Youyou fell silent for a moment, carefully considering the situation, then turned to Song Ke with a serious expression. "Regarding Mirror Lake, Song Ke, I apologize to you. I'm sorry. If you want that crystal, I can return it to you.

"What compensation do you want? Within my capabilities, I'll do my best."

"Miss Lin, not all mistakes can be made right afterward," Zhuang Qingyan interrupted her. "Even if wounds can be healed, the scars left behind are difficult to erase."

Song Ke nodded, though she wanted to argue that the scars on her body could disappear, but now was not the time to correct Zhuang Qingyan.

So, she endured.

"You're right, I feel sorry for what I've done... but I don't regret it."

"If I had to do it again, I would."

Lin Youyou's gaze was resolute. "Because I have a reason I can't afford to lose."

"Song Ke, you won't trust me again, will you?"

Lin Youyou sighed, a hint of bitterness in her mouth. "My initial intention in proposing cooperation was not to deceive you. If that wasn't the last crystal, we should be able to sit together and celebrate victory."

Song Ke remained silent.

There were no "ifs" anymore; Lin Youyou had betrayed her trust, and she couldn't get over that.

"Betrayal is never worth forgiving," Zhuang Qingyan calmly commented.

"If Miss Lin feels truly guilty, she should take some practical actions."

"What do you want? Money? How much money?" Lin Youyou asked.

Zhuang Qingyan shook his head slowly. "What kind of people do you take us for? Extortionists and thugs?"

Lin Youyou replied, "From your actions, is there really a difference?"

Still being defiant, Zhuang Qingyan wheeled his wheelchair across the floor and approached the famous star.

"Lin Youyou, you left Ferrara and came to Tongwan, specifically to the Fifth Hospital, which is mainly responsible for recuperation? Why? Do you have someone here who means a lot to you? Family or friends? Is the other person hopeful to wake up, or have they already turned into zombies?"

“I guess it should be the former, but the situation isn’t great, which is why you’re willing to do whatever it takes to snatch the crystal, right?”

Lin Youyou narrowed her eyes suddenly.

“Since we were able to capture you, it wouldn’t be difficult to find out who your family and friends are and what their names are,” Zhuang Qingyan replied.

“Unfortunately, I’ve been working in the archives for the past few days, responsible for compiling all the patient data admitted after the apocalypse, and there aren’t many people from Ferrara...”

“That’s enough,” Lin Youyou said expressionlessly. “...I admit it, let’s negotiate the terms.”

Zhuang Qingyan gestured for Song Ke to come over and whispered to her, “How do you want to get back at her?”

Song Ke asked curiously, “Do you really know the names of her family and friends?”

“I was bluffing,” Zhuang Qingyan winked at her, “There’s too much patient data for me to go through.”

In a hidden spot where others couldn’t see, Song Ke secretly gave a thumbs-up, impressed by Zhuang Qingyan’s cunning.

“How about we make her do ten commissions for us?” Zhuang Qingyan suggested. “Free labor, why waste it?”

Song Ke’s eyes lit up. Zhuang Qingyan was still wicked... no, Zhuang Qingyan had a lot of good ideas!

The two returned to Lin Youyou, and Zhuang Qingyan added a precaution, “Miss Lin, this time, you won’t suddenly change your mind again, will you?”

Lin Youyou winced as his words cut deep, mentally and physically drained, she said, "I'll do as I say. If you don't trust me, you can report to my fans that I participated in the Throne Race, and ruin my reputation. Will that be enough?"

The importance of the Throne Race to Lin Youyou was self-evident. She dared to make this promise, so it seemed she was genuinely willing to cooperate.

"Remove the barrier. If Su Cha can't find me, he will tear down the entire hospital."

Song Ke and Xu Xing tried to coax Tao Tao again, with Song Ke performing a sort of acrobatic act with her emei thorns, and Xu Xing barking "woof, woof", trying to find the right frequency to communicate with the dog.

Finally, Tao Tao couldn't stand it anymore and hid in the doghouse, with its round buttocks facing the two people, ignoring them completely.

Lin Youyou felt like facepalming: 'How did I end up being kidnapped by these people?'

But when she glanced at Zhuang Qingyan, who remained unfazed while watching this absurd scene, she thought that when it came to cunning, this man was the most terrifying.

After coaxing Tao Tao for a long time, Tao Tao finally decided to forgive these two indecisive humans and withdrew her domain ability.

Song Ke prepared herself for what was to come.

In less than five minutes, a snake-like figure burst into the room, heading straight for the group of people.

Song Ke raised her emei thorns to block, and a dark green dagger flew out, embedding itself in the ground and instantly corroding a large area.

Tao Tao's tail wagged frantically as it barked alertly, "Woof, woof!"

"Su Cha, stop," Lin Youyou stopped him with a tired voice.

Su Cha slowly moved forward, exuding an aura of danger in the midst of the turmoil. He walked silently in his short boots, bringing with him the damp and oppressive feeling of the rainforest. He seemed like a weapon ready to be unsheathed, his muscles taut, ready to strike at any moment.

If Tao Tao was a cute puppy, then Su Cha was like an enraged watchdog, desperate to bite down on any threats, especially those who threatened his owner.

Everyone in the room kept a close eye on him because when a powerful psychic lost control, the destruction they could cause was astonishing.

Fortunately, Su Cha had not completely lost his sanity. He coldly glanced at the people in the room, then came to Lin Youyou's side and knelt down to untie the tightly bound ropes.

Lin Youyou flexed her wrists, which had turned red from the tight bindings. "So, what do you need me to do?"

Song Ke put forward the request for 10 commissions. Lin Youyou furrowed her brows, taking a moment before nodding. "Alright, but make sure it's done before the next match. I won't stay in Tongwan for long."

"Considering it's a temporary employment, sharing your information publicly should be a basic requirement, right?" Zhuang Qingyan spoke with a chilly tone.

Lin Youyou silently nodded and compromised.

"Lin Youyou, A-class support type, psychic ability: Illusory Singing. Depending on the lyrics I sing, I can apply curses or blessings."

“He’s Su Cha, A-class offensive type, psychic ability: Venomous Corrosion. However, he excels at assassination, and in one-on-one combat, before meeting Song Ke, no one was his match.”

Zhuang Qingyan’s speculations were indeed correct; these two had sound and venomous abilities.

A double A-class combination.

With these two free laborers, Song Ke’s excitement surged. They could take on more challenging requests and make a lot of money!

Chapter 50.1 – Tongwan Hospital (4)

Coolies, come quickly

Tongwan, in a specialized drug transport route.

The towering figure of nearly 1.9 meters moved through it, clad in a plain black vest, camouflage pants, and combat boots. Occasionally, he would bend down to clear the road debris, and when a zombie jumped out, he would ruthlessly take them down without expression.

The task he was undertaking was one of the most tedious within the C-level — checking the conditions of the lifeline checkpoints, clearing blocked roads. After clearing each segment, he had to pass through the outposts for confirmation to ensure unobstructed drug transport into Tongwan.

Though it was a C-level mission with a good reward, few people took it due to its dirty and tiring nature, consuming a lot of time.

V587 had come, not only that but completed it quite comfortably—after all, they even got two free coolies!

Song Ke and Xu Xing were acting like old bosses. Despite the cold weather, they had set up a pergola and were squatting side by side on the curb, sipping juice, and supervising Su Cha’s work.

They would occasionally provide some feedback.

As Su Cha kicked a zombie away, the two clapped in unison.

Su Cha's muscles bulged as he threw a steel bar to the side, and the two compared their wrists, regretfully realizing they both had thin arms.

Their appearances seemed lacking no matter how one looked at them.

Amidst the sounds of "clap," "wow," and "ah", Lin Youyou gradually lost herself.

Once again, she asked that classic question: Why was I kidnapped by people like this?

Su Cha, covered in sweat, stopped in front of her.

The former big star now had a bare face due to helping clear the roadblocks, with dust on her face and body.

"Don't do this," Su Cha took the gravel from her hand and gestured for her to rest.

"I'm willing to admit defeat." Lin Youyou gritted her teeth.

"Not following the rules is fine," Su Cha's gaze turned cold. "I'll go kill them."

Lin Youyou quickly stopped him, afraid he would actually do it. "You don't have to. It's my debt to them in the first place.

"Zhuang Qingyan was right, betrayal isn't worth forgiving."

Su Cha looked at Lin Youyou. Her long lashes drooped, and when she said these words, her expression was both lost and resigned.

Su Cha remained silent for a long time, and in the end, he only said two words, "Soft-hearted."

How could Lin Youyou not be soft-hearted? After all, she did deceive Song Ke, but she never thought of actively harming her. In the environment of Mirror Lake, survival for oneself was paramount, and she willingly accepted punishment for a mistake.

"Move your bricks. Why do you talk so much?" Lin Youyou scolded.

Su Cha snorted lightly, using one hand to pull off his vest and continued to work shirtless. The black snake tattoo on the back of his neck appeared more menacing in the sunlight, and the scars on his exposed back were numerous and horrifying, all old scars from years past.

...

The two people under the pergola were also talking.

"Sister, are you coming this afternoon?" Xu Xing asked Song Ke with a pained expression. He couldn't take it anymore, his stomach was bloated. He had drunk three bottles of juice in the morning, and he didn't expect supervising would be this tough.

Song Ke bit the straw and shook her head, "Not coming, got some-something to do."

She had an appointment with Lu Ning in the afternoon to visit the 119 Hospital.

It wasn't safe for Xu Xing to stare at these two alone. Anyway, their dose of happiness for the day had already exceeded the limit, so Song Ke had given their two coolies a break.

...

At the 119 Hospital, Song Ke went around to the back window of the archives room and knocked on the wall.

After a while, a slender finger opened a gap, revealing half of Zhuang Qingyan's handsome profile in gray uniform.

She didn't know why he was so dedicated to the archivist's job, leaving early and returning late for several days, spending all his time here looking up information.

Song Ke had her hands behind her back, "Yesterday, it was agreed."

Zhuang Qingyan sighed, "I've also said that an ordinary doctor can't cure my leg."

Song Ke persisted, "The, the doctors in Tongwan are very ca-capable."

Zhuang Qingyan locked eyes with her persistent gaze for a long time and finally compromised, "Okay, I'll listen to you."

Song Ke pushed him to the 13th floor and found Lu Ning's office, knocking on the door in a proper manner.

"Come in," a cold voice came from inside.

During this period, whenever she had free time, she would come to work as a zombie cleaner, and Lu Ning felt that it wasn't easy for her to support her family at such a young age. He would often take special care of her. Over time, they grew closer.

After learning that she had a companion with a leg injury who could only move in a wheelchair, Lu Ning suggested that Song Ke bring him over for an examination whenever she had the time.

After Zhuang Qingyan's blanket was pulled back, Lu Ning was momentarily stunned.

This leg was not simply “injured”; from the appearance... it was grotesquely twisted, resembling being crushed by a truck. Song Ke usually had to take care of her disabled brother, and from what she said, it seemed there was also a younger brother at home. The little girl had it really tough.

Lu Ning’s misplaced affection for Song Ke deepened.

“I’ve scheduled a holographic scan for you. Take your brother to get the imaging done first,” Lu Ning said.

Song Ke had a slight objection to the term “brother”: “Not brother!”

Not a brother? She thought only family would be so devoted and loyal.

Lu Ning’s gaze shifted back and forth between the two, and suddenly she seemed to have a realization, thinking she had figured it all out. “I’m sorry, you seem quite... devoted. So, take your... friend to get the imaging done.”

Song Ke was puzzled, feeling that there was some hidden meaning in Lu Ning’s omission.

Once they left the room, Song Ke asked Zhuang Qingyan, “What, what do you think Dr Lu is thinking?”

Zhuang Qingyan smiled faintly. “You’ve touched her heart, I suppose.”

Song Ke said, “Huh?”

After completing the holographic scan, the two returned to the office, and Lu Ning carefully examined the report. “Your leg has been broken for a long time, and the wound has been repaired twice before. This has led to significant internal bone displacement. With the current level of technology, if I perform the surgery, I won’t be able to achieve the restoration you’re asking for.”

Song Ke’s shoulders slumped in disappointment.

Lu Ning put down the report and contemplated for a moment. "I'll check with some of my colleagues to see if they have any better solutions."

She swiftly made inquiries among Tongwan's elite orthopedic surgeons while Zhuang Qingyan took back those few documents and flipped through them with a cold expression.

After ending the voice calls, Lu Ning paused, then hesitantly spoke, "Ideally, we would insert a rhenium steel plate to externally fix the injured leg. However, reshaping the leg later is difficult. Even if you don't use a wheelchair, you may still need crutches in the future."

"Or, have you considered the option of a mechanical prosthetic leg?"

"No, we haven't." Zhuang Qingyan coldly rejected the idea.

The more Song Ke heard, the more disheartened she became. Even Lu Ning couldn't do anything?

"If Senior Fang were here..."

In the heavy silence, Lu Ning sighed.

This was the second time Song Ke had heard her mention "Senior Fang." Who exactly was this person? Every time Lu Ning felt helpless, she would bring him up, as if having this person around could solve everything.

Song Ke finally voiced her curiosity.

Lu Ning sighed again. "Senior Fang, his name is Fang Zhixu, the former genius surgeon of Tongwan. He was a legend in the medical field.

"Senior Fang liked to take on challenging surgeries. He wouldn't take on anything unless it was difficult and critical. I know many people criticized him for being arrogant behind his back, but so what? No one doesn't admire his remarkable skills. For every surgery Senior Fang undertook, the failure rate was zero.

“A doctor who has never failed a high-difficulty surgery, isn’t that already a legend?”

“What about, about him?” Song Ke inquired. With such an amazing doctor, if they could find him, was there hope for Zhuang Qingyan’s leg?

Lu Ning’s gaze darkened. “He disappeared.”

“The last time I saw Senior Fang, he was not in a good state. When the apocalypse arrived, I heard he refused to perform a crucial surgery, then disappeared from the hospital. People spread rumors that he was a deserter, refusing to save lives, devoid of a doctor’s moral line. But I don’t believe it. Senior Fang isn’t that kind of person. He must have his reasons.”

...

After coming out of Lu Ning’s office, Song Ke lowered her head, feeling down.

Zhuang Qingyan turned to comfort her, “It’s alright, the result was within expectations. At least Dr. Lu seems reliable, she didn’t push the bionic material, did she?”

Song Ke didn’t smile. She stared into Zhuang Qingyan’s eyes. “You mentioned that healing-type awakeners can cure, right?”

Zhuang Qingyan fell silent for a moment. “Perhaps.”

To restore his leg, this healing-type awakener not only needed to be at least A-level but also required a solid medical foundation, familiarity with the human skeletal structure. Such a person, even if they truly existed, would undoubtedly be highly regarded by major regions, and it was unlikely they would get to know them.

Song Ke leaned her head against the back of her chair again, thinking despondently.

Where could she find a healing-type awakener?

She looked down, and outside the hospital, there were many people wearing security guard uniforms, chasing away suspicious refugees. Under the bridge, in the park, a large number of homeless people were being driven away from their original spots, leaving in confusion.

“What are they doing?”

Zhuang Qingyan glanced down and quickly recalled recent news in his mind. “The current flow of people in Tongwan is too high. The city hall is strictly checking people coming in and out. Those without permits will be driven to nearby shelters.”

Song Ke stretched her neck. The disheveled homeless people couldn't be seen clearly. They huddled, shoulders slouched, leaving with unsteady steps.

Chapter 50.2 – Tongwan Hospital (4)

Coolies, come quickly

On this night, when the night was deep and quiet, Song Ke's terminal suddenly rang. The glaring red light illuminated the entire room, and she sat up, the sleepiness completely gone.

On the terminal appeared an A-level urgent commission: “Hello, awakener. The following information is from the Tongwan City Hall. There's a large-scale zombie tide near the LuoJia Shelter. The crisis is urgent. Please assist with all your might in defending Tongwan.”

LuoJia was the nearest shelter to Tongwan. If it was engulfed by the zombie tide, Tongwan would be wide open to danger, and its downfall was just a matter of time.

Song Ke grabbed her coat and rushed to the door.

“Bang, bang, bang!” She forcefully knocked on Zhuang Qingyan's door. There was a slight movement inside. Song Ke couldn't wait and barged in directly.

“Zhuang Qing—”

Before she could finish saying “there’s an urgent commission,” her eyes widened.

Zhuang Qingyan was leaning against the writing desk with his clothes disheveled. The silk pajamas were carelessly buttoned with two buttons, revealing clear clavicles and faint abdominal muscles. In the rush, he managed to put on some pants, but his hand was still on the belt, supporting himself against the table to maintain balance.

Song Ke’s mouth dropped open.

Zhuang Qingyan’s bangs were scattered on his forehead, and he sounded helpless, “You... just barged in like this?”

Huh? Song Ke was stunned and glanced at him again. She was in a hurry, and who knew he wouldn’t properly dress while sleeping?

No, he wasn’t wearing anything at all!

Not only did she barge in without any embarrassment, she stared at him unabashedly.

Zhuang Qingyan raised an eyebrow involuntarily. They used to share a room, and he could overlook it when she slept without covering, but now they had separate rooms, and she still came and stared like this. Did this young girl not see him as a man at all?

“You want to watch me change clothes?”

“No, I don’t.”

Song Ke looked disgusted, turned around, and stepped back.

“Close the door,” Zhuang Qingyan’s indifferent voice came from behind.

Song Ke hesitated and closed the door.

Five minutes later, the still sleepy Xu Xing was also awakened and brought into the impromptu meeting. V587 was dressed neatly, and they sat together.

“I want to go to Luoja,” Song Ke stated her thoughts.

This time, it wasn’t for money and points but for Tongwan.

If Tongwan fell, the medical resources here would be lost in an instant. Not to mention, Song Ke and their temporary shelter would be lost. For the entire Alliance, it would be a massive disaster, essentially extinguishing the faint hope of life.

Zhuang Qingyan also realized the severity of the situation and nodded in agreement, saying, “Alright, let’s go together, but we need to be careful. Zombie tides are not easy to deal with.”

The three quickly packed up and were getting ready to leave.

“Wait,” Song Ke suddenly stopped in her tracks, “I forgot, there are two more.”

Lin Youyou was abruptly awakened from her sleep by a series of urgent calls.

“Who is it?” Irritated, she ruffled her hair and answered with her eyes closed, “Who’s disturbing me in the middle of the damn night...”

“Come quickly, a commission, sending you the location.”

The person on the other side hung up after saying this, not giving her a chance to refuse.

“Seriously, who gives a commission in the middle of the night?” Lin Youyou grumbled and casually threw the terminal, attempting to go back to sleep.

However, soon, the constant beeping of notifications became unbearable for Lin Youyou. She picked up the terminal, squinting to adapt to the bright light, and identified the information on the screen. As if afraid she would fall asleep, the other side sent the location every few seconds, urging her.

“Come quickly, or I’ll report you.”

“Are you coming?”

“Hurry, seven commissions left.”

Lin Youyou: “Song Ke...”

These brats, I really owe them!

...

Luojia Shelter.

A circular iron wall tens of meters high separated the safe zone from the zombie tide. Inside the high wall, a solemn and killing atmosphere lingered, while outside the wall on the wasteland, an endless horde of zombies was converging towards this place.

As Song Ke hurried along, she tirelessly sent messages to her coolies: “Location, come quickly.”

A few minutes later, Lin Youyou, wearing a mask and sporting dark circles under her eyes, appeared with an unpleasant expression. Following her was a plain-clothed Su Cha, showing no expression as expected.

“...You better have a good reason.” Lin Youyou gritted her teeth with a bare face. Song Ke rushed her so much she didn’t even have time to wash her face.

“Of, of course, I do,” Song Ke gestured for both of them to look at the base of the wall. The horrifying zombies had already gathered by the wall, climbing and reaching the middle position. It was time to act quickly.

After observing the situation, Lin Youyou was first surprised, then felt a tightness in her heart. Did Song Ke really not regard her as an outsider? Every time there was dirty and tiring work, she never forgot them. Could they endure suffering for themselves?

Song Ke showed her awakener ID at the outer perimeter, and the group smoothly entered the security line.

At this point in time, there were very few external awakeners arriving for support; most of the people on the scene were members of the security team.

“Why did the zombie tide suddenly break out?” asked an external awakener.

“It’s not sudden,” sighed the uniformed security team captain. “The surrounding D-grade cities have been falling, and the number of zombies is increasing. They are gradually gathering here, and an outbreak is just a matter of time.”

“What do we do now? You’re not going to send us to our deaths, right?”

“No need to trouble you,” the security team captain’s expression was sorrowful and resolute. “The security team has a total of 230 awakeners, and we swear to fight to the end!”

The security team was composed of official awakeners from Tongwan, mostly local residents. After awakening, they registered locally, underwent verification, and joined the security team, enjoying the status granted by the Tongwan City Hall. Their families were here, and they had a strong sense of honor and belief compared to external awakeners.

In the short time Zhuang Qingyan spent in the archives, leaving aside other matters, he had a clear understanding of the personnel information for the entire Tongwan. He had a good grasp of the structure and situation of awakeners. He glanced around and, amidst the determined gazes of the security team members, he took the initiative to speak.

“Captain Zhao, the situation isn’t as dire as you think.”

“You are...” Security team captain Zhao Liqiang turned at the voice.

“Me? I’m just an ordinary citizen, working in the archives of the 119th Hospital.”

Here we go again, this familiar fabricating of identities. Song Ke shook her head in exasperation.

Zhuang Qingyan calmly introduced, “This is our captain, Song Ke, an A-level awakener and also an outstanding medical volunteer in Tongwan.”

Oh, how come her part is involved this time too? Song Ke was stunned, but after being called, she couldn’t help but stand up straight.

As for being an outstanding volunteer, it should be a compliment for her good work as a zombie cleaner, right?

Zhao Liqiang was not in the mood to verify Song Ke’s “outstanding” identity at the moment. He was more struck by her A-level status and looked at her for a moment longer.

“What do you mean by the situation not being so bad?” he asked.

“As long as we utilize the terrain and the awakeners cooperate properly, clearing these zombies won’t be a problem,” Zhuang Qingyan stated directly without further ado.

Zhao Liqiang’s face showed surprise. “Are you confident? You can’t joke about something like this.”

Zhuang Qingyan nodded calmly. "Yes, but the condition is that I take command."

Zhao Liqiang fell into contemplation. He didn't have a better plan, so he was willing to give this person's words a try. But he stood up on his own initiative, and he didn't know what his purpose was...

Zhuang Qingyan assessed his expression and added, "Of course, if we succeed, as for the commission rewards..."

Zhao Liqiang immediately felt relieved. He had overthought it. They, the external awakeners, were undoubtedly here for points. "No problem, I will report it truthfully to the magistrate."

...

The battle horn sounded.

Zhuang Qingyan organized the awakeners on the scene into different groups: fire and wind, thunder and water, earth and rock types... then placed them in various positions. Everyone had their roles, and they strictly followed the order to use their abilities.

Bright fireworks rose into the air, spreading rapidly with the help of the strong winds, swallowing the ferocious roaring zombies in a raging blaze.

On the other side, a fierce storm raged, with thunder and lightning, and raindrops, a mix of both abilities, fell incessantly, causing the zombies to tremble from the electric shocks.

Other combat-oriented awakeners charged out from behind the high wall, fearlessly confronting the zombies.

At this moment, they were not just security team members or awakeners; they were not motivated by fame or gain. They had grown up enjoying the shelter of Tongwan, and now it was time for them to stand up, becoming the strongest shield to defend their homeland.

While individual awakeners had limited power, when they came together, their combined force was earth-shattering.

Zhao Liqiang watched the awe-inspiring scene before him, his eyes moist. Tongwan wouldn't fall, and they still had hope!

Amidst the intermittent bursts of light coming from awakeners' abilities, one scene stood out from the rest.

Xu Xing was like a human refrigeration unit. From his small body, a fierce snowstorm raged down, and countless ice crystals enveloped the zombies, freezing them into sculptures.

"Your indifference hurts the most~ like December's snowstorm~ my heart has already broken into two pieces~"

Accompanied by a melodious and haunting song, the frozen, slow-moving zombies were instantly cursed, splitting into two pieces just as Lin Youyou had sung about!

However, the eerie singing did not stop. The melody changed, transitioning into another song.

"I want to borrow from you~ borrow from you, borrow a pair of invisible wings~ to take you flying, flying towards the brightest light in the world~"

Two assassin-like figures leaped down from the wall. Crack! As they landed, the ice-sculpted zombie wall split in half, and the shattered debris filled the air.

Like shooting stars, the two black dots charged into the densely packed sea of corpses. Soon after, waves splashed, and ripples appeared on the calm surface, disrupted by the intrusion.

Lin Youyou cast a speed buff on them. Song Ke and Su Cha went on a killing spree.

Su Cha was surrounded by a toxic mist. Even though the zombies couldn't feel pain, their bodies rapidly disintegrated, turning into a pile of white bones. The former insect tide would probably be terrified encountering this kind of biochemical attack.

Song Ke, wielded a massive jagged blade longer than her own body, swinging it wildly. With each strike, it was as if a gust of wind swept fallen leaves. She mowed down the zombies in groups, and countless heads flew aimlessly.

The four worked seamlessly together. Whether in ranged or melee combat, each of them was at a monstrous level. When combined, they were catastrophic!

The awakeners atop the high wall were dumbfounded. What kind of monsters were these people?

“Don't zone out. Speed up in the southeast; continue setting traps in the west.”

Oh, there's one more here. He gave clear and orderly commands, overseeing the situation.

V587.

Everyone present silently remembered the name of this team.

...

Cleaning up the zombie tide took a little over an hour. In the end, the scattered zombies fled in all directions, and Zhuang Qingyan ordered the awakeners to stop.

A security team member responsible for guarding the shelter hurriedly came to report. During the recent skirmish, a section of the wall was broken through, and quite a few zombies rushed in. Although they were promptly eradicated, it still resulted in casualties. Many of the refugees in that area were bitten.

“Captain, how should we deal with these people?”

Zhao Liqiang sighed helplessly. "Check them one by one. If it's a mild case, send them to Tongwan. If it's above stage two mutation, handle them on the spot."

The degree of mutation was based on the tiered system introduced by Tongwan. Level one was a mild mutation, also known as "pre-spread mutation." As long as it's detected early, the spread of zombification could be effectively halted through medical procedures by amputating the affected area.

For level two mutations, wounds festered and turned black. Excessive radiation entered the body, causing symptoms like grayish eyeballs and confusion. Even with treatment, patients couldn't be saved; the best that could be done was to slow down the zombification until they eventually succumbed.

When Song Ke returned from outside the wall, she happened to witness the security team inspecting and cleaning up the scene.

A middle-aged man, his eyeballs cloudy and his fingers transformed into claws, was subdued on the ground, struggling desperately.

"Let go, I need to go to the hospital. I can still be saved!"

"No chance. You're at stage three mutation."

"Impossible!" The middle-aged man convulsed nervously, saliva flowing from his mouth, the sound of his throat raspy.

"Confirmed stage three, nearing complete zombification."

A security team member drew out a particle gun, "Bang," ending his life.

Sobs broke out, and the others who had been attacked by the zombies huddled together, their hearts in turmoil.

These were all vagrants who had just been driven away from Tongwan that afternoon. They thought LuoJia was a safe haven, but little did they know they'd encounter a zombie tide at night. If they had just died outright, it would have been fine, but they were unlucky to be bitten by zombies, left to wait in a half-dead state for an inevitable fate.

Song Ke looked around and unexpectedly found a person still lying by the door.

As the middle-aged man's body was being dragged away, the person seemed to sense something. Slowly, they turned over and faced upwards.

Song Ke caught a glimpse of a familiar logo in his pocket and took a step forward.

"Don't go near," Lin Youyou held her back, her expression serious.

"This person has been bitten."

The scruffy-bearded vagrant stared blankly at the ceiling, the open collar revealing several black bite marks.