

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 8: F177 District (8)

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©Goodbye my home. (Novice Village Completed)©

Song Ke stood in front of a folding table, exchanging glances with the tall figure in military attire. On the table sat that burnt and short-circuited black box. She subtly pushed it forward to convey her innocence.

The tall figure glanced at the charred mess of wires and circuits, then back at her. Suddenly, he exclaimed, “Oh, wow.”

Song Ke’s nerves were on edge. She quickly waved her hands and shook her head, saying, “N-No, it’s not me!”

“Yeah yeah, not you,” the tall figure beamed at her with a brilliant smile, then turned to report, “Captain! The detector’s busted!”

The stern captain approached, bending down to inspect. The ventilation panel of the black box was still emitting smoke. He pressed a button, the indicator light blinked twice, and then went out. He looked hopelessly at it, and then raised his gaze to Song Ke, narrowing his eyes as he noticed her hands.

“It really wasn’t me, it malfunctioned all on its own!” Song Ke continued to explain. She hadn’t done anything, and if these two asked her for money, what would she do?

“Show me your hand,” the captain’s voice was cold.

Song Ke obediently extended her open palm. Her hands were wrapped in white bandages, starting from her knuckles, winding around her wrists, forearms, and elbows, disappearing under her T-shirt sleeves. Except for her fingers, no skin was visible.

“Unwrap the bandages,” the man ordered, each word pronounced deliberately.

Song Ke hesitated for a moment, then slowly unwound the layers of bandages. The delicate palm of her hand had a few deflated blisters, and there were a few shallow scrapes on her arm. They looked somewhat long but not very deep, and they had already scabbed over.

“Accidental scratches,” she explained.

The man didn’t respond immediately. He just looked at Song Ke with a stern expression, his gaze fixated on her hand. The young girl before him had bright eyes and moist pupils, occasionally darting towards the black box, appearing worried about having to pay money.

Though they were just ordinary scrapes that seemed perfectly normal and lacked any signs of mutation, the captain seemed lost in thought, remaining silent, his gaze seemingly trying to burn a hole through Song Ke.

The tall figure beside them couldn’t stand it any longer, “Come on, Captain, don’t scare the girl. Look at her, she’s so nervous that she’s stuttering. Hahaha!”

Song Ke thought to herself, no need to worry, she was a stutterer to begin with.

“Have you awakened your ability?” the man suddenly asked, catching her off guard. His voice was cold and rigid, as if it had been honed by grinding against stones for a long time.

Song Ke didn’t reply, her face displaying just the right amount of confusion.

She didn’t want to expose the secret of her ability, at least not right now. After what happened with Old Cheng, her guard had become even heavier. These people were not only strangers, but they were also fellow ability users like her. She couldn’t trust them; if things turned violent, it could become troublesome.

The tall figure muttered, observing Song Ke from head to toe, “I don’t think so. Look at her delicate arms and legs. Doesn’t quite fit...”

A few burly men carrying the tightly wrapped Xu Xing passed by swiftly, boarding the luxury compartment of the starship. The tall figure’s voice grew fainter and he awkwardly touched his nose, clearly reminded of how badly they had been dealt with by Xu Xing, who had similarly “delicate arms and legs.”

The man paid no attention to the tall figure's muttering and pointed out directly, "You saved that mutant."

A shiver ran down Song Ke's spine. She quickly started thinking. Did he see it? How much did he see? Her action of turning the piece of wood into a shield had been discreet, and she had retracted it after blocking the ice shards. How did he manage to notice while he was still engaged in battle?

"Mutants all eventually turn into zombies, without exception. Saving them serves no purpose."

The man's cold attitude was like a needle, pricking Song Ke. Yet, she stubbornly explained, "They, they aren't zombies yet."

At least when she saved them, Aunt Qing and Xiao Bao hadn't turned into zombies yet. They shouldn't be treated like monsters.

The man remained non-committal, "It's just a matter of time."

Song Ke fell silent for a moment. She couldn't argue.

Uncertain why the captain was being particularly stern with the young girl, An Qiwen tried to diffuse the tension, "Miss, don't be so nervous. We mean no harm. We're from the Azure Phoenix Army, the 11th Battalion of the Azure Phoenix. I'm An Qiwen, and this is our captain, Wu Juemin."

He turned his right palm upward, and faint electric arcs coalesced into a ball in his hand, "If you have awakened an ability too, you can join us. See, the cabin in front is empty." He gestured towards the luxurious compartment of the starship.

Song Ke stared at the lightning ball in his palm, pursing her lips, "No, I... I don't have an ability."

"If not, then stay at the back," Wu Juemin withdrew his gaze and walked away briskly.

An Qiwen followed him and glanced back at Song Ke, who was about to enter the regular cabin.

"Captain, are you still suspicious of her having an ability? Isn't it unlikely? I've even mentioned the name of Azure Phoenix. If she really has an ability,

wouldn't it be safer for her to come with us? No need to hide anything. She's probably just an ordinary person."

Wu Juemin's tone was cold, "Just suspicious, better if she doesn't."

Wu Juemin had heightened senses, even more so after awakening his ability. During a recent teleportation, he had sensed a strange and intense energy fluctuation, fleeting though it was. At that moment, only Song Ke and two mutants were in that direction.

Although the detector was broken, he could have detained her until they found a place for testing. But their squad had an urgent mission; they couldn't afford to waste time here. She was just a suspected ability user and wouldn't cause much trouble. If she denied it, so be it.

Furthermore, someone who disregarded orders to save mutants was inherently at odds with the values of Azure Phoenix.

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In the regular cabin of the starship...

Passengers here were either numb or cautious. When Song Ke entered, she didn't draw much attention. Scanning the area, she noticed several rows of empty seats in the back. She lowered her head and took a seat in the corner.

Not long after, the engines started, the starship accelerated, and it set forth into the boundless night.

This was a low-orbit starship with openable windows. Passengers in the front seats had cracked their windows open, allowing the stifling late summer evening breeze to blow in, carrying a gloomy and humid atmosphere. An air of melancholy hung over every person inside the vehicle, and Song Ke heard a few low and hoarse sobbing sounds.

Everyone's hearts were enveloped in unspeakable shadows.

Far from their homeland, the future was uncertain. No one knew if they would survive or for how long.

Song Ke looked out of the window. The mist had receded, and there was no moon tonight. The sea was pitch black, and the faint lights of the isolated

islands gradually sank, melding into the darkness of the night. This also meant that District 177 was getting farther and farther away from her.

Goodbye, my home.

Song Ke bid her silent farewell in her heart.

About an hour after the starship had departed, Xu Weiguo seemed to have regained his spirit and came back to life.

He fumbled to stand up from his seat and skillfully made his way to the front where the active-duty soldiers were stationed. Apparently, he realized that his money manipulation ability was no longer effective. He took out a pack of premium cigarettes and approached one of the soldiers with a friendly tone:

“Hey, buddy, let me ask you something. Where’s this starship headed?”

The soldier accepted the cigarette, rubbed it a couple of times, sniffed it, and then pushed it back without lighting it, saying, “The nearby D-class city.”

Xu Weiguo’s hand holding the cigarette box trembled twice, and his voice dropped low, “D-class?! Why is it a D-class? Aren’t we going north... to the base??”

The soldier turned his head, gave Xu Weiguo a calculating look that was neither a smile nor a frown, and didn’t directly respond, “It’s just D-class. We’re relocating to a nearby D-class city for now. The next batch of rescue teams won’t arrive for another two days. After that, we’ll take you to the nearest emergency shelter.”

Xu Weiguo’s expression turned grim. He leaned in and seemed to say something to the soldier, his emotions appearing slightly agitated. However, the soldier’s attitude remained cold and unyielding. He shook his head at Xu Weiguo and repeated, “I don’t know. Follow the orders from above, stick to the protocol.”

Most of the people on the vehicle weren’t in the mood to sleep. As soon as Xu Weiguo returned to his seat with a dark expression, many surrounded him to inquire about the information.

“Mr. Xu, you’re resourceful. I’d like to ask, where are we headed?”

“Where else can we go? We’re just waiting to die somewhere else!”

“Weren’t the soldiers supposed to evacuate us? Take us to a safe place?”

“Do you actually believe that? Is a safe place that easy to find? For people like us, it’s all up to fate!”

Although he said “it’s all up to fate,” his expression was clenched and full of resentment and sarcasm.

“Mr. Xu, what do you mean by that? Do you have some insider information?” an anxious middle-aged man asked.

Xu Weiguo stared intently at the person who spoke, “Do you think the apocalypse just came out of nowhere?”

“Aren’t they saying it’s due to solar activity?”

“Nonsense!” Xu Weiguo’s voice trembled, and he sounded deeply resentful, “So many emergency shelters, so many ability users. Could it all have been arranged in just two or three days? Let me tell you all, they knew about this long ago! Those people knew long ago! And now, the apocalypse has finally arrived. The ability users have become superior beings, while we ordinary folks are just disposable lives, mere puppets for them. Eventually, we’ll all turn into zombies!”

Blue light flickered in Song Ke’s palm, a slender swallowtail dart dancing nimbly between her fingers. The sharp blade brushed against her delicate skin, yet it moved with a grace reminiscent of a child’s toy. Upon hearing Xu Weiguo’s words about “ability users being superior beings and ordinary people being disposable lives,” the swallowtail dart spun in a beautiful arc, radiating a chilling coldness.

The middle-aged man who was the first to speak was berated by him, and his face turned sour, “Mr. Xu, it’s true we’re just disposable lives. As long as we survive, it doesn’t matter where we go,” a trace of disdain appeared in his eyes, “but isn’t your son an ability user? Why don’t you have a way out?”

Xu Weiguo’s eyes lit up, as if he had grasped onto a lifeline. He couldn’t listen to anyone else’s words anymore, muttering to himself, “Right! I have a son, my son is an ability user!”

The atmosphere in the vehicle, once again, fell into a deep depression after Xu Weiguo's inquiries. Some stared at the partitioned luxury cabin in a daze, while others softly discussed how abilities came about and why they hadn't been so fortunate. Yet, nobody could find a reasonable explanation, nor the courage to question the armed soldiers at the front.

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Around four in the morning, the starship came to a silent stop.

At this moment, most of the passengers in the regular cabin were asleep. The few who remained were closing their eyes with evident exhaustion. The subtle mechanical sounds of movement were easily overlooked, but suddenly, Song Ke opened her eyes, rousing from a light doze.

She opened the window, stepped onto the window ledge, like a agile gecko, and clung to the window frame as she bent down and slipped out. In a few moves, she climbed onto the top of the starship. Through the dim morning light, she saw that the starship was actually separating automatically! The luxurious cabin housing the ability users reconfigured itself into a separate small aircraft in a matter of seconds. It then switched tracks and headed in a different direction, parting ways with them.

Song Ke wasn't foolish enough to shout and create a commotion. She stood on top of the starship, watching as the other aircraft vanished into the distance. She then observed her surroundings and was soon taken aback—right in the city center, a familiar landmark building caught her eye.

The nearby D-class city? It turned out to be here.

As dawn broke, a civilian starship silently entered a food factory warehouse on the outskirts of Hua City (D99 District), a suburban area.

This rectangular warehouse occupied an area of about 500 square meters and had been converted into a temporary shelter. Three sides of the walls were sealed, with only a single entrance in the south. A group of armed Alliance soldiers patrolled the entrance, and sentry posts extended out two kilometers away. Surface-wise, the security measures were nearly impeccable.

All the passengers from the starship disembarked, queued up for inspection, and entered the warehouse like a silent herd of sheep. Song Ke hung at the

back of the line, her footsteps gradually slowing, and she started to create distance from the front.

While this place appeared safe, it likely came with limitations on movement. Once inside, it would be difficult to get out. Song Ke never fully entrusted her safety to others; she had a different plan since earlier.

Taking advantage of several soldiers moving up front to maintain order, she flashed into a nearby alleyway.

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Swallow Tail Flying Knives, also known as Swallow Tail Darts, are traditional Chinese throwing weapons that date to the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Chapter 9: Rainy Night in Hua City (1)

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©Who in their right mind would challenge zombies?©

Hua City (D99 District) was located in the southeastern part of the New Asia Alliance. The district had convenient land and water transportation, abundant natural resources, and was a rare livable city in class D. When it came to the most famous aspect of Hua City, it was undoubtedly the extremely complex radial road network in the central city area. With its ingenious layout resembling the pattern of a “Bagua” formation, Hua City had won the gold prize in the first Alliance City Planning Competition.

Song Ke was not unfamiliar with Hua City. She had studied here, walked through its streets and alleys, and experienced the summer rains and winter snow of Hua City. If it weren't for what happened later... she might have been even more familiar with this city.

However, the Hua City of the present could no longer see the lively scenes of the past. Song Ke traveled from outside the Fifth Ring Road and as she moved inward, the density of zombie groups along the way grew thicker. The once bustling central commercial area was devoid of people.

Along the streets, shops were either looted or closed with thick iron chains hanging on the doors, preventing a clear view of the interiors.

As if overnight, the city that had once been filled with crowds and noise had turned into a desolate wasteland.

Zombies often roamed the main roads, and Song Ke didn't want any sudden "intimate" encounters with them. She had to find alternative routes.

She jumped up and down between the rooftops of the residential area, quickly moving through. Unexpectedly, there was a young boy on the opposite high-rise. He looked at her through a security window, and their eyes met. The boy's pupils trembled, startled. He was about to scream when an adult behind him quickly covered his mouth and led him away from the window. They hurriedly closed the curtains. For them, any creature wandering outside was as threatening as a zombie.

Song Ke paid no attention to this, as she had spotted an unmanned supermarket. Jumping down from the third floor, she quickly approached her target. The glass door sensed the infrared signal and slid open slowly on both sides. The interior light suddenly dimmed, and Song Ke keenly sensed that there were people inside!

Three or four men had their backs to her, rummaging through the shelves. Judging from their attire, they seemed to be local residents. Upon hearing the sound of the door opening, they became tense and turned around as if facing a formidable enemy. They frantically raised weapons like kitchen knives and rolling pins at Song Ke.

Song Ke quickly scanned the area and realized that the supermarket had been mostly stripped of its contents.

She didn't want to start a conflict recklessly, so she raised her hands immediately, indicating that she meant no harm. She kept her gaze on them and slowly backed out.

While other supplies were manageable, after a day and night of traveling, the drinking water was running dangerously low.

After exiting the supermarket, she observed the surrounding environment. She suddenly remembered that there should be a delivery station for an online shopping platform nearby. When the platform was first launched, there

were a few seconds about it, including the location of the delivery station. It was supposed to be hidden, maybe at the end of a certain alley.

Following her rough memory of the direction, she circled around a few times and indeed found the delivery station, surprisingly still undiscovered by anyone.

Song Ke picked the lock and entered. The weather was hot, and the station was filled with the sour smell of rotting fruits and vegetables. She replenished her drinking water, then selected some cakes, dried fruits, sausages, and biscuits with longer shelf lives, stuffing them into her bag with effort. While reorganizing her backpack space, a sudden sound from outside caught her attention. Song Ke zipped up her bag and silently moved to the window, pushing aside the blinds to look outside.

At the corner of the alley, several meters away, a burly bald man was dragging a woman, attempting to snatch the bag from her hand.

“Let go!” The bald man’s menacing expression was evident as he threw punches at the woman.

The woman had disheveled hair and hunched back, appearing extremely weak, yet she clung tightly to her bag. “Give it back to me. I’ve worked so hard to find it... please, give it back to me!” After the bag’s mouth was pulled open, several cans of loose milk powder spilled out, followed by baby items like bottles and diapers, and finally, two or three bags of instant noodles.

The bald man, having a clear view of the items on the ground, kicked the woman’s face angrily, causing blood to flow instantly. Seeing that he had grabbed the bag and was about to run away, the woman disregarded everything and clung to his trousers, shouting hoarsely, “You beast! You’ll have a miserable death! Ahhhh!”

The fight outside happened too quickly for Song Ke to intervene. The woman’s scream had already pierced the night sky. She inwardly exclaimed, “Not good!”

True to her fears, within a few seconds, over a dozen zombies came rushing from the main road, swarming into the alley and attacking the two individuals with wild bites. The bloody scene and the piercing screams were too distressing to watch.

Both individuals fell to the undead onslaught, but the zombies didn't disperse. Attracted by the strong scent of blood, they gathered, more and more of them converging. Soon, the alley became so packed that there was hardly any room to move. The nearest zombie had wandered to the doorstep of the delivery station, passing right by Song Ke on the other side of the window.

No, there were getting more and more. Waiting any longer would make it impossible to escape. Song Ke secured her bag's strap, made sure its contents wouldn't spill, and pushed open the delivery station's door. The slight "creak" of the door caught the attention of the zombie horde. Dozens of pale faces turned in her direction simultaneously.

Facing the approaching zombies, Song Ke didn't back down but advanced. Swish-swish, several swallowtail darts were thrown accurately, stabbing into the eye sockets and necks of the roaring zombies in front. Their movements were visibly delayed. She picked up a kettle from the station and in an instant, it transformed into a nearly three-foot-long staff, which she swung down fiercely.

The foremost tall zombie's brain matter splattered, its head completely detached. Song Ke slung its head into the horde and, while rapidly advancing, skillfully swung her staff, knocking away the zombies converging from all sides. When she reached the entrance of the alley, she held the staff's end with both hands, sweeping it 180 degrees in front of her. The remaining zombies that hadn't squeezed in all fell down.

In less than five minutes, she had cleared an escape path, climbed over the rooftops ahead, and swiftly disappeared.

...

That night, Song Ke slept on top of an abandoned water tower in the industrial district. It was far from the city center, sparsely populated, and the zombies couldn't climb up.

Lying on the concrete ground, she looked up at the chaotic night sky, feeling utterly lost.

Since the day she learned of the impending apocalypse, Song Ke had been lost. Her grandfather had told her to "live well," but she had only slept for three days. When she woke up, everything had gone awry. She hadn't understood anything yet, and she was already being chased by zombies, abandoned by

the Cheng family, followed by her master's death, the martial arts school's destruction, and being forced to leave District 177, exiled to Hua City. Then what? What should she do to survive in this kind of apocalypse?

After nearly two days and nights without sleep, Song Ke was reaching her limit. As drowsiness gradually overtook her, she turned over, silently repeating in her mind: Regardless of everything, just stay here for a couple of days, hold on until the rescue team arrives. At least, she was familiar with Hua City; enduring for a while shouldn't be a problem. Moreover, she had to figure out how her special abilities came to be...

The next day, Song Ke continued her exploration westward. As the first light of dawn broke, she arrived at School Street in Hua City.

This street used to have many shops, but unexpectedly, there wasn't much left in terms of supplies. It seemed they had already been scavenged once. Passing a corner, faint rustling noises came from up ahead. Song Ke's right hand gently brushed her pocket, where several swallowtail darts remained.

She turned the corner, and there on the ground, a huddled figure was present. Upon hearing footsteps, the figure froze instantly. After a strange silence, the figure slowly raised its head and turned it around, revealing grayish-white eyeballs, a mutilated face covered in flesh and blood, and jagged teeth smeared with who-knows-what kind of minced meat. Spotting live prey, its pupils dilated, and its mouth slowly opened, ready to roar at Song Ke.

Just as Song Ke was about to make a move, a succession of shouts erupted from behind, "Here! There's a zombie here!" Suddenly, a few teenagers in Hua City First Middle School uniforms, each holding a baseball bat, appeared.

Two agile boys rushed past Song Ke and charged ahead, yelling in terror. In a chaotic flurry, they dispatched the zombie. Afterwards, they turned their attention cautiously to Song Ke, while the remaining individuals slowly spread out, encircling her.

"Who is she? No, is she human or a zombie?"

"Probably, probably human..."

"But she was just standing with the zombies! Who in their right mind would challenge a zombie face-to-face like that!"

“Which one of you wants to go ask her? I surely don’t dare...”

“No, why are you all looking at me? I said I don’t dare!”

Finally, the chubby guy who repeated “I don’t dare” several times was pushed forward. Gathering his courage, he nervously asked, “Um, miss, a-a-are you a human?”

Song Ke moved her hand away from her pocket and was about to answer, but the chubby guy started panicking on his own, “Oh no! She’s not speaking! She’s so fierce! I said I don’t dare, wuwuwu!”

“?” Song Ke took a deep breath and explained, one word at a time, “I... am... human.”

Tears welled up in the chubby guy’s eyes, “T-t-t-then, h-h-h-how did you come out alone?”

“What are you all doing, standing here?” At this moment, seven or eight more people arrived at the intersection, joining the group of students. Among them, a gentle-looking girl inadvertently caught sight of Song Ke and exclaimed, “You’re... Song Ke?”

Song Ke slowly raised her gaze upon hearing that voice.

“Yiyi, do you know her?” a round-faced girl asked with confusion.

After finishing her awkward shout, Cao Yiyi unexpectedly encountered Song Ke’s ice-cold dark pupils. She quickly averted her gaze, as if pricked by a needle, and stumbled to explain, “Ah? Oh, she... she was my former classmate.” She glanced furtively at the figure of a certain guy ahead, her explanation distracted and hasty. The guy had his back turned to her, facing in Song Ke’s direction, his posture appearing quite tense.

Cao Yiyi bit her lip, fingers nervously clutching her clothes’ corner. Suddenly, she took the initiative to approach, grabbed Song Ke’s hand, and put on an intentionally enthusiastic smile, “Song Ke, you disappeared from school without a word. We were all surprised. Later, we heard you went back to your hometown to work. How did you end up here now?”

Expressionless, Song Ke stared at their intertwining hands until Cao Yiyi awkwardly let go. Then, she turned to the chubby guy and continued to

answer in a measured tone, “I got, got separated from the retreat, retreat group accidentally, so I, I’m alone.”

“Oh, I see.” The chubby guy didn’t expect Song Ke to still answer him, and he responded foolishly.

“Pfft~” Someone was successfully amused, and the way they looked at Song Ke suddenly changed, “What’s this? A stutterer?”

“I heard survivors from other districts have come over these two days. Seems like they want to manage us collectively.”

“Weren’t they supposed to be centralized? Then why is she wandering outside alone?”

“Who knows, but she seems pretty bold. The girls in our class would scream at the sight of zombies...”

Amid their laughter and banter, Song Ke stood unmoved, her expression unchanged.

“Brother Jiang, what do you think?”

A young man, whose hair looked like it had been curled with aluminum foil, appeared more mature than the others. He asked softly, looking at the tall and silent guy who had been standing at the forefront.

Jiang Rui’s gaze was complex. He stared at Song Ke in silence, the old scar on his brow especially prominent in the sunlight.

He clenched his hand tightly and then released it unexpectedly. He invited, “Song Ke, our school has a safe zone with around a hundred people. Do you want to come with us?” He added, “We have people with special abilities.”

“Jiang Rui! Why are you telling her all this? She’s not from our school!” Another guy complained unhappily.

Jiang Rui touched the ring on his hand. His icy gaze swept over the person, and they immediately shut up in fear.

Encountering Jiang Rui and Cao Yiyi unexpectedly made Song Ke’s mood plummet. She felt irritated, truly annoyed, and wanted to avoid any

interactions with them. She had already taken steps forward when she heard the last sentence, causing her to hesitate.

Special abilities? They have people with special abilities. Maybe they know something.

Song Ke nodded, “Sure.”

Chapter 10: Rainy Night in Hua City (2)

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© More terrifying than zombies ©

Jiang Rui appeared to be the leader of this group of high school students, with everyone else in the team obeying his every word—except for Song Ke.

Song Ke had a carefree attitude, not quite understanding the twists and turns of social interactions. When Jiang Rui asked her to join him, she unreservedly stood by his side, paying no attention to the people behind her and their varied expressions.

The atmosphere remained quiet throughout the journey, and the two of them only exchanged a few words after a long while. Song Ke was not one to speak much; she had always been of few words. Jiang Rui, on the other hand, was acting unusually. In the past, he had been bold and unruly, making it impossible to ignore his existence. Almost three years had passed, and his recklessness had mellowed considerably. His entire demeanor had transformed as if he had undergone a profound change, almost as if he had completely forgotten the past grievances when facing Song Ke. He even took the initiative to explain the current situation.

“On the day of the solar eruption, it happened to be the day students returned to school. Many people suddenly fainted. At that time, no one realized the severity of the situation. They thought it was just ordinary heatstroke and took them to the medical room. The first zombie appeared that evening, followed by the second, the third... In less than two days, the school was completely overrun.”

“You mean, there are people with special abilities among you.”

“Yes, there are three individuals with special abilities.”

“And how many normal people were there?”

“One hundred and twenty-three. Two days ago, there were nearly two hundred, but some didn’t want to stay at the school and found ways to escape—either back home or to nearby shelters. After they left, we lost all contact with them... so there have been fewer people leaving these past few days.”

At this critical juncture, students who lost contact were probably facing dire circumstances. Song Ke tactfully refrained from further questions.

“Song Ke, how... have you been?” Quite abruptly, Jiang Rui turned to her and asked.

Song Ke glanced at him in bewilderment. This question was quite out of the blue, and she didn’t know how to respond. If she said she was doing well, it would be a lie. With her family gone and nowhere to belong, how could she be considered “well”? If she said she wasn’t doing well, she would have been bitten by zombies long ago on this journey and wouldn’t be standing here conversing with Jiang Rui.

Jiang Rui seemed to realize that his question was ill-timed. After a moment of silence, he changed the subject.

...

Several minutes later, they found a Western-style restaurant and managed to pry open the locked curtain at the entrance. The group was preparing to split into two teams for a search.

“We haven’t been to this restaurant before. I’ll take a few people to the main hall and the second floor. Zhang Hao, you and your group go to the kitchen to look for food.”

“Keep it quiet and don’t attract any zombies.”

Jiang Rui quickly organized the teams. There were twelve people in total. He took seven with him, leaving the remaining five with Zhang Hao. Cao Yiyi was assigned to Jiang Rui’s team, and she wisely refrained from engaging in conversation with Song Ke, keeping her head down and lost in thought.

When it was Song Ke's turn, Jiang Rui hesitated for a moment. "Song Ke, go with Zhang Hao to the kitchen."

Zhang Hao, who had received this hot potato, didn't voice any objections upon hearing this. He cast a lingering glance at Song Ke before complying.

The main hall faced the street, and the second floor had numerous outdoor balconies. Compared to the kitchen, which was situated deep within the restaurant, the danger level was naturally higher. By assigning Song Ke to Zhang Hao's team, everyone understood that they were looking out for her.

Song Ke didn't mind. She was fine with going wherever. Since the teams were already divided, she simply agreed and stood behind Zhang Hao.

The kitchen was located deep within the Western-style restaurant. They crossed the main hall and walked along the corridor for a while. Someone exclaimed in excitement, "There's a cold storage room here!"

Zhang Hao immediately decided, "Let's go check it out."

When Song Ke tried to follow them inside, Zhang Hao reached out and stopped her. "Wait here, classmate. Don't move around."

Zhang Hao had already come out for the third time. He was more cautious than the others, and the addition of a fragile girl to the team, especially one who had a connection with Jiang Rui, didn't sit well with him. If this girl started causing trouble with tears and complaints, it could jeopardize their lives. At the moment, he just hoped that Song Ke would stay put like a fragile doll, not offering assistance and not causing any disruptions.

Song Ke sensed his rejection and slowly retracted her raised foot. "Oh."

Zhang Hao and another boy continued to carry out beef, mutton, fruits, and vegetables from the cold storage room. They handed the items to the round-faced girl in their team, who squatted on the ground, organizing the various foods and packing them into the backpacks of several people.

Song Ke was left standing aside, and the girl didn't show any intention of asking for her help. She ended up sitting on a table, watching them work.

Inside the narrow kitchen, two boys entered one after the other, searching for supplies with curiosity.

“Wow, this restaurant’s kitchen is so small. There probably isn’t much here.”

“So should we go back outside?”

“Why rush? Going out now means helping with carrying things.” Some of the potatoes in the basket had started to sprout. The taller boy picked up a small one, mimicking a basketball shot, and playfully threw it into the chubby boy’s hooded T-shirt. “Three-points! Nice shot!”

The chubby boy wore a distressed expression. “Kongzi Qi, stop messing around!”

Kongzi Qi ignored him and continued, “It’s fine. Brother Jiang and the others are outside. Hey, Tian Yi, don’t dodge!”

Chubs was afraid of pain, twisting and turning to evade. The small potato’s aim was off, and it missed him, bouncing off the counter with a few thuds, seemingly hitting something with a muffled sound. Both of them were surprised and simultaneously turned their heads to the point of impact. Several zombies stood up unsteadily, one of them wearing a white chef’s hat and being as round as a small hill.

Kongzi Qi was dumbfounded, staying frozen for several seconds. These zombies were holding spatulas and knives in their hands!

“Oh my god! Tian Yi, run!” Since he was close to the door, Kongzi Qi rushed out in a few steps, gripping the doorframe and shouting, “Quick, come over, Tian Yi!”

Tian Yi was positioned closer to the inside. He was facing the head chef zombie directly and, in his panic, stumbled. The head chef zombie reached out and grabbed his leg. Tian Yi desperately kicked and stomped on its face, shouting in terror, “Help! Help!”

The commotion quickly reached the outside, and Zhang Hao’s group hurriedly rushed out of the cold storage room, even Jiang Rui’s team arrived in haste.

Kongzi Qi’s voice was trembling with urgency. “Brother Jiang, save Tian Yi!”

The kitchen’s door was narrow, allowing only one person to pass at a time. Inside the confined space, Jiang Rui hesitated while rubbing the ring on his right hand. He wasn’t particularly skilled in close combat. However, as he

lifted his head and faced the expectant gazes of everyone around him, his breath caught, and with a voice hoarse with resolution, he finally ordered, "Once I'm in, all of you retreat."

But someone acted even quicker than him.

Song Ke had been idly watching, swinging her slender legs, as the girls packed the food. Suddenly, she heard a scream from the kitchen. Soon after, a boy stumbled out, disoriented.

Without much thought, she used one hand to support herself on the table and leaped out. Like a whirlwind, she rushed into the room. Delivering several swift kicks to the chubby chef zombie's belly, she forced it to retreat. Then, she grabbed a bucket from the sink with lightning speed and slammed it down on the zombie's head. When it staggered in confusion, flailing its limbs, she caught hold of the chubby boy's collar, pulling him up, and swiftly instructed, "Run, now."

The slightly chubby boy, Tian Yi, weighing around 160 pounds, was flung out of the kitchen by her like a ball. The pursuing zombies followed suit. Song Ke targeted their vulnerable joints, attacking with cracking bone sounds—snap, snap.

The movements of the zombies were disoriented, and she then picked up the baseball bat that Tian Yi had dropped. With a heavy thud, she struck the head of the head chef zombie who had just managed to free itself from the bucket. It fell backwards in confusion, its bulky body resembling a bowling ball. It collided with the other zombies, creating a clattering commotion.

Taking advantage of the chaos, Song Ke swiftly shut the door, locked it, and pushed tables against it.

Turning around, she faced a group of teenagers, their jaws dropping in shock as they looked at her.

Song Ke kindly informed them, "It's taken care of. We should, we should leave."

Silence—a eerie silence. After a while, someone couldn't hold back their amazement.

“It feels like...” Kongzi Qi supported Tian Yi, swallowing hard, “she’s more terrifying than zombies.”

Jiang Rui stood at the front of the crowd, looking at Song Ke’s slender figure. The old scar on his brow seemed to throb slightly. He couldn’t help but smile wryly to himself. Indeed, he had been overthinking things. Back in the day, Song Ke could handle an entire class on her own. Why had he ever thought she needed his protection?

“Pack up, let’s go quickly.”

The journey back to the school went surprisingly smoothly, perhaps because Jiang Rui’s group had become familiar with the route and didn’t encounter any more zombies along the way.

The high schoolers whispered behind Song Ke’s back, no longer daring to mock her openly. Lin Xia, the round-faced girl who was previously in Song Ke’s group, tugged on Cao Yiyi’s sleeve and said with surprise, “Yiyi, what’s the deal with your classmate? She’s amazing.”

Cao Yiyi lowered her eyelashes, her voice soft and hard to read. “Is that so? She’s always liked to fight.”

As they approached Hua City No.1 Middle School, Song Ke finally voiced the question that had been on her mind for a while.

“I have... a question.”

“What’s the question?”

“Tell me, if the school is, is infested with zombies, why is there still a, a safe zone?”

“Well... you’ll find out soon.”

Instead of entering the school through the main gate, they took a detour around a side hill. When they looked down from the slope, the sight before them left Song Ke momentarily speechless.

Hundreds and thousands of zombies dressed in Hua City No.1 Middle School uniforms had taken over the playground, dormitories, and teaching buildings. Their dense presence was enough to make one’s scalp tingle. They wandered

everywhere like ghosts, their heads twitching nervously as they turned, sniffing the scent of living humans in the air.

This was the largest zombie horde that Song Ke had seen since the apocalypse, and also the most chilling.

After all, these were once lively boys and girls in their teens, with bright futures ahead of them, the hopes of the Alliance. Now, they had become lifeless walking corpses.

The expressions of everyone grew heavy.

Tian Yi's sadness was about to overflow from his face. "In our class, except for me and Kongzi Qi, everyone... Our homeroom teacher was bitten by the zombies while trying to protect us." Even Kongzi Qi, who had always been jovial, had red eyes as he turned away.

Jiang Rui pointed in a direction. "There's the safe zone."

He was referring to a storm-proof, enclosed stadium near the edge of the school, built using the latest seismic and fire-resistant materials provided by the Alliance. Behind it was a high-voltage electric fence.

Song Ke gazed at the tightly packed zombies outside the stadium. "How do we get in?"

"Through here." Jiang Rui took the lead, and the others followed him. They went around the slope behind the stadium. When they got closer, Song Ke noticed a hole in the high-voltage electric fence. It looked as if it had been burned open by intense heat, just large enough for an adult to pass through. However, two or three zombies were wandering nearby.

"Step back." The group halted in the woods not far from the zombies. Jiang Rui's voice was stern.

Everyone else took two steps backward, and Song Ke hesitated for a moment before falling back in line with them. She looked left and right, took small steps, and aligned herself with the others on the same level.

Jiang Rui took off his ring and walked towards the zombies. Song Ke's sharp eyes noticed a faint red mark around the base of his middle finger. Just then, Jiang Rui raised his hand, and a two-meter-long flame snake burst from his

palm, instantly transforming into a fiery whip. He lashed it at several zombies, the smell of burning flesh and skin quickly spreading. The zombies emitted cries of agony and soon fell to the ground.

It finally dawned on Song Ke—Jiang Rui was actually an ability user!

After dealing with the zombies, Jiang Rui turned back and glanced at Song Ke. It seemed like he wanted to say something, but the others had already burst into cheers.

“Brother Jiang is amazing!”

“That AOE skill, it’s so satisfying to whip those zombies!”

After eliminating the minor obstacle blocking their path, the group passed through the gap in the electric fence and soon arrived beneath the wall at the back of the storm-proof stadium.

Jiang Rui took out his phone and typed out a message.

Two minutes later, something unbelievable happened. The wall in front of them rapidly dissolved, revealing the shape of a door, jutting out abruptly!

A transforming... door?

“Song Ke, welcome to the safe zone.” After Jiang Rui finished speaking, he pushed open the door without hesitation.

The group filed inside, and the door closed again, existing for about ten seconds before suddenly disappearing.

Song Ke turned around, only to see that the wall was as smooth as before.