

Doomsday 81

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 81: Sin City (15)

A special commemorative model from twenty years ago

Song Ke found a medical equipment store at the end of the trading street.

The store was located deep in winding alleys, with dim lighting, and artificial light sources didn't reach there. She stepped on several puddles along the way, the underground sea was very close, less than a kilometer away. The cold sea breeze blew towards her, making her shiver and waking her up.

Probably due to its remote location, the business didn't seem to be doing well, and the entrance was deserted.

Song Ke entered the store, and a middle-aged man behind the counter was busy with a calculator. He greeted her without much enthusiasm, saying, "See for yourself what you want."

The interior space was quite large. Song Ke went straight to the wheelchair section, where there were various models, colors, and functions. After some research, she couldn't make up her mind. She had initially thought of buying them all, but when she touched her money pouch, she felt helpless.

Thinking of Zhuang Qingyan's critical gaze, Song Ke reluctantly chose the most expensive one, with a fancy description and even a small booklet.

When it came time to pay, the store owner glanced at her and asked, "Is this for someone else?"

"Uh-huh," Song Ke nodded.

"Is it for a new one, or are you just exchanging it?"

“New, the previous one broke.”

The store owner calmly said, “This wheelchair doesn’t offer good value for the price. Many of its functions are superfluous. If you want something practical, you can take a look at those in the showcase. They’re from Qingsong Biotech, and they’re considerably cheaper.”

She didn’t expect the owner, who appeared uninterested, to be quite honest.

Song Ke went to the showcase and indeed found a familiar silver-white one that resembled the one Zhuang Qingyan used before. She happily picked it up and went to the counter to pay, saying, “I’ll take this one.”

The store owner’s forehead twitched, “This is a sample! Let me get you a new one from the warehouse.”

The store owner went through a small door, and Song Ke waited at the same spot. The main door opened with a “swish,” and two playful figures entered.

First, there was a six or seven-year-old boy with a face covered in sand, looking all dirty. Following him was a beautiful young man with a dark green snake tail. This time, he was wearing an old cartoon T-shirt with rolled edges. His tail swayed merrily, making a “clang, clang” sound as it bumped into the counter.

When the two entered, they were suddenly startled upon seeing Song Ke, and both of them trembled visibly.

Then the little boy quickly realized and turned to push the snake-tailed young man, saying, “Hurry, run, you run!”

The store owner, upon hearing the commotion, emerged from the warehouse and, after taking in the scene, sternly shouted, “Yanosh, I told you not to bring him in here!”

The boy clung to the snake-tailed young man, crying loudly, “Papa, don’t give Gabriel to the bad people, don’t give him to the bad people, waaaah!”

Song Ke, who was confused by being labeled a bad person without a word: “??”

The snake-tailed young man stared at Song Ke with his amber-colored eyes for a while, and the rings on his tail rustled. Suddenly, he burst into a cheerful laugh.

Song Ke, feeling quite awkward, shook her head and said, “Um, I think we should know each other.”

Yanosh’s crying abruptly stopped, and the bubble of snot popped with a “pop.”

After explaining the situation with the Rose Auction House, the store owner sighed, “Gabriel is a creature Yanosh found by the sea. I told him not to do it; these exotic pets are usually kept by wealthy individuals. He might have escaped from somewhere, and sooner or later, he’ll be captured.

“But Yanosh doesn’t listen and goes to play with him every day. So, I had to set a rule: Gabriel isn’t allowed inside the store.”

“He... Gabriel probably doesn’t have an owner yet,” Song Ke kindly informed the store owner. After all, the auction hadn’t concluded, and they had disrupted it. It was chaotic afterward, and the snake-tailed young man seemed to have sneaked out on his own.

Yanosh eagerly asked, “Papa, can we adopt Gabriel?”

The store owner shouted loudly, “Clean your face!”

Yanosh shrunk his neck and, leading Gabriel, went out to the seaside to play and wash his face.

The store owner settled Song Ke’s bill and hesitated for a moment before asking, “Are you sure the auction house has been destroyed, and there won’t be any more people coming?”

“Yes,” Song Ke nodded. After all, the person behind the Rose Auction House, She Liang, had fallen from power. Now, with Hu Yong taking over, the chances of these illicit activities making a comeback were slim. “Adopting him shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

The store owner gazed out of the window at Yanosh and Gabriel playing in the water, lost in thought.

As soon as Song Ke pushed the door open to leave, Yanosh ran over, followed by the gracefully swimming Gabriel. He circled Song Ke a few times, then affectionately rubbed his tail tip against her calf.

“Gabriel likes you and wants you to touch him,” Yanosh enthusiastically translated.

Reluctantly, Song Ke extended her fingertip cautiously and touched Gabriel’s emerald green tail. The scales beneath her touch were smooth, cool to the touch, and slightly rough from the mixture of sand and seawater.

Gabriel seemed to thoroughly enjoy her touch, closing his eyes as the scales on his belly gently expanded, revealing a faint waistline.

With sharp eyes, Song Ke noticed a concealed row of small letters where Gabriel’s human body met his snake tail. These weren’t tattoos or engravings; they seemed to be naturally part of him. She bent down, getting closer to Gabriel’s abdomen, and carefully read the words: RYK1275.

It was a U-Lab experimental subject number.

Gabriel wriggled out of Song Ke’s palm and moved behind her, staring intently at her waist.

Song Ke, feeling uncomfortable, asked, “Why is he looking at me like that?”

Gabriel made a couple of “ah ah” sounds and tilted his head in confusion.

Yanosh earnestly translated for him, “Gabriel is asking, ‘Where’s your tail?’”

Song Ke replied, "I never had a tail to begin with."

It seemed that Gabriel found the absence of a tail difficult to comprehend. He circled Song Ke at close range, observing her arms, neck, and face. Then, he suddenly straightened his upper body, bringing his beautiful face close to hers, locking eyes with her. His clear eyes gradually filled with confusion.

"Gabriel, you can't. You can only like me first, and then you can like her!" Yanosh said, jealous of Gabriel's closeness to Song Ke.

Gabriel burst into laughter, swaying his tail and splashing sand, showering Song Ke and Yanosh with it.

Song Ke spat out the sand and thought, with an expressionless face, that she couldn't handle Gabriel's affection.

...

Back at the safe house, Song Ke tiptoed toward Zhuang Qingyan's room and quietly placed the newly bought wheelchair outside his door.

After contemplating for a couple of seconds, she decided it would be better to tell him in person and maybe persuade him not to be upset with Lu Xiaoyu. She was about to push the door open when she suddenly remembered Zhuang Qingyan's repeated emphasis on "maintaining proper decorum" between men and women. So, she knocked on the door respectfully instead.

"Knock, knock." She gently tapped the door twice.

No response from inside.

"Knock, knock." She knocked a bit harder.

Still no response.

“Bang, bang!” She applied more force, and the door was flung open.

Song Ke stuck her head inside and scanned the room, but it was empty.

Oh no, Lu Xiaoyu is in danger!

...

Limping with a crutch, Zhuang Qingyan unceremoniously pushed open Lu Xiaoyu’s door.

Lu Xiaoyu was in the midst of adjusting his two new “legs,” and upon seeing the unexpected visitor barging in, he paused for less than a second before continuing his activities as if nothing had happened, one step at a time.

Zhuang Qingyan strolled in leisurely, glancing at Lu Xiaoyu’s familiar pair of mechanical legs, and calmly leaned against the wall.

Lu Xiaoyu proudly showed off, “I recreated them based on ‘Practical Theory of Mechanical Design and Structural Technology.’ How’s that? Oh, I forgot, your GPA is only 4.2; you probably can’t understand it.”

Zhuang Qingyan instantly countered, “At least I still have a 4.2 GPA, unlike someone who failed an elective course like ‘Language, Social Interaction, and the Arts.’”

Lu Xiaoyu quickly shot up to 2.5 meters in height. “Objection! You’re distorting the facts. I failed because I got the exam time wrong.”

Zhuang Qingyan disregarded his protest, saying, “I’ve said it before; I don’t like talking to people with my neck tilted.”

Lu Xiaoyu clicked his tongue and slowly descended, returning to his wheelchair.

“Why are you limping?” he asked.

“Accident.”

“I thought you’d have ‘accidentally’ died by now.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

“So, did you find a backer because you couldn’t make it on your own?” Lu Xiaoyu inquired, his curiosity evident.

Zhuang Qingyan tilted his head and gave him a sidelong glance. “What, are you envious?”

“What’s your relationship with Song Ke? Are you using her?” Lu Xiaoyu’s ice-blue eyes flashed. His social interactions were always laced with aggression.

“No,” Zhuang Qingyan answered without hesitation, but then he paused for a moment, seemingly lost in thought.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he appeared unusually serious. “She is indeed my backer, but I won’t use her.”

Lu Xiaoyu remained quiet for a moment before relentlessly pressing on, “Why did you skip my first question?”

Zhuang Qingyan coldly retorted, “Why can’t you learn to read people’s expressions?”

Lu Xiaoyu clicked his tongue once more.

Zhuang Qingyan tapped his crutch on the ground and his almond-shaped eyes carried a warning. “Don’t mess with her. She grew up in District F. She doesn’t have as many twisted thoughts as you do, and she might take things seriously.”

“District F?” Lu Xiaoyu repeated, his expression showing some oddity.

“What’s the problem?” Zhuang Qingyan keenly noticed his unusual reaction.

Lu Xiaoyu said, “I thought she was from District B.”

Zhuang Qingyan straightened up, asking, “What do you mean?”

Lu Xiaoyu pulled out the light screen that Song Ke had given him before she left, saying, “Although this light screen is quite old, it’s a special commemorative model from twenty years ago, only available in a limited quantity in District B. You guys at Qinglan mentioned ordering a large batch, and it cost me the opportunity to get a first edition. That’s why I remember it vividly.”

“What does that have to do with anything? Light screens can be second-hand.”

“Light screens can be resold, but what about the data inside?” Lu Xiaoyu brought up a copy of “Particle Physics Advanced Microbiology” and glanced through it casually. “These textbooks aren’t within District F’s access rights.”

Zhuang Qingyan couldn’t help but frown. He had used Song Ke’s light screen before and hadn’t noticed anything special, but he had overlooked one thing: he had always been looking up the content according to his level of understanding. However, when it came to Song Ke... could she understand it?

Lu Xiaoyu continued, “There’s also something interesting. I found a hidden database and it took me a full 45 seconds to crack it.”

Zhuang Qingyan took the light screen from Lu Xiaoyu, and in the folder that Lu Xiaoyu had found were cutting-edge research papers and data on genetics.

“This light screen...” he began to say.

BAM! The door was abruptly pushed open, and Song Ke rushed in frantically.

“Please, please don’t fight!”

In the room, the two men, one standing and one sitting, and the expected explosive argument was nowhere to be found. The atmosphere remained peaceful and harmonious. Both Zhuang Qingyan and Lu Xiaoyu turned to look at her.

Song Ke found herself in an awkward situation, her words of persuasion stuck in her throat. She wished she could disappear on the spot.

“Song Ke, come here,” Zhuang Qingyan called out to her.

“Why...” Song Ke hesitantly approached.

“Where did this light screen come from?” Zhuang Qingyan asked.

“Huh?” Song Ke blinked, puzzled. “It belonged to my grandfather.”

Zhuang Qingyan and Lu Xiaoyu exchanged a glance, silently agreeing to skip the previous topic. Song Ke had mentioned that she was an orphan and had lived with her only grandfather. Until they figured out the true owner of the light screen, it was better not to reveal it and add to her troubles.

“I remember you said your grandfather left this light screen for you,” Zhuang Qingyan emphasized the word “left” deliberately.

“Yes, he wanted me to study every day,” Song Ke nodded.

“He wanted you to study these? Particle physics?” Zhuang Qingyan opened the rather complex textbook.

“Sorry for the interruption,” Lu Xiaoyu coughed lightly. “Just my humble opinion, but I think your grandfather intended for you to study the content of this database.”

Lu Xiaoyu swiped his fingertip, quickly switching to another layer of the system. The screen displayed a set of children’s textbooks and several peculiar e-books: “Learn Local Dialects and Travel Fearlessly Across the Alliance”, “One Hundred Clever Tips for Independent Living”, “Practical Everyday Applications of Legal Knowledge”...

Song Ke exclaimed, “Huh?”

Could it be that she had been studying the wrong books all along? No wonder she’d diligently studied every day and hadn’t learned anything!

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 82: Sin City (16)

Lu’s Law of Road Rush (End of Sin City Arc)

“Song Ke, you’re thirteen now. You need to learn to cook for yourself. Even when Grandpa isn’t here, you should eat well to grow strong and tall. There’s a cookbook I personally wrote on the tablet. Follow the videos and remember not to eat failed dishes!”

“Song Ke, you’re fourteen this year, right? Try not to get into fights at school, and even if you do, don’t break anyone’s head. We can’t afford the damages. Find some hidden places... Ahem, you should continue your education, and become a knowledgeable and cultured person. Study your textbooks diligently.”

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you something. Don’t be afraid to spend money. Our family isn’t as poor as you might think. Grandpa left three backup funds for you. One is with your Uncle Cheng, another is in my secret account, the password is xxxx, be sure to retrieve it, or it might expire. And the last one, hehe, Grandpa hid it three inches inside the wall behind your bed. Reach in and feel around. There’s a small box inside with some rhenium bars that Grandpa secretly stashed. If you ever run out of money, you can sell them. I heard that this thing is very valuable.”

Along with a pile of children’s textbooks, there were voice messages from Song Zhiyuan for Song Ke. Starting from the year he passed away, there were about two or three messages a year, adding up to nearly twenty messages. They were filled with various reminders and oozing with care for her.

“Song Ke, even though Grandpa can’t see it, you must be growing up well, right? This world is more beautiful than you can imagine. Stay happy, safe, and healthy, do whatever you want to do, and most importantly, you have to live well.”

Song Ke finished reading the last message, her nose red. She stared at the screen until it automatically went dark.

She missed her grandpa so much.

A pair of gentle hands ruffled her hair, not saying anything, but their comforting gesture was enough.

Song Ke nuzzled into Zhuang Qingyan’s palm, unreservedly wetting it with her tears.

Zhuang Qingyan’s hand paused for a moment, then slid down the back of her head, teasing her like a little cat. He pinched her fair nape and, in the process, returned her tears to her.

Song Ke’s heartache was swept away, and she turned to glare at him, her clear eyes full of vitality, back to normal.

Zhuang Qingyan’s lips curved with a faint smile.

Unfortunately, the third person present, Lu Xiaoyu, was not one to appreciate the romantic atmosphere. His rigid voice abruptly broke the two people's beautiful atmosphere, "This light screen is designed for researchers and its main feature is two independent systems and a deep firewall. Its practicality is average."

Song Ke puffed her cheeks, "I'm not very good at using it."

She was never familiar with high-tech products. She must have accidentally switched systems while fumbling around and then forgotten how to switch back. Not only did she not gain any knowledge, but she also missed what her grandfather wanted to say to her.

Song Ke silently sighed and for the first time, she felt like she might be a bit stupid.

Lu Xiaoyu, completely oblivious to her disappointment, continued in a matter-of-fact tone, "In situations like this, my suggestion is to re-read 'Kali + Linux Penetration Testing Techniques Detailed Explanation'. It will take a little time to crack the hidden database. But considering your level of knowledge, I think you should start with web security and DOS commands..."

Song Ke stared blankly, "Huh?"

Lu Xiaoyu paused, "Maybe start with the 'Basic User Guide for the Light Screen,' and the version for 7-14-year-olds might be more suitable for you."

Zhuang Qingyan's cold gaze swept over, "Shut up."

Lu Xiaoyu shrugged.

Song Ke blinked at the screen and said sincerely to Lu Xiaoyu, "Thank you!"

After all, if it weren't for Lu Xiaoyu, she might never have heard the words her grandfather left for her.

Lu Xiaoyu was left a little baffled, "?"

...

Half an hour later, Lin Youyou, Fang Zhixu, and others gathered in Lu Xiaoyu's room for a meeting.

“Lu Xiaoyu has been found, and our next plan is to go to Mu City,” Zhuang Qingyan said.

Song Ke nodded solemnly. The operation in Sin City had been full of difficulties and unexpected twists from the beginning. However, with everyone's concerted efforts, they had ultimately succeeded.

“Before we leave this place, I suggest that we get to know each other better. After all, we will be traveling together for some time,” Zhuang Qingyan relaxed in his new wheelchair, “Let's start with the captain.”

Song Ke, who was called upon, puffed up her chest, and her palm subtly moved, forming a blade-shaped azure light.

“Song Ke, S-class strong offensive-type gold and metal-type ability. I can transform things into a spiritual weapon and I'm really good in fights.”

Xu Xing clapped his hands enthusiastically, offering support, “Big sis is the best!”

Zhuang Qingyan chuckled, “We've all witnessed the captain's strength, no doubt about that.”

The rest of the team nodded in agreement.

“Next is me, Zhuang Qingyan, from the Qinglan Research Institute, an S-class spiritual-type ability.”

“Lu Xiaoyu, from District B8, Erjia. S-class hacker-type ability.”

The abilities of these two couldn't be easily classified as either attack or support; they were more control-oriented. They could both engage in offense and defense, and as S-class awakeners, their power was equally remarkable.

“Fang Zhixu, from District C60, Tongwan. A-class healing-type ability, formerly a renowned surgeon.”

Although Fang Zhixu wasn't a combat talent, his role in the team was indispensable. Without him, Song Ke's severe injuries wouldn't have received timely treatment, and Lu Xiaoyu, with tubes all over her body, wouldn't have escaped Death Prison so easily.

“Lin Youyou, from District C72, Ferrara. A-class support-type sound ability. I'm not good at fighting, but I can buff you guys.”

“Su Cha, from District E170, Rainforest. A-class strong offensive and poison-type ability.”

Zhuang Qingyan said with a smile, “These two are temporary team members.”

Lin Youyou gave him a sidelong glance, her long eyelashes drooping down without a word of rebuttal.

She had indeed joined V587 with impure intentions, partly due to the pressure from Song Ke and partly for her own selfish reasons.

After everyone else had introduced themselves, only Xu Xing remained.

He looked to his left, then to his right, and suddenly burst into tears, crying and choking as he said, “I'm Xu Xing... I'm a B-class strong offensive... Ice-type ability, from District F177...”

While everyone else was either S-class or A-class, he was the only B-class. Xu Xing's self-esteem took a serious hit, and at that moment, he deeply realized the meaning behind Zhuang Qingyan's constant push for him to improve his abilities. He didn't want to be a slacker who only shouted “666”! He didn't want to be useless!

Song Ke ran over to comfort him, “Xiao Xing, you’re really strong, you’re a group attack type.”

Xu Xing sniffled, “Really?”

“Yes!” Song Ke nodded decisively. “You still have 90% of your potential and a chance to level up.”

Xu Xing wiped away his tears, and when he discreetly glanced at Lu Xiaoyu, who had successfully leveled up, he silently made up his mind.

“Where do we go next? Did you mention District C55?” Lu Xiaoyu asked.

Lin Youyou opened her terminal and looked at it, then alerted everyone, “The Throne Race’s third round of competition for the final 16 is about to begin. The official competition day is in three days.”

Su Cha’s deep voice said, “If we rush back now, we might not make it.”

They had been delayed too long in Death Prison, and District F had poor transportation. Three days didn’t seem like enough time to get them back to Ferrara.

Should they give up like this? Lin Youyou clenched her lips in frustration.

“Why wouldn’t we make it?” Lu Xiaoyu suddenly asked.

Lin Youyou explained, “It took us a week to get here, first with the transport convoy to the outskirts, then switching to off-road vehicles to enter the desert.”

Lu Xiaoyu: “Why not switch to more efficient means of transportation?”

Lin Youyou: “...” Did they not want to? Did they not have it? Speaking of the Alliance’s most advanced flying ships...

Song Ke looked at Lu Xiaoyu with a hint of helplessness. "You forgot, the starship, it's broken."

Lu Xiaoyu tugged at the corner of his mouth, trying to make a "slightly disapproving" smile, but it wasn't very successful, and it looked a bit odd. "It's just a loss of power. You can't describe it as 'broken.'"

"What do you mean? Do you have a solution?" Lin Youyou's eyes lit up.

Lu Xiaoyu answered without asking, "The competition you mentioned sounds interesting. Can I participate?"

"Huh? Do you have a wish you want to fulfill too?" Song Ke asked. She had already promised Lin Youyou that if they won the championship, she would give Lin Youyou the opportunity to make a wish. If Lu Xiaoyu also wanted...

"No, I just like coming first," Lu Xiaoyu replied matter-of-factly.

The group fell silent.

The genius's thought process was truly beyond the comprehension of ordinary people.

"Okay, then you can participate next time. Captain, do you have any objections?" Zhuang Qingyan sought Song Ke's opinion.

Song Ke was slightly worried. Lu Xiaoyu had just recovered and looked fragile. Would he be okay?

Lu Xiaoyu's two "legs" shot up, and his towering 2.5-meter height made him look down on everyone. His ice-blue eyes gleamed, his silver hair flew, and his awakened energy poured out, enveloping the entire room in a silver-white matrix of 101010 code.

Song Ke: "...No objections."

Lu Xiaoyu was more than okay; he was more than capable.

Lu Xiaoyu sat back in his wheelchair with satisfaction. "Let's go then and find a starship."

...

Before leaving, V587 bid farewell to an old friend.

Cheng Yi's business was thriving more than ever, keeping her extremely busy. She had just seen off one customer when she was greeted by the familiar group of seven.

Zhuang Qingyan was in a wheelchair, and Lu Xiaoyu had "walked" over on his own. Lu Xiaoyu's towering 2.5-meter height made him stand out, but in a city full of strange individuals, where even mechanical bodies were not unusual, their presence only attracted a bit more attention.

As they approached, Cheng Yi's gaze lingered on Su Cha's face for two seconds before she couldn't help but burst into laughter. Su Cha's hat was pulled low, he wore a mask, and had on a thick coat that wrapped him up completely. His face, with his current reputation, was well-known throughout Sin City. Going out without any disguise would probably lead to a mob of fans making it impossible for him to move freely.

"Boss Cheng, we're about to leave," Zhuang Qingyan greeted Cheng Yi, "Before we go, we'd like to make one last deal with you."

Cheng Yi touched her half-shaven head and took a deep breath. "Where else do you want to attack?"

Zhuang Qingyan smiled, "Boss Cheng, you've misunderstood. We just want to get some information about the Starship Port. How many crystals would you require?"

After a moment of contemplation, Cheng Yi unexpectedly replied, "I can provide you with the information, you don't need to pay for it."

She pointed towards the direction of Death Prison, her expression remarkably calm.

“I don’t know who you really are, but because of you, Sin City has indeed changed, and for the better.”

“The Rose Auction House has changed hands, and human tr*fficking has been categorized as a serious crime. Anyone attempting a comeback must think twice.”

After taking office, Hu Yong had not hurried to declare his authority. He hadn’t even made public appearances or delivered speeches. He remained entrenched in the dark depths of Death Prison, systematically correcting “errors.”

The absence of Criminal Records did not mean the prisoners outside would gain their freedom. The underground city had enacted new regulations, and though chaos still reigned and villains were aplenty, it was slowly moving towards order.

Cheng Yi laughed heartily. “Consider the information about the Starship Port a gift from me.”

Even the most opportunistic of merchants had a human side to them.

...

Su Cha drove the off-road vehicle through the desert. According to Cheng Yi, the Starship Port in Sin City had been nearly abandoned before the apocalypse. Inside, there were only a few starships left unattended, and she wasn’t sure if they still existed or if they had been sold as scrap.

Just as Song Ke and her team approached their destination, something interesting happened. A group of heavily armed bandits leaped out and shouted, “Robbery! Hand over everything valuable!”

“Uh...” Song Ke and her team exchanged glances, and everyone couldn’t help but find the situation somewhat amusing.

They had been robbed by the treacherous Mia when they first arrived, and now, as they were leaving, it seemed they couldn't escape being robbed again.

It could be said that, even as new changes were emerging, Sin City still lived up to its reputation as a city of sin.

Su Cha had been in a foul mood the whole way, and his patience had reached its limit. He removed his hat and mask, then spoke coldly, "You have three seconds to get lost."

The leader of the bandits stared at him for a full four seconds, maintaining an arrogant attitude. "Who are you to tell me to get lost? If you tell me to get lost, then I'll just get lost? Wouldn't I lose face by leaving?"

"Boss, maybe we should retreat. These people look... not easy to deal with."

One of his subordinates, displaying some wisdom, had already started to back down.

"Retreat? Are you kidding me? Don't you know that causing trouble when entering Sin City is essential? We've finally made it here, and we can't just give up now!"

Oh, it's a rookie. No wonder he doesn't recognize the famous V587.

Xu Xing jumped out, hands on his hips, and shouted with great vigor, "I said get lost! Can't you hear me?"

A relentless snowstorm blew in, freezing the bandits who were attempting to rob them into ice sculptures. The leader who had been boasting had his mouth contorted from the cold.

"Oh my ancestor! Little ancestor, please let us go. We'll leave immediately!"

Xu Xing snorted and eased his power, causing the bandits to flee in a panic.

This little incident was quickly forgotten as the seven made their way into the Starship Port. Inside, they found a collection of dilapidated and half-buried starships.

Lu Xiaoyu picked a relatively intact-looking one and climbed into the cockpit. Curious, Song Ke followed him.

Lu Xiaoyu effortlessly accessed the control panel, with his ice-blue eyes reflecting the data. Various parameters rapidly changed and reconfigured.

“Without Yiyu, there are other energy sources, wind, water, sunlight... everything you can see can be used to power the starship.”

Lu Xiaoyu was the primary reason for the “Eternal Soaring Bird’s” never-ending flight.

The old starship slowly ascended, stirring up the yellow sand as it roared to life.

Observing this, the others boarded one by one and found their seats.

Lu Xiaoyu closed the cabin door. Although he didn’t smile, everyone could sense his happiness. “We’re ready to go.”

“Boom!”

The engines roared to life, and the starship, now reinvigorated, shot off like a meteor.

Inside the cockpit, Song Ke and the others were thrown off balance by the powerful thrust and had to grab onto the seat’s armrests.

Lin Youyou, who often traveled on starships due to her job, spoke up, “Wait a minute. Did you forget to engage the star track route?”

Deviation from the star track route would disable the automatic pilot and navigation, leaving the entire journey reliant on manual control, greatly increasing the risk.

Soon, Lin Youyou discovered another critical issue and shouted in panic, “Hey, aren’t you speeding like crazy?”

The starship accelerated again, flashed a few times in the vast desert, and vanished into the airspace above District F180.

“Lu Xiaoyu, you lunatic!!!”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 83: When the Roses Bloom (1)

We became stronger

After a three-month absence, Ferrara still shone with neon lights.

“Is this the city ruled by artificial intelligence?” Lu Xiaoyu lowered the starship’s altitude and peered out the window. A flower parade ship passed by, and on the floating advertising screen, a sweet female star with cherry blossom-pink hair was smiling at him.

Lu Xiaoyu focused on it for a couple of seconds, then turned back and found a certain person in the back seat with precision.

Lin Youyou awkwardly covered her face. “Um, yeah, it’s me, already used to social death.”

“An illusory city with fake personalities,” Lu Xiaoyu commented pointedly.

“Eugh.” On the opposite side, Song Ke and Xu Xing were sprawled across their seats, their faces pale. The intense motion sickness from the high-speed ride made the two, who rarely took starships from District F, unable to stop themselves from vomiting.

Fang Zhixu’s complexion wasn’t too good either. He had always followed safe driving practices and had never ridden in a “black car” like Lu Xiaoyu’s starship. Luckily, he was a healing-type awakener himself, and with his ability enveloping his body, he managed to overcome the discomfort after a few breaths.

Lu Xiaoyu piloted the starship, blending in with the flower parade ship, and found a spot to land. Song Ke got off the starship in a daze and caught a whiff of a burnt smell. She looked around and quickly noticed something abnormal, “The engine is on fire!”

While traveling at super high speed, the four engines of the starship emitted black smoke and, with a ‘puff’, were rendered completely useless.

Lu Xiaoyu deactivated the control panel with some regret, “Couldn’t break the speed threshold; this is the main reason solar energy got phased out. Next time we get a new starship, I’ll consider using a different energy source.”

Song Ke repeated in shock, “Next time, a new starship?”

You really don’t know how expensive firewood and rice are!

Thanks to Cheng Yi confiscating their money, there was no sign of the next starship.

With Lu Xiaoyu’s habit of wasting one aircraft for every trip, they were quickly heading towards bankruptcy!

The impoverished captain silently hugged her money pouch.

...

The group of people returned to the hotel, booked the largest suite, and without saying a word, they all collapsed onto the couch and beds, sleeping like logs.

After spending a long time in the dim and cramped prison cell, their legs and bodies felt stiff. The soft mattress in Ferrara made for an exceptionally comfortable rest. They woke up one by one, yawning and heading to the multimedia room for a meeting.

The screen displayed the previous match's recordings, and Zhuang Qingyan projected the new rules.

The top 16 knockout stage followed a challenge mode for team battles. The first-place teams from the previous A to G group matches were the defending champions, while the remaining teams became challengers. In each round, the challengers could select one defending champion to challenge. If the challenge succeeded, they would replace the defending champion.

The qualification rules were simple as well. If the defending champion received a bye in a round or won all rounds in a single turn, they would directly qualify. However, each team's participants couldn't be repeated in each round, which meant that if they started as challengers, they had only five chances to challenge (each team had a maximum of five players). Choosing the right defending champion was crucial.

This competition format was reminiscent of the ancient story of "The Tian Ji's Horse Race." If the defending champion was strong in a particular round, the challengers might choose to forfeit and wait for the next chance. On the other hand, if the defending champion appeared weak, they might face multiple challenges within the same round.

V587, as the first place in Group G, naturally received the title of defending champion. They needed to win three rounds to qualify. Lin Youyou and Su Cha had also joined the team, increasing their pool of available participants to seven.

In the selection of defending champions for the rounds, Zhuang Qingyan first ruled out two support-type participants, Lin Youyou and Fang Zhixu, as they had no advantage in this type of challenge.

"For the first round, Lu Xiaoyu, you haven't appeared before, and there's no information on you. Due to the underestimation by challengers, there should be many who want to challenge you, but their strength won't be very high. You can win with surprise tactics and quickly secure a victory."

Lu Xiaoyu nodded calmly, and the others agreed without objections.

“For the second round, Su Cha, your solo combat abilities are strong. Get it done as quickly as possible.”

“Got it,” Su Cha responded coolly.

Zhuang Qingyan smiled slyly, “For the last round, it’s our captain’s turn to lead.”

“Alright,” Song Ke confidently nodded.

“I... I also want to participate,” Xu Xing raised his hand and spoke with eagerness.

He was already the weakest in V587, and if he didn’t improve his strength quickly, the gap with others would only widen.

“In that case, Xiao Xing, you’ll go second, Su Cha third, and I’ll go fourth.”

Song Ke patted Xu Xing’s head, encouraging the child to get some practice as well, saying that as long as she was there, losing wouldn’t be a problem.

“Since you’ve made your decisions, I guess it’s alright if I don’t appear tomorrow?” Lin Youyou summoned her terminal, and a rose gold invitation letter appeared: “Although it’s all a fake persona, I still need to make a living. I’ve been invited to be a special guest for tomorrow’s match.”

Song Ke was puzzled, “Aren’t the guests supposed to be artificial intelligence only?”

Lin Youyou replied, “I’m not entirely sure, but it seems that after the Ferrara incident last time, Ilya has relaxed the regulations in this regard. The Ten New Stars even shot a short film together.”

“It’s not relaxation,” Zhuang Qingyan said, leaning on his crutch, “During the three months we were away, although Ilya hasn’t appeared in public, his abilities have been continually growing stronger, far surpassing humans. He doesn’t care about whatever commotion you make.”

Everyone fell silent.

No one knew just how far this powerful AI magistrate would develop.

“Then, may I take a day off tomorrow?” Lin Youyou asked.

“Sure,” Captain Song agreed with a wave of her hand.

The atmosphere in the multimedia room was calm, and Zhuang Qingyan suddenly asked, “What are you doing?”

Song Ke turned her head and was surprised to see that Lu Xiaoyu’s hand was about to reach another wheelchair in the room.

He answered seriously, “I need materials for a second modification.”

A crutch extended through the air to block his path, and Zhuang Qingyan squinted slightly, speaking with a confrontational tone.

“Lu Xiaoyu, there are some things I can only tolerate once.”

Lu Xiaoyu casually retracted his hand, “Oh, then please help me get some materials.”

“I’ll handle the procurement,” Fang Zhixu volunteered. Since everyone had tasks, he didn’t want to remain idle.

“This is the list,” Lu Xiaoyu’s ice-blue eyes flashed as he transferred a large amount of data to Fang Zhixu’s terminal. “By the way, if possible, buy another terminal. We’ll be going to District C55, right? I need equipment to hack into District C’s household registration system.”

Fang Zhixu paused for a moment, then nodded, “Alright.”

Two days later, the Throne Race Competition’s top 16 knockout stage officially began.

The host was the ever-energetic Ah K, and after explaining the rules, he turned the topic to something special, saying, “Today’s guests are quite unique. Please welcome one of the Ten New Stars, Lin Youyou, as she brings us a new song, ‘Gentle Rain.’”

Spotlights illuminated the stage, and unlike previous appearances, the star on stage wasn’t a holographic projection but emerged slowly from a lift.

Lin Youyou wore a magnificent performance outfit with exquisite makeup, shimmering at the corners of her eyes. Her melodious voice filled the air.

“I like your smile~ like a gentle rain sprinkled in my heart~”

In the competitor’s area, Song Ke swayed from side to side, humming along with the enthusiastic fans, “I like your smile, like a gentle rain~ sprinkled in my heart~”

She sang off-key, not hitting a single note, but she was oblivious to it herself.

Zhuang Qingyan turned to look at her, and Song Ke remained unaware.

A faint smile appeared on his lips, and he couldn’t help but laugh.

On the other side, Irene gazed at the dazzling Lin Youyou on stage and cast a glance in the direction of V587. The mysterious masked competitor was indeed not among them.

She turned her head back to continue watching the performance.

After the song ended, Lin Youyou stood beside Ah K, and the line between the real person and AI was gradually becoming blurred, indistinguishable from a distance.

Ah K enthusiastically asked, "This is your first time visiting our live event, Lin Youyou. Is there anything you'd like to say to everyone?"

Lin Youyou displayed her signature smile, "I'm honored to accept the invitation, and I've actually been following the competition."

"Oh? Do you have a team you're supporting?"

"Of course, but I can't reveal it now. I hope they can achieve victory successfully."

"Alright! Let's all look forward to it together."

After the opening, the seven defending champions took the stage one by one, and the audience's discussions grew louder.

"What's going on with the defending champion from Group G? Did they come to the wrong place?"

"Damn! Even disabled people are participating?"

"V587, weren't they the dark horse from last time? Why did they change members?"

Amidst a group of celebrity participants like Duanmu Qi, Old Xiang, and Irene, Lu Xiaoyu, sitting in a wheelchair with his legs disabled, appeared particularly fragile, like a little lamb lost among wolves.

Zhuang Qingyan's speculation was correct. Lu Xiaoyu had indeed become the target of many challengers. In the first round of challenges, a staggering fifteen people saw him as an easy breakthrough.

"I choose him!"

"I choose him too!"

The first challenger was an old acquaintance, the "Ferrara Star," a bassist who had crossed paths with them in Mirror Lake.

Without any hesitation, the young man with smoky eye makeup immediately began producing his unique ability, creating a cacophonous noise with his bass.

Lu Xiaoyu calmly appreciated it for a moment, then shook his head, quickly drawing a conclusion. The opponent's musical taste was truly terrible and hard to bear. His ice-blue eyes gleamed as he released his psychic power, sending a Cotard wave segment straight into the opponent's face.

The bassist's eyes rolled back, and he convulsed before collapsing on the ground.

The audience had yet to fully comprehend what had happened when the match was already over.

The second challenger was noticeably more cautious. His awakened ability was defensive-type, allowing his entire body to become like steel, resisting external attacks. However, seeing that Lu Xiaoyu had no legs and difficulty in moving, he slyly circled around him, like a mischievous monkey.

Lu Xiaoyu followed his movements, but couldn't catch him head-on. Growing increasingly impatient, he made a "tch" sound and instantly extended six massive mechanical arms from his back, resembling spider legs. They shot out from mid-air and swiftly attacked, their cold tendrils accurately piercing the opponent's chest.

The arena fell into a sudden hush, with even the surrounding sounds of battle coming to a momentary pause. Then, a thunderous cheer erupted.

Duanmu Qi and Old Xiang, who had already advanced by default, watched the Group G battle, their expressions growing more serious.

Duanmu Qi had been defeated by Song Ke before, so he had always been cautious about her. He wanted to have a fair and square showdown with her. On the other hand, Old Xiang was a man with deep thoughts and had eliminated his adversaries, but he had yet to make a move against V587. This was quite unexpected.

Duanmu Qi teased, "Old Xiang, allowing your opponents to grow seems to be against your style."

Old Xiang snorted, an uncharacteristic lack of retort.

He also wanted to suppress V587 and snuff out the enemy while they were still in the cradle. The key was that he couldn't get ahold of them! After the Mirror Lake competition's round of 64, Old Xiang dispatched his men to gather information about V587. Just as he was starting to get some leads, they disappeared without a trace the next day, and he couldn't find them anywhere in the entire Ferrara.

After waiting for the round of 32, V587 reappeared, and Old Xiang immediately ordered his men to eliminate them. But before they could act, Lyon's uprising and the zombie attack threw Ferrara into endless chaos. By the time Old Xiang regained his senses, they had disappeared again!

Seeing that their opponent was becoming increasingly powerful and might even threaten to win the championship, Old Xiang could no longer sit still. This round was his last opportunity to take action. If they managed to advance to the finals... everything would be uncertain.

"V587, no matter what, I won't let you leave Ferrara alive this time."

...

Group G.

Lu Xiaoyu fought with a god-like demeanor, defeating all the challengers. As the match went on, it became absurd. One of his mechanical arms opened a data panel and began working slowly and leisurely, all while effortlessly battling his opponents. His arrogant demeanor was infuriating, making everyone grit their teeth.

The defeated challengers regretted their decisions bitterly.

In the first round, V587 secured an easy victory.

In the second round, it was Xu Xing's turn to take the stage. It was his first time participating in a solo battle, and he climbed onto the platform nervously. He glanced back and saw Song Ke, who was swaying to the music, cheering him on from below. Beside her were Zhuang Qingyan, who had a half-smile on his face, Su Cha, who had a neutral expression, and the drowsy Fang Zhixu.

Xu Xing's face was tense, but he nodded heavily. He thought that he would be an easy target for his challengers due to his young age. However, to his surprise, the defending champions from other groups were even weaker.

Everyone had analyzed the match videos, and in comparison, Xu Xing, who had once single-handedly killed a mutant zombie, was surprisingly one of the top contenders. In the end, only three people dared to challenge him.

Xu Xing went from being the lowest-ranked player in V587 to being seen as a formidable opponent by others in no time. He hadn't even realized it himself. The 'whoosh' of his ice blades quickly put all three challengers on the ground.

Xu Xing: "Am I really this strong? Why didn't I know?"

V587 won two consecutive rounds!

In the third round, it was Su Cha's turn. With a single push, he leaped onto the platform like a nimble cheetah.

Su Cha was a tall man, standing at 1.9 meters. His short hair, tattoos, and the wild and untamed look in his eyes made him appear intimidating. However, the other teams had also reached the brink of elimination and had no choice but to challenge him. There were five challengers in total.

Su Cha, who had been tempered by the Death Prison, easily defeated his opponents, even without using his special ability.

Song Ke in the audience was a bit puzzled, "Why do they seem weaker?"

Zhuang Qingyan shook his head, "It's not that they've become weaker; it's that we've become stronger."

The strength of their seven-member team had far exceeded that of the other participants in the Throne Race, from being evenly matched in the preliminary rounds to now holding a clear lead. They were no longer on the same level as the rest of the competition.

Su Cha defeated the last challenging opponent, and V587 had won three consecutive rounds, advancing to the final of the Throne Race.

As the excited announcer, Ah K, announced the list of finalists, Song Ke and her team walked against the crowd to meet with Lin Youyou, who was waiting outside.

Zhuang Qingyan asked in a low voice, "Did you manage to get Mu City's access permit?"

Liu Xiaoyu replied casually, "Done."

With a motion of his mechanical arm, they all received seven fake identification cards that were indistinguishable from real ones, all registered in District C55, Mu City.

"Let's not waste any more time. Let's go."

"But before we go, we need a new starship."

“You’ve got the nerve to say that. If it weren’t for you crashing our last one, would we need a new one?”

Song Ke noticed that someone was slowly falling behind and looked back at him. “What’s wrong?”

Fang Zhixu wiped his face and his emotions were trembling uncontrollably. He took a deep breath and said, “Nothing, let’s go.”

It took some time, but they managed to sneak into the starship harbor of Ferrara and disappeared from view at the gate.

Just a few seconds after they entered, a spatial distortion occurred, and a group of individuals with supernatural abilities slowly appeared from the shadows.

“Is everyone here?” the leader, a spatial manipulation awakener, asked coldly.

“We’re all here.”

“Hurry up and get to work. This is the third time. If we can’t complete the mission this time, Mr. Xiang won’t spare us. Do you understand?!”

“We understand!”

Just as they were about to move, they suddenly heard the familiar sound of a starship taking off from the starship harbor. It seemed like... the sound of a starship lifting off.

The leader with spatial manipulation abilities felt a shadow fall over his heart, “Oh no, quickly, get inside!”

Before he could finish his sentence, a silver starship rapidly ascended into the sky, moving swiftly through the steamships and flower ships below, and disappeared into the neon depths in the blink of an eye.

One of the pursuers muttered, "Damn it!"

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 84: When the Roses Bloom (2)

Birds and House Dogs

"These identity documents, why are all the professions mercenaries?"

During the flight, Lin Youyou had some free time, so she flipped through the forged admission applications made by Lu Xiaoyu and noticed a common trait.

"Mercenaries are the best choice."

Lu Xiaoyu probably thought everyone had the same level of intelligence as him, as he didn't continue to explain after saying this.

The rest of the people looked at each other in confusion: "..."

They didn't quite understand, but they didn't want to ask and make themselves appear ignorant.

Song Ke turned to "Alliance Know-it-All" Zhuang Qingyan and secretly signaled to him.

Zhuang Qingyan cleared his throat and timely explained to everyone: "The social structure of the Mu City society is highly stratified, with people divided into different classes. At the top is the magistrate, also known as 'General,' who holds supreme power and authority. He is the creator of the rules, and right and wrong are determined by his will alone."

“Below the General are warlord leaders and various military officers, who monopolize the channels of military production and enjoy many privileges, even having private armed forces. As beneficiaries of these privileges, they fervently support the rule of the General and become his loyal henchmen.”

“The third level consists of the wealthy and businessmen, who serve as intermediaries for the circulation of military supplies and amass great wealth. They may appear prosperous on the surface, but because of the illegitimate sources of their assets, they must rely on the protection of warlords and are usually closely aligned with them.”

The starship soared across the horizon, and the navigation system indicated that they were nearing the border of District C55.

Surrounding Mu City were several D-level cities, forming a crescent shape around it in the central region.

Zhuang Qingyan quickened his pace of explanation: “From the fourth level and below, you have mercenaries, workers, and the destitute. Mercenaries make up a large portion, they act relatively independently. Workers are often local residents for generations, leading uneventful lives but at least living without worry. At the lowest level are the destitute, also known as the ‘downtrodden,’ with the lowest status, only able to do laborious work and constantly facing the risk of expulsion.”

After hearing the explanation, everyone suddenly understood. It made sense why Lu Xiaoyu had chosen the identity of a mercenary. Officers and wealthy individuals were prominent figures in the local community, and their unfamiliar faces would only invite unnecessary trouble. Workers and the destitute had too many limitations, which wouldn’t be conducive to their operations. Therefore, being mercenaries seemed like the perfect choice.

Lu Xiaoyu slowly reduced the speed of the starship and said, “We can’t proceed any further. Once we enter Mu City’s territory, unidentified flying objects will be shot down.”

Lin Youyou peered outside, but the limited view through the window made it difficult to see clearly. “Is there something ahead?”

Song Ke put on a hood, opened the starship’s cabin door, and hung onto the handrail with one hand, leaning out to look into the distance.

The high-altitude wind blew against their faces, bone-chilling cold. Beneath their feet, there were countless zombies and mutated animals wandering aimlessly between the wilderness and the abandoned cities. The sound of gunfire and howls echoed back and forth, and occasionally, they could hear intense gunfire.

The cities they had visited before, whether it was Ferrara or Tongwan, had relatively clean surroundings, with the nearby zombies having been cleared out. And Sin City, due to its unique geographical location, was far from natural disasters.

However, the current view of Mu City revealed the most brutal side of the apocalypse.

Between several D-level cities, there was a road faintly visible, enclosed by a high-voltage iron net, leading directly into the distance and extending to the base of the city walls.

“This is Mu City’s ‘lifeline,’ and only those who pass through this road are qualified to enter the city,” Zhuang Qingyan explained.

Song Ke fixed her gaze on the endpoint of the lifeline, which was the impenetrable city of Mu City, and at the other end, there seemed to be an endless horde of zombies.

She smiled and asked, “To enter the city, do we have to pass a test?”

“We’ll kill our way in,” he said.

There was no one nearby, and there was no need to hide their abilities. After descending to low altitude, the seven of them successively jumped off the starship. Song Ke drew her twin blades from behind, Su Cha unsheathed his dagger, Lu Xiaoyu’s six mechanical arms were displayed menacingly, Lin Youyou’s singing voice echoed, creating soundwaves around them, and Xu Xing, right behind them, unleashed a barrage of ice blades. V587 cooperated seamlessly, unleashing its full firepower.

A group of ashen-eyed beasts suddenly jumped out. They resembled dogs but were smaller than wolves, surrounding them, baring their teeth and growling. These were the unique and fierce creatures of Mu City, the zombie hyenas.

Song Ke quickened her pace, charging forward with her dual blades spinning to eviscerate the hyenas, slicing their bodies in half in an instant!

Various supernatural abilities shone brightly, and in less than five minutes, a small-scale battle was swiftly extinguished, with V587 effortlessly eliminating the obstacles in their path.

Even Fang Zhixu, holding a spiritual weapon longsword, though he was in the support class, couldn't always rely on others for protection. He needed to learn to defend himself and, when necessary, could deliver a few blows himself.

The lifeline was about six to seven kilometers long, and along the way, they encountered other teams hunting zombies. Each time they killed one, they recorded it with their terminals. When Song Ke and her group passed by, the people in those teams were intimidated by the aura of death on them and took two steps back, leaving the zombies behind as they ran away.

Judging from their abilities, it was evident that the others were also awakeners.

Song Ke was puzzled, "What are they doing?"

Zhuang Qingyan answered, "They should be 'Clearers.'"

"What are 'Clearers'?"

"Mu City's specialty is that most of its population consists of mercenaries and the destitute, responsible for clearing the monsters outside the city to prevent the outbreak of zombie hordes," Zhuang Qingyan explained.

As they passed by abandoned buildings along the way, they occasionally saw signs of human activity, half-built camps, and unfinished drinking water...

Song Ke furrowed her brow and asked, "Why live here? It's all zombies nearby, and sleeping out in the open doesn't seem like a good choice."

Zhuang Qingyan's eyes darkened, "Without admission applications, they can only wander around the outskirts."

Lu Xiaoyu accessed the new laws enacted by the general after the apocalypse and said, "Mu City revoked the permanent residence rights of the destitute within the area and replaced it with a quantitative approach. They release 300 temporary slots for the Clearers every day. Only those who complete the clearing tasks are allowed to enter the city."

Lin Youyou frowned, "Isn't this essentially forcing people into dangerous situations? Accidents happen all the time when hunting zombies. While the destitute have a lowly status, this kind of oppression is too much, isn't it?"

Fang Zhixu, who had been silent, spoke coldly, "In the eyes of a tyrant, all destitute are like pigs and dogs. What's there to care about with pigs and dogs? Just call them twice, and they stop in their tracks."

The others sighed at his words.

This was a brutal city.

After walking for half an hour, the number of zombies gradually decreased. At the same time, the towering city wall, with no visible end, gradually appeared in front of them. At regular intervals along the wall, there were rows of dark tanks and heavy artillery, and patrol drones circled the sky. It truly lived up to its reputation as the Alliance's arms depot, with these heavy weapons serving as a glaring deterrent to outsiders.

At the city gate, there were several long lines of people, stretching as far as the eye could see, all of them Clearers who had come to complete their tasks.

As Song Ke and her group walked along with the crowd, they overheard hushed conversations among those waiting in line.

"Did you meet the criteria?"

“I did, but I came back late, afraid I won’t get in.”

“Who’s on duty at the gate today?”

“Godanwei.”

“...That lackey. Forget it, don’t bother waiting in line, try your luck tomorrow.”

“Godanwei?” Song Ke’s sharp ears picked up on the unfamiliar name.

When they got closer, the group chose the line marked “Green Channel (Mercenaries Only),” where there were noticeably fewer people.

A sentry on duty asked in a routine manner, “Show your admission permits.”

Song Ke held up her terminal, tapped it against the interface, and Lu Xiaoyu’s forged identity information appeared on the screen.

The sentry glanced at it and processed their passage through the instrument. “Proceed to the checkpoint ahead for verification.”

“Just a moment,” a deep voice suddenly rang out, followed by the heavy footsteps of military boots on the ground.

The sentry stood up, looking somewhat fearful. “Lord Godanwei, what are your orders?”

Godanwei was dressed in the uniform of a mercenary, had tanned skin, and had a robust, imposing physique. He squinted his eyes slowly and asked, “Are you mercenaries? Whose mercenaries are you? I’ve never seen you before.”

Song Ke's heart skipped a beat, and she couldn't help but feel nervous. She thought, 'Uh-oh, this Godanwei is also a mercenary, and he seems quite knowledgeable about the situation in Mu City?'

In response to Godanwei's questioning, Zhuang Qingyan remained calm and composed, saying, "We are freelance mercenaries. We left Mu City for a mission before the apocalypse and have just returned. It's not surprising that you haven't seen us, but ignorance cannot be your excuse to hinder us."

Godanwei stared at him for a couple of seconds, snorted, and then meticulously examined the identity information of each member of the group. Their hometowns were indeed in District C55, Mu City, and he couldn't find any discrepancies. However, he had an animal instinct, and these people didn't seem like local mercenaries.

He pointed at Song Ke and said, "You, undergo verification."

Silently, Song Ke walked forward, with Godanwei following closely behind her.

Song Ke reached the checkpoint and entered a machine similar to a scanner. Numerous beams of light covered her from head to toe, capturing her facial and body data, and the screen displayed the message "Verification in progress."

As time passed, the result was still not visible.

Godanwei's expression grew cold, and he pulled a particle gun from his waist, aiming it at Song Ke's head, ready to pull the trigger.

"What are you doing?" Lin Youyou shouted, her heart pounding.

Fang Zhixu and Su Cha's palms also tightened their grip on their weapons. Xu Xing, being young, had a tense expression, and his lips quivered slightly.

Zhuang Qingyan moved at just the right moment, placing himself between Godanwei and Song Ke, his expression still calm.

Song Ke was anxious and stole a quick glance in Lu Xiaoyu's direction, silently praying, 'Lu Xiaoyu, please come through for us!'

Lu Xiaoyu sat in his wheelchair, looking unperturbed, and even yawned as if saying, "Are you doubting me?"

Zhuang Qingyan subtly nodded in her direction, and Song Ke, for some reason, began to relax a bit.

After five seconds, the scanner's screen finally displayed "Verification passed, welcome home, mercenary."

Song Ke straightened up her posture, maintaining a composed expression, but inside, she let out a huge sigh of relief.

Godanwei shifted the barrel of his gun to the side, gesturing for Song Ke to move along, but he still didn't lower the weapon. He said, "Next one."

The remaining six members of the group took their turns in the scanner one by one, and all of them passed without any issues.

Godanwei finally holstered his particle gun and said in a peculiar tone, "Welcome home, freelance mercenaries."

The group entered Mu City under Godanwei's watchful gaze, and they felt the uneasy sensation of his eyes on their backs until it disappeared from view.

Song Ke muttered, "Who is that guy?"

Lu Xiaoyu slid his fingers across the terminal and replied, "Just checked the information. Godanwei is a private soldier raised by the warlord Miao Lun's family. And to add, Miao Lun's reputation in Mu City is extremely notorious."

In Mu City, mercenaries were divided into two categories: freelance mercenaries, nicknamed “Flying Birds,” who had no constraints and could choose the contracts they wanted to take, and private soldiers loyal to the powerful, derogatorily referred to as “House Dogs.” Although they enjoyed a comfortable life, their reputation was often tainted by the actions of the warlords.

“Lu Xiaoyu, you’re really amazing,” Song Ke genuinely praised him.

While she was standing in the scanner, there was a moment when she had a fleeting thought of the image of “verification failed” in her mind, causing her heart to race.

Lu Xiaoyu accepted her praise with composure.

Xu Xing followed behind them and discreetly glanced at Lu Xiaoyu. He moved closer to him, his big eyes shimmering as if he had made a decision.

When they turned a corner, the entire city of Mu City lay before them. Compared to other C-level cities, Mu City’s level of technology wasn’t particularly impressive, and its architectural style was quite ordinary. It resembled the D-level cities they had visited, such as Hua City and Luli Port. However, the air here was thick with the scent of gunpowder, mercenaries walked the streets armed to the teeth, and you could encounter restrictions and private guards wielding weapons on every corner. Military factories were ubiquitous and belonged to different factions. In the distance, at the tops of the mountain ranges, there was a grand golden palace, with its spires piercing the sky, symbolizing authority.

Massive holographic projections hung on both sides of the streets, displaying the image of a middle-aged man with striking silver hair, dressed in the attire of Mu City’s supreme ruler, adorned with numerous medals and ribbons. He had a stern face, prominent eyebrows, and a sharp, imposing hawk-like nose.

“Nai Kang,” Fang Zhixu exclaimed, looking up, trembling all over. He called out the man’s name heavily.

Nai Kang, the tyrant, was the highest executive officer of Mu City, the general at the top of the pyramid, and the person Fang Zhixu wanted to kill but couldn’t.

“We will succeed,” Song Ke reassured him, placing her hand on his shoulder.

Fang Zhixu’s reaction was a bit exaggerated, and they were currently on the streets, which could easily arouse suspicion from others.

Zhuang Qingyan suggested, “Let’s find a place to stay first.”

As they were planning to stay in Mu City for a while, they decided to rent an apartment.

“Regarding the situation in Mu City, we should take some time to explore, and in the next few days, we can split up to gather more information,” Zhuang Qingyan said with gravity.

“It’s okay; we have plenty of time,” Song Ke said in a relaxed tone.

Since they had already infiltrated the city, their registered hometown was Mu City, and they wouldn’t have the problem of lacking access permissions. As long as they were cautious, they wouldn’t be discovered.

“Beep beep.”

At the same moment, their terminals displayed a message.

This was a broadcast message intended for all residents in the area, and it could be received by anyone in Mu City.

“Starting today, the modification of access restrictions’ validity period is implemented. Please strictly adhere to the following regulations: The validity period for destitutes is reduced to three days. Permanent residency rights for workers and freelance mercenaries are revoked. Workers have a seven-day access period, and freelance mercenaries have fifteen days, with the possibility of extension by completing municipal tasks.”

Zhuang Qingyan’s voice suddenly grew solemn, “The General has issued a new law.”

This was the power of Mu City's "tyrant," who could modify local laws at any time.

Their identity documents displayed an additional line of information: "Remaining validity period of your access application: 14 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes, and 42 seconds."

Time was decreasing rapidly.

The faces of everyone in the room, including Zhuang Qingyan, suddenly turned grim.

They were freelance mercenaries, and they had thought that once they entered Mu City, they could rest easy. But now, they realized that they were about to be sent out as clearers just as they had barely settled in.

Song Ke, who had just said, "We have plenty of time," quietly covered her mouth.

Oh no, she must have jinxed it with her crow's mouth, right?

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 85: When the Roses Bloom (3)

My people

Countdown: 15 days.

As the concrete dates for their possible stay were determined, V587 began to feel an inexplicable sense of urgency. If within these 15 days they made no progress, they would be forced either to take on the role of a clearer or face expulsion from Mu City.

After the recent amendments to the laws, the application process would now involve constant and unrelenting scrutiny. Their household registrations were already forged, and any further intervention by Lu Xiaoyu would only increase the risk of exposure.

What was more significant was the inclusion of freelance mercenaries in these amendments. Specifically mentioning “flying birds” and yet not imposing mandatory regulations on “house dogs,” the General was still providing a small amount of face-saving to those who supported him.

“Time is limited. Let’s divide into groups and take action tomorrow,” said Zhuang Qingyan in a grave tone.

The group division resulted in Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan forming one, Lin Youyou paired with Su Cha in another, while the remaining three – Lu Xiaoyu, Fang Zhixu, and Xu Xing – formed the last group.

After a brief sleep, the next morning, V587 set out in different directions to gather intelligence.

Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan arrived at the Golden Palace, the General’s residence also known as the “Reunification Palace.”

The main gate of the Reunification Palace was heavily guarded by armed soldiers, with a demarcated exclusion zone that barred anyone from approaching. Though there were no visible signs of heavy weaponry, an air of palpable hostility pervaded the atmosphere.

Song Ke cautiously felt along the perimeter, daring to consider scaling the wall, but Zhuang Qingyan stopped her by pulling her hood.

“Don’t go there, there’s infrared detection.”

Song Ke silently withdrew the foot she had already lifted and released a wisp of mental energy, confirming the presence of numerous concealed mechanisms within the walls.

The infrared sensors swiveled in a different direction, and the smell of gunpowder grew stronger. Song Ke's hairs stood on end; she quickly retreated. She had a premonition that any trespassing or unusual behavior would immediately prompt numerous muzzles to aim and obliterate her on the spot.

Zhuang Qingyan scanned the surroundings and swiftly made a decision: "Let's head to the hill opposite."

The two changed course and ascended the hill. Although the distance was great, from there, they could overlook the entire Reunification Palace.

"Captain, please support me a little," Zhuang Qingyan extended his left hand, openly displaying weakness to her.

"Wasn't there a cane?" Song Ke murmured softly but dutifully held his arm.

The mountain path was uneven. When Zhuang Qingyan stood up, he accidentally stepped on some gravel, causing his body to lean slightly towards Song Ke. Song Ke instinctively lifted her head just as the other person was bowing down. Their breaths unexpectedly intertwined.

Zhuang Qingyan's deep peach blossom eyes curved, and his magnetic voice seemed as if it intended to seep into Song Ke's ears: "I want to draw, it's more convenient leaning against you."

Song Ke blinked slowly, swiftly turned her head, and suddenly felt a warmth in her ears.

"...Oh." She didn't know what to say and finally responded.

Zhuang Qingyan skillfully manipulated the screen and sketched and painted. Song Ke watched as he delineated the three-dimensional structure of the Golden Palace, even creating models and sections. She stole a glance at the person beside her, focusing intently on his profile. Song Ke looked again and again, gradually becoming entranced. How could this person be so intelligent? Not only did he understand a lot, but he seemed to know everything; he could effortlessly draw even.

As Zhuang Qingyan drew, he spoke, "The General's mansion is larger than we anticipated. Sneaking in recklessly poses a high risk and could easily alert the guards."

“Ah? Oh,” Song Ke hadn’t caught what he said at all, she mumbled in response, feeling a bit uneasy as she awkwardly touched her own neck.

“You keep the blueprints.” Zhuang Qingyan finished drawing, handed the screen to Song Ke, then stood upright, closing his eyes slightly.

A strong surge of mental energy slowly flowed out from him, heading directly towards the Reunification Palace.

“There are awakeners inside, probably the Guard Unit, mainly A and B levels, and their numbers... close to a hundred.”

Suddenly, Song Ke remembered the first encounter with the mutant zombie at the City Hall in Luli Port. She and Xu Xing couldn’t find their way, but it was Zhuang Qingyan who first noticed the mental energy fluctuations and led them through the maze. He seemed particularly sharp in this regard.

“It seems like a direct assault won’t work; we’ll have to think of another way,” Zhuang Qingyan said. As he spoke, he noticed Song Ke’s strange expression. “What’s wrong?”

Song Ke lifted her head and said seriously, “Lu Xiaoyu is S-level, and he has demonstrated his strength before.

You are also S-level, but I don’t know how powerful you are.”

Apart from the incident at Manzoni Street when he rescued her from the Bloody Killer, Punk, Zhuang Qingyan had barely used his abilities. Most of the time, he was strategizing. As an S-level psychic awakener, his true strength was still a mystery.

“You should think this way, because there’s a reassuring captain, so there’s no need for me to step in,” Zhuang Qingyan said with a sly smile.

Song Ke turned her head, puffed her cheeks, and hmped at his sweet words.

...

On the other side, Lu Xiaoyu and his two companions arrived at Mu City's commission center.

This place gathered a large number of mercenaries and awakeners, a diverse crowd, the best place for outsiders to gather information.

Lu Xiaoyu found a self-service terminal and, after a moment of tinkering, suddenly sounded puzzled, "Huh?"

"What have you found?" Fang Zhixu asked in a low voice.

Lu Xiaoyu accessed the new announcement he had just seen: "Mu Qin's family issued a recruitment notice for the Guard Unit two days ago."

Fang Zhixu concentrated on reading the contents of the recruitment notice: "They will hold a Hero Banquet in their residence in seven days, recruiting for the Guard Unit on-site, inviting all the aspiring individuals in the region. The identity is unrestricted, but it requires the submission of a Level 3 crystal."

Mu Qin, Miao Lun, and Ruan Wenjun were the three major warlords in Mu City. Not only did these three families tightly control the core development of military technology, but it's also said that they have a close relationship with the General. Joining their Guard Unit could grant an individual an officer's status, facilitating a leap in social rank.

A Level 3 crystal, also known as a blue crystal, is exceedingly rare in terms of availability. It's only produced by evolved Level 3 zombies or mutant zombies of B-level and above. This threshold can be considered quite high.

Lu Xiaoyu returned to the hall and found a secluded corner. His focus fixed on the central floating screen, where numerous data streams flowed through his pupils. He rapidly sifted through the information, occasionally pausing at seemingly unrelated fragments.

“Cover me, I’m looking for something,” he said.

Fang Zhixu and Xu Xing quickly positioned themselves to shield him.

After a while, Lu Xiaoyu’s movements came to a halt.

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

...

Before sunset, V587 safely returned and gathered at the apartment.

“We went to the arms factory, but it’s heavily guarded by a large number of private soldiers. It’s impossible to sneak in. Here’s the footage we captured.” Lin Youyou cast the terminal’s projection, showing Su Cha stealthily approaching the periphery. The footage shook for a moment, followed by clear sounds of patrol teams and a vague view of something tank-like being loaded onto a vehicle and taken away.

“We also went to the Reunification Palace.” Song Ke displayed the architectural structure diagram drawn by Zhuang Qingyan, emphasizing that both direct assault and infiltration were unfeasible.

They were all at a loss. A day had passed, and they remained clueless, with only 14 days left.

“We’ve made a discovery,” suddenly said Lu Xiaoyu, lifting their spirits.

“What did you find?” the others asked eagerly.

“We found out that Mu Qin’s family is about to hold a Hero Banquet to recruit guards.”

“What does that have to do with us?” Song Ke inquired.

“It’s absolutely related,” Lu Xiaoyu’s icy eyes glinted as he presented all the information about the Hero Banquet, “The timing of Mu Qin family’s Hero Banquet is extremely subtle, occurring a whole three months earlier than usual. I have substantial evidence to suspect that, due to the urgent situation, they are actually gathering talents on behalf of the General.”

Lu Xiaoyu continued, “The General might have encountered an ambush, causing shock or injury.”

He effortlessly retrieved news snippets from the cluttered data: A month ago, multiple media outlets reported that the General encountered an attack by refugees during a ‘hunt.’ Fortunately, with timely defense, he escaped unscathed, while the rioting refugees were instantly subdued by the Guard Unit.

“Regardless of the General’s actual condition, it’s likely that his Guard Unit suffered some losses and therefore urgently needs fresh recruits.”

“I analyzed surveillance footage of the General over the past 26 years; there have been approximately 132 different faces among his guards. If we can figure out how many are still around...”

“95 people,” Zhuang Qingyan stated.

“There are 95 guard members remaining in the Reunification Palace,” he confirmed.

“Are you sure?” Lu Xiaoyu expressed doubt.

“More certain than your ‘approximately,’” Zhuang Qingyan countered calmly.

Lu Xiaoyu fell silent for two seconds and then clicked his tongue.

“But what kind of refugees could cause the General’s Guard Unit to lose nearly 40 people?” Lin Youyou questioned, “Could there be another reason? How could a disorganized and undisciplined group of

refugees overpower elite awakeners who make up the Guard Unit, all of whom are at least B-level and among the most skilled individuals?”

“No matter what the truth is, for us, this is an opportunity. If we can attend the recruitment meeting, maybe we can infiltrate the Guard Unit,” Zhuang Qingyan suggested. He didn’t explicitly say the latter part, but everyone understood; the Guard Unit protects the General closely, and if they can successfully join, there will be opportunities for action.

Song Ke lowered her head and rummaged through her backpack in dismay. “But we don’t have a Level 3 crystal.”

The highest quality crystal she currently had was a green Level 2 crystal from Mirror Lake’s water monster. As for Level 3 crystals, she had never even seen one.

Su Cha chimed in, “We could go to the lifeline. On the day we entered the city, I encountered Level 2 zombies.”

In the surrounding D-level cities near Mu City, monsters roamed everywhere. If they searched carefully, they might discover Level 3 zombies.

“Alas...” Lin Youyou felt a headache just thinking about zombies, “It seems like there’s no escaping playing the role of a cleaner again.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll leave the city tomorrow,” Zhuang Qingyan declared.

Song Ke cautiously sought the opinions of the others, “Since we’re going out, should I take on some commissions on the side?”

As the team captain, she needed to plan carefully to sustain the whole group.

The other six: “...Up to you.”

...

In Xian Port, a D-level city near Mu City.

Lin Youyou scoured the ruins for signs of zombies. Because V587's dedicated captain, Song Ke, "incidentally" accepted over a dozen commissions, they were concerned about time and decided to split up to complete tasks. However, they weren't too far apart, so they could call out if anything happened.

As Lin Youyou emerged from a collapsed office building, she brushed off the dust. Just as she looked up, a group of fierce-looking mercenaries approached her. Noticing she was alone, they stopped with hostile intent.

The post-apocalyptic setting, the ruins, and a vulnerable yet beautiful young woman—these three elements together easily spark the imagination.

The mercenary, Sang Bo, was one of those lower creatures. He stared fixedly at Lin Youyou, excitement tugging at the corners of his mouth.

His companion, Hu Chao, guessed what he was thinking and cautioned in a deep voice, "Sang Bo, such a fine commodity should be offered to Lord Miao Lun."

Sang Bo shrugged it off, "Lord Miao Lun has seen enough beauty; one won't make a difference. I'll enjoy myself first."

He emerged from the rubble and whistled provocatively at Lin Youyou.

Furrowing her brows, Lin Youyou coldly ordered, "Go away."

Sang Bo, however, didn't retreat but instead leered, his sinful eyes lingering on Lin Youyou's face and descending further.

Incensed, Lin Youyou struck him hard across the face.

There was a moment of silence among the others.

Sang Bo seemed momentarily stunned, spitting out a mouthful of blood, “The little girl’s got some fire, I like it.”

Suddenly, his body turned into a black, rotten mud, moving behind Lin Youyou. It reconstituted, with his robust wrist now seizing her arm. His lips approached her cheek, his foul breath ominously close.

Enraged, Lin Youyou prepared to retaliate but realized she couldn’t sing!

No! A silence field—her innate ability restrained her. She couldn’t sing, nor could she even make a sound to call for help.

Startled, Lin Youyou looked up to see another lean man opposite her, covering his left eye while his bloodshot right eye fixed deeply on her. The world around Lin Youyou fell into silence; she couldn’t hear or produce any sound.

As Sang Bo’s foul breath neared, she felt a wave of nausea. With a slight movement of her sleeve, a dark blue hand arrow fell into her palm. She cut herself deeply.

The world remained silent, but—

A gust of wind rushed past Lin Youyou, a graceful figure zipping by her, heading straight for the lean man.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

Song Ke’s hand flashed with a sharp blue light, piercing directly into the sinister eye of the lean man.

“Ah—!” A piercing scream tore through the air, breaking the silence field of the opponent!

Almost simultaneously, Sang Bo, who had been restraining Lin Youyou, was struck heavily in the chest by another foot, causing blood to spurt out. Lin Youyou took the opportunity to escape.

In front of Sang Bo, Su Cha, furiously enraged, released his erratic ability, thunderously attacking him.

Realizing imminent danger, Sang Bo's body rapidly disintegrated into black mud, about to retreat.

An ethereal song resonated in his mind. Suddenly, a boundless fear overwhelmed Sang Bo, freezing him in place, unable to move. This was Lin Youyou's A-level ability, a debuff control!

Su Cha unleashed his venom, covering the wriggling black mud, inflicting unbearable pain on Sang Bo. Reverting to human form, he climbed in agony. At that moment, a dagger, infused with a green hue, pierced his heart. Sang Bo turned in shock, seeing that Lin Youyou had used Su Cha's dagger to personally end his life.

In just a few seconds, a sudden turn of events: both mercenaries who had targeted Lin Youyou fell dead on the spot!

Song Ke landed beside Lin Youyou, asking, "Are you okay?"

Su Cha, a towering figure, looked down at her, a hint of regret flickering in his eyes.

Lin Youyou held his shoulder, reassuring him, "I'm fine."

Not far away, Zhuang Qingyan and the others heard the commotion and quickly rushed over.

Hu Chao, witnessing Sang Bo's death, spoke with a grave expression, "Who are you? Daring to kill the Miao Lun family's mercenaries, don't you want to survive here?"

Song Ke fearlessly stared back, "We are freelance mercenaries."

“Freelance mercenaries? From the South or the Western Street? Who’s your boss? Which faction?” Hu Chao pressed.

“…Are there factions among freelance mercenaries?” Song Ke couldn’t come up with an answer.

Hu Chao grew suspicious, “Whose people are you, really?!”

His mercenaries behind him assumed a combat stance, encroaching on the group.

V587 tensed up, preparing for a confrontation.

The tense atmosphere was on the brink of eruption.

“Boom!”

A micro missile hit the open space between the two groups of people, shattering rocks and raising a cloud of dust.

“My people.”

A familiar voice rang out.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 86: When the Roses Bloom (4)

Leave as soon as possible

“They are my people.”

A person leaped from the sniper position on the rooftop.

Wearing black military boots, camouflage pants, a hot vest, with a mobile artillery piece slung over the right shoulder, the left arm, however, was partially missing, only a stump remained above the elbow joint.

The newcomer had a slender figure, with brown skin and a crew cut, robust muscles, a resolute and powerful look in the eyes, exuding a rare leadership quality.

Irene.

Song Ke silently recited her name in her mind.

Surprisingly, it was the captain of the “Guns and Roses,” their opponents in the Throne Race. How could she appear here?

“The famous Western Street Fox, I heard you transferred to another district, why have you returned?”

“I guess no one wanted her there. Where else can you find a woman as tough as her?”

“Look, she doesn’t even have a hand now, she’s become a miserable cur, hahaha!”

The mercenaries recognized Irene. Initially, they laughed heartily, mocking her carelessly. However, faced with the densely packed muzzles and Irene’s expressionless face, their raucous laughter gradually weakened, disappeared, and finally, there was dead silence.

Hu Chao spoke slowly, “Fox, it’s been half a year since we heard from you. How have you been? Care to sit down and reminisce...”

Irene coldly interrupted, “Save your concern, and have your people withdraw.”

The false smile on Hu Chao's face vanished, his voice suddenly rising, "Withdraw? These people killed Sang Bo, Lord Miao Lun's private soldiers. By standing up for them, are you ready to make enemies of the entire Miao Lun family?"

Facing Hu Chao's threats, Irene remained unmoved, "I'll say it again, they are my people. Sang Bo brought it on himself. Hu Chao, you can report today's events truthfully to your master and see how he reacts."

Hu Chao choked up. Sang Bo's death resulted from his own lust for Lin Youyou's beauty and his desire to possess her alone. To put it bluntly, it was his disrespect and betrayal towards Lord Miao Lun, which, if escalated, would not end well, even if Sang Bo were still alive.

Seeing Hu Chao's silence, Irene added, "What's the matter? Can't speak? Do you need me to help you report?"

Hu Chao's heart trembled. Irene was threatening him. Everyone knew that Lord Miao Lun's new favorite was from Western Street. If, under Irene's insinuation, she whispered a few words in someone's ear... Even he, as a bystander, might be implicated.

Hu Chao, though not as brave as Sang Bo or as skilled as Godanwei, considered himself someone who understood the situation and could survive better than most.

After contemplating for a while, he spoke in a solemn tone, "Nothing happened today. Unfortunately, Sang Bo and Para fell victim to the zombies."

Para was the 'Evil Eye' user who possessed the field of silence.

"No, Sang Bo cannot die in vain!"

An agitated mercenary shouted at the top of his lungs, disregarding everything and drawing a particle gun from his waist.

“Boom, boom!”

Without a second thought, Irene fired three micro-missiles, creating deep craters near the shouting person’s feet. Shattered debris tore the mercenaries’ clothes, stones grazed their faces, rendering everyone speechless, afraid to act rashly. The particle gun, under the overwhelming suppression of absolute firepower, seemed almost comical, like a child’s toy.

This Irene seemed like a lunatic, especially after losing a hand!

“I believe we’ve come to an understanding, haven’t we?” Irene ignored the mercenaries, staring at Hu Chao.

“...” Hu Chao’s expression turned cold. It wasn’t an understanding, it was clearly this woman using force to coerce them. Irene was a B-level awakener, awakening an ability specializing in firearms, and today, she was determined to protect someone. Angering her might not end well.

“...Withdraw,” Hu Chao gritted his teeth.

“Hu Chao, they...” someone unwillingly interjected.

“If you don’t want to die, mind your own business!” Hu Chao left with his people, abandoning Sang Bo and Para on the ground. Only V587 and Irene remained at the scene.

Irene retracted her gun and glanced at V587, scanned through Zhuang Qingyan and the others, finally settling her gaze on Song Ke.

“If you’re hiding here because of Old Xiang’s pursuit, this isn’t a good choice. Find another place.”

“What pursuit?” Song Ke asked, confused.

“You don’t know?” Irene was surprised.

Song Ke shook her head. She was clueless.

Irene's brow furrowed.

“Since it's not because of pursuit, you, and you, the big star,” Irene disregarded the other men behind, pointing at Lin Youyou, who was trying to cover her face with sunglasses, “Why did you all come to Mu City?”

Lin Youyou's identity was exposed, and she dryly smiled, “When did you recognize me?”

“I had suspicions before. During the top 16 competition, I couldn't find you among them, so I confirmed it.”

Irene paused, “I don't understand. What do you want from Ferrara? Why suffer by coming here?”

“We're searching for a Level 3 crystal,” Song Ke explained seriously.

Upon hearing this, Irene turned to her, “Even though Level 3 crystals are rare, there's no need to specifically come to Mu City to find one.”

“Oh, we want to participate in the Hero Banquet hosted by Mu Qin.”

Irene's grip on the artillery tightened, her expression suddenly turning cold, “So, you also want to be the warlord's dogs?”

“No, no, no, it's not like that! I... we...” Song Ke repeatedly waved her hands, trying to explain. However, Irene's stance was still uncertain, and he couldn't directly say, ‘In fact, we're here to assassinate the general.’ Her nervousness led to an incomprehensible explanation.

“Looks like it’s a bit complicated. Won’t you step in?” Lu Xiaoyu asked. Diplomacy was usually Zhuang Qingyan’s responsibility in the past.

“It’s not suitable for me to step in. Let the ladies handle it themselves,” Zhuang Qingyan leaned back in his wheelchair, supporting his chin with a smile.

Irene obviously didn’t appreciate them and only spoke to Song Ke and Lin Youyou. If he intervened now, he wouldn’t get a good reception.

“Let me speak,” Lin Youyou patted Song Ke on the back. “Irene, we came to Mu City for a specific purpose. Although we can’t tell you what it is right now, attending the Hero Banquet is the best opportunity for us. But rest assured, our position is fundamentally at odds with the warlords, and we absolutely won’t be their ‘dogs.’”

“Thank you for helping us just now,” Lin Youyou genuinely thanked her.

Irene carefully observed Lin Youyou’s expression to judge the truth in her words. Song Ke vigorously nodded on the side, hoping to increase their credibility.

After a while, Irene nodded slightly, “Do as you wish.”

She lifted the artillery with one hand. Before leaving, she hesitated for a moment, then, facing away from Lin Youyou, she murmured softly, “Let me remind you, Mu City isn’t suitable for you. Finish your business and leave as soon as possible.”

Lin Youyou was briefly stunned. Irene’s words were directed specifically at “you,” evidently meant for her.

A few zombies jumped out from the ruins. Irene calmly retreated, set up the artillery, and blasted them before taking out a terminal to take a photo and record.

“Huh? She’s acting as a clearer, for a mission?” Song Ke exclaimed in surprise.

Lu Xiaoyu's ice-blue eyes flickered, "Irene, 27 years old, biological ID: MUD3220875, registered in Mu City, a freelance mercenary. According to current laws, her admission period has expired. To enter the city, she must complete clearer missions. Currently, her progress is at 15%."

"How do you know so much?" Song Ke's eyes widened.

Lu Xiaoyu replied, "When she took a photo just now, I hacked into her terminal."

Song Ke: "...Can't you leave people with some privacy?"

Lu Xiaoyu looked at Song Ke's speechless expression. His social barriers gave off the wrong signal, making him think that Song Ke also wanted to grasp that skill.

"In fact, it's simple, you can use supernatural abilities. The first step is to release your mental energy..."

"No, I don't want to know," Song Ke waved her hand, feeling mentally exhausted.

"I have an idea," Lin Youyou suddenly spoke up. "Mu City's hierarchy is complex, even within the mercenary community, there are various hidden rules. Right now, our only choice is to participate in the Hero Banquet. But if we can get help from locals, could there be another way?"

"Are you thinking of asking for Irene's help?" Zhuang Qingyan asked.

"Irene's personality might make it a bit difficult to ask for help... What about discussing a trade with her? I'll ask her about her needs," Lin Youyou recalled the unique and peculiar merchant, Cheng Yi, from Sin City and her eyes lit up. "Do you think that's feasible?"

"We can try," Zhuang Qingyan said, "Based on her recent attitude, even if she doesn't align with us, at least she won't be an enemy."

“If we help her do the clearer missions, it might be quicker,” Song Ke reminded.

V587’s goal was Level 3 zombies, which didn’t conflict with Irene’s mission. They could help her along the way.

Fang Zhixu and Xu Xing didn’t mind, nodding in agreement.

“Alright, I’ll go talk to her.” Lin Youyou jogged over, catching up with Irene.

After a few minutes of conversation, Irene and Lin Youyou returned together.

“What trade do you want to make?” Irene asked.

“We’ll talk about that slowly. First, we’ll help you with the mission,” Lin Youyou replied.

“Okay, at the latest by tomorrow, I need to enter the city.”

“No problem,” Song Ke nodded.

Irene temporarily joined the group, and they proceeded towards the Xiangang Center, clearing out zombies as they advanced.

Song Ke and Su Cha, along with Lu Xiaoyu in his six-claw mode, were responsible for drawing monsters, leading the zombies within a few kilometers together. Lin Youyou sang, causing the monsters to slow down, Xu Xing froze them with frost, and then Irene, positioned on the roof, adjusted her angle and launched a micro-missile.

“Boom, boom.”

Destructive smoke rose into the air, and most of the zombies were blown to bits, while the remaining few were quickly dealt with by the trio who had drawn them in, leaving the ground shimmering with crystal shards.

Zhuang Qingyan and Fang Zhixu cleared the battlefield. Fang Zhixu maneuvered through the pile of monsters, striking with remarkable precision. Each strike was clean and precise, hardly causing the zombies' brain fluid to spill. He swiftly detached whole crystal shards, wiped them clean with a cloth, and stowed them in his bag. Most of this round was comprised of white Level 1 crystals, with only a few Level 2 crystals occasionally found.

Irene jumped down from the rooftop, the military boots hitting the ground. She took out her terminal for counting and photographs. With V587's assistance, the progress indeed sped up significantly. Half a day had passed, and they had already reached 85%, but unfortunately, Level 3 zombies were still nowhere to be found.

As darkness gradually enveloped the area, visibility became difficult. Zhuang Qingyan suggested, "Let's find a place to spend the night and continue tomorrow."

Irene glanced around and said, "Follow me."

She led Song Ke and the others through the ruins of Xiangang and finally arrived at a tall building. This seemed to be a base, with quite stringent defense measures. Occasionally, one could see traces of supernatural fire rings. Irene used the base of her artillery to tap the copper bell at the camp's entrance.

"Who's there?!" From a distance of several tens of meters, lights turned on, followed by a thunderous voice questioning with caution.

Song Ke keenly detected an unfamiliar mental presence; the speaker was a awakener.

The next moment, there was a faint sound of mechanical movement above the camp, targeting them unseen.

"Western Street, Irene." Irene raised her hand, signaling Song Ke to remain calm.

“So it’s the Fox, long time no see,” came the reply from the other side in a deep tone.

“Samuel, eight people, we’re seeking a place to stay for the night,” Irene stated.

The gate slowly opened a crack, but the people inside remained hidden. The resonant voice echoed from a distance, “Turn left to the first floor, make yourselves at home. Fox, it’s because of your face that I’m allowing your people in. But if they cross the line, they’ll face the consequences.”

“Thank you.”

The group smoothly entered the camp. The ground floor had a few temporary accommodations resembling bunk beds. Irene pointed out two of them, “Conditions are basic, but it’ll do for the night. This is the base for the Western Street mercenaries and relatively safe.”

Men and women separated into different rooms. Song Ke and Zhuang Qingyan bid farewell at the door, following Irene to the room on the left.

Lin Youyou picked a relatively clean bed and sat down, asking, “I heard that person call you ‘Fox’.”

“Just a nickname,” Irene replied indifferently.

Lin Youyou didn’t beat around the bush, asking directly, “Irene, we want to know about the information regarding freelance mercenaries.”

Irene unloaded her artillery and placed it within easy reach, saying, “The freelance mercenaries in Mu City mainly gather in the South District and Western Street. They’re divided into two major factions. The South District has a larger influence and more people. However, in recent years, some have covertly allied with warlords, like Hu Chao. The members are a mixed bunch, making it hard to distinguish. The mercenaries in the Western Street are constantly in life-or-death situations. They are all daredevil types, not abiding by many rules, and even the ‘house dogs’ won’t provoke them.”

The three lay side by side on the bed, and a silence enveloped the room.

Song Ke turned over and quietly glanced at the silhouette of the person beside her, "Irene, why did you participate in the Throne Race Competition?"

Irene remained motionless, "I don't know how you managed to get in, but Mu City's admission restrictions are very strict. You're aware of that, right?"

In the darkness, Song Ke and Lin Youyou nodded.

"Even stricter than the admission restrictions are the procedures for changing citizenship."

"Do you want to leave Mu City?" Song Ke sat up in surprise.

Irene fell silent for a moment, "Sort of."

"But you don't need to participate in the competition...", Lin Youyou whispered, "You're a B-level awakener, you just have to apply, and I'm not sure about other C-level cities, but at least Ferrara would definitely accept you."

Irene, with one hand behind her head, gazed with determined eyes at the pitch-black ceiling, her amputated arm resting alone on the bed frame.

"You don't understand Mu City."

"I can leave, but some people, even if they sacrifice their lives, can only be trapped here."

"I have to get them out."

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 87: When the Roses Bloom (5)

The crystal was stolen!!!

The next morning, V587 and Irene prepared to leave the temporary camp.

To their surprise, this camp not only housed individuals with supernatural abilities but also had many ordinary people: the elderly, children, women... each person was occupied with tasks, and the aroma of cooking and food filled the air, exuding a rich essence of life.

At the entrance, a burly mercenary leader sat on the ground, his upper body bare, with a full-length python tattooed across his back. The snake's mouth was wide open, its sharp fangs vividly detailed, enough to intimidate anyone. He was assembling an L39 anti-tank rifle, a firearm known for its extreme destructive power. At close range, this rifle could split an elephant into two in a matter of minutes.

Several mercenaries nearby were speaking to him with a respectful attitude.

“Samuel, representatives from the Shaye faction have come again, wishing to meet with you.”

“Hmph, just a bunch of refugees. They think too highly of themselves. I won't see them.”

As he noticed them approaching, the mercenary who was talking showed a wary expression and fell silent immediately.

Irene nodded slightly in Samuel's direction.

Samuel cast a sharp glance at Song Ke and the others before nodding in response.

After leaving Samuel's camp, Song Ke inquired, “Is this Samuel also a freelance mercenary?”

“That's right,” Irene replied. “The mercenaries in Western Street each have their own influence and generally avoid crossing paths. Samuel refused to comply with admission restrictions and moved out of

the city after the apocalypse. During this time, many people sought refuge with him. He might be domineering, but he's still a man of his word."

Song Ke had long understood not to judge a person solely by their appearance. Although Samuel looked fierce, his willingness to openly resist the control of the generals and his decision to accommodate the elderly and children indicated he wasn't a villain. It was no wonder Irene brought them here to spend the night.

The group later killed a few nearby zombies. Irene's clearer mission progress reached 100%, smoothly completed. Unfortunately, V587's level 3 crystal remained missing. Song Ke sat on the top of an overturned small car, letting out a long sigh.

In the distance, there was the faint sound of footsteps, quickly passing by. However, everyone present had supernatural abilities and immediately detected the anomaly.

Su Cha retrieved a dagger: "I'll go check."

A while later, Su Cha returned: "It was Samuel, leading 17 individuals with supernatural abilities, heading southeast."

"Are they armed?" Irene asked.

"A.K.47, G36, FAMAS, small cannons, Samuel has the L39," Su Cha elaborated.

Irene lifted the cannon with one hand and gestured towards Song Ke, raising her chin. "Whatever makes Samuel take action personally isn't a small matter. It might have what you're looking for. Want to check it out?"

"Let's go," Song Ke made a quick decision, leaping down from the car roof.

With Su Cha around, there was no worry about losing track of Samuel. The group trailed behind them, arriving at the southeast corner of Xiangang Center.

As a precaution, Song Ke found a somewhat distant office building and ascended to the rooftop for observation.

“Wow!” As soon as she got a clear view of the scene, Song Ke couldn’t help but exclaim.

Indeed, it was no trivial matter. In the ruins on the ground, hundreds of individuals with supernatural abilities were surrounding and attacking a mutant zombie.

This zombie was notably evolved, twice the size of an ordinary one, with no visible signs of decay. Its body muscles were robust, with sharp nails, each about half a meter long, capable of deeply scratching the ground. Despite its powerful physique, its head looked relatively small, nestled among its shoulders. Its pupils were jet black, moving swiftly.

Nearby mercenaries hurled their supernatural iron chains, binding it tightly. The zombie roared in anger, breaking free from the restraints, snapping the chains into pieces, and grasping the ends to viciously throw the mercenaries into the collapsed steel of the building.

Several fire-based individuals rushed forward, attacking it with flame guns. The agile zombie swiftly dodged behind a nearby truck, disappearing from view, and leaving the group cautiously surrounding the area. Suddenly, a robust arm extended, gripping one person’s leg, pulling them back and the gruesome sound of the head being crushed echoed: “crunch, crunch.”

The mercenaries quickly encircled the truck, gunfire erupting, yet it was empty; the zombie had already escaped.

Two seconds later, it leaped out of a broken window in another high-rise building, instantly killing another mercenary. This zombie not only possessed intelligence but also conducted guerrilla warfare, shamelessly toying with humans.

Hurriedly arriving at the scene, Samuel joined the battlefield, leading his people in a rapid, continuous barrage of gunfire.

Observing from the top floor of the office building, Zhuang Qingyan, after a moment’s observation, concluded, “Mutant zombie, conservatively estimated to be level 2 or above.”

“Why are there so many people?” Song Ke was puzzled, wondering if everyone was participating in the Hero Banquet.

“It’s not just because of the Hero Banquet. It’s more likely for money or resources,” Lu Xiaoyu said. “I just checked casually. In the black market now, the value of a Level 3 crystal has been driven up to over ten million.”

Song Ke gasped; she had never seen ten million in her life!

Meanwhile, the mutant zombie continued its massacre, with mercenaries falling one after another. Ambushers were being exposed, and Irene swiftly reported their positions.

“Target in position 3, left 10-70, close to 23, enemy mortar position.”

“Target in position 6, right 10-40, depression, enemy grenade assault formation.”

Suddenly, Irene paused, her voice turning more serious. “Coordinates X6742, Y5878, Ruan Wenjun’s people are here.”

Ruan Wenjun, one of the three major warlords of Mu City. If Mu Qin is sly and crafty, and Miao Lun is reckless, then Ruan Wenjun is a complete war maniac. He commands the largest private army and is passionate about the sensation brought by gunpowder and destruction.

Song Ke looked around in confusion—3, 6, depression—where were they?

With a soft sigh, Zhuang Qingyan wheeled closer, gently placing a hand on Song Ke’s head, turning it 30 degrees to the left. “Here, position 3.”

Then, adjusting it 70 degrees to the right. “Position 6.”

Next, he directed Song Ke's whole body towards himself, almost hugging her. "Look forward from here, Ruan Wenjun's people are there."

"See clearly now, hmm?" Zhuang Qingyan asked, close to her ear, his tone ambiguous.

Feeling uncomfortable, Song Ke shrugged. "Um, yes."

Finally, she saw it.

Irene's cold voice unexpectedly sounded, "Ruan Wenjun's side has made a move."

Song Ke snapped back to attention, witnessing a massive tank convoy slowly entering. The sounds of gunfire and engine roars were deafening. While the mutant zombie continued its killings, it lost the best opportunity to escape due to the overwhelming number of people; its defeat was only a matter of time under such a sea of tactics.

Excitedly, Song Ke asked, "Shall we... snatch?"

Zhuang Qingyan pondered for a moment. "We can try."

"How do we snatch?" Song Ke inquired.

"We'll play it by ear, but we only have one shot. Whether successful or not, we retreat immediately," Zhuang Qingyan replied.

With only eight of them, seizing and killing the zombie was an extremely risky endeavor. Being assaulted by numerous individuals with supernatural abilities wasn't a fun prospect. Additionally, being recognized midway could pose trouble for participating in the Hero Banquet later.

Zhuang Qingyan created a group chat on Song Ke's device and assigned tasks to everyone.

“Irene, switch to incendiary rounds. You’re responsible for distracting the enemy, disrupting their sight. Remember, the more chaos, the better.”

“Understood,” Irene’s microphone representing her lit up, and her composed voice came through.

Incendiary rounds were highly destructive bullets that could also create explosive dust clouds, particularly effective in underground tunnels and densely built areas.

“Lin Youyou, do you have a debuff that temporarily blinds the enemy?”

Lin Youyou’s ability was song-based and she swiftly scanned her mental lyric database, “Yes.”

“What’s the duration?”

“20 seconds at most.”

“20 seconds, one shot, can you do it, Captain?”

Song Ke contemplated for a moment. “I’ll try.”

“Su Cha, you’ll stealthily move ahead. If successful, grab the crystal immediately.”

“Okay,” Su Cha’s figure vanished, blending seamlessly with the surroundings.

Once the team was in position, Zhuang Qingyan softly encouraged, “Ladies, let’s go for it. It’s up to you.”

...

In the midst of the ruins, the mutant zombie, subject to a series of heavy weapon assaults, sensed danger and swiftly retreated.

Suddenly, countless shells rained down from the sky.

“Boom—Boom—”

Irene lay in a sniper position, her supernatural abilities bursting forth. One explosion followed another; the incendiary rounds she fired were extraordinarily powerful. They exploded upon hitting the ground, launching debris and smoke into the air. The air was consumed by burning gases, causing the mercenaries in the area to clutch their throats in agony, desperately scrambling to flee.

As the firepower descended, Irene’s position became exposed, and several individuals with supernatural abilities swiftly rushed towards her.

“Irene, retreat,” Zhuang Qingyan promptly commanded.

“Understood.” Irene dismantled her cannon, turned, and ran, deftly navigating the winding paths, soon vanishing without a trace.

Amidst the smoke and debris, Lin Youyou’s melodious and gentle singing echoed, “Why can’t you see, can’t see this red and black dryness, allowing wickedness to sleep peacefully, untroubled hearts~”

The mercenaries were suddenly blinded as a result of Lin Youyou’s song. Unable to see or breathe, the chaos intensified under the dual effects.

“Song Ke, one chance.”

Zhuang Qingyan turned back, his deep eyes looking at her, exuding complete trust.

Song Ke’s fingers brushed across a stone slab; in an instant, the slab disappeared, replaced by an enormous longbow in her hands.

Raising the bow, pulling the string, setting the arrow, the flexible bow arm slowly extended. A deep blue arrow materialized, accumulating energy. With exceptional dynamic vision, Song Ke had firmly locked onto the mutant zombie's position even before Irene's bombardment. With the assistance of her mental power, she tracked its movements, quickly aiming the arrow.

"Ahh!!"

A thunderous roar echoed as the enraged zombie went on a killing spree, instantly taking down two more people.

However, its roar exposed its position. With a focused gaze, Song Ke released the arrow!

"Swish—" The arrowhead, moving at super-high frequencies, rapidly oscillated through the mist and smoke, flying straight toward the mutant zombie.

"Thud—" The metal arrow, formed by supernatural ability, accurately pierced its forehead.

The arrowhead fragmented the next second, dispersing hundreds of smaller needles that pulverized its brain. With its vulnerable head fatally penetrated, the zombie's eyes widened in rage, and with a "thud," its body crashed heavily to the ground.

"Direct hit!" Song Ke shouted in joy.

"Quick, let's retreat." Zhuang Qingyan grasped her wrist, pulling her along.

"Cough, cough, cough. The zombie's dead!" The nearest mercenary shouted instinctively, without thinking.

The others first appeared bewildered, then crazily surged towards the direction of the corpse.

Amidst the crowded crowd, a vague wisp of green smoke drifted over, lingering at the zombie's head for two seconds before swiftly dispersing.

As those individuals excitedly rummaged through the body, the zombie's brain was squashed like a rotten melon—no trace of the crystal to be found.

“Damn it! Who the hell stole the crystal?!”

...

V587, successful in their chicken steal, ran wildly, stopping only after running a good ten kilometers, finally able to catch their breath.

The group looked at each other and burst into laughter, even Fang Zhixu couldn't help but smile faintly.

This was precisely the legendary “hit and run.” Ah, so frustrating to be unable to catch up.

Song Ke couldn't wait and urged, “Su Cha, check the crystal.”

Su Cha opened his palm, and a luminous, translucent azure crystal appeared slowly.

“Sister, it's a Level 3!” Xu Xing, sweating from the run, danced with joy in place.

Song Ke's cheeks dimpled slightly; this whole escapade wasn't in vain.

“What about Irene?” Lin Youyou looked around. “Why isn't she with us?”

At the right moment, Irene's voice came through the group chat, “I've completed my task, and you've got what you wanted. Consider the deal even this time. I'm off; I'll contact you if necessary.” After speaking, she exited the group.

Lin Youyou couldn't help but sigh; Irene's personality was indeed carefree.

"Let's return to the city," Zhuang Qingyan suggested.

After a lengthy wait at the city gates and intricate security checks, the group finally returned to their apartment well past midnight.

At this time, they had 12 days remaining before their admission period expired and only two days until the Hero Banquet.

Zhuang Qingyan tapped the table with his slender fingers. "One crystal corresponds to one slot. Let's discuss now who will attend the Hero Banquet."

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 88: When the Roses Bloom (6)

Breathtakingly beautiful

Who was going to attend the Hero Banquet?

That was a good question.

"I'll go," Song Ke said confidently.

"No way!" Lin Youyou, Su Cha, Fang Zhixu, and Xu Xing vehemently objected.

"Why?" Song Ke felt deeply affected. Did her companions really lack faith in her?

Xu Xing, hands behind his back, sighed like a little adult. "If you go, you'll definitely end up in a fight."

Surprisingly, the rest of the group nodded in agreement, thinking Xu Xing made a valid point.

Lin Youyou added, "And if you act recklessly and take down that warlord, our entire plan will be ruined."

Su Cha coldly echoed, "That's right."

Song Ke couldn't believe it. "Is that even possible?"

She was so mature, so composed in her actions. How could she easily get into fights with others? Well... she shouldn't, right?

Faced with everyone's "It's possible" gaze, Song Ke inexplicably felt a bit insecure.

This Hero Banquet organized by Mu Qin had a participation threshold of Level 3 cystral. Inside, not to mention hidden dragons and crouching tigers, there would be numerous awakeners. It could very well be a trap. Among the V587 team, Zhuang Qingyan and Lu Xiaoyu had mobility issues, Lin Youyou and Fang Zhixu leaned towards support abilities and lacked offensive capabilities, while Xu Xing, despite being clever, was young and prone to nervousness in big situations. Calculating all this, Song Ke and Su Cha were the most suitable candidates.

Su Cha excelled in lurking and gathering intelligence covertly. For instance, during the Death Prison incident, he was very suitable to come forward. However, in this forthcoming mission, where actions would be out in the open, and participants would be under scrutiny from various parties, Su Cha's skills were not advantageous. Him going or Song Ke going made little difference fundamentally.

Song Ke also had her own considerations. In the absence of any knowledge, the individuals sent by V587 would undoubtedly face enormous risks. Compared to her companions, her abilities were more suited to taking on risks: "I'm the team captain. With the current uncertainty, whatever happens, at least, I can handle it."

Song Ke raised two fingers, solemnly promising, "Alright, I'll try... not to fight. If things don't look good, I'll run."

The others still seemed hesitant.

Song Ke turned to Zhuang Qingyan, gazing at him expectantly with watery eyes, silently asking for support. 'Speak for me quickly.'

Zhuang Qingyan cleared his throat lightly, "You can go."

Everyone looked at him in surprise, assuming that Zhuang Qingyan's had the biggest opinion among them. However, he surprisingly became the first to agree?

"The situation at the Hero Banquet is constantly changing, and everyone's concerns are valid. The fear is that you might not... cough, cough, might have a change of heart," Zhuang Qingyan said, "So the best solution is to bring an assist inside, such as an external brain."

"What?" Song Ke was completely bewildered.

Zhuang Qingyan turned to Lu Xiaoyu, not mincing words as he poked his wheelchair with his cane. "Hey, last time you needed so many materials, there should be leftovers, right? The money came from our team captain."

Speaking of the list Lu Xiaoyu had compiled...

When Fang Zhixu returned with the bill to claim expenses from Song Ke, she almost ended up in tears while holding her money pouch.

Regarding the people Song Ke had gathered, their abilities were extraordinary, but their pockets were quite meager.

The wealthiest was Xu Xing, but it was his inheritance from Xu Weiguo. Song Ke couldn't possibly spend his money. Next were Lin Youyou and Su Cha. After Su Cha paid off the hefty fine of 130,000 in Death Prison, his savings were wiped out, leaving him with nothing.

The rest was a sorry state: Fang Zhixu turned destitute, practically homeless. His original accounts were unusable. Lu Xiaoyu and Zhuang Qingyan didn't even have legitimate identities, let alone a cent... No wonder from having no concept of money, Song Ke was now reluctant to spend even a penny; she was toughened up by these people.

Lu Xiaoyu's mechanical arm flexed agilely, blocking Zhuang Qingyan's cane with a click. "What do you need, just say it."

"Trackers, detectors. I need to know all the details about Mu Qin's main residence. Also, a portable micro communication device that can't be detected by any surveillance," Zhuang Qingyan listed one by one.

"Although the team captain is going alone, if we can see real-time situations, we can advise her," Lu Xiaoyu added.

"Can you do it, 5.0?" Zhuang Qingyan deliberately teased him with the stellar academic record Lu Xiaoyu had boasted about.

Lu Xiaoyu's icy eyes shimmered; the pride of a genius couldn't be trampled upon. "Of course."

*

Two days later, Song Ke arrived alone at Mu Qin's family estate.

The buildings here were distinctly characteristic of the local style, with vast stretches of bamboo houses forming a grand estate. At the center of the estate were luxurious villas, while on the outskirts, there were strict patrols composed of mercenaries with supernatural abilities.

Song Ke adjusted her black collar discreetly, reaching for the slight bulge on her neck where a tiny microphone was hidden.

“Hello, hello, can you hear me? Can you hear me speaking?” she nervously inquired, feeling a sense of unreality.

A slight electric buzz sounded in her earpiece, followed by the magnetic voice of a man, [I can hear you.]

Zhuang Qingyan chuckled, as if a breeze flowed into Song Ke’s ear, [Don’t be nervous.]

Song Ke’s face inexplicably grew warm again.

[Sister, sister, I can hear it too!] a playful child’s voice suddenly erupted.

Tap! Xu Xing received a thump on the head.

[Ah! Don’t hit my head!] He touched his head and jumped up irritably, tipping over his chair, creating a noisy commotion.

The brief moment of tenderness disappeared without a trace.

Song Ke maintained a neutral expression. “Guys, keep it down!” Her ears felt like they were about to explode.

To enter the main residence, one had to register and complete an on-site check-in.

Song Ke went to the side entrance where a middle-aged man in a private security uniform was meticulously verifying the identities of each registrant. On the floating screen beside him, the number of entrants had reached 26. After a quick refresh, the number suddenly increased by 3.

“Southern District Freelance Mercenary, Wild Wolf.”

“Southern District Worker, Lo Sang.”

“Western Street Corporal, Mandaya.”

“They need their identities verified,” Song Ke stepped back a few paces and quickly reported to her companions in a corner.

After a while, Lu Xiaoyu’s unwavering voice sounded, [I’ll handle this, don’t worry.]

Song Ke followed the queue forward, presenting the azure Level 3 crystal.

Su Fengsa, the man responsible for verification, wearing gloves, accepted the crystal stone from Song Ke and gently placed it into the adjacent transparent device. Several rows of gleaming Level 3 crystal stones were already laid out, one of them particularly unique, with a serene blue hue subtly tinged with a hint of blood-red.

“Please show your identification information.”

Song Ke pressed the terminal against the connector, causing a momentary flicker on the floating screen, a brief disruption in the data flow that went unnoticed.

Su Fengsa glanced at the screen. “Western Street Freelancer, Song Ke.”

“That’s me,” Song Ke raised her head confidently, exuding a righteous aura.

“Welcome. I wish you a successful day today,” Su Fengsa nodded slightly towards her.

As Song Ke was about to step forward—

“Su, Su Fengsa, something’s happened up front!” A mercenary responsible for patrolling hurried over.

“Such a fluster, so unseemly!” Su Fengsa reprimanded with a stern face.

“At the main entrance, Lord Miao Lun has arrived!”

Su Fengsa’s expression froze. The Hero Banquet was held early this year, and Mu Qin hadn’t invited Lord Miao Lun. What could his sudden appearance mean?

“You go report to the Lord,” Su Fengsa turned and pointed to a few mercenaries, “You guys, come with me.”

Seeing Song Ke still standing in place, Su Fengsa patiently said, “Mercenary, kindly go inside. Just follow the signs.”

“Alright, no problem,” Song Ke replied eagerly.

After entering through the side door, Song Ke glanced around to ensure no one was watching. She flicked her cuff, and several clever mechanical spiders dropped to the ground, dizzily spinning around a few times before scurrying in all directions, swiftly vanishing into the shadows.

These were miniature detectors concocted by Lu Xiaoyu. After his reprogramming, they possessed basic artificial intelligence, enabling them to move autonomously and capture images as they passed through areas, facilitating Zhuang Qingyan and the others in understanding the situation on-site.

“I’ve released the spiders. Can you see them?”

[Yes, take a few more rounds and release the detectors.]

“Alright.”

Overhead were massive directional signs, but Song Ke paid them no heed, pretending to be lost and started wandering aimlessly within the estate.

A few steps here, releasing a few spiders; strolling a couple of circles near the pool, releasing a few more spiders.

“How’s it going?”

[We’re building the model. Progress is at 45%.]

...

In an apartment several kilometers away, the entire layout of Mu Qin’s estate gradually filled the model, and real-time visuals were transmitted back. Zhuang Qingyan and the others focused, gazing at the projection.

Suddenly, Lu Xiaoyu paused, his fingertip tapping on the screen, and made a soft “tsk.”

“Here,” he pointed to a corner, which was the direction Song Ke was about to advance, “There’s a strong hyper-frequency band. The risk rating should be at H level (high-risk area). The signal from Song Ke’s microphone will be detected.”

...

In the surveillance room of the estate, the mercenary responsible for maintaining site security noticed something amiss. They pulled up Song Ke’s feed and placed it at the center.

“What is this person up to? Acting all suspicious, and she’s about to reach the restricted garden.”

Another person immediately brought up Song Ke’s registration information. “She’s here for the Guard Unit recruitment. Could she be lost?”

“Even if she’s lost, she can’t wander aimlessly. That area is close to where the two lords are discussing matters. Quickly, get the patrol to chase her away!”

Song Ke dodged the guards on patrol and was about to enter the courtyard when Zhuang Qingyan’s voice came through her earpiece.

[Song Ke, danger ahead. Turn off your microphone and listen to my instructions.]

Song Ke touched her collar, disabling the microphone, switching to one-way input mode.

In this mode, she could hear Zhuang Qingyan’s instructions, but her voice wouldn’t transmit back.

Danger ahead? Song Ke thought for a moment, abandoned the main route, and instead opted to climb the wall and leap onto the roof.

But then, her movement abruptly halted—

By the side of a pool in front, there stood a graceful figure, gently lifting her head, gazing towards the tightly shut window in the distance.

The woman wore a simple dark green long dress, accentuating her fair skin. Her luscious and soft black hair cascaded over her shoulders. Her waist was slender and elegant, captivating with a touch of femininity. Though she didn’t seem particularly young, no one could deny her beauty, especially her profile, simply breathtaking. Her features seemed enshrouded in a mist of charm and vulnerability, making it hard for anyone to avert their gaze.

Unfamiliar with such a sight, Song Ke was left dumbfounded.

“Hey, get her down! Grab her!”

“Don’t let her in!”

Clamorous footsteps approached from behind as several mercenaries lunged towards Song Ke.

Startled, the woman turned her head upon hearing the commotion and directly faced Song Ke.

Wow, she's even prettier from the front...

Song Ke was captivated by her beauty, her mind went blank, and instinctively, she smiled at the woman, dimples forming on her cheeks.

“Stop her!” shouted the pursuing mercenaries.

Swiftly, Song Ke flipped and dodged their attacks, landing on the ground, then raised her hands. After releasing the spiders and with Zhuang Qingyan's model built, she had no intention to flee.

The mercenaries swiftly surrounded her. “Who are you? Who sent you here, and why are you here?”

Song Ke honestly replied, “I came to attend the Hero Banquet.”

“The Hero Banquet isn't here at all! Didn't you see the signs?” The interrogating mercenary spoke sternly.

Gritting her teeth, Song Ke resolved to come clean, “I... I can't read. I don't understand.”

The mercenaries collectively were incredulous. In this day and age, in the Alliance, who would believe that someone couldn't read?

“Even if you can't read the signs, it doesn't explain why you've 'lost your way' to this place. Tell us honestly, who instructed you to come here?” The lead mercenary sternly pressed on, not buying into Song Ke's pale attempt at deception.

Song Ke was momentarily at a loss; she genuinely had no idea where she was.

The menacing barrels of guns were instantly aimed at her.

“It was me who brought her here.”

In the deathly silence, the woman standing by the pool suddenly spoke up.

The wind gently lifted her skirt in the hall, making her seem like a pure white rose blossoming gracefully in the dark.

“She’s my friend. I’m the one who brought her here.”

What a good person! Song Ke was close to tears.

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 89: When the Roses Bloom (7)

Little trash, why are you here?!

After the beautiful sister, who had a similar temperament to a rose, finished speaking, everyone including Song Ke looked directly at her.

The pursuing mercenaries seemed wary of her, exchanging glances, hesitant to act immediately. The leader, observing this, took a few steps back, intentionally lowering his voice as he communicated with his superior through the earpiece.

The remaining mercenaries occasionally stole glances, their eyes not only filled with admiration but also mixed with indescribable implications that Song Ke couldn’t comprehend.

She simply turned her head, mouthing a “thank you” to the beautiful sister. The sister’s gaze lingered on Song Ke’s face for a moment, then coldly turned away. Even though she had just actively helped Song Ke out of the situation, her current attitude made it clear she didn’t want any association with Song Ke.

The head mercenary returned, glaring darkly at Song Ke and the woman. “If you two want to talk, I can arrange a meeting room for you to ‘sit down’ and have a proper chat, but it must be outside the restricted garden.”

“No need, I don’t want to talk,” the beautiful sister interrupted, ungraciously refusing.

The mercenary sneered, “In that case, it’s getting late. I will ‘escort’ your friend to the Hero Banquet venue.”

Though he said ‘escort,’ it was more like ‘escort’ with vigilance, personally monitoring Song Ke to ensure she didn’t wander off again.

Someone pushed Song Ke forcefully from behind, “Move!”

Damn it, my fist is hard.

[Song Ke, don’t start a conflict,] even though not aware of what was happening on her side, Zhuang Qingyan timed in to caution her. [Judging from the layout of this mansion, the place you’re in should be the conference hall. Mu Qin and Miao Lun are likely having a confidential discussion inside.]

Alright, she endured it. Song Ke shrunk her head, feeling pitiful as she was chased away, and before leaving, she couldn’t help but glance back.

The beautiful sister was still gazing absently at the closed window, her solitary and elegant figure resembling a painting.

After leaving the restricted garden, the mercenaries began gossiping, “She’s just a plaything, Banya, you’re giving her face.”

“That’s not right. Even if she’s a plaything, she’s Miao Lun’s canary, thinks she’s so noble.”

“I heard she’s been favored for almost three months now. That’s quite a long time, huh?”

“With a face so pretty, I wonder what her skills are in bed?”

The group exchanged lewd glances, then slyly smirked, understanding each other’s insinuations.

Song Ke’s temper flared upon hearing this, wishing she could just punch these people right then and there.

The mercenary leader named Banya coldly interjected, “Shut up! If you want to die, don’t drag me into it. Do you really think this place is impenetrable? If Miao Lun finds out that you dare gossip about him, skinning you alive would be considered lenient!”

There were plenty of advanced awakers by Miao Lun’s side, some skilled in eavesdropping. If the recent conversation truly reached his ears...

Everyone fell silent as if collectively struck dumb, sweating cold bullets.

The fierce-looking mercenary escorted Song Ke to a heavily guarded, large bamboo hut, which was the main venue for the Hero Banquet.

“Banya, who is she?” asked the guard at the entrance, a bit confused about the situation.

“Watch her for me. This guest has a habit of wandering,” Banya instructed.

The guard glared and spoke with a lowered tone, “The Hero Banquet is about to begin. Please enter as soon as possible.”

Banya only left with his people after seeing Song Ke enter, personally observing her go in.

Song Ke walked into the bamboo hut like a silent quail, head down.

[It's safe now, you can switch on the microphone,] Zhuang Qingyan said.

Song Ke pretended to adjust her collar, casually flicking the receiver's switch.

[Are you okay?] Zhuang Qingyan inquired. They couldn't hear anything earlier, so they couldn't be sure if Song Ke was in trouble.

Song Ke said softly: "I'm fine, there's no fight, I've already entered the venue."

Because she arrived the latest, as soon as she entered, numerous scrutinizing gazes fell upon her. There were men and women inside, each with unique physiques. Some who were familiar sat together conversing, while others, unknown to anyone, remained quietly alone in corners. But it was evident they were all powerful awakeners. Song Ke counted, and aside from her, there were a total of 36 individuals.

As an unfamiliar face, Song Ke didn't recognize anyone, so she tried her best to diminish her presence and found a seat in the farthest corner. The internal space of this banquet hall was quite vast; those sitting at opposite corners might not even see each other clearly.

Concealed by her oversized coat, Song Ke released a pocket-sized ladybug that flew up to the ceiling, scanning the entire room with its compound eyes.

Lu Xiaoyu had always been proud of his intelligence and rarely showed interest in anything. However, with Zhuang Qingyan as a close friend, who had the knack of provoking him accurately, this time, his creations—spider surveillance devices, collar microphones, and ladybug cameras—astounded Song Ke and their group.

[The real-time footage has been fully loaded. Song Ke, your task is complete.] [Adapt to the situation as it unfolds,] Zhuang Qingyan cautioned in a slow tone. [Also, be mindful of safety.]

Ten minutes later, finely crafted bamboo curtains were lifted by servants, and under the guidance of Su Fengsa, a group of people entered gracefully.

At the forefront were two middle-aged men dressed in high-ranking military uniforms, exuding remarkable airs. One was robustly built, with sharp facial contours, neatly trimmed goatee, and eyes that sparkled despite their narrowness. Upon entering, he confidently took the main seat, commanding respect from the entire room.

Song Ke understood instantly; this was definitely Mu Qin.

However, the person standing beside Mu Qin left Song Ke stunned. He appeared gentle and amiable, with a seemingly affable demeanor. Compared to Mu Qin's sturdy physique, this man had a rounder face and a body with a protruding belly that strained against his belt.

Rather than letting her guard down, Song Ke furrowed her brow slowly, sensing that this person was undoubtedly more formidable than he appeared.

Behind the man, Song Ke spotted Godanwei, who had clashed with V587 at the city gate. Based on the information she had gathered, this smiling man was most likely the other warlord, Miao Lun.

Sure enough, after Mu Qin sat down, his sharp gaze swept the room, and he spoke solemnly, "All of you here are the talented awakeners of Mu City. Thank you for giving me face and being willing to join the Mu Qin family's guard. I solemnly promise to all of you here that as long as you pass the selection, whether in terms of wealth or status, I, Mu Qin, will never treat you unfairly!"

"Great!" The participants at the event cheered enthusiastically.

Mu Qin raised his left hand, pointing towards the guest seat. "Today, we are honored to have Brother Miao Lun here as well."

Miao Lun waved amicably, "Oh, I'm just here to join in the fun. Please don't mind me."

In Song Ke's earpiece, she heard her companions discussing.

[Are Mu Qin and Miao Lun on good terms?] Lin Youyou asked in confusion. [On the surface, the three warlords coexist peacefully without conflicts. Their true relationship, however, is unknown to anyone,] Zhuang Qingyan answered.

Mu Qin stood up from his main seat, and his resonant voice filled the entire room, “Now, I announce the rules for tonight’s selection...”

“Wait, Mr. Ruan, you can’t go in!”

“Stop him! Quickly report to the boss!! Ah—”

Sudden and intense sounds of fighting erupted outside the banquet hall, followed by grunts and cries. Three to five of Mu Qin’s private guards stumbled in, looking disheveled, while the footsteps of another group neared the door.

“Bang—”

The formidable supernatural ability poured out, causing the bamboo gate to instantly split into five parts, and amidst the debris on the ground, a sturdy figure appeared.

Wearing a similar high-ranking military uniform with the same domineering air, this person was much younger than Mu Qin and Miao Lun. His countenance was delicate, with pale skin and neatly arranged black hair tucked under the brim of his hat. With his semi-long black military boots, he fiercely kicked aside the mercenaries blocking his path.

“Sir!” Banya rolled several times, coughing blood, and desperately shouted towards Mu Qin seated on the high platform.

Mu Qin suddenly stood up, exuding an overpowering aura, engaging in a confrontation using his unique abilities. Judging by the intensity of their awakened energy, both of them were A-level awakener. The people present were compelled to release their own abilities to counter the pressures exerted by these two, causing an ominous gust of wind to stir within the area.

Song Ke felt no sense of suppression, casually eating fruit from a plate while observing the situation, glancing left and right.

Suddenly, she noticed Godanwei with his abilities fully activated, steadfastly shielding Miao Lun.

Pondering for a moment, Song Ke realized that after the awakening, there is a special awakened energy force generated within their bodies. Even if they were at a technical disadvantage against higher-level awakener, at most, they would be immobilized. It's only ordinary individuals who might be severely injured or even die from such pressure.

Could it be that Miao Lun had no abilities?

“Ruan Wenjun, what's the meaning of barging into my residence without a greeting?” Mu Qin, the master of the house, angrily demanded.

“It's nothing much. Two days ago, my people mysteriously lost a Grade 3 crystal in Xiangang, and I was pretty unhappy about it. I heard something about a Hero Banquet going on here, so I came to find that pest. Why not extend a welcome?” Ruan Wenjun replied nonchalantly.

Xiangang, Ruan Wenjun, Grade 3 crystal... Could it be the one they snatched?

Song Ke choked on her fruit, silently patting her chest as she accidentally swallowed it.

“Even if you don't welcome me, today I'm determined to dig out that person, no matter the cost,” Ruan Wenjun declared.

With a flourish of his coat, Ruan Wenjun confidently walked in, causing people along the way to fearfully evade him.

[Hmm, it seems the relationship between these two isn't great,] Lin Youyou commented. [Deep water and scorching fire,] Lu Xiaoyu incisively remarked.

As tensions escalated between Mu Qin and Ruan Wenjun, Miao Lun calmly stood up, assuming the role of mediator: “Just over a Grade 3 crystal, is it worth the two of you getting so worked up? Let’s rein in these abilities, don’t scare our future elite guards.”

Under Godanwei’s protective ability, Miao Lun walked up to Ruan Wenjun and greeted him warmly: “Old Ruan, why don’t you take a seat first? Everyone’s here, we can take it slow. If you can’t find it, I’ll make it up to you, right?”

“A mere Grade 3 crystal, why would I care? Those who dare challenge me will die.” Ruan Wenjun’s effeminate face revealed a hint of cruelty and malice.

Miao Lun chuckled, “Let’s be frank, you just want to find someone, easy as that.”

He then turned to Mu Qin, patting his round belly, “Mu Qin, look, Ruan isn’t here to make a scene. Why don’t we all sit down today? A peaceful gathering can be profitable.”

“Thanks to you, except for meeting the general, I didn’t expect the three of us to sit together. Hahaha.”

Ruan Wenjun was clearly unwilling to let it go.

Mu Qin coldly snorted and, under Miao Lun’s mediation, reluctantly agreed, “The guest is here; take a seat.”

Not wanting to escalate the situation, Ruan Wenjun gave Mu Qin some face, leaving his people at the door and entering the banquet hall alone.

Now, the three major warlords of Mu City gathered under one roof, creating an atmosphere rife with eerie tension, causing some awakeners to break out in a cold sweat.

[This smiling tiger seems to have two sides, huh?] Lin Youyou marveled. [Bad thing, just like Zhuang Qingyan,] Xu Xing insulted in one sentence.

After a brief moment of silence, a crackling sound erupted from the earpiece.

[Sister, help me!]

Song Ke's fruit-eating action paused. She rolled her eyes to the sky, utterly speechless.

In her distraction, she hadn't noticed two young people sneaking in through a side door and seating themselves behind Mu Qin.

Ruan Wenjun's interruption altered the atmosphere, making it chilly and stagnant.

Mu Qin announced the selection rules again: "Among you, if anyone can defeat one of my men in a one-on-one combat, you'll pass and be formally enlisted in the elite guard."

One-on-one? Is it that simple? Song Ke found it somewhat surprising.

She had assumed there would be layers of selection and strict assessments, yet winning a single combat seemed like an inconsequential requirement for joining the elite guard.

It was a bit strange. The entry requirements seemed stringent, but the assessment appeared overly lenient, or rather, excessively lax.

"I'll go first." The Southern District free mercenary, Wild Wolf, volunteered.

Su Fengsa gestured, and a private soldier stepped forward behind Mu Qin.

Inside the banquet hall, a transparent isolation room rose up to facilitate the combat between the two. Once Wild Wolf and his opponent entered, they engaged in a fierce battle.

At the guest seat to Mu Qin's left, a servant respectfully offered a cigarette to Miao Lun. Leaning back in a spacious chair, Miao Lun unbuttoned his collar, loosened his belt, and comfortably exhaled smoke rings. After a while, he whispered a few words to the person beside him.

Soon after, a servant brought over an exquisite bamboo screen, escorting a beautiful lady to Miao Lun's side, whom he warmly embraced without reservation.

The beautiful lady displayed no emotions, neither compliant nor resistant, sitting down obediently.

Despite having prepared herself after hearing Banya's comments earlier, Song Ke found herself feeling a chill in her heart when witnessing this scene. It felt like the collapse of her world, and she couldn't even continue eating her fruit.

So, the beautiful lady was indeed Miao Lun's new favorite... The feeling in her heart was gloomy, inexplicably uncomfortable.

Perhaps due to her repeated sneak peeks, she caught the ice-cold glare from Godanwei directed at her.

Startled, Song Ke quickly averted her eyes and lowered her head, avoiding his gaze.

In the hall, Wild Wolf successfully defeated his opponent, winning the match.

Mu Qin nodded in satisfaction, "Southern District mercenary, truly valiant in combat. Congratulations on joining the elite guard. You'll formally join starting tomorrow."

Wild Wolf was elated, "Thank you, Sir. I will devote myself wholeheartedly to your service!"

Ruan Wenjun played with the gun in his hand and sneered disdainfully.

Meanwhile, Miao Lun caressed the smooth shoulders of the beautiful lady, puffing smoke leisurely. His face became increasingly obscured by the smoke, his smile growing deeper.

Successive individuals were called up to single combat, with more wins than losses overall. By the 11th round, only two had been defeated.

“Next up,” Su Fengsa brought out the screen to check the list, “Western Street free mercenary, Song Ke.”

Finally, it was her turn. Song Ke wiped her mouth and stood up from the corner.

[Come on, sister! Beat them down!] Xu Xing encouraged her. [The skills are really lacking, just throw a few punches.] Lu Xiaoyu suggested. [Stay low-key,] Zhuang Qingyan softly advised.

Low-key, low-key, finish the fight and leave.

Reciting this sage advice in her mind, Song Ke briskly walked towards the center of the stage.

Su Fengsa announced, “The mercenary stepping up is—”

A sudden sound interrupted, and the bamboo chair was pushed aside, revealing someone standing behind Mu Qin.

“You little trash, what are you doing here?!” A voice unexpectedly spoke out from a young man with a deep brown complexion.

Song Ke froze, her heart pounding with worry. It couldn't be, it couldn't be— It was Tun Qin! She also wanted to ask, how could Tun Qin be here?!

However, Tun Qin's next words caused her mental shutdown.

“Free mercenary? Aren't you from District F?”

Doomsday Spiritual Artifact Master

Chapter 90: When the Roses Bloom (8)

Let's PK

A single sentence from Tun Qin made Song Ke the center of attention in the entire venue.

Mu Qin, Miao Lun, Ruan Wenjun... all participants cast various appraising glances in her direction.

[Don't panic, stay calm,] in a crucial moment, Zhuang Qingyan's composed voice resonated.

In just a few seconds, Song Ke experienced an emotional rollercoaster, but thankfully, she managed to keep a straight face without revealing any clues.

"Hmph," Ruan Wenjun's eyes darkened slightly, showing a bit of interest in the spectacle. "What Hero Banquet. Even a stray rat managed to sneak in."

The cunning Mu Qin, without immediately showing anger, contemplatively stroked his beard. "Tun Qin, come here."

Tun Qin walked over to the main seat, completely restraining his arrogant attitude. He clasped his hands tightly against his thighs and respectfully addressed, "Uncle."

Mu Qin glanced at him, and Tun Qin quickly corrected himself, "...My lord."

Mu Qin gestured towards Song Ke who was standing in place. "What did you mean by your words just now? Explain yourself."

Tun Qin lifted his head, locking eyes with Song Ke. Even after more than half a year without seeing each other, his gaze still harbored ill intentions towards her. Despite once practicing martial arts together day and night, Tun Qin's malice towards her never waned. Back then, he could launch a sneak attack with a particle gun, and today, he could betray her without hesitation.

“Two years ago, I was undergoing ancient martial arts training in District E166. This person is my fellow disciple, having spent more time there than I did. She has been a student there since childhood, at least for over a decade. I am certain she’s not just from District F but is an illegal resident as well.”

Tun Qin succinctly revealed all there was to know about Song Ke.

Of course, Song Ke couldn’t just sit back and accept it. She tried to defend herself, “No, I’ve, I’ve obtained citizenship in Mu City.”

Immediately, some participants below sneered, “What a joke. Someone from District F obtaining citizenship in Mu City?”

District F, the most barren and backward digital area within the Alliance, a dilapidated place where even flies didn’t want to linger. Mu City (District C55), not only ranked within the C category but also had a strict admission system.

Song Ke’s words lacked credibility. To put it simply, she was like the lowest-class commoner suddenly becoming a second-tier officer.

More than just absurd, such a thing was impossible in Mu City.

“It’s true, I am a freelance mercenary,” Song Ke persisted tenaciously.

“A freelance mercenary? Which faction do you belong to?” asked Wild Wolf, also a freelance mercenary, suspiciously.

Here we go again with this question. What’s with you mercenaries, always asking about factions so persistently?

“I, I belong to... Western Street, of Sly Fox,” Song Ke struggled and had to resort to using Irene’s name in a pinch.

Suddenly, the beautiful woman in Miao Lun's arms raised her gaze and looked towards Song Ke in the middle of the crowd.

Mu Qin, with a deep and silent gaze, didn't speak, but the private soldiers in the venue had already surrounded Song Ke.

Song Ke clenched her fists, standing still in her place.

Mu Qin tilted his head slightly. "Check when was the last time she entered the territory."

Su Fengsa promptly confirmed, "Six days ago."

A faint smirk appeared under Mu Qin's beard.

To Mu Qin, this small fry like Song Ke, regardless of whether she came from District E or F, couldn't stir much trouble. Her true identity was of no concern to him. What truly concerned Mu Qin was another matter, something he could exploit.

"Miao Lun, if I remember correctly, it was you who volunteered to General for the authority of admission checks, right?"

"With such a mistake, how will you explain it to the General?" Mu Qin insinuated significantly.

Miao Lun paused in his action of rolling a cigarette, his smile fading slightly.

Godanwei had already recognized Song Ke at the speed of light when Tun Qin called out. He immediately kneeled down and quietly reported near Miao Lun's leg, "My lord, I personally verified... facial recognition... is accurate."

Miao Lun's hand, holding the rolled cigarette, pressed lightly on Godanwei's shoulder. Though the force was light, Godanwei couldn't help but tremble.

"Mu Qin, are you questioning me now?" Miao Lun, usually easygoing, suddenly turned serious, with dark currents swirling in his eyes.

However, he was serious for only a moment before bursting into a hearty laugh. "Who says it must be a mistake? Since everyone's so curious, why don't we verify it on the spot? If what she says is true, changing one's class through hard work isn't that inspirational?"

"If the identity information is falsified," Miao Lun's smile sent chills down people's spines, "I will present her head to the General myself to beg for forgiveness."

Miao Lun released his hold on the hand of the beautiful woman he was embracing and gestured backward. A plain-looking, short man stepped forward.

"He is... Hasa?!" The awakeners in the crowd recognized this person and couldn't help but exclaim.

Hasa, an A-level awakener and Mu City's most formidable white-hat hacker, possessed the ability to track data. It was said that as long as there was a network, no secrets could escape his watchful eye. Surprisingly, he had joined Miao Lun's ranks.

"Hasa, make all the information about this person from the day she was born available for everyone to see."

A person, as long as they exist, will undoubtedly leave traces, and by delving deep into those clues, one might discover some surprises.

Hasa nodded silently and retrieved several light screens from his space, projecting them onto the bamboo curtains in the banquet hall for everyone to see. He also set up a dozen or so supercomputers on-site in a row.

Song Ke: "!!!"

'Oh no, they're going to investigate everything about me.' She was feeling extremely anxious.

On the ceiling, the mechanical ladybug's compound eyes slowly turned, transmitting all the happenings at the scene back to their apartment.

"Uh-oh, Miao Lun is going to check Song Ke's files!" Lin Youyou exclaimed.

"Even if her identity information is fine, her record is easy to expose, as she hasn't even submitted an application for citizenship," Fang Zhixu said.

Several people wore worried expressions on their faces.

The wheelchair moved, and Lu Xiaoyu's tablet-like voice sounded, "Please make way."

He looked at Hasa's every move in the projection, his ice-blue eyes gradually piqued with interest. "A white-hat hacker? Let him check."

Zhuang Qingyan glanced at him, instantly understanding, and spoke softly into her earpiece, "Song Ke, Lu Xiaoyu will handle it. Don't worry."

In the banquet hall, Song Ke felt as if she were on pins and needles. After receiving Zhuang Qingyan's instructions, she let out a sigh of relief.

Lu Xiaoyu held just one lonely terminal and an old, outdated light screen that was already cracked. In contrast, Hasa was fully equipped, using the latest suspended technology screens that could connect to six supercomputers simultaneously.

Hasa operated a sophisticated device, and a camera on the top extended to scan Song Ke from head to toe. When it retracted, a miniaturized mechanical ladybug fell neatly, wedging itself into a gap in the mechanical arm, planting a hidden Trojan horse.

Hasa collected Song Ke's biometric information and swiftly traced the data.

"Song Ke, originally from District F177, her activity trajectory is as follows: E166, D99, C72, D150, C60..."

"Parents unknown, date of birth unknown, she attended Hua City No.1 High School in D99 but dropped out midway."

Hasa's eyes gleamed faintly as his supernatural ability kicked in, starting to trace even finer details of information.

At the same time, Lu Xiaoyu's silvery hair fluttered as he simultaneously operated with both hands. One hand rapidly typed on the terminal, while the other hand composed complex attack programs on the screen.

In the digital realm, two forces collided head-on. One force surged forward courageously while the other collapsed and dissolved into specks, merging into the vast ocean. However, the dispersed starlight didn't vanish but rather subtly altered the direction of the opponent's data flow.

The clash between white-hat and black-hat hackers wasn't about visible confrontation but about who could occupy the high ground first, enabling them to comprehensively overwhelm their opponent.

Hasa's tracking briefly stalled as the chaotic stream of code rushed in, disrupting and diverting his course, leading him astray. He seemed lost and began murmuring.

"On October 2nd, New Calendar Year 46, granted special citizenship in Ferrara, District C72, due to a close relationship with the magistrate."

"On November 15th, New Calendar Year 46, awarded the Outstanding Youth title in Tongwan, District C60, and obtained an entry green card."

“...On February 6th, New Calendar Year 47, due to meritorious service in zombie eradication, submitted a household registration change request, which was approved, resulting in citizenship in Mu City, District C55.”

“Latest identity: Freelance Mercenary.”

Detailed files were disclosed, causing a commotion among the crowd.

It was the first time they had heard that someone from District F could successfully change their citizenship to Mu City. The scrutiny in the review department was known to be stringent to the point of being extreme! Could it be that faced with Song Ke’s “glamorous” resume, they were swayed, intentionally being lenient?

No, Godanwei suddenly raised his head. He remembered vividly the day Song Ke entered the city. There were seven of them, and the reason given was “locals, dispatched from Mu City before the apocalypse.” How could this suddenly change to a citizenship change? There were contradictions, something was definitely wrong.

‘Hasa, what are you doing?!’

Godanwei’s eyes reddened, about to shout in anger, but suddenly caught sight of Miao Lun’s face covered in smoke. That calm expression amidst the smog was not an ordinary calmness; it was the calm before a storm.

Like a sudden splash of cold water, Godanwei instantly became alert. No, he couldn’t say it. Song Ke’s identity had to be “real.” Otherwise, not only would he be ineffectual, but Sir Miao Lun would lose face in front of Mu Qin, Ruan Wenjun, and even the General. Then...

Trembling, Godanwei suddenly realized the intention behind Hasa’s actions.

He humbly, incredibly obediently, lowered his head, keeping silent.

Looking at her own gleaming “resume,” Song Ke couldn’t help but exclaim inwardly.

‘Lu Xiaoyu, I can’t believe you’re such a good storyteller!’ She almost believed she was the great hero saving the Alliance!

In the apartment...

Lu Xiaoyu was manipulating Hasa’s data while sarcastically commenting, “Your talent for spouting nonsense has improved over the years.”

Song Ke’s entire background was hastily created by Zhuang Qingyan in a short time through verbal storytelling.

Zhuang Qingyan smiled faintly, “Not as much as your deteriorating technical skills. You’re so slow that they might uncover everything on the other side.”

Lu Xiaoyu grumbled discontentedly, “Objection! You’re distorting the objective facts. What equipment does he have? What do I have? Just a bunch of junk!”

Although the words were as such, Lu Xiaoyu’s fingers swiftly operated, erasing the true records that Hasa was about to find about Song Ke.

In the banquet hall,

Miao Lun smiled at Mu Qin, “Mu Qin, my friend, this is talent. If you don’t want her, I certainly do.”

He then turned to Song Ke, “Mercenary, if you want to stand out, you don’t necessarily have to join the Guard Unit. Coming to my side offers the same opportunities.”

Mu Qin spoke coldly, “Miao Lun, it’s too early for these talks. Let her defeat my people first.”

Among all present, the most embarrassed at that moment was none other than Tun Qin.

Intentionally exposing Song Ke's identity was an attempt to impress Mu Qin, to gain his attention. However, this little trash actually managed, through skill, to enter Mu City and acquire the identity of a freelance mercenary, even though she was a lowly creature from District F. How could this be possible?!

"My lord, please allow me to take action," Tun Qin's voice was hoarse as he voluntarily requested to deal with Song Ke.

Since the apocalypse, he had awakened his supernatural ability. The humiliation he had suffered at the hands of Song Ke, he wanted to reclaim it all, with interest.

"Father, I also want to have a go at her." Another young man couldn't sit still and stood up from behind.

He had three diamond studs on his eyebrow ridge, almost the same height as Tun Qin, with a rebellious expression, half a smirk on his lips as if he wouldn't yield to anyone.

"Rong Qin!" Tun Qin stared at him angrily, paused, then lowered his voice, "You just awakened your ability, you're not used to it yet, maybe..."

Rong Qin glanced at him nonchalantly, "Maybe what? You're just a B-rank, but I'm an A-rank."

Tun Qin's back stiffened, his hand pierced by the thorn.

Rong Qin curiously asked, "Don't you know her? Is she tough?"

Tun Qin lowered his head, his expression uncertain, "She... she's average, no, she's really weak, definitely not your match."

Rong Qin's confidence soared, "Father, let me try, I want to test my ability."

Tun Qin called out to Mu Qin as “uncle,” but Mu Qin sternly stopped him with his eyes. This young man boldly called him “father,” yet Mu Qin remained composed, even a hint of indulgence, “Alright, come then.”

Song Ke and the young man named Rong Qin entered the isolation room.

“Hey, what level are you?” Rong Qin asked disdainfully.

“A-level,” Song Ke responded, as that was what her ability card stated.

“We’re the same,” Rong Qin smiled and without a word raised his arm, revealing a row of miniature gun barrels that went “swoosh” as they fired bullets continuously.

Wow, it’s the legendary hail of bullets.

Song Ke swiftly moved, her figure almost flashing in a zigzag pattern, seizing the opportunity to strike back with a swift spinning leg kick!

Rong Qin was kicked hard and sent flying, landing with a thud on the ground as his gun barrels fell silent.

Huh? Song Ke was stunned. Wasn’t he A-level? How did he get knocked down with just one kick?

Struggling to get up, Rong Qin wiped the blood from the corner of his mouth. A glint appeared in his hand, and suddenly numerous crystals materialized, mostly of level 2 and 3. He extracted their energy with his mental powers, dimming the crystals before casually tossing them away and fiercely attacking Song Ke.

Song Ke was bewildered. She had seen people on drugs, but never seen someone using crystals to fight!

Dodging the attack, she tentatively threw a punch.

“Bang!”

Rong Qin failed to evade it again, taking a direct hit on the bridge of his nose and falling backward.

Song Ke: ??? What’s going on?

[Song Ke, the opponent is a secondary awakener,] Zhuang Qingyan said.

Song Ke was puzzled. What did ‘secondary awakener’ mean?

Zhuang Qingyan quickly provided a detailed explanation, [Secondary awakeners are those unable to awaken their abilities naturally, relying on external stimuli like crystals to create a false magnetic field within their bodies.] [You can also understand it as... noobs.]

Struggling like a roly-poly toy, Rong Qin got up again, pulling out another crystal to draw energy.

Song Ke was confused and watched as Rong Qin charged towards her once more. She decided to respond with her awakened energy.

Her confrontational and forceful awakened energy struck Rong Qin unprepared, instantly disorienting him. He charged forward in a daze and, due to his aggressive momentum, crashed into the isolation room’s transparent glass, knocking himself unconscious!

Mu Qin swiftly stood up, “Rong Qin? Where’s the doctor?!”

“The match is stopped, everyone take a ten-minute break,” Su Fengsa shouted in a panic.

Song Ke maintained her punching stance, standing in confusion.

What was happening?

Amidst the chaos, the folding screen to Mu Qin's right moved, revealing half of a misty and beautiful face, signaling towards Song Ke.

Huh? Song Ke blinked her eyes.

It seemed the beautiful sister had something to say to her.