

The Mechanic 41

Chapter 41: First Operation (Part 3)

“Just give it a try.”

Lambert cut Li Ya Lin off as he bent down to unmask the agent. To their alarm, the man did not have a face, or rather, he did not have any facial features.

“What— what is this?”

Li Yao was horror-struck. They proceeded to unmask the remaining 9 men, and they were all faceless!

Suddenly, a change occurred in the first man that Han Xiao had asked them to unmask. As the mark of a black spider slowly appeared on his face, facial features also began to form, and it soon became clear that it looked exactly like Black Spider’s face. Next, the wounds on this person actually began to heal up, and after a while, this ‘corpse’s’ eyelids began to move!

“Blow his brains up!” Han Xiao instructed firmly.

Lambert fired without hesitation.

They proceeded to listen to Han Xiao and repeat the same procedure one by one on whichever faceless man the same signs next appeared on. Li Ya Lin and Li Yao were thoroughly shocked by what was happening, but they suppressed their doubts and carried out Han Xiao’s instructions.

Although they had no idea how Han Xiao knew of Black Spider’s secret; he, without a doubt, knew his stuff.

When there was only one faceless man left, Han Xiao stopped them.

“Don’t kill him. Just cripple him.”

When the mark of the black spider and Black Spider’s face formed completely on the faceless man, he opened his eyes in horror and shouted, “How do you all know my superpowers?”

The name of his ability was [Parasitic Copy].

It allowed him to create a faceless copy out of himself after a certain period of time. The copy did not possess intelligence and could only operate and follow simple instructions within a fixed radius of himself.

Each copy that Black Spider had was like an extra life, and he could reincarnate indefinitely as long as a copy still existed. In this manner, he was virtually immortal.

While this ability did not have any direct offensive use, what it did was alter Black Spider’s very life-form and free him from the restraints of flesh and blood, turning him into a force of consciousness that could reside in any of his copies.

As long as a copy existed, he was invincible!

It was his greatest secret, and one that he would never divulge to anyone.

How could anyone have figured it out?

Han Xiao laughed at the sight of Black Spider's dumbfounded and horrified face on the feed. If it had been some other mini-boss, he might not have been able to recall their abilities, but Black Spider had been a headache for countless players in the game, so he left a lasting impression.

At present, Black Spider had actually not even mastered his power, making it the perfect time to deal with him. Nonetheless, it was a superpower with extremely high potential. Who knows what someone who had mastered it would be capable of. Not even Han Xiao knew, as Black Spider had died early in the game as well—not this early though, of course.

How did he die?

Black Spider's power might have been tricky to deal with, but there were still ways to deal with it. Since he had transcended flesh to become purely 'soul', one could simply damage his soul directly to cripple his wings. Still, superhumans with soul-damaging abilities were far and few in Galaxy, so most players remained incapable of killing him easily. This was why he was considered one of the 'Hardest Bosses to Kill' in Version 1.0.

And of course, Black Spider considered himself so as well... until he met Hila.

Out of all the classes, Espers were the ones who possessed all sorts of extraordinary abilities. Unlike the other four superhuman classes, Espers only needed to consume gene awakening drugs instead of learning knowledge in order to unlock their abilities. Each character in Galaxy was given one chance to take the gene awakening drug, and if it failed, that character would never be able to switch classes to become an Esper again.

The success rate would depend on the type of gene awakening drug used, and as you might have guessed, this was indeed a pay-to-win feature.

Even the lowest grade gene awakening drugs went for as high as 398 dollars, and the [Ultra-Perfect-Deluxe Gene Awakening Elixir], the awakening drug with the highest success rate, was worth well over 5,000 dollars despite it only having an 18% success rate without guarantees.

It was truly a money spinner for the game's company.

Previously, Han Xiao had also tried his hand at switching to an Esper. Unfortunately, the only result that he arrived at was that Esper players were all filthy rich.

Black Spider quickly calmed down and threatened, "I have unlimited copies. Even if you destroy this body, you won't be able to kill me! Mark my words! I will definitely hunt you down for the rest of your lives!"

Lambert was about to raise his gun when Han Xiao hurriedly stopped him.

"Follow my instructions..."

As Li Ya Lin listened to Han Xiao, she suddenly began to act high and all-knowing as she replied to Black Spider, “Unlimited copies? Stop trying to scare people. You can have at most have 50 bodies! Apart from the 10 here, the rest are scattered across the globe!”

Black Spider’s eyes grew wide with disbelief. Figuring out the nature of his powers was one thing, but to actually know such secret information? How was that possible? Black Spider’s mind was racing.

Someone knows everything about my powers!

Who? Who could it be?

Could it be... an Esper who can read minds?

Li Ya Lin continued, “As long as we don’t kill this copy of you, we can lock you up for as long as we want!”

Black Spider’s face changed, and he immediately attempted to bite his own tongue off to avoid his impending fate. Unfortunately, Lambert was a step faster, and he managed to restrain him.

Unable to even end his own life, Black Spider could only glare hatefully at Li Ya Lin.

At this point in time, the trio had the same questions in their mind.

Who exactly is Han Xiao?

Why does Division 13 treat his identity with such secrecy?

How does he possess such secretive information?

...

A cleanup crew soon arrived to put a straitjacket over Black Spider and take him back.

At the same time, Han Xiao, who was relaxing in the faraway base, received a mission completion notification.

—

You have completed the E-Class mission, ‘Black Spider’, earning 5,000 experience.

You have fulfilled the secret condition: “Take Black Spider in Alive”, earning 40,000 experience or a Soul Stabilizer.

The Soul Stabilizer had the effect of raising spiritual resistance, granting the user immunity to mental and spiritual attacks. It was a piece of equipment that was particularly useful against magic users.

As there were no mages or psychics on Aquamarine, the Soul Stabilizer was not really of much use to Han Xiao for now, so he naturally selected the more practical reward of 40,000 experience.

What about Hila, you ask? That would still be thinking too far ahead.

Not bad at all. Han Xiao smiled to himself.

...

The trio finally arrived back at the secret-ops HQ. Li Ya Lin rushed into the room and asked Han Xiao with wide, curious eyes, "How did you know that Black Spider was a superhuman?"

Han Xiao laughed enigmatically.

"I'll tell you for one million dollars," he offered, frustrating Li Ya Lin.

"Whatever. Oh right, what are we going to do about him?"

Li Yao shook his head.

"I heard that the higher-ups want to send him to Death's Door Island and lock him up forever."

Death's Door Island was a maximum security prison that the Six Nations established together. It was located in the middle of an ocean, making it impossible to escape from. Only those that the Six Nations deemed the most dangerous were sent there—evil individuals, warlords of the Wanderers Army, and other important figureheads.

Death's Door Island was so named as a sentence to the island was essentially a death sentence, except that it was worse—death would actually be an escape.

Han Xiao was pleased with the arrangement, as there was truly no other way to keep him from coming after them for revenge.

At the end of the day, the team's first operation together was a perfect success, and after tidying up, everyone made their own way home.

Han Xiao, too, was about to leave when, suddenly, Feng Jun came up to him with a worried look.

"Internal affairs wants to ask you a few questions."

"Haven't I proved my trustworthiness?" asked Han Xiao.

"The internal affairs department appealed for a second interrogation. As it is within reason for them to do so, the higher-ups did not object. As you know, your previous identity is a sensitive topic."

"The higher-ups are split in two on the matter of yourself," he added softly. "While departments like intelligence and logistics think a friendly relationship is more beneficial, the hardliners led by internal affairs think otherwise."

Han Xiao sighed. Where there is people there will be conflict.

...

At internal affairs, Han Xiao had his height and weight taken again before being brought to an interrogation room, where a sole investigator awaited him.

"Name."

"Han Xiao."

“Gender.”

“Female.”

The veins on the investigator’s temple bulged.

“Age.”

“30... no, I mean 31.”

Bang!

The investigator slammed the table.

“Stop playing a fool!”

“Why ask all these pointless things? Can we just go straight to the point?”

“Continue. Family relationships,” the investigator continued through gritted teeth.

“I’m an orphan. No relatives.”

“Where were you born?”

“Mt. Buzhou.”

“Nonsense! We didn’t find any record of your birth!”

“Go ask your superior,” Han Xiao replied plainly.

Obviously, the higher-ups would not divulge Han Xiao’s information to a normal member of staff. This interrogation was simply the internal affairs department’s idea of giving him a warning.

The investigator was being given instructions through his earpiece, and he suppressed his anger to proceed with the psychological assessment.

The investigator gave Han Xiao a number of hypothetical scenarios for him to say what he would do in each of them. Han Xiao, however, was not cooperative and gave random answers.

...

Finally, the interrogation ended.

As the investigator sealed the compiled information in an envelope, he coldly told Han Xiao, “The internal affairs department is always watching you. Pray we don’t find anything on you.”

“So you mean you currently have nothing, and can’t take any action against me?” taunted Han Xiao, before leaving the room in high spirits.

The investigator’s face instantly darkened, and his hands shook with fury as he clutched the envelope.

Chapter 42: The Research Department’s Greed

On his way back to the workshop, Han Xiao thought about how to go about starting his business in Division 13.

The first thing he would need to do was to get his name out there. Pulling out his phone, he made a call to Li Ya Lin to ask for her help. After some negotiation, she agreed to help him out on the condition of a lifetime 20% discount.

However, there was still a problem—the workshop was not well equipped for Han Xiao’s plans, so he would not be able to carry out mass production. After thinking things through, he decided that he had no choice but to speak to Lu Qian directly.

...

“Sister Qian, I have something to say.”

Lu Qian shivered.

‘It was unavoidable all along,’ she thought to herself, ‘but now I am mentally prepared!’

“There’s something I want to tell you,” continued Han Xiao. “Actually, I-”

Suddenly, Lu Qian turned to face him and bowed resolutely.

“S-sorry, but I have to reject you. Please don’t get me wrong, you are a good person.”

The atmosphere instantly stiffened.

Han Xiao’s eyelids twitched. Although he actually did not even have any intention of wooing her, being rejected in such a manner still left a bad taste in his mouth.

“...”

“You misunderstand. I just want to refit the workshop and install an independent workroom for my own use. My friend has lent me the money. What do you think? It’s like a small upgrade.”

Lu Qian gave a start and started to blush. She felt like she was about to die from embarrassment.

“Okay, fine. I agree,” she replied before running upstairs.

“Ahhhh! That was so embarrassing!”

Han Xiao rolled his eyes. He suspected that she probably did not even hear him clearly.

...

Han Xiao drew up a proposal for his upgrades and passed it to Feng Jun to get it approved by the higher-ups.

As Division 13 valued Han Xiao highly, and it was a perfectly reasonable request, it was immediately passed, and construction workers soon arrived at the workshop.

Two days later, there was now a new mini workshop right next to the main building. As Division 13 had fully paid for it, it would be more accurate to say that Han Xiao was borrowing it, and under his request, they had also built an underground space for his convenience.

Over the next few days, Han Xiao received many orders for the Retractable Knife.

Although all of his clients were Division 13 agents, Han Xiao preferred not to meet with any of them directly just in case. He instead relied on Li Ya Lin to act as a middleman.

The materials were sent directly to Han Xiao's workshop, and he crafted dozens of Retractable Knives over the next few days, earning him quite a lot of experience, some of which he used to raise Mechanic Affinity to the highest level, thereby gaining another talent point.

Back in Division 13, word that Li Ya Lin's team had acquired a mechanic named Han Xiao—and that he was open to private orders—spread like wildfire.

As a result, the amount of orders he received skyrocketed, and Han Xiao found himself barely able to meet the demand. Nonetheless, thanks to this, he was able to earn tons of experience each day.

Unlike in his previous life, there were no competitors, so Han Xiao had the entire market to himself.

Han Xiao only intended to take orders for both the Retractable Knife, and High-explosive Gunpowder, but he made an exception to craft a Lightweight Mecha Arm for Li Ya Lin.

While the Retractable Knife was indeed selling like hot pancakes, Han Xiao knew that its popularity would soon fizzle out. After all, most people were only buying it for its novelty. Moreover, as its design wasn't really that complex at all, it wouldn't be strange for imitations and similar products to appear in the near future.

As such, Han Xiao had planned all along to only use it to earn a quick buck. Comparatively, the [High-explosive Gunpowder] had more promising potential. Not only was it inexpensive, it was extremely useful, and being a consumable, clients would keep on returning for more.

Furthermore, unlike the retractable knife, [High Explosive Gunpowder] would not be easily replicated—as soon as the bullet cap was opened, the gunpowder would react with air to combust and leave no trace. It was essentially impossible to craft without the blueprints and manufacturing process for the planet's current technology.

Han Xiao used the money he earned from the Retractable Knife each day to purchase large quantities of materials for making [High-explosive Gunpowder]. He only planned to push it out into the market after accumulating a stockpile.

...

One day, when Old Lu and the tall old man were having one of their 'chess sessions', Han Xiao saw the tall old man and came up to him.

"Is the prosthetic good to use?" he asked, smiling.

"Not bad," the tall old man laughed and rolled up his sleeve. The prosthetic arm had been fitted with a layer of artificial skin, making it seem extremely realistic.

"As long as you like it. If it needs maintenance, feel free to come to me."

The tall old man nodded and asked, "I heard from Old Lu that you joined Division 13?"

“Yes, I did.”

“What a promising young lad. Do your best for the country,” he applauded.

Han Xiao smirked inwardly. The tall old man did not know that he knew who he was.

Working for Division 13 was not a huge secret to keep. After all, the division had a front cover. Ordinary people had heard of a Division 13, but they simply knew it as a company.

As they conversed, Han Xiao wondered when the tall old man would come clean with him and if he should act surprised when he did.

Suddenly, Feng Jun entered the workshop in a hurry and said to Han Xiao with a grave expression, “Let’s go outside for a talk.”

As Han Xiao’s caretaker, Feng Jun always kept a small team around the compound to monitor the workshop, mainly to keep an eye out for any Germinal Organization operatives.

As they stepped outside, the tall old man wondered what had happened.

“The research department has their eyes on you!”

Han Xiao narrowed his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“The research department is tasked with inventing new weapons and equipment. They have the power to perform risk assessment on any equipment we use. Using the claim that your Retractable Knife is dangerous to use, they are demanding that you cough up the blueprints! As they have the right to do so, the other departments are unable to interfere.”

‘So they want my blueprints!

‘Risk assessment? What a joke!’

Han Xiao snorted coldly. If he handed them the blueprints for the Retractable Knife, they would immediately begin mass production of it!

Feng Jun proceeded to enlighten Han Xiao on the internal strife in Division 13. The research department and internal affairs were both on the side of the hardliners, and essentially hostile towards him.

As the research department had not produced many results over the past few years, their budget was continuously slashed every year. In Division 13, their standing was even lower than that of the logistics department, which was why they were now targeting Han Xiao’s blueprints. They were truly desperate.

“And what if I refuse?”

“You will be blacklisted by them, and it will reflect on your record. The good thing is that you are not an ordinary agent, and the Division values your intel highly, so it should not cause you many problems; after all, the research department can’t really force you due to your position.”

“Then that’s fine. I won’t give them the blueprints,” said Han Xiao as he shook his head.

Feng Jun laughed bitterly. He had come knowing that Han Xiao would most likely refuse.

Although the Retractable Knife would end up being over-saturated in the market, it was still earning him a lot for the time being. Naturally, Han Xiao would not give it up.

The tall old man made a phone call to someone in Division 13. When he learnt of what had transpired, his face darkened.

“A bunch of greedy imbeciles! All they do is stir up nonsense!”

That Han Xiao was able to achieve an amicable relationship with Division 13 was something that the tall old man had played a huge role in. Now, however, there were people within the division itself who were clumsily undermining his efforts! What if Han Xiao became averse to the division and decided to pack up and leave? Then, all of his thoughts and efforts would have been in vain.

“The gall of them!”

Chapter 43: Stealing Credit (Part 1)

“Unbelievable!”

Li Ya Lin was enraged to hear of the research department’s plot, mainly because she was worried about her 20% discount.

“This is the higher ups’ game,” said Li Yao. “We can’t do anything about it.”

“Might as well get rid of that research department head,” suggested Lambert plainly as he polished his daggers.

Li Yao gave a start.

“Uncle! Don’t say that kind of thing!”

“Well, that seems like one way to solve things...” mumbled Li Ya Lin in deep thought, sending Li Yao to the verge of tears.

Even if you guys don’t want to live, I still want to live! he thought to himself.

Although Han Xiao had only joined them a few days ago, after the Black Spider operation, the trio had fully accepted him as their comrade. Naturally, they were displeased to hear of his predicament.

“Why not ask for his opinion directly?” asked Li Yao.

“His address is top secret, and his phone is always off!” scowled Li Ya Lin. “Who knows where he could be...”

“Then what should we do? How can we just watch him suffer at the hands of the research department?”

“Wait,” Lambert abruptly interjected.

Footsteps could be heard, and a few seconds later, a woman appeared at the door.

“Hey, Lin Lin, I heard that your new teammate is quite the troublemaker.”

The woman was short-haired, and a beauty in her own right. However, her voice was derisive, and she looked down on the trio antagonistically as she leaned against the door with folded arms.

The woman’s skin was extremely fair, and her lips were exceedingly red, as though the petals of a rose. She possessed a flirtatious temperament, and although she was tall, the strength of her aura did not seem to pale against Li Ya Lin’s. Although Li Ya Lin was unquestionably prettier, the woman was, without a doubt, more of a head turner than her.

Li Ya Lin’s face immediately darkened at the sight of her.

“Vixen Su,” she growled through gritted teeth, “are you looking for a fight?”

Di Su Su giggled tauntingly.

“If you dare.”

Di Su Su and Li Ya Lin were well known to be hated rivals. The bad blood between them could be traced all the way back to when they were fellow disciples of a dojo in their childhood. While Di Su Su always excelled in each of their tests and fights, Li Ya Lin’s performance was always average, and she was always easily defeated by her.

Even until this day, Li Ya Lin would sometimes be reminded of the way that she would put on a pretense in front of everyone and act nice to her despite them detesting each other. While everyone would praise Di Su Su and offer her guidance, Li Ya Lin’s conversations with their master always end in a few sentences, and he would always just ask her to follow Di Su Su’s example.

Recalling those events always dampened Li Ya Lin’s mood. Her master essentially treated her like an abandoned dog in the rain.

The two would eventually both end up joining Division 13, but only for history to repeat itself. Di Su Su’s always outperformed Li Ya Lin’s team, and her team became the ace of secret ops. What Li Ya Lin hated most was how Di Su Su would frequently come over to mock her, and the way she called her ‘Lin Lin’!

Bitch! Since when were we close?

Di Su Su was obviously doing it on purpose, and while Li Ya Lin knew this, it still got on her nerves.

“Hehe,” Di Su Su laughed softly. “I heard that you guys have a new addition, so I came specially to look for him. Where is he? He can’t have gone to hide, right?”

“He’s not here,” replied Li Ya Lin coldly. “Get lost.”

“Looks like I’ve made a wasted trip, but I guess that’s understandable, since he’s busy being destroyed by the research department.”

Li Ya Lin stared at her.

“Hurry up and get lost!”

“How heartless.” Di Su Su pouted. “We’re childhood sweethearts, after all.”

She shot a look towards Li Yao before sauntering off.

Li Ya Lin was already frustrated, but when she turned around to see Li Yao all intoxicated, her anger swelled. She stood up abruptly to grab Li Yao by his collar.

“Is this beautiful woman right beside you not enough?” she yelled. “Why are you looking at that vixen?”

“B-b-but,” stammered Li Yao, “she smiled at me...”

“You had better give me a good answer: is she more beautiful or am I?” she asked threateningly.

For some reason, Li Yao still had to take a moment to think before he replied, “I think... that Sister Su Su is gentler than you...”

“Humph, Li Yao! I think that your brain needs some adjustment!

“Reverse-avalanche-bridge-breaking suplex!”

As Lambert casually sipped on the cup of water in his hand, he picked his phone up to make a call.

“Get a doctor over here—a bone specialist, preferably.”

...

The research department had expected Han Xiao to refuse their demands.

To mechanics, blueprints were like their lifeline.

They did not care about Han Xiao’s personal gain, or rather, that was to be expected, as the hardliners were hostile to him from the very start. In their eyes, giving Han Xiao the chance to cooperate was a soft move, and he should have been locked up and controlled instead.

On the other hand, the conservatives thought exactly the opposite. They were willing to give Han Xiao the benefit of the doubt as he seemed trustworthy and was cooperative. Why cause unrest and animosity over a simple beginner equipment blueprint?

What if he wasn’t scared of torture?

Division 13 had tried all sorts of methods on captured Germinal members before, but torture seldom worked, and nine out of ten would give false intel that was harmful instead of beneficial.

Besides, Han Xiao was a truly unique case.

As such, the conservatives, too, were outraged at the pressure that the hardliners were trying to put on Han Xiao. They saw them as a bunch of outdated, old farts. Times had changed, and talent was in high demand—Division 13 should have been treasuring him, not pressuring him.

Weren’t there other mechanics in the division too? Stealing Han Xiao’s work would reflect poorly on the division.

What year was it? All the talk about loyalty and what not would only serve to chase away prospects and talents seeking refuge. Don't forget that the Six Nations was the main culprit for the destruction of all the other countries! It would not be surprising if these foreign talents just up and rebelled!

Unfortunately, as Division 13 was extremely compartmentalized, only the top brass would be able to interfere with the research department's actions, but they seemed to only be interested in continuing to observe for now.

The research department was offering high amounts of cash to the agents for the Retractable Knives that they had bought from Han Xiao, which everyone saw through as a low move.

As most of the agents did not know of Han Xiao's special status, most felt that it was unreasonable to bully an ordinary mechanic so, and they decided not to turn in the knives. Doing so would also be, in some sense, disrespectful to Han Xiao.

However, there were still some who turned them in for the money.

Korat was the first agent to strike a deal with the research department. He asked for 30,000 dollars—thirty times more than the opening offer—and the research department relented.

His reasoning was simple—it was simply worth the money. While most of the agents held on to their morals, he laughed at them for being fools to pass up the opportunity.

It's just a small-time mechanic anyway, who even cares? Just wait till the research department mass produces it if you really want it.

...

In the research department, Luo Xuan and the head secretary were examining the retractable knife.

"Luo Xuan, can you reproduce it?"

Chapter 44: Stealing Credit (Part 2)

"Piece of cake. This thing isn't even well made; plus, it's not encrypted."

"Then I'll leave it to you. If you can figure out the blueprints, I'll pull you over into our department. Of course, your position will be higher."

Luo Xuan's eyes lit up. Since his debacle over the mecha arm, he had started to feel that he did not have a future in logistics.

If he could gain the favor of the higher-ups again, he would definitely be able to surpass that blasted Han Xiao!

...

Back at the workshop, Han Xiao had moved into the new building for convenience sake.

The arrangement brought Lu Qian some relief as things were still awkward between the pair.

“Whoosh.”

Hot steam gushed out as Han Xiao, who was wearing a heat-resistant suit, opened the furnace lid. He proceeded to use a pair of iron tongs to pick up a piece of glowing hot metal from within.

For now, there were two options available to Han Xiao for making the Retractable Knives—molding or stamping.

While both methods had their own advantages, the latter allowed for mass production with a higher success rate, so Han Xiao favored it.

The selling point of the Retractable Knife was its concealability. Since practicality was more important than the quality of craftsmanship, Han Xiao did not bother to put much detail into making them.

The metal sheets that he used for stamping were provided by Division 13, so they were top grade. Han Xiao had polished the metal sheet with a chemical spray before putting it into the furnace. After taking it out of the furnace, he set it under the stamping machine. Of course, he still had to carry out a few more steps before the knives were complete.

Each Retractable Knife gave him 100-200 experience, and the level of the blueprint itself had been increased to Lv. 2, giving the final product a slightly higher quality.

When he was done, Han Xiao stepped out of the heat-resistant suit and wiped the sweat off his brow. After examining the newly made knives, he proceeded to work on some workshop orders.

Midway, Han Xiao’s phone rang. He picked up his phone to see that it was Li Ya Lin.

“Something bad has happened! All the agents want to cancel their orders!”

“What happened?” Han Xiao was shocked by the news.

“The research department has reverse-engineered the Retractable Knife, and they announced that they will proceed with mass production very soon and make it available to everyone!”

Although everyone could see how blatantly underhanded the research department was being, since they were going to be provided with free Retractable Knives, it was only natural for them to want to cancel their orders with Han Xiao.

The Retractable Knife’s profitability had run its course.

Han Xiao sat in deep thought. He had not expected the research department to be so brazen. Although Han Xiao had already known that something like this would happen, he did not expect them to take action so fast.

While giving up the blueprints voluntarily would earn him some faction reputation, he would not be able to earn any experience.

In any case, they were putting a dent in Han Xiao plans to get stronger.

Han Xiao picked up his phone to make a call to Feng Jun.

“I assume you’ve heard?” he asked in a low voice.

Feng Jun sighed.

“The research department is really too much. The higher-ups haven’t even given them permission, and they’ve already leaked that they will mass produce the Retractable Knife.”

Han Xiao frowned.

“Fill me in on the details.”

Feng Jun proceeded to tell Han Xiao about Korat and Luo Xuan.

“Has the research department given an official statement?”

“Not yet.”

Han Xiao’s face darkened. Looks like the research department did not even intend to give him an explanation.

How the research department dared to act was one thing, but the higher-ups definitely understood exactly what was going on. Han Xiao speculated that the reason they had not granted or denied the research department permission yet was to test how he would react. If he let the research department trample over him, it could be the green light for them to stop playing nice with him.

Of course, that was an extreme line of thought.

The top brass definitely won’t side with either faction. As long as I don’t push things too far, they will have to act accordingly and compensate me.

A thought suddenly occurred to Han Xiao. *This could be my chance to obtain advancement knowledge!*

However, as advancement knowledge was top secret, it would not be so simple to just mention it casually.

A plan began to formulate in Han Xiao’s mind.

Rob me in broad daylight? I’ll teach you all that I’m not that easy to bully!

...

In the Research Department...

“Heh heh. Well done, well done.” The research department’s head secretary was full of praise for Luo Xuan.

Luo Xuan smiled plainly, but in truth he was suppressing his delight.

“The department head thinks highly of you. We’ve already requested all the necessary information and documents from the logistics department. You can already be counted as our staff.”

“What about the... promotion?”

“The department head specifically instructed that you will lead your own team. Your clearance will also be raised. Keep up the good work and there will be nothing to worry about.”

Luo Xuan’s smile widened.

“I heard that Han Xiao is valued highly by the higher-ups. Will there be any problem?” he asked.

“Relax, I have inside information. There is nothing he can do.”

Chapter 45: The Last Laugh

News of the conflict between the research department and Han Xiao spread throughout Division 13 like wildfire. As everyone thought Han Xiao to be an ordinary mechanic, the outcome seemed obvious.

Over the next few days, Han Xiao showed no signs of action, so it became apparent that he had, as expected, decided to swallow it.

Nonetheless, it still remained a mystery as to why the research department would pick on a normal staff member so much.

Li Ya Lin also suffered from the incident due to her involvement with Han Xiao, and while she kept on trying to call Han Xiao to speak to him, the line always failed to get through.

Of course, Han Xiao was not going to let things end like that. While he had not made his move yet, that was because his preparations were not complete.

Han Xiao had previously made about \$100,000 from selling the Retractable Knives, \$30,000 of which was used to purchase materials for High-explosive Gunpowder.

Over the last few days, he had used another \$30,000 of materials to make a huge batch of Retractable Knives—100 in total.

“That should be enough.”

Han Xiao had just finished with the hundredth knife, and he went to look for a crate to store them all in before leaving Division 13.

As the threat of war loomed, guns were heavily regulated in the Six Nations. It was in fact illegal for civilians to possess any, which was why Han Xiao had gotten rid of his guns before entering the city.

Nonetheless, there were illegal arms dealers situated all across the Six Nations. Neutral vendors such as these were implemented in Galaxy as a way for players to purchase equipment and intel as they carried out infiltration and assassination missions in enemy nations.

Naturally, Han Xiao knew exactly where these vendors were located.

Han Xiao was headed to District 8 to look for an arms dealer named Ma Xiu Si. Ma Xiu Si was an operative for the Fabian Company, a global powerhouse in the arms market who sold everything from guns to jets. Under the table, they even did business with the Six Nations themselves and the Revolutionary Army.

...

Han Xiao easily found Ma Xiu Si, who was more than happy to entertain him when Han Xiao opened up the crate of Retractable Knives before him and began to explain their usage.

Ma Xiu Si was experienced in the black market, so he instantly recognized the Retractable Knife's worth. While conventional melee weapons were not much of a money spinner, the Retractable Knife's concealability and element of surprise would definitely be favored by many.

Han Xiao expressed his wish to sell the whole crate.

"Can you supply them long-term?" asked Ma Xiu Si.

Han Xiao chuckled.

"Would you be interested in the blueprint?"

Ma Xiu Si's eyes widened. Blueprints were extremely important items to mechanics. They essentially gave their owners monopoly over their inventions. It was extremely rare that a mechanic would offer to sell one of his blueprints, so Ma Xiu Si was not only shocked but overjoyed.

As he was a veteran salesman, however, he suppressed the excitement boiling within.

"Name your price," he asked casually.

"There's a hundred here. 5,000 each, and I'll sell you the blueprint for a million."

Ma Xiu Si gasped lightly. '5,000 each? A million for the blueprint? Just rob me, will you?'

"No bargaining."

Han Xiao was confident that Ma Xiu Si would agree to his terms.

Ma Xiu Si frowned, but after a while of contemplation, he relented.

"Deal!"

Being able to obtain the blueprint was far too lucrative a chance to miss.

As the banks of each of the Six Nations were not connected to one another, dark web banking was the primary method of transaction in the underworld. Not only was it accessible worldwide, it was also extremely secure.

Han Xiao performed fingerprint verification for the account on the spot.

"I look forward to doing more business with you. This is a VIP card."

Han Xiao took the card from Ma Xiu Si and kept it.

Fostering good relations with these arms dealers would prove useful in the long run as he did not plan to stay in Division 13 forever.

...

Back in Division 13, the research director encountered the intelligence director in the hallway.

“Looks like you guys have chosen to support a good-for-nothing,” mocked the research director. “He caved in so easily to a little bit of pressure. Take my advice—stop playing nice with him.”

For some reason, the intelligence director was not enraged by his words. He simply smiled back.

“Good luck,” he replied plainly as he patted the research director on the shoulder.

The research director was confused. ‘Good luck? What do you mean?’

Suddenly, his phone rang. The division chief was looking for him. He hastily bumbled his way to the chief’s office.

“Chief, you called?”

“Your plans were approved yesterday. The Retractable Knife will be credited to your department.”

The research director was overjoyed to hear the news.

“Thank you for your trust, chief.”

The chief chuckled.

“Don’t be happy so soon.”

The research director furrowed his brows.

“What happened? If it’s about Han Xiao, there won’t be a problem. There’s nothing he can do.”

“Oh, you think so?” questioned the chief.

The research director nodded.

“Good...”

Suddenly, the chief picked up a folder and threw it in the research director’s face.

“To think that you would abuse your power to sell the division’s technology for personal gain! How disappointing.”

What?

Chapter 46: Settlement

The research director was flustered. He hastily scrambled to pick up the document on the floor, and as he went through it, he began to tremble.

The report stated that the blueprint for the Retractable Knife had been leaked, and that, naturally, the ‘inventor’ of the Retractable Knife would have to take responsibility for it.

“T-t-this is not my fault!” he cried out. “It must be that brat, Han Xiao! He is obviously trying to frame me! Everyone knows that the blueprint belonged to him, please help me clear my name, Chief!”

“The report clearly states that the research department invented the Retractable Knife,” replied the chief coolly. “It is your responsibility.”

The research director felt a chill run down his spine as he suddenly realized what was going on.

The top brass had chosen to back up Han Xiao!

The reason why the verdict on their proposal was delayed for so long was simply that the higher-ups wanted to wait and see what Han Xiao would do.

And Han Xiao had managed to play everyone.

By leaking the blueprint, he was asking the higher ups, ‘Here is the excuse you need. Do you want to help me or not?’

While they had not expected Han Xiao to come up with such a brilliant comeback to frame the research department, they were more than willing to help him out to appease him. After all, they did want to continue having his cooperation.

Originally, Han Xiao’s Retractable Knife would have been exclusive to Division 13, even if it meant that he himself had the monopoly over it, but thanks to the research department’s greed, the Retractable Knife would now appear in the hands of others too.

While Han Xiao’s actions might have been a little bit extreme, the higher-ups were willing to overlook it. The blueprint was rightfully his anyway.

Of course, if it had been a normal agent, they would without a doubt send him to court martial and expel him from Division 13. It was Han Xiao’s unique identity that stopped them from doing so. The intel he possessed was truly far too valuable. In any case, he had not stepped entirely out of line yet.

Furthermore, it was important to display the Division’s fairness to everyone.

At this point, the research director’s face had turned completely pale. He deeply regretted having tried to pick on Han Xiao.

While the ‘crime’ itself was not grave to the point of a death sentence, his career was essentially over.

Han Xiao, you bastard! he screamed inwardly.

...

When news of the research director being charged with selling weapons illegally broke out, all the agents in Division 13 were filled with disbelief.

The fact that he was not immediately sentenced heavily hinted that there was more to the entire incident than met the eye.

It did not take long for the agents to put two and two together and arrive at the unbelievable conclusion that Han Xiao had orchestrated it all.

Previously, they thought that Han Xiao had kept quiet due to caving in, but in retrospect, it was simply the calm before the storm.

“Did he actually frame the research director?”

“The gall of him!”

“But doesn’t that mean that the higher-ups are supporting him?”

What everyone found hardest to believe was that Han Xiao actually got off scot-free. This caused a lot of speculation regarding his true identity to arise.

And the person happiest to hear the news was none other than Li Ya Lin, who was vindicated from all the odd looks that people had been giving her due to her connection to Han Xiao. The first thing that she did was look for Di Su Su and gloat in front of her. However, Di Su Su was not the least angered by her. Instead, she was more preoccupied with her newly found interest in Han Xiao.

“Who exactly is Lin Lin’s new teammate?”

...

The research director was only given a strict warning for now, and, unable to touch Han Xiao, his men suffered the brunt of his rage. Of course, Luo Xuan was not spared. Instead of his promised promotion, what he earned was a demotion to the position of an ordinary staff member.

“Damn it!” cursed Luo Xuan.

If he had known things would turn out like this, he would have obediently continued on in the logistics department. It was also now too late, as the logistics director was not even willing to grant him an audience.

This is unfair!

Why do they want to protect Han Xiao?

How is he better than me?

Luo Xuan was blinded with rage.

...

The next day, Han Xiao received word from Feng Jun that the higher-ups wanted to discuss the matter of settlement with him.

Finally, the chance for Han Xiao to negotiate had come. Han Xiao knew that in the future, the hardliners would not carelessly take action against him again, so it was probably the one time that he would be able to acquire advancement knowledge.

Han Xiao arrived at the HQ with his mask on as usual to meet with Feng Jun. Feng Jun led him to the chief’s office where three people waited: the chief himself, the research director, and an old man who was faced against the glass window.

“Gu Hui, Stardragon Strategic Defense Chief,” introduced the chief.

Han Xiao squinted. It was a familiar name, but he could not recall where he had heard it.

“Someone wants to see you,” Gu Hui continued in a low voice.

The old man turned around and smiled at Han Xiao.

Han Xiao’s acting skills immediately kicked in.

“Tall, old man?”

The tall old man chuckled.

“It must be quite a surprise.”

“Who exactly are you?” asked Han Xiao as he nodded blankly, similar to how he had once acted back in the Germinal Organization.

“All you need to know is that I have some power in Division 13.”

“...”

“Heh. Don’t be so nervous. I’ve already noticed you from back then. You gave me quite a favorable impression.”

Mission accomplished!

As Han Xiao wiped the confusion off his face, the tall old man scrutinized him for a second before slowly saying, “Tell me, how do you want this matter resolved?”

Chapter 47: Sore Loser

“I just want some compensation,” Han Xiao stated calmly.

“Isn’t the money you earned from selling the blueprint enough compensation?” The research director could not resist shooting his mouth off.

Han Xiao shot a look at him.

“If not for you trying to steal my blueprint, I would have been able to make even more money. And if you had even tried asking nicely, I might have even sold it to the division! But ask yourself – did you?”

The research director could not retort.

“What kind of compensation do you want?” asked Gu Hui.

Han Xiao faked a sigh and pretended to contemplate for a moment before replying, “I don’t want something like this to happen again.”

“That’s for sure.”

In any case, even if Han Xiao only chose to sell his goods privately, he would still only be selling to Division 13’s own agents. While the quantity would not be as much as if they were mass produced, they still only benefited the division. Furthermore... what if more valuable blueprints ended up ‘leaking’?

“And...” continued Han Xiao as he rubbed his chin. “I want to have a look at advanced mechanic knowledge.”

The tall old man furrowed his brows. Was it a coincidence, or had Han Xiao planned to ask for it from the very start?

Advanced mechanic knowledge was top-secret in Stardragon, and only accessible with a level 5 or higher clearance. In Galaxy, the equivalent requirement was an ‘honored’ reputation. Each of the Six Nations and the Germinal Organization possessed different kinds of advanced knowledge, but only the most trusted and deserving would have a chance to obtain them.

Although Han Xiao appeared calm and firm on the outside, he was actually extremely nervous. Such a request would normally be impossible to ask of. Now, it all depended on the tall, old man.

“Why advanced knowledge?”

“Just curious.”

“...”

After five minutes of tense silence, the tall old man made up his mind. As he looked deeply into Han Xiao’s eyes, he slowly spoke, “Fine, I will allow it.”

Han Xiao was instantly overcome with relief and joy, but he suppressed his emotions.

Suddenly, the research director interrupted, “Hold on! Advanced knowledge requires a level 5 clearance. This is against the rules!”

Han Xiao’s mouth twitched.

If this bastard dares to spoil my plans, I’ll beat him into a pulp!

“What do you suggest then?” Gu Hui asked unhappily.

“Rules are rules. Although you, senior, are okay with it, I hardly think that the others will agree.”

The tall old man smirked.

“Are you threatening me?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” answered the research director matter-of-factly.

There were two levels of hierarchy in Division 13. Besides the thirteen section heads, there existed a higher committee comprised of the chief himself and other high-ranking officials who wielded enormous influence in Stardragon.

The tall, old man was none other than one of the higher-ranking members, and he was the leader of the conservatives. Naturally, the hardliners had an equally powerful backer, which was why the research head dared to speak up.

“My word alone will suffice,” declared the tall old man plainly.

The research head gritted his teeth. Suddenly, his eyes lit up.

“Then, I suggest granting him only half an hour of browsing. He doesn’t even have the proper clearance anyway.”

Gu Hui and the tall old man exchanged looks. This was a fair suggestion. Besides, Han Xiao himself had only asked to ‘take a look’.

“We’ll give you one hour!” declared Gu Hui.

The research head rejoiced secretly. Even an hour would not be enough time to look through a third of the advanced knowledge.

Deep down, however, Han Xiao was laughing.

One hour? Watch me take one minute with my talent points!

He had to bite his lip to stop himself from grinning.

Calm down... calm down...

...

The advanced knowledge was protected with an extremely secure multi-layered encryption. The code to unlocking it was a combined series of over a hundred 48-digit strings that were refreshed constantly.

The contents itself were only able to be browsed by using a special terminal.

Han Xiao was brought by Gu Hui to take an elevator to a secret basement. When the lift doors opened, Han Xiao was greeted by the sight of a brightly lit metallic hallway lined throughout with surveillance cameras on either side. While there were no guards, the corridor was full of metal detectors and red lasers, and there were guns concealed behind the walls. They would activate automatically upon unauthorized entry.

It was a fortress in its own right.

“How much did you guys spend on this corridor?”

“A few billion,” Gu Hui calmly answered.

Han Xiao let out a soft snort.

The terminal was Stardragon’s most advanced computer. The amount of data that it could process in just one second alone could overload a regular computer. It contained all of the nation’s top secrets.

Han Xiao guessed that even if he maxed his ‘Computing’ talent, it would not be enough to hack through the terminal’s firewall.

It took an entire five minutes to walk across the entire stretch of the hallway, and, as they approached the end, a spherical room appeared in Han Xiao’s view. A transparent passageway connected the hallway to the center of the sphere where a screen could be seen. There was also a panel connected with a mouse and a keyboard. This was the interface of the terminal.

As they stepped into the room, Han Xiao noticed that there were actually countless optical fibers and advanced looking computer parts laid inside the glass – the entire room was actually the terminal!

Han Xiao, however, was not impressed.

“Why is the air here so stale? Did you guys forget the ventilation or something?”

Gu Hui’s eye twitched.

He calmed himself down and replied, “That is the interface. The preparations have been made. You will not be able to access any other information apart from the advanced knowledge. For the sake of protocol, I will remind you that we will be watching, and you had better not try anything funny.”

Got it, I won’t make you laugh.

Han Xiao nodded and proceeded to walk to the panel.

The terminal prompted him for a search input, so he typed in “advancement knowledge”, and several results appeared on the screen:

Esper Advanced Knowledge: [DNA – Strengthened Energy Level]

Esper Advanced Knowledge: [DNA – Strengthened Control]

Pugilist Advanced Knowledge: [Shockwave Burst]

Pugilist Advanced Knowledge: [Wave Control]

Chapter 48: Advancement!

In Galaxy, talent trees were named slightly different for each class: Machinery Knowledge Tree for Mechanics, Qi Mastery Tree for Pugilists, DNA Tree for Espers, Spell Knowledge Tree for Mages, and Psychic Ability Tree for Psychics.

Pugilists focused on strength and combat, and they practiced the art of qi. Some of their skills included [Energy Burst], which is self-explanatory, and [Wavedash], which allowed instantaneous dodging of attacks.

Although Pugilists across the universe practiced and employed different kinds of teachings and techniques, all of them were centered around the use of qi.

Espers were far more unique, as each of them possessed different kinds of supernatural powers. An Esper’s strength was determined by their DNA growth. Through leveling up their talents, their control over their powers would increase: power, speed, control, etc. For example, Magneto, when he was young, could only exert control over small objects like coins. However, as his powers developed, he became able to move entire stadiums and ultimately even control the very earth’s magnetic field. With sufficient time, an Esper’s potential could be said to be unlimited.

Of course, two Espers with the same superpower might not necessarily use them in the same ways. For example, not all electricity users would be able to emulate each other's feats and applications of electricity manipulation. To some extent, in Galaxy, each player had to choose to 'specialize'.

The screen before Han Xiao lit up.

—

Mechanic Advanced Knowledge: Advanced Material Composition

"This is weaponry knowledge!"

Although it appeared that there was only one piece of advanced knowledge suited for Mechanics available, Han Xiao was happy enough to have it.

Now, no one in Stardragon will be able to stop me!

Han Xiao pressed enter without hesitation. Immediately, columns of texts and complex diagrams flashed across on the screen.

—

Advanced knowledge detected.

[Advanced Material Composition]

Use 2 talent points to learn. Y/N

"Yes!"

Han Xiao began to grow dizzy as all the knowledge on the screen started to transmit into his brain.

—

Learning in progress, do not cancel.

1%... 12%... 37%...

Although the entire process only took a few seconds, it felt much longer to Han Xiao.

Suddenly, Han Xiao flung his head back. The 'upload' had been completed successfully.

—

Success! You have learnt [Advanced Material Composition], unlocking advanced Weaponry talents!

[Lv. 20 Novice Mechanic Advancement Mission Complete]

You may now choose one of the following three advancements: Cannonmaster, Technician, or Warmachine.

These were the three paths available to Mechanics, and choosing one was an irreversible decision.

Cannonmasters specialized in long-ranged bombardment and heavy artillery. At higher levels, they possessed frightening firepower. It was commonly known in Galaxy that the key to winning or losing against Cannonmasters lay in range.

If the enemy Cannonmaster is within 100m, don't hesitate—charge him down!

However, if he is over 1,000m away, it would be wise to proceed with caution.

And if he is 3,000m away... well, that won't be the end of the world just yet, but any further and good luck, buddy.

Warmachines, on the other hand, employed technologically advanced combat weapons to fight at close range. From bio-armor to mobile suits, there were many ways for Warmachines to quench their thirst for melee combat.

Yet, when compared to the Technician, both of these paths steered away from the true essence of a Mechanic—invention.

Over 80% of blueprints were exclusive to Technicians, so choosing either path would mean forfeiting the ability to create many higher-level gear and machines.

The trade-off was that they were superior to Technicians in combat and, to most, more fun to play. After all, most people considered 'manufacturing' classes to be boring. Technicians were always the least popular class, until Version 3.0.

In Galaxy, Han Xiao had mained a Technician, preferring them to the other two paths, so he had already set his mind on the Technician path from the very start.

—

Congratulations! You have succeeded in class advancement.

Han Xiao could feel an invisible, mysterious power wrapping around his body.

You are now a Technician (Lv. 1).

+30 STR, +1 DEX, +1 END, +3 INT

3 Attribute Points Gained

1 Talent Point Gained

You have completed the first advancement. Endurance stat-boost has increased:

1 Endurance = 15 Max HP

1 Endurance = 18 Stamina

Although from start to end nothing appeared to have happened in the eyes of Gu Hui and the others, incredible changes had taken place within Han Xiao's body. At present, the mysterious power enveloping him was not only granting him new power—it was awakening the dormant energy lying within his very cells, causing it to resonate.

Suddenly, the interface lit up.

—

You have gained Energy Affinity: Metal!

You have acquired a new ability: Presence of Mind!

You have learnt Energy Training Technique!

You have learnt Intermediate Mechanic Affinity!

You have learnt Blueprint: Special Platinum Alloy!

When the process ended, Han Xiao felt as though his body had been entirely remodeled.

He could now see with stunning clarity the tiny specks of dust on the keyboard, and even the previously unnoticeable buzz of the current running throughout the glass sphere room was now clearly audible to him.

“I did it!”

Han Xiao brought up the character information tab.

Name: Han Xiao

Race: Human (Carbon-based)

Model: NPC (Launch countdown: 138 days, 3 hours & 51 minutes)

Level: 21

Experience: 181,000

Main Class: Lv. 10 Novice Mechanic/ Lv. 1 Apprentice Technician (0/50,000)

Health: 670/670

Stamina: 854/854

Attributes: 31 STR, 18 DEX, 38 END, 32 INT, 1 MYS, 5 CHA, 1 LUK

Unassigned Stat Point(s): 3

Energy: 160/160 (Lv. 3)

(NEW) Energy Type: Magnetic – Gives a Bonus to Machinery Affinity

Lv. 1 (10 Energy) – [STR +1, DEX, +1, END +1, INT +1] Max Stamina +20, Damage (Machinery) +1%, Crafting Speed +1%

Lv. 2 (50 Energy) – [STR +3, DEX, +2, END +3, INT +1] Max Stamina +50, Damage (Machinery) +2%, Crafting Speed +2%

Lv. 3 (100 Energy) – [STR +3, DEX, +3, END +5, INT +2] Max Stamina +100, Damage (Machinery) +3%, Crafting Speed +3%

Energy Level: 98-104

Grade: Class E Superhuman

[You have finally taken the first step of transcendence. Don't get too full of yourself, there is still a long way to go.]

Specializations: [High Focus], [Lesser Mental Resistance], [Hard Worker]

(NEW) [Presence of Mind] – +5 INT

Class Abilities:

– Basic Machinery Affinity Lv.5

– Basic Maintenance Lv. 10

– Basic Enhancement Lv. 10

– Basic Refining Lv. 1

– Overload Lv. 1

Blueprint: Sky Swallow Gliders Lv. 1

Blueprint: Prosthetic Limb Lv. 1

Blueprint: Lightweight Mechanical Arm Lv. 1

Blueprint: Rover Lv. 1

Blueprint: High Explosive Lv.3

Blueprint: Retractable Knife Lv. 2

(New!) Intermediate Mechanic Affinity Lv. 1 – +2% Production Quantity – +2% Production Speed

(New!) Strafe Lv. 1:

Cost: 3 Energy, 15 Stamina.

Cooldown: 12s

For two seconds, enables instantaneous movement within a 3-meter radius. Grants 15% bonus firing speed for the duration of the skill. Can only be used when equipped with a gun. (This skill can be activated even if you are on your last bullet.)

(New!) Blueprint: Platinum Alloy

Grade: Green

This material is made with advanced technology. It has high ductility and is suitable for making armor and various machines.

Crafting Requirement: Basic Refining Lv. 5

Other Abilities:

Basic Combat Lv. 10 – +10% Damage (Barehanded), +2 STR, + 1 END

Basic Shooting Lv. 8 – +8% Accuracy (Ranged)

Grappling Lv. 5 – +7% Counter (Melee), +10% Damage (Barehanded)

Precise Aim Lv. 1 – +3% Accuracy (Ranged), +2% Critical Rate (Ranged)

Special Ops Combat Lv. 1 – +6% Critical Rate (Melee), +4% Damage (Barehanded)

Stealing Lv. 1

(New!) Energy Training Technique – +10 Energy – 0/80 times (Each use costs 800 experience and 500 stamina)

Talent Points: 16

Class Talent Tree

Weaponry

Basic Assembly Lv. 1 (0/1)

Basic Mechanical Engineering Lv. 2 (0/1)

Basic Bionics Lv. 2 (0/1)

Basic Weaponry Knowledge Lv. 1 (0/1)

Basic Material Knowledge Lv. 1 (0/1)

(New!) Advanced Material Composition Lv. 1 (0/2)

[14 Talents Not Learnt]

Energy

[20 Talents Not Learnt]

Manipulation

[20 Talents Not Learnt]

Reputations:

Germinal Organization – Hated (-1000)

Stardragon SDI (Division 13) – Neutral (300/1000) – Clearance Level 1

Legend: 0

Chapter 49: Squad Leader's Return

180,000 experience—45,000 from the Black Spider mission, and the rest mostly accumulated from Han Xiao's efforts in tirelessly crafting Retractable Knives and Highly Explosive Gunpowder. Currently, both blueprints were at Lv. 2 and Lv. 3 respectively. As they were cheap and easy to craft, they were much easier to level up in contrast to other blueprints like the Lightweight Mecha Arm, or the Rover.

A month had passed since Han Xiao arrived at the Western Capital. Since then, Han Xiao had earned an overall amount of 200,000 experience, which was equal to a third of what he had earned back in his 6-month stint with the Germinal Organization. Now, with over \$1,500,000 in his possession, finances were the least of Han Xiao's concern.

The first-class advancement was the biggest game changer as it granted the player an energy attribute.

Han Xiao lightly pressed his thumb towards his index finger. As soon as he did so, his index was enveloped by a sort of invisible air. It felt similar to a weak current, and Han Xiao could discern that it was magnetism. Magnetism was one of the attributes that a Mechanic could specialize in. Combat-wise, it was not as powerful as the destructive attributes of fire or lightning. Instead, its main use was in strengthening the Machinery Affinity of a Mechanic. It would eventually allow for automated crafting.

Energy Attributes were not limited to just the natural elements. Instead, they could be thought of more as 'concepts' of how each class uses energy. For example, the energy attribute for Psychics is [Spirit].

Furthermore, energy attributes could also be nurtured and changed. For example, a Pugilist who cultivated various techniques would be able to grasp the speed of wind, power of fire, or hardness of iron, etc.

[Abstract Thinking] and [Intermediate Machinery Affinity] were self-explanatory, while [Strafe] was an active defensive skill.

If Han Xiao had chosen the path of Cannonmaster, he would have gained three new skills. However, he only gained one: [Strafe], a defensive skill. Han Xiao was by no means a coward who did not dare to face the enemy head-on, but he did indeed prefer a dual-natured skill like this that could be used both offensively and defensively to other flashy and high-damage ones. Furthermore, gaining unlimited ammo, even if temporary, could prove to be useful.

[Energy Training Technique] was a common skill acquired after the first advancement.

It was a special type of 'growth' skill that did not have a level system. Instead, its effects could be improved through repeated usage/practice that expended experience, and each use increased the character's energy, up until the skill's set usage limit. The user's energy attribute played an important part in the training effectiveness.

Most energy-related training techniques utilized such a growth system.

Energy was indeed an integral part of Superhumans. It largely decided a character's grade and power level. The early levels of energy stages are as follows:

Lv. 1 -10

Lv. 2 – 50

Lv. 3 – 100

Lv. 4 – 200

Lv. 5 – 400

Lv. 6 – 1000

...

Not only did reaching the next energy level give each player bonus stats, there were also extra benefits that could be unlocked upon reaching certain levels.

Lv. 1 was the bare benchmark, and while Hila was only Lv. 30, her energy level had already reached 500 ouna, roughly five times more than Han Xiao's. One of the reasons for this was the Energy Training Technique system.

Platinum Alloy was a new material-type blueprint acquired through [Advanced Material Composition]. The alloy itself was green in color, and it was well-suited for making armor due to its sturdiness. Its crafting requirement was Lv. 5 Novice Refining.

Of the 180,000 experience at hand, Han Xiao decided to spend 25,000 to reach Lv. 10 Agent. This gave him a number of stats (+2 STR, +2 DEX, +3 END, +1 CHA), as well as 1 talent point and 1 assignable stat point.

Advancement detected! Delete [Civilian] Class?

Y/N

The [Civilian] class was simply one of the default starting classes for new characters. It functioned as a tutorial class that could be deleted upon the first advancement. The experience that a player put into the [Civilian] class would be refunded upon deletion, unless the unknowing player had maxed it out.

“Delete, I guess,” mumbled Han Xiao to himself. There was nothing to lose from deleting it.

The [Civilian] class subsequently disappeared from the information window, leaving it to reflect only a max level [Agent], as well as Han Xiao’s character level of 21.

Next, Han Xiao inputted another 45,000 experience points to raise [Basic Shooting] to Lv. 10, which gave him 10% Accuracy, +2 DEX, and another talent point.

In short, Han Xiao had just spent 70,000 experience points, but he still needed to save 64,000 for the [Energy Training Technique], leaving him with... yup, give me a second...

47,000 more experience points!

“I’ll keep them for now,” muttered Han Xiao, lamenting how quickly the experience points vanished.

Fortunately for him, there was still the High-explosive Gunpowder that he had been stocking up on. It would ensure a steady stream of experience ahead.

...

When the time was up, Gu Hui promptly escorted Han Xiao back upstairs, where Feng Jun had been waiting.

Suddenly, Han Xiao remembered something.

“Oh right. I heard that it was a guy called Korat who stirred up this incident. Help me get word out that I won’t be selling anything to this person.”

Feng Jun grimaced.

“Do you think I’m a messenger or something?”

Han Xiao raised an eyebrow.

“Aren’t you?”

Feng Jun opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“Fine,” he groaned.

...

“He says he’s blacklisted me?”

Korat laughed coldly, seemingly unfazed.

All along, he had only been concerned with personal gain, and he did not see how Han Xiao could ever pose a threat to him.

...

With the resolution of the incident, Han Xiao returned to the workshop, where three days went by peacefully.

Having just advanced, Han Xiao spent the time adjusting to his newly upgraded body. With his past life’s experience, he quickly got in sync and began to train with the [Energy Training Technique]. Each training expended experience points, as well as stamina. As stamina recovery rate was limited, and Han Xiao had to continue with manufacturing, he could only train up to two times a day.

You have trained with [Energy Training Technique] once.

Mastery: 81%

Stamina: +3

Training effectiveness depended on the main stat of one’s class. The main stat for Mechanics was INT, so he devoted four unassigned points into INT, raising its total to 36. Previously, Han Xiao had needed to put quite a few points into STR and END, but that was only for the purpose of escaping the Germinal facility. From now on, he could focus solely on INT.

The effectiveness of [Energy Training Technique] was divided into three stages:

+1 Stamina for lower than 40% Mastery

+2 Stamina for 40%-80% Mastery

+3 Stamina for 80% and above Mastery

Han Xiao was right on Stage 3.

As Han Xiao had no other outlet to sell the Retractable Knife for now, and a few days had already gone by, he felt that it was about time to release the gunpowder. By now, he had produced thousands of bullets.

He was just about to ring Li Ya Lin up when she beat him to it.

“Leader is out of the hospital. He’s called us up.”

...

Han Xiao found himself the last to arrive at the secret ops team meeting room, where, other than the trio, was another man. The man’s face was extremely square, and he seemed both righteous and stern. He looked extremely reliable and currently had his lips pursed.

“So, you are Han Xiao?”

The team leader’s eyes were filled with both unhappiness and caution as he examined Han Xiao.

Han Xiao was caught off guard by him. Suddenly, Li Yao tugged on his sleeve and muttered to him, “He has the final say in who can join secret ops, but since your case was special, and you had the approval from the higher ups without going through him, he’s a bit—uh—unhappy. But don’t worry. Leader might be strict, but he’s not a bad person.”

That explained things.

Han Xiao was given a second shock when he turned to look at Li Yao. Li Yao’s entire body was wrapped in bandages, and he looked very much like a giant rice dumpling, with only his eyes and mouth revealed. It was an extremely pitiful state.

“Who beat you up?” asked a bewildered Han Xiao.

Suddenly, Li Ya Lin coughed.

Li Yao looked as though he was about to say something but changed his words. “I— I fell down.”

Han Xiao gave him a weird look. His injuries were so serious, if he really fell, he must have done the ‘fall a hundred times if you’re a man’ challenge.

“Let me introduce myself,” interrupted the leader.

“I am the team’s leader, Zhang Wei,” he introduced, shocking Han Xiao a third time.

“How casual is your parents’ naming sense? I think only Ye Qiu or Ye Fan could be worse!”

Han Xiao’s response, for some reason, caused Zhang Wei to look confused.

“You know Ye Fan from Hai Xia’s military affairs? Middle—cough—I mean, I worked with him a few times back in the hostel.”

Heavens! There really exists someone with such a godly name? That guy’s rank must be S+!

“Anyway,” continued Zhang Wei sternly. “With your inclusion, our team is back to being a five man cell. Although your position is in the backline, I still have to say this: as your background is a complete mystery, and I don’t trust your ability yet, I will continue to observe you for now. I don’t care if it’s some high-level agent who assigned you here. If you fail to meet my expectations, I will kick you out of the squad.”

Chapter 50: Rescue Mission (Part 1)

Han Xiao's eyelid twitched.

Trust did indeed take time to be established—Zhang Wei might have been blunt, but he was, without a doubt, simply acting the part of a responsible leader. Naturally, Han Xiao was not offended at all.

However, the chances of him being kicked out were nonexistent—after all, the top brass had decided things.

Zhang Wei himself understood this fact, but, as the leader of a squad, he could not just instantly accept someone whose background was a complete mystery—the higher-ups had not provided him with any information regarding Han Xiao.

Furthermore, in his eyes, Han Xiao was still new, and it remained to be seen if he was truly capable. In their field of work, the slightest mistake could result in the gravest of consequences, so being assigned a new guy all of a sudden was not a laughing matter.

Of course, it was not that Zhang Wei looked down on newbies. However, he believed that any new agent should have to go through two or three years of training before earning the right to even be considered for secret ops.

Who the hell threw this guy to us? Do they think that we're babysitters?

They're taking this far too lightly! Damn you all!

As Zhang Wei continued to examine Han Xiao, he made up his mind to ignore the repercussions and kick Han Xiao to another team if he proved unable to gel with the squad.

Meanwhile, Han Xiao did not know what was going through his mind, but he found that Zhang Wei's eyes were slowly filling up with animosity.

Suddenly, Li Yao's laptop flashed, prompting him to turn his neck around with much effort. His expression changed as he yelled, "There's an urgent mission! They want us to depart now!"

"Details?" asked Zhang Wei sternly.

"Ma Qing Yang's team was ambushed during their mission to assault a Germinal base. The higher-ups want us to provide assistance immediately. They'll fill us in on the plane."

"Assaulting a Germinal base?" wondered Han Xiao. He could guess roughly what had occurred, having previously given Division 13 info on three of their bases.

All three bases were situated within Stardragon territory, which was why Stardragon had been able to immediately mobilize its troops to destroy two of them. The destruction of these two bases had increased Han Xiao's achievement progress rate to 2.0%. However, the Germinal were no fools and had clearly anticipated that the third base would be attacked as well. They had clearly set up a trap.

Zhang Wei promptly headed for the door. When he passed Han Xiao, he paused for a moment and frowned before instructing, "Li Yao, you will stay behind to provide support. Han Xiao, you are new, so this is a good chance for you. Stay with Li Yao and learn well if you want to become useful."

Li Yao was about to say something, but he hesitated. Han Xiao smiled and simply replied, "Fine."

As Zhang Wei did not participate in the Black Spider mission and had only received a flowery description of events from Li Ya Lin; he did not trust in Han Xiao's ability yet. Han Xiao sighed inwardly. He understood this well.

Han Xiao pondered for a moment before holding Li Ya Lin back to pass her four magazines of High-explosive ammo.

"Consider it a gift from a friend."

Li Ya Lin's eyes lit up upon seeing them.

"Is this your new invention?"

Han Xiao chuckled.

"Don't squander them—they can start quite a fire."

...

—

You have triggered the E-class mission: [Rescue!]

Mission Description: Provide assistance to the secret-ops team being chased by the enemy. Your role is to assist your teammates in completing this mission.

Mission Requirement: Successfully rescue Ma Qing Yang's squad.

Mission Rewards: 8,000 experience

Bonus Rewards: None

8,000 experience only, lamented Han Xiao. Fitting for a backline support I guess.

"Brother Han..." said Li Yao. "Leader isn't particularly against you or anything like that, so don't worry about it."

"I know," replied Han Xiao casually, which eased Li Yao's worries.

He then swiftly popped up three laptops and worked away at them to adjust the video and audio feeds. From the first-person footage on the screen, they could see that the trio had already boarded the aircraft.

Beneath HQ was a special railway used to quickly transport agents and staff to a landing site.

On the jet followed another team of twelve secret-ops agents, and on the way, Han Xiao, Li Ya Lin, and Li Yao made small talk, while Zhang Wei and Lambert closed their eyes in rest.

An hour later, the jet arrived at their destination.

It was a cold desert filled with long stretches of dunes, and a bright, scorching sun was hanging in the azure sky, the intense heat of which caused the air to shimmer and the ground to simmer. Upon contact with the sand, the agents' boots instantly gave off a burnt smell.

"We have arrived," reported Zhang Wei in a deep voice.

The trio were fully-equipped. Li Ya Lin, still with that yellow hoodie and black bodysuit, had a retractable knife by her waist, and a black bag over her back that contained the Lightweight Mecha Arm; Lambert carried ten modified Retractable Daggers and a huge, large caliber rifle; and Zhang Wei, whose equipment gave even Han Xiao a shock.

It was a powered armor suit!

Zhang Wei's entire body was covered inside a sturdy, grayish suit of armor that spotted a few scars of battle. The helmet would have fit right in with the Middle Ages, and only had openings for vision, but the arms were modified and fitted two thick-barreled machine guns. The ammo belt was concealed within the armor, but the reload chamber was located near the thighs. On the back of the suit hung a hexagon shield of steel, reminiscent of a tortoise, and overall, the suit made Zhang Wei look like an incomparably heavy, giant clunk of iron that was designed for show.

It spurred Han Xiao's interest.

This is the prototype for the [Combatant Armored Suit], one of the few suits available back in Version 1.0.

As the Six Nations each possessed different kinds of advanced knowledge, the suits that they engineered differed from one another.

Theseus was the nation that initiated development of the armored suit, and, sometime after the game's launch, they made the [Combatant Armored Suit], a mini modular mobile suit—the first of its kind on Planet Aquamarine. At present, it was probably still under development, but although what Zhang Wei was wearing was just a prototype, Han Xiao wondered how Division 13 were able to acquire Theseusian technology.

In Galaxy, players who were 'Exalted' with Theseus could purchase the [Combatant Armored Suit] from them. They were extremely pricey, and even routine maintenance and repairs cost well over tens of thousands. It was not something that most players could afford.

As a back-line support, Han Xiao's duty included maintenance of equipment, so Zhang Wei's armored suit would probably fall into his charge as well.

Without encryption measures in place, Technicians were able to reverse engineer blueprints.

If the Technician already possessed the required knowledge, it would make the process faster, but even without any, it was still possible to reverse engineer a piece of machinery or technology—just that it would take much more time and require astronomically larger amounts of experience. Furthermore, the results would often come out as 'Incomplete'.

The required knowledge for crafting the [Combatant Armored Suit] was an advanced weaponry knowledge possessed by Theseus.

Han Xiao bit his finger. If he could reverse-engineer the blueprints of the armored suit, then even if incomplete, they would still provide him with a new means of combat and boost his combat power. However, when he thought of how he could better spend the experience on the other more valuable and useful blueprints in his memory, he gave up the idea.

Li Yao spoke into the intercom. "Ma Qing Yang's squad is about 13km away. There are 15 armored cars and one Black Harrier helicopter in pursuit. The meeting point is set on a hill 3km away. The objective will be to slow down the enemy and link up with the Ma Qing Yang's squad. Do not engage the enemy excessively. I have already sent them the coordinates. Now, get ready."

His instructions were clear, as befitting of a back-line supporter, functioning as a third eye to provide precise coordination and tactical advice.

The trio and the field team swiftly arrived at the hill, where they lay in wait for the enemy.

Soon after, the sound of engines began to approach, and on the vast desert plains appeared a single vehicle being chased by over a dozen others. The sound of gunfire was incessant, and behind the fleeing car was a continuous trail of smoke and blasts.

Aboard were none other than Ma Qing Yang's squad.

"Ready!" ordered Zhang Wei sternly as he closely waited for the Germinal vehicles to come in range. "Fire!"

Suddenly, from behind the hill, a rain of metal dense enough to cover the sky descended upon the surprised Germinal agents. Bullets rang and clattered non-stop as they hit the armored vehicles.

Upon the sudden ambush, the leading Germinal vehicle immediately spun around to avoid direct hits, almost overturning as it skidded.