

Beautiful 721

Chapter 721: It turns out...

Meanwhile, the operators watching over the biker girl frowned. Their expressions were hard to control once they realized their sisters had been targeted on purpose.

Another report citing a similar incident came through, and the air around them grew heavy with seriousness. The mood shift was visible to anyone paying attention.

As they considered whether to move in support of their sisters, the biker girl suddenly spoke up.

"Well, is there any problem? Am I allowed to leave?"

Something about her rubbed the wrong way, but the lead operator's thoughts were still on the ongoing events.

Soon enough, a wave of relief washed over her as Athena's detailed report came in—aside from one twisted foot, everyone was fine.

"Not yet, ma'am. Please show us your ID," the operator requested calmly.

"Come on, officers. I haven't committed a crime or broken any laws, have I?" the biker pushed back, tone sharp with defiance.

"That doesn't matter right now. We need your identification. This is not optional."

"Something happened?" she asked, a little too quickly.

The operator's eyes narrowed. "How do you know?"

"I just guessed," the biker girl shrugged, averting her eyes. "Didn't expect to hit bullseye, huh?"

The operator sighed, clearly growing annoyed by the 'clever' civilian. "Let's not waste time here."

Ordinarily, Spirit Fox never forced civilians to surrender their IDs without solid suspicion. But once they took action, it meant they had cause—and now, they had it.

The internal warning system had already flagged the biker's identity—or rather, a strong possibility linked to it.

Seeing the firm, unwavering look in the operator's eyes, the biker girl finally gave in with an exaggerated groan. "Fine. I don't know what I did to deserve this much bad luck today."

The operator rolled her eyes and accepted the card. She studied it with deliberate slowness, though her HUD was already processing it at lightning speed.

Every suspicion was confirmed. The system's warning tagged the biker as a dangerous individual. The risk flagging stood at a solid 100%.

Being labeled dangerous didn't necessarily mean the person had committed a crime—it simply meant their identity posed potential risk, capable of triggering chaos or endangering the public.

Given the tense atmosphere after Fallen Angel had been declared, any anomaly demanded thorough scrutiny.

The operators on-site couldn't help but feel a little shocked. They'd initially been concerned for this girl—but now realized, she might've been the threat all along.

They both flushed under their hoods, mildly embarrassed.

The woman wasn't in danger; she was the danger.

Thankfully, they had stepped in. Who knew what might've happened to that man if they hadn't?

Maybe he'd be missing a few limbs by now—or listed as "disappeared." (Of course, that was just a joke... kind of.)

Although Ling Qingyu's surveillance net wasn't omnipresent yet, most areas were under Athena's watchful AI eyes.

As long as someone was in danger, the flagging system could often prevent a tragedy before it struck.

The real effort now was deciding how to handle these edge cases—because identifying the threat was only step one.

Other than that, those crimes in the past to be reassessed and filed to end and gave justice.

"Kickstand down and hands up!" the operator barked, her right hand snapping to her sidearm and aiming from the waist. "I won't say it again."

"Wait, what?! Why?!" the girl froze, eyes wide in confusion. Her right hand instinctively slipped inside her jacket.

"I said hands above your head—unless you want your body turned into a sieve," the operator warned coldly.

Her partner, still in the driver's seat, reacted instantly. She threw open the door and rounded the hood with her pistol drawn, taking a flanking angle. "Listen to her. Hands up. Slowly. I've got her covered," she said, locking onto the biker with her sights.

The first operator moved in, weapon raised and pressed close to her chest while her free hand ripped the biker's jacket open.

"Don't move!"

"Umm... should I take my hand out and raise them, or stay like this? These orders are kinda conflicting. You two need to coordinate better," the biker deadpanned.

The operator nearly cursed aloud. "Shut up—and raise your hands. Slowly. Fuck!!"

The outburst came as she spotted a pistol shoulder-holstered beneath the jacket.

"You'd better not move an inch," she growled.

The biker girl slowly shook her head and sighed. She had briefly considered resisting. With her experience, she was confident she could take both of them down.

But three reasons stopped her.

One: This was the infamous Spirit Fox. Thinking of them as just special police would be idiotic.

Two: Her instincts screamed don't resist. Those instincts had saved her life too many times.

Three: The killing intent these two radiated—subtle, but sharp—shone like moonlight in the dark. No bluff.

The operator swiftly removed the pistol and disarmed it one-handed, drawing a raised eyebrow from the biker girl.

Not many could disable her gun that fast—unless they knew it intimately. Which meant... these weren't amateurs.

She began to understand why gangs in Province N had been flattened by Spirit Fox. There was simply no comparison.

"You're very law-abiding. A model citizen," the operator muttered, checking her for any additional weapons.

"Why'd you reach for the gun when we shouted?" she asked.

"Haha, subconscious reflex. Couldn't help it," the biker girl replied with a cheeky grin.

"A good citizen wouldn't carry a gun in a restricted country," the operator said dryly.

"And no sane mercenary would ride around with one in plain sight," her partner added.

The biker rolled her eyes. "And how do you know I don't have a license?" Always read from the source:
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"Oh, please. We know your identity," the operator replied, brushing off the question.

The biker tilted her head. "Really? Since when? I thought I was doing a damn good job hiding it."

That struck a nerve. The operators exchanged a quick, embarrassed glance. Truth was—they hadn't known a thing until now. If they hadn't decided to help what looked like an innocent woman being harassed, they might've missed her entirely.

After all, who'd suspect someone so composed, so... ordinary?

They forgot the lesson they'd been taught early on: Threats often come dressed as victims.

"Anyway," the first operator changed the subject, "we're certain you don't have the qualifications or the license."

"Alas," the biker sighed dramatically. "Tell me, when did you figure it out? I really thought I had this whole thing sealed up tight.

"No answer?" the operator prompted.

"Pray that you two are lucky I didn't resist," the biker girl muttered. "Wouldn't take much to take you both down."

"Oh, be grateful you didn't," the operator snapped back. "Otherwise, I doubt you'd still be in one piece."

"Hmph," the girl snorted. "Who doesn't know how to brag these days?"

"Likewise," the operator said coolly, pulling her off the bike. Since the biker was cooperating, the operator kept her restraint gentle as she cuffed her.

"Ouch, be gentle!" the girl complained.

The operator sneered. "I didn't think your kind felt pain."

"What kind? That's discriminatory," the biker girl huffed. "Mercenary is a sacred profession too, you know. And I can sue you for excessive force."

"But you had a gun," the operator shot back, effectively silencing her. "What are you doing here?"

"Hmm... vacation," the biker said flippantly.

"Yeah, sure. Vacation—with a firearm," the partner snorted.

"Hey, what if my enemies tracked me down like they do to you? I gotta protect myself, right?" the biker argued.

"We don't know, and we don't care," the operator replied flatly. "We'll sort you out back at the station."

The driver was already reporting the situation to headquarters. Orders came in immediately: return to base. Interrogation would follow there.

Escorting the biker girl toward the SUV, the operators called in a responder unit to collect her motorbike and clear the scene. The same went for her disarmed pistol—treated like discarded trash.

Meanwhile, the man who'd previously tried to chat up the biker girl stood rooted in place, cold sweat on his back.

He hadn't expected that the seemingly gentle woman would turn out to be a potential killer. If Spirit Fox hadn't stepped in—God knows what might've happened. He offered a silent prayer of thanks for their presence.

He made a quiet vow: never harass strangers again. Some people weren't just trouble—they were trained trouble.

The onlookers were just as shocked. None of them expected things to play out this way. It was a hard lesson—don't judge a book by its cover.

As for the man, his reputation didn't recover. The crowd continued to throw judgmental looks his way.

After all, if the girl had been an ordinary beauty with no protection, who would have helped her?

Probably no one.

Even without violence, his actions had already crossed the line—and frightened someone.

The onlookers made up their minds: they would provide aid to the best of their abilities and look out for one another from now on.

People like that man shouldn't be tolerated, nor allowed to cause harm simply because everyone preferred to avoid trouble.

What the operators didn't realize was that their decisive actions had sparked a change—enlightening many of those watching.

They had shattered the bystander effect, inspiring others to take initiative instead of freezing in hesitation.

Chapter 722: Truth Serum?

"I'm gonna sue you."

"Well, be ready to be charged with illegal possession of a firearm," the operator replied as she and her partner slammed the SUV door shut. Outside, a nearby police unit took over the scene, securing the motorbike.

As for the firearm, it had already been sealed in an evidence bag. Spirit Fox had no intention of handing this woman over to the local police. She wasn't just some criminal—they suspected she might have leads related to the coordinated attacks that had erupted tonight. Headquarters would want to question her personally.

"Do you have any idea what's going on tonight?" the driver asked, eyes narrowing at the rearview mirror as she watched the arrested woman.

"No idea," the biker girl shrugged, though her eyes lingered a little too long on the live feeds displayed inside the vehicle. Sirens wailed in the distance. A flash of something—recognition, concern—crossed her expression. Then she said nothing.

Both operators noticed the shift immediately.

"You better spill the beans before we do something you'll regret," the copilot warned, tone laced with warning.

"Oh my, I'm so scared," the biker girl mocked, voice thick with sarcasm. "The infamous Spirit Fox is about to torture me."

"You think we won't?"

"It's not that you won't," the biker replied coolly. "It's that you can't get anything useful out of me."

She paused deliberately, then continued, "I'm not one of those street rats you break in five minutes. Your so-called advanced interrogation techniques—tweezers, shock, water, whatever—they never work on the strong. In the end, all you get are lies or what you want to hear, not the truth. And besides—"

She looked them both dead in the eye.

"I don't have anything you need."

"That's for us to decide," the operator snapped, signaling her partner to start driving.

Of course, she understood what the female mercenary meant. Much of Spirit Fox's early success in extracting information came from dealing with small-time enemies—those who lacked ambition or ideals and were driven purely by profit. But things were different when it came to ideologues or extremists.

Take, for example, the terrorists wreaking havoc across the Middle Kingdom—including IS, which had been dominating international headlines lately. Against hardened individuals like those, torture was ineffective. The stronger their convictions, the more resistant they became, rendering conventional methods useless.

The operators recognized that this woman was likely telling the truth. She didn't break because there was nothing to break. And they knew that HQ understood those limitations, too.

Even so, the order to bring her in for further questioning had clearly come from high up—likely straight from the founders themselves.

Both she and her partner suspected that this woman had heard or seen something—maybe not direct involvement, but a lead, a rumor, a detail—that connected her to the coordinated attacks. And in a night like this, even whispers mattered.

While the SUV made its way back to headquarters, more reports of attacks came in. By now, the operators deployed across the field were no longer surprised—the shock had worn off after the first few incidents.

Unfortunately for the attackers, the operators had already heightened their vigilance, and the lack of coordination among the enemy proved to be a fatal weakness. Within the span of an hour, enough confirmed reports had surfaced to prove that these weren't random outbursts—there was someone orchestrating the chaos.

In one case, operators had explosive balls thrown at them by a speeding motorbike. In another, a seemingly innocent pedestrian suddenly drew a firearm, fired a few shots, then hopped onto a waiting vehicle to flee the scene.

Despite the audacity of these tactics, Spirit Fox crushed the threats with efficiency. Yet, the IED-style grenade attacks proved harder to completely neutralize—whatever was thrown did explode. Though the operators came out unharmed, several nearby civilians suffered minor injuries from the shrapnel.

The only silver lining was that every attacker was killed moments after appearing. But the frequency was alarming—ten coordinated attacks in under an hour, all targeting Spirit Fox alone. That number couldn't be dismissed as coincidence.

If not for the receiver being Spirit Fox operatives, any other organization would kneel from the damages and collapse momentarily.

Aside from the motive of retaliation, no other explanation presented itself. Naturally, police stations throughout Province N began to panic. Even Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning were thrown into a frenzy, trying to discern the reasoning behind the wave of assaults, their concern deepening for Ling Qingyu's operatives.

After all, Yang Qingyue had paid next to nothing to earn the assistance of such reliable allies, and now it was those very women risking their lives to achieve her goals.

Yang Qingyue, in particular, felt a pang of guilt. These attacks were happening under her jurisdiction, while Ling Qingyu traveled the world. She could only hope the Spirit Fox girls would survive the chaos.

Meanwhile, Cai Ning was busy coordinating multiple police stations, dispatching patrols and initiating investigations into every scene. Both women—seasoned veterans—sensed a hidden dagger aimed in their direction, even though they had no proof.

They sympathized with Spirit Fox's situation, but also privately lamented their own luck. Because if these attacks had been directed at the police force instead... there was no way the outcome would have been this contained.

In fact, the chances of a full-blown disaster would've been higher than an amateur betting all their savings on a volatile stock.

As grim as it sounded, this misfortune striking Spirit Fox instead of law enforcement was, in some twisted way, a relief.

And so, both chiefs immediately reached out—Yang Qingyue contacted Su Ruomei and Jiang Yu, while Cai Ning hesitated briefly before pressing the button to call Tang Ziyi.

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Underground.

Tang Ziyi burst into the hidden control room—one of the few places only she, Xiao Yue, and Ling Qingyu knew existed.

"Athena, what on earth is going on? How did you miss the attacks?"

"I'm sorry, Aunt," the AI replied, her voice soft and contrite. "I detected nothing abnormal until the attacks had already begun."

Tang Ziyi took a long breath, silently thanking Ling Qingyu for her paranoia. If not for her obsessive overprotectiveness, the news would have been catastrophic. As it stood now, the situation was still under control.

"It's okay, Athena," Tang Ziyi said, her tone easing. She wasn't one to blame blindly—especially not Athena. After all, Ling Qingyu had raised her with firm principles: growth with restraint, power with empathy. Athena wasn't allowed to indiscriminately scan everything like an all-seeing eye. It was a conscious tradeoff—respect for privacy at the cost of full-spectrum surveillance.

They had all known this day might come.

"Aunt, I suspect our enemies are using primitive forms of communication to bypass my detection," Athena explained. "Even carrier pigeons and handwritten letters aren't out of the equation."

"I agree," Tang Ziyi nodded. "Don't worry, I'm not angry. I was just caught off guard for a second."

"Should I inform my mother?" Athena asked carefully.

"No need to bother her," Tang Ziyi said with a faint smile. "Let her enjoy her trip. We can handle this."

She added teasingly, "What? You think I can't solve problems on my own?"

"Of course not, Aunt Tang."

"So, now that you've picked up on the pattern, did you find anything useful?"

"Yes," Athena answered quickly. "Especially after tracing the driver who escaped during the first attack. I've compiled intel and related data."

The screen lit up with cascading reports. Tang Ziyi stepped forward, scanning the summary as her eyes narrowed in focus. Despite missing the initial threat, Athena had quickly narrowed down a list of suspects—most of whom were remnants of minor gangs Spirit Fox had dismantled in the past.

She hadn't expected the scattered remnants of those old gangs to regroup into a new force.

Someone had to be supporting them.

Tang Ziyi mentally drew a line toward the old rulers of Province N—those anxious relics shaken by sweeping reforms, terrified of losing their grip on power.

She scoffed. Pathetic, desperate. But now wasn't the time to deal with them.

"Athena, organize assault teams to breach these safehouses. I want SSE to track down the real mastermind."

"On it, Aunt."

"And figure out how these attackers are communicating," Tang Ziyi added. "Once we crack that, the rest will fall into place."

"Success is guaranteed."

"Relax, Athena. No need to be so serious," Tang Ziyi chuckled, unconcerned about the inevitable 'casualty reports.'

She had absolute faith in the tech she and Athena had developed—and even more in the operators she had personally trained.

"Aunt Tang," Athena reported, "an operator has detained a high-risk individual. They suspect she's connected to the attacks."

"Who is it?" Tang Ziyi asked, pausing to review the file Athena brought up. A moment later, she added, "Also, remind the girls—if they can, try to keep some of the attackers alive. We might still get something out of them."

She didn't care about the attackers' fate. The moment they chose to strike, they forfeited mercy. Consequences were part of the game they played—and death was just another cost.

Tang Ziyi had no intention of sparing their lives. As far as she was concerned, these minions had little to offer beyond serving as breadcrumbs leading her to the real mastermind.

Still, the so-called "dangerous individual" caught her attention.

Her instincts stirred—sharp and certain.

Whether truly connected or not, Tang Ziyi had a feeling this woman might just be the final nail in someone's coffin.

"It's just the right moment to test our new inventions," Tang Ziyi showed excitement.

"Are you talking about Truth Serum, Aunt?"

"Good guess, my niece."

"Thank you."

Chapter 723: Aftermath

15 minutes later.

"Aunt, the girls have captured the escaping vehicles," Athena reported.

"Show me the feed," Tang Ziyi requested.

Live video footage filled the screen, showing a high-speed chase in progress. Under Athena's surveillance, once a vehicle initiated an attack, it could never escape her sight.

Perhaps the criminal had planned to switch cars and disappear into the public, but he had underestimated Athena's intelligence network. He didn't get the chance to switch, nor to cut contact. The encirclement was swift—available units, especially Spirit Fox's vehicles, had locked onto him.

What Tang Ziyi saw now was his final act of resistance.

Multiple feeds were displayed: helmet cams, pursuit vehicles, nearby CCTV, drones hovering above, and even satellite imagery.

If any battlefield commander had access to these assets, leading an operation would be as easy as eating cake.

Alongside the video streams were Athena's overlays—labels, predictive paths, and threat assessments—streamlining the decision-making process.

Naturally, Tang Ziyi had no interest in interfering. She could already predict the outcome.

Either he would be captured alive—though that seemed unlikely, given her subordinates' current mood—or the vehicle would be torn to shreds.

She mused that if she hadn't ordered them to try to capture him alive, he probably would've crashed and died already.

Gazing at the bullet-riddled sedan, Tang Ziyi nodded slightly. Her girls had done well, particularly the three first victims of the sudden hit-and-run.

Athena's report confirmed it: the driver was alive, but his passenger was dead, shot by the recovered operator immediately after the impact.

The attackers might have held the initial advantage, but they ran into Spirit Fox.

Well, Tang Ziyi chose to ignore the exaggerated perks of Spirit Fox's so-called invincibility, that she and Ling Qingyu had emphasized.

Tut-tut. A call came in. Tang Ziyi glanced at the screen—it was Su Ruomei. She answered casually.

"Hey, what's the matter, Sister Su?"

"Sister Tang, aren't you going to take care of our affairs? It's absolute chaos over here."

Tang Ziyi shook her head, unfazed by Su Ruomei's exaggeration.

"No need for me to step in. I trust you. Besides, the situation—unexpected as it was—is well under control."

"Tsk. And here I thought you'd stretch your limbs a bit now that Xiao Yue is following Sister Ling. Turns out you're still the same."

"Hehe, that's why I trained you all so well. What's the point of me doing everything myself? Anyway, enough pleasantries. You clearly have something to tell me."

She already had a hunch, especially after the images Athena had shown her.

"Alas, who made you our instructor?" Su Ruomei clicked her tongue. "Yes, we've captured a few of the attackers and interrogated them. They spilled some useful info, and I'm prepping to hit the safehouses they pointed out. Don't worry—we confirmed with Athena too. But aside from what they told us, there's nothing else on the bodies. No ID, no tech, nothing."

Tang Ziyi watched the beaten faces and wretched clothes of two attackers. Apparently, her operators should have roughen them up hard.

Expressionless, Tang Ziyi regarded these dirtbags as lucky.

"So, where exactly do you need me?"

"It'd be great if you came with us," Su Ruomei said, clearing her throat to sound more formal. "Also, Sister Yang just called me. She wants to know what the police should do now, since it looks like we've already taken down almost everyone—except for that one early sedan."

"You're right about that sedan. Give it a few more minutes; that'll be wrapped up too." Tang Ziyi idly scratched her toes against the polished floor. "As for Sister Yang, tell her to raise the alert level across the province. Get patrols out, make some noise, draw attention. The more disruption, the better. No

need to hide what we're doing—we'll cut off the last buds before nightfall. Just make sure to prompt her that we'll take care of everything and they'd trail behind."

"Roger that. I'll pass it along," Su Ruomei confirmed.

"Also, be advised—we might be dealing with terrorist elements here. This isn't just some run-of-the-mill organized crime," Tang Ziyi added, even though she still wasn't fully convinced herself.

She didn't want to believe things had escalated that far. But better to be prepared than caught off guard.

"Understood," Su Ruomei replied.

"If that's all, I'll end the call. I've got a few matters to handle," Tang Ziyi said.

"Oh? Quite unexpected," Su Ruomei teased.

"Shut up," Tang Ziyi chuckled helplessly before ending the call.

She then turned to Athena. "When will that mercenary arrive?"

The female mercenary had caught Tang Ziyi's attention—for both professional and personal reasons. Professionally, she was tied to the current crisis. Personally, Tang Ziyi found herself intrigued by a woman operating in one of the world's most dangerous fields.

Though their experiences were vastly different, something about that woman's path resonated with her. Tang Ziyi had already gone through the available intel on the network, supplemented with Athena's own data aggregation.

"Aunt, she'll arrive soon—within a dozen minutes or so," Athena replied, tracking the incoming SUV returning to base.

"Alright. Notify me the moment they arrive. Prepare the serums and arrange a room," Tang Ziyi instructed.

Outside Ling Qingyu's residence, the streets were alive with the wails of sirens.

Blue and red lights streaked across the neighborhoods as police vehicles patrolled the area. Foot patrols moved through the streets, questioning residents—many of whom stared, wide-eyed and anxious.

Province N had been peaceful for some time. So peaceful that people had nearly forgotten the days of chaos. Now, some feared those dark times might return.

Online, netizens lit up the platforms with news of the attacks on Spirit Fox. The footage and updates had already gone viral, spreading with a snowball effect.

While a few pessimists voiced their worries, the majority cursed in frustration or clung to hope, praying the peace they'd come to cherish wouldn't be shattered.

As the police made a noisy show of presence, no one paid much attention to the discreet convoys slipping through side routes—vehicles splitting into strike teams, heading toward marked targets.

To maintain appearances and distract any eyes watching too closely, Su Ruomei had also dispatched several patrol units with Aegis teams in tow, reinforcing public trust.

It would've caused even more panic if Spirit Fox hadn't shown up at all. Their visible presence was part deterrent, part reassurance.

Not to mention, there were hidden criminals still observing the situation. Had Spirit Fox failed to respond at all, it would have been a direct signal that the net was closing in on them.

At a particular residential apartment complex, three Toyota Hiace vans—one white, one black, and one blue—pulled up near the boom gate at the entrance.

The barrier lifted automatically, bypassed through Athena's hacking. The security guard stationed nearby didn't even notice anything unusual as the vans passed through.

They came to a halt in front of one of the buildings, parking at a slight angle.

Two dozen Spirit Fox operatives swiftly exited and fanned out, establishing a perimeter. Two assault teams—each composed of four members—moved toward the entrance.

Their presence immediately drew the attention of bystanders. Ignoring the murmurs, camera flashes, and gossiping residents, Spirit Fox locked down the building. All points of entry and exit, including the emergency stairwell, were secured.

Two shieldbearers took the lead—each equipped with a polygonal anti-ballistic shield—while their partners followed close behind with rifles raised.

One team ascended via the stairwell; the other took the elevator. They met outside the target unit's door.

The team leader gave a final reminder: "Remember—don't go in too hard. There could be unrelated personnel inside."

"Roger!"

On cue, the breacher stepped up and delivered a heavy mule kick. The door burst open with a sharp crack.

"Province N Police!"

"Police! Don't move—stay where you are!"

Inside, an elderly woman who had been peacefully watching her favorite mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law drama clutched her chest and gasped.

"Oh my! Oh my!"

The operators quickly assessed the threat level and began advancing into the side rooms. One by one, they kicked open closed doors.

A few passed the old lady, sweeping into the bedroom and clearing it thoroughly—checking under the bed, inside closets, and behind curtains. They left no space unchecked, but took care not to damage personal property.

"Stay calm, Ma'am. Where's your son?" one of the operators asked.

"Stay calm? How am I supposed to stay calm when someone just kicked down my door?" the old lady snapped, clearly furious.

The team already knew she was the mother of their target—a man who, while not a major criminal, had assisted in delivering messages that helped coordinate the attack on Spirit Fox.

Athena had confirmed it by cross-referencing security footage of his past movements and comparing it with the terrified confessions of two captured suspects.

Even messengers could carry vital intel. And Spirit Fox, determined to root out the mastermind behind the operation, couldn't afford to ignore any potential source of information.

"Clear!"

"Clear here!"

"Why are you here?!"

A new outburst rang out from the kitchen. A woman had just seen the operators enter and screamed in protest, her voice shrill with both fear and anger.

Chapter 724: Fans are the greatest enemy @ V @

The operators firmly but carefully pulled the young woman from the kitchen and placed her in the same room as the old lady. She put up a brief, instinctive struggle—but it was soft, more out of shock than resistance.

Perhaps she was simply too stunned to see Spirit Fox operators storming her home, reacting subconsciously before her mind could catch up.

Meanwhile, the rest of the team searched the apartment thoroughly, looking for anything that might lead them to their target.

"Ma'am, where is your son?" the team leader asked directly.

Thanks to Athena's prior intelligence gathering, each operator already understood the context and the layout of the location.

"I... I don't know. Why?" the older woman stammered. "Did he do something wrong? He's a good boy—I raised him myself."

"What's going on? What did my little brother do?" the young woman asked, clutching her mother's hand for comfort. "I'm his sister. We have the right to know why you're raiding our home!"

The operators exchanged looks. One of them stepped forward to explain.

"Just over an hour ago, eighteen coordinated attacks were launched against Spirit Fox units across Province N. There were casualties. We're currently tracking and apprehending those responsible."

"Your son—Person A—based on our intelligence, acted as a messenger, helping to coordinate the attacks. Of course, he isn't the only one. Other teams are raiding safehouses and suspects' homes as we speak."

The operator paused slightly, adjusting her wording. She almost said "terrorists," but held back, careful with her language in front of the family.

In truth, every Spirit Fox operative was still reeling internally. Their emotions remained restrained only because none of their own sisters had fallen.

If it weren't for the heavy protection protocols in place, they dared not imagine the outcome.

"Impossible!" the mother cried out, her voice cracking.

The operators didn't argue. They weren't here to accuse—they were here for information.

Sophia's psychological analysis had prepared them to detect micro-expressions. From what they saw, the mother and daughter seemed genuinely unaware of the young man's involvement.

But time was pressing.

"So where is he?" one of the operators asked again, this time with sharper urgency. "Please don't lie to us."

The tone shifted subtly as they noticed a flicker—barely perceptible—cross the young woman's face.

They didn't want the family protecting someone out of misplaced loyalty. Pressure was necessary.

The sister wasn't trained for moments like these. There were no threats or raised weapons, but even the presence of Spirit Fox—trained, composed, deadly—was overwhelming.

Before she could respond, one operator made an educated guess.

"Your brother was here just before we arrived, wasn't he? Did he just leave?"

The reaction from both women—too slow, too tense—told them everything.

And just then, another operator called out from a nearby room.

"Found his phone!"

"It seems like he knew we were coming and escaped," the lead operator said grimly. "Someone must've warned him before we reached the apartment."

"Or maybe someone saw us on the way in and tipped him off," another suggested.

"Could've been just a noisy passerby, too excited to keep their mouth shut," a third added. "People love to broadcast drama."

"No, he didn't," his sister argued, her voice shaking. "He would never do something like that. There's no way..."

Her voice faltered. She inhaled deeply, trying to steady herself. Emotional restraint was wise—especially in anything involving legal consequences.

"Either way," the operator said, steady and neutral, "we have confirmed links between him and the group that recently attacked us. If he truly did nothing wrong, there wouldn't be a need to run. And if his involvement was unintentional or minor, there's still time. But fleeing only complicates things."

"I really don't know anything," the young woman murmured. "He just rushed out. We didn't talk. We've had... other family troubles."

The lead operator exhaled silently. They weren't getting anything more from these two.

Suddenly, Athena's voice cut in through their earpieces.

"Be advised: I've hacked into his phone. There was a call right before your breach. Likely a warning from someone. I've also traced the caller's number."

No one flinched. By now, Athena's sudden interjections were expected—part of the job.

Unfortunately, she continued, there were no functional CCTVs covering the building's immediate perimeter. The suspect had left too fast.

Randomly kicking down doors was out of the question. The backlash would be enormous, both politically and publicly. Forceful entry had to be the last resort.

Athena understood the complexity and tried another route. She traced the caller's signal—originating from another building nearby.

Interesting, she mused silently, as she initiated one of her restricted protocols: tapping into all accessible electronic devices in the vicinity. It was a forbidden action unless absolutely necessary, a rule given by her mother—Ling Qingyu.

"Four of you, sweep each floor," the team leader ordered. "Look for anything suspicious."

"Understood," the four acknowledged and moved out immediately.

The rest of the team stayed behind, combing through the man's room for any evidence or overlooked clues.

But most of them held the same belief: the suspect hadn't escaped the building.

The downstairs containment team had locked down all exits. Chances of slipping through were less than one percent.

More likely, he was hiding—maybe in a friend's apartment, or somewhere he thought Spirit Fox wouldn't check.

Soon enough, with every trick at her disposal, Athena located both the caller and the fleeing suspect. Spirit Fox teams moved swiftly. One kicked down the suspect's door and finally took him into custody.

Meanwhile, another team downstairs shifted from containment duty to knocking on the caller's door, initiating a direct interrogation.

It turned out the caller was simply a close friend of the suspect. They had been chatting casually, as they often did, when the caller noticed a strange convoy of vehicles pulling up. Curious and excited, he blurted out the news—especially after spotting Spirit Fox operatives.

When the operators knocked on his door, he wasn't scared or defensive. In fact, he looked ready to ask for autographs.

Later, Athena confirmed his innocence, quelling earlier suspicions that he might have posed as a fan to lower their guard.

The team retreated quickly, their expressions twitching. Dealing with overly enthusiastic fans was—by unanimous agreement—the most painful part of the job.

Similar operations played out across the province. Some suspects were captured easily. Others, misguided by adrenaline and hope, tried to flee, giving rise to brief "action sequences"—at least in their own minds.

But against Spirit Fox's physical prowess, even Olympic champions would've been forced to surrender. Escape was a fantasy.

Several raids yielded nothing but empty homes. Some targets had died during the earlier attacks against Spirit Fox.

Most of those who remained had kept their distance from family—ironically saving their lives. Spirit Fox needed live suspects. They needed answers.

With their "enhanced interrogation" methods, Spirit Fox extracted plenty of information.

Athena, however, played a limited role during these raids. She hadn't detected the attacks in time, which meant the related data hadn't passed through any accessible network.

She could have picked it up—by passively listening through devices and analyzing environmental noise to forecast an attack—but that crossed a moral boundary.

Without those restraints, Athena would be a god, tracking every breath and heartbeat. But her mother, Ling Qingyu, had warned her against it.

And Athena trusted her mother's wisdom. There had to be a reason.

It wasn't a hardcoded limit—just restricted access. She could override it if the situation became dire.

Like now. Her intervention had helped Spirit Fox lock down the suspects so swiftly that the enemy never had a chance to react.

Still, there were other sources of data she could exploit: purchase histories, past GPS logs from phones, even search records.

(...Ahem...)

In the modern world, data was king. If someone truly wanted to disappear, they'd have to cut off all contact with the digital realm.

In this era, you were always tracked. Everywhere. Every time.

Most of the suspects were nothing more than messengers—human LAN nodes—used to relay information between various parties.

Under interrogation, they all described being contacted by a masked individual who delivered orders and instructions. The voice was artificially altered, making it impossible to identify the speaker's gender.

Whether it was one person or several using the same disguise, the operators couldn't say for sure.

Payments were always in cash. Phones used for coordination were burner devices—one-time tools with strict instructions to keep moving before and after delivery.

Whoever was behind this had clearly taken extreme precautions to avoid any electronic trace. The mastermind—or masterminds—was cautious, disciplined, and likely experienced in espionage or underground operations.

Now, the trail had gone cold.

It wasn't that Spirit Fox or Athena couldn't investigate further, but that any delays would allow the enemy to vanish without a trace. By the time new information was discovered, it might be irrelevant.

At present, Athena was rapidly scanning past CCTV footage, cross-referencing the known movements of the suspects to identify any moments of contact with the masked figure.

If this individual truly excelled in counter-surveillance, then spotting them would be extremely difficult...

But the one reviewing the footage was Athena.

And Athena didn't tire. She didn't get frustrated.

She was not only a super astro-class AI, but also found the entire process—this massive, tangled data web—both entertaining and engaging.

After all, she'd been idle for far too long.

The perpetrators behind tonight's attacks weren't professionally trained, but they managed to mimic tactical behavior—thanks to pre-recorded instruction videos and step-by-step orders.

That raised a troubling question:

Why now?

Why would the remnants of a gang—after successfully dodging Spirit Fox and lying low for so long—suddenly risk everything in one reckless move?

Chapter 725: Bursting in

Elsewhere, one area drew intense Spirit Fox activity: a slum district. Athena had flagged it as suspicious due to an overlapping pattern—between the incident sites, the attackers' residences, and the messengers' routes.

Humans might have struggled to detect the anomaly, but Athena had no such difficulty. The moment she spotted the oddity—a nail sticking out—she dug deeper.

Furthermore, when Athena resorted to the surveillance methods usually restricted by her mother, she gained a crystal-clear visualization of all electronic devices connected to the network across the district.

Every household had such devices—phones, computers, and other appliances accessing the internet.

But the villa?

It emitted no signal whatsoever.

That anomaly stood out like a different species among its surroundings—silent, disconnected, and glaringly out of place.

Preliminary analysis led to a peculiar target: a 'villa'—a well-built house standing out in the middle of the slum.

To be clear, slums in Province N weren't just makeshift shacks like in the movies. Many were built with bricks and cement, proper homes by appearance.

However, compared to more affluent areas, their facilities lacked almost everything—no clean water, no proper sanitation, often no steady power.

Athena's findings prompted Spirit Fox to gather more intel on the slum zones. Testimonies from the arrested suspects added new variables, narrowing their estimates. Soon, they drew a troubling conclusion about how weapons had been moved.

No—they hadn't been smuggled in. They were manufactured locally. A terrifying conclusion, save for some critical components, which likely had to be imported illegally.

From a geographical analysis, Athena even raised the possibility of DIY submarines being used to smuggle in restricted parts. It wasn't without precedent—after all, the Tiger Gang's downfall had revealed similar techniques.

No matter how much Province N bragged about improved surveillance and tighter border control, loopholes always existed. Mistakes, if nothing else, served to prevent repeat failures.

Now, six unmarked vans were en route to the suspected villa—followed at a distance by two conspicuous Aegis units. The plan was to strike fast and covertly, catching the occupants off guard. The Aegis would act as both insurance and heavy support if things went sideways.

According to Athena, this slum—like many others in Province N—wasn't exactly welcoming to law enforcement, let alone Spirit Fox.

They had once thrived off crime. For many, helping gangs had been no different from holding a job. Now that Spirit Fox had crushed those gangs, the residents' financial lifelines were cut.

And anyone who threatened their wealth or livelihood?

Would be seen as the enemy.

That was an eternal truth.

The six vans split into two groups—one taking the western route, the other continuing toward the target.

As the convoy moved along narrow roads barely wide enough for a single vehicle, the operatives could clearly observe the residents' activities.

Most people loitered outside, chatting freely. A few tea shops bustled with games—likely gambling for fleeting thrills and short-lived earnings.

Their unusual arrival didn't go unnoticed. Curious eyes followed the convoy as it wound through the cramped streets.

Only a handful of cars were seen, parked at odd angles—most households here didn't own vehicles.

Frankly, Athena had to admit—even with a provincial-wide surveillance system, areas like this posed logistical challenges for Spirit Fox.

Thankfully, their destination wasn't a remote village, but neither was it a proper town.

Most residents here lived illegally—constructing homes without permits, grabbing land in hopes of future compensation if redevelopment occurred.

It was a persistent headache for the government. Forced evictions would only provoke backlash, painting the authorities as tyrants bullying the poor.

Indeed, many here struggled to make ends meet.

But just as many exploited the gray area between legality and morality, living off loopholes and ambiguity.

The government avoided stirring up unnecessary controversy—especially in a climate where the narrative of rich vs. poor could spiral quickly.

Public gossip loved nothing more than an underdog tale.

Besides, there were always vested interests eager to amplify the chaos or burn it further.

Now, the convoy came to a halt.

The streets ahead narrowed even more—tight enough that only motorbikes could pass.

Spirit Fox dismounted.

Their presence made everyone nearby instinctively step back.

In the darkness, the glint of firearms—even from disciplined hands—was enough to chill any soul.

Through the narrow streets, the group of Spirit Fox operators hustled across the convoluted network of buildings, ignoring the prying eyes around them.

A few members remained behind to guard the extraction point near the vehicles. The rest moved in two tight column formations, advancing aggressively toward the designated villa.

As they progressed, more and more residents gathered to watch.

The team leader issued a warning in a firm voice:

"Stay vigilant. This area is known to be hostile to officials. We might get an unfriendly welcome."

"Understood."

"Everyone, watch your sector."

"Copied."

Each operator took responsibility for her assigned angle. The point women covered the front, the middle flanks were held steady, and the rear guard watched their six.

Suddenly, a rock struck one of the operator's helmets with a dull clack.

The formation immediately halted. The leader's eyes followed the trajectory.

Her gaze landed on a child—frozen, mid-step. A woman beside him instantly yanked him back behind her.

A man stepped forward, placing himself between the operators and the pair.

"What's the matter? You want problems?" he growled, chest puffed and stance wide.

The Spirit Fox girls stood motionless, speechless for a moment.

Please, they weren't even doing anything. They were just observing who had the nerve to throw a rock.

But part of them suspected the act wasn't random. This whole group might be deliberately provoking them.

In such a hostile environment, the worst-case scenario was being encircled—losing every fallback or escape option.

"Ignore them. Stay on mission. We're wasting time. The other team is waiting for us," the leader ordered calmly.

The formation resumed, boots crunching against the broken pavement.

But the noise from the crowd intensified. Some residents started banging on pots and pans, raising a ruckus that spread in the direction of the team's advance.

One of the operators voiced the concern:

"What are they doing?"

"They're interfering," the leader responded through comms.

An experienced team member added, "They might not know who we're after—but they'll alert someone."

"Clear the comms," the leader cut in firmly. The channel went silent again.

Internally, she made a note: This town needs a cure.

The level of resentment brewing here—directed at the government, at enforcement—was a festering threat.

If left unaddressed, it could spiral into something worse. The slums might grow unchecked and become a nightmare—just like the lawless zones in the nations of the Southern Bush continent.

The expansion of the slum was reaching a dangerous tipping point—one where no countermeasures would be effective anymore. If left unchecked, the growth might spiral beyond recovery. By the time anyone acted, it could already be too late.

She had made up her mind: this couldn't be ignored. She would report her concerns to Sister Su, who in turn would forward the message to Yang Qingyue. These decisions weren't hers to make—but she understood the gravity of the situation well enough to raise the flag.

As they moved through the cramped alleys and finally approached their objective, the team linked up with another unit that had dismounted from the opposite side. The vans had split up earlier, approaching from multiple routes to encircle the target location with minimal exposure and to ensure nobody escaped if alerted.

The ISR—satellites and drones nearby to assist the mission controlled by Athena—above was watching to discern any suspicious person making escape impossible without noticing at all.

Now, the full cordon was in place.

There was no need for verbal coordination. Each woman knew her role. The two squads silently stacked up near the front gate—tight, disciplined, and ready.

One operator stepped forward. From a pouch on her vest, she pulled out a thin, flexible strip of explosive—a plastic slap charge—and quickly attached it to the metal gate's latch.

With a hand gesture—fist closed, arm pumping twice—she signaled: Breach imminent. Then she quickly retreated to the stack.

The rest of the team stepped back, positioning themselves behind cover.

Three... two... one...

The two lead operators instinctively lowered their heads, bracing for the shockwave.

Boom!

The explosive charge detonated with a deep thud, forcing the metal gate to screech and fold inward under pressure. Fragments scattered. No time to wait.

Like liquid through a breach, the operators surged in, splitting into pairs to sweep the perimeter and secure potential exit points.

While containment teams fanned out around the structure to intercept any fleeing suspects, the primary assault team—eight female operators—rushed to the front door in a seamless blur of motion.

The pointwoman raised her boot and slammed it against the door, splintering the frame.

Before the dust could even settle, her partner hurled a nine-banger inside.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A trio of rapid concussive blasts stunned the interior.

In perfect sync, the eight-woman team flooded through the entryway—each with assigned angles and sectors to clear.

"Province N Police!"

Chapter 726: DIY gunsmithings

Target: Villa — A two-story building exuding an aged, almost ancient aura. Weathered paint clung to the outer walls, cracked and flaking, but the structure itself stood firm and unyielding.

Objective: Capture the targets alive for interrogation.

Bang!

"Province N Police!"

The assault team burst through the main door in a seamless entry. The pointwoman immediately spotted a man coughing and staggering in the hallway, disoriented from the breaching charge. His hands flailed instinctively.

She didn't hesitate. In one smooth motion, she surged forward and slammed him to the floor, driving her knee into his back while pinning his wrists.

"Stay down! Don't move! You're under arrest!" she barked, voice sharp and firm.

Her partner stayed close, sweeping their sector and covering the exposed flank.

Further ahead, the rest of the team moved according to formation. A narrow hallway opened into a larger atrium—at the center, a circular stairwell wound upward toward the second floor.

Their boots echoed across the tiled floor, still dusted from the detonation.

Then—

Bang! Bang!

Gunfire erupted from above.

Muzzle flashes flared along the stairwell railing. A man was up there—leaned over, spraying rounds blindly down the stairwell with no clear aim.

"Contact! Second floor, stairwell!" one operator called out.

Rounds clanged and sparked against the walls, gouging chunks out of plaster and wood. But the operators had already snapped into action, darting for cover with fluid coordination.

"Hold fire! Suppressive only!" the team leader ordered sharply over comms.

This was a live-capture mission. Intel came first. Dead suspects were wasted leads.

Two operators at the front raised their rifles and returned controlled suppressive fire, rounds striking near the shooter's cover. The man instinctively ducked back—nerves overriding bravado.

Two more operators moved up—hugging the walls, slipping behind their suppressing teammates. They approached the stairwell cautiously, weapons low, boots soft on the stone floor.

"Bang up!" the trailing operator called out.

The pointwoman and her partner nodded once and broke from cover. Low and fast, they sprinted along the wall, keeping tight as they approached the base of the stairwell.

Thunk!

A flashbang soared up the spiral.

Bang!

The blast punched through the air—light and sound collapsing into a paralyzing shock.

A deafening pulse of light and sound ruptured the silence upstairs.

The shooter screamed, staggering back from the railing. The two operators didn't wait.

Charging up the stairs, the pointwoman vaulted the first steps in two bounds, her partner trailing half a step behind, muzzle raised to cover her.

She spotted the shooter—staggering, half-blinded, weapon loose in his grip. As they crested the top landing, she didn't hesitate.

Wham!

With one fluid motion, she launched a brutal kick into the chest of the stunned gunman.

Thud!

He crashed backward into the wall, his weapon clattering from his hand. The operator pounced, locking down his limbs and pinning him in seconds.

Her partner didn't even glance at the takedown—her focus swept left, rifle up, as she took position against the nearest hallway intersection.

"Stairwell secure! One suspect down and disarmed!" came the pointwoman's voice through comms.

"Copy. Moving to support," the leader replied.

A few from the stack flowed up the stairs like a tide—controlled, steady, weapons at the ready.

The operator trailing behind reached out and squeezed the figure's shoulder, who covered the previous teammate's back during the takedown—the silent confirmation to express ready and to press on. That teammate stayed behind to restrain and guard the subdued suspect while the stack pressed forward.

Her partner, now assuming the pointwoman role, moved up to a closed door on the left. Faint noises filtered from within—movement, maybe voices. She raised her gloved hand and gave two sharp taps on the top of her helmet.

The operator behind her understood instantly.

She reached into her pouch, pulled out a flashbang, and held it where the pointwoman could see. With practiced precision, she removed the pin and gave the canister a quick shake to arm it.

Ready.

The pointwoman shifted into a high-ready stance, turned to the door, and delivered a rapid mule kick to the handle. The door snapped inward. She immediately withdrew from the fatal funnel, letting the next operator take over to throw a grenade in.

One... two... Boom!

The flashbang erupted in a thunderclap of light and sound.

The pointwoman surged through the doorway, sweeping left and covering one flank. Two more operators followed close behind—one split right, the other advanced straight through the center.

Three rifles locked on a figure kneeling in the middle of the room, clutching his face in a daze, blinded by the blast.

Without a word, the center operator slung her rifle and quickly secured the target's arms. Her teammate followed with cuffs, binding the man's wrists. The third covered the room, muzzle steady, eyes sweeping every shadow.

Once the target was restrained, one operator stayed behind at the doorway to hold security. The other two rejoined the stack outside.

Elsewhere on the same floor, the remaining operators methodically cleared each room in formation—disciplined, efficient, by the book.

"Upper floor clear!" came the call over comms.

Meanwhile, on the ground floor, the second team had also completed their sweep—until a sudden creak revealed a hidden panel sliding open. A man emerged from what looked like a concealed vault in the wall.

"Hands! On the ground!"

He froze mid-step—too slow. The operators rushed in, tackled him, and secured the suspect with ease.

Pushing further inside, they discovered what the vault was hiding: a staircase leading downward.

Their boots hit concrete as they descended into a dim, musty basement—lined with metalwork, grease stains, and rows of tables filled with machinery.

Gun parts. Ammunition molds. Barrels and slides.

A small-scale weapons workshop.

They'd found the heart of a local arms operation.

"Basement secured. Confirmed weapons manufacturing site," one of them reported.

At the rear of the room, a narrow tunnel stretched into darkness—dug through earth and reinforced with wood beams. It was clearly an escape route or smuggling passage.

Three operators split off, rifles raised, advancing cautiously into the tunnel.

"Watch for traps. Secondary clearance team will need to comb this place top to bottom," the squad leader noted. "Could be more than one exit."

"Copy that," a voice answered.

They pressed forward, alert and silent.

Outside the villa, the exterior team monitored the comms chatter—room-by-room confirmations, target apprehensions, and the sudden discovery of a hidden tunnel. They adjusted their formation slightly, tightening the perimeter in anticipation of runners.

Behind the villa, one operator paused. A subtle noise—barely audible over the quiet gurgle of the nearby water stream—caught her attention. She turned her head slightly, eyes narrowing toward the edge of the underbrush.

Something moved.

A shadow shifted against the faint moonlight—a figure trying to blend into the overgrowth, creeping low toward the water.

Her instincts fired instantly. She shouldered her weapon, switched on her flashlight, and lit up the dark.

Beam on.

"Stop right there! Target sighted, rear side!" she shouted into her comms.

The blinding white light snapped onto the figure. A man—disheveled, dirt-streaked, and panicked—froze like a deer caught in headlights.

Then he bolted.

"Runner!" she called, already tracking his motion.

Her two teammates near the corner sprang into position, cutting toward her from the flanks. The escapee dashed toward the stream, weaving through tufts of grass and rubble.

The point operator exhaled, adjusted her aim, and squeezed the trigger.

Crack!

Chapter 727: Not this time!

Crack!

The suppressed round found its mark, tearing through the fugitive's thigh. The man stumbled mid-stride, momentum collapsing as he pitched forward into the dirt beside the water's edge.

"Aghhh!" he screamed, clutching his leg, writhing on the ground.

The trailing operators reached her side, rifles raised. They swept their flashlights forward, catching the downed figure in overlapping cones of light.

Moments later, more movement stirred from the shadows at the base of the villa. The trio of exterior operators—still focused on the subdued fugitive—glanced up and saw three more Spirit Fox members emerging from a concealed exit, half-crouched and alert.

It was the tunnel team.

"Target down and secured," one of them confirmed, kneeling beside the wounded man to check him for weapons and secure restraints.

"Tunnel's clear. It led out to the edge of the drainage line," another operator added. "This was their escape route."

The exterior trio exchanged brief nods, flashing a thumbs-up signal to the operators above who were watching from the high ground. In response, the upper team shut off their flashlights to avoid further attention from the surrounding residents.

Meanwhile, the captain of the entire operation keyed her radio, voice calm but firm as she summarized the results to Su Ruomei.

"Villa secured. One wounded escapee apprehended behind the perimeter. All rooms and the tunnel have been cleared. Machinery confirmed in the basement. We've taken multiple detainees—preparing exfil."

Su Ruomei responded almost instantly.

"Copy that. Get a full sweep and handover protocol started. I'll inform the higher-up to coordinate with the local police for post-operation sealing. That villa needs to be airtight—no stragglers, no equipment left unsecured."

The captain acknowledged. "Understood. We'll mark it and stay until the handover."

She turned to her team with a grim glance. "We're not leaving any holes behind. This place—no matter how unfriendly the neighbors—must be sealed tight. If we walk away without proper clearance, the locals or criminal sympathizers will scavenge the machinery the moment we turn our backs."

Nobody needed convincing. They had experienced the local's speciality and treatment toward them.

If not for the intimidating presence of guns and tactical gear, even the average troublemaker might have harassed the perimeter—and ordinary police officers would've been forced to retreat in shame.

That changed the moment the two Aegis armored vehicles arrived.

They no longer bothered to conceal themselves, rolling up with steady force to link with the previously parked vans. Their reinforced chassis gleamed under the slum's dim lighting, their engine rumbles swallowing the murmurs of the watching crowd.

The Spirit Fox operators guarding the vans allowed themselves a slight breath of relief. Not because they were afraid—none of them feared the gathering civilians—but because the armored vehicles sent a message.

A silent one: We're untouchable.

The hostility that lingered in the eyes of the locals dulled. The braver few, those considering taking photos or provoking a scene, faded into the background. Nobody wanted to throw eggs at a wall, especially one made of reinforced steel and backed by elite forces.

Even if tensions had escalated, these operators wouldn't have flinched. Firearms aside, their sheer physical prowess and unit coordination were enough to scatter a crowd.

Meanwhile, in a high-security operations center, Su Ruomei finished her report and transferred the line to Cai Ning, who was already pacing with anxiety. Upon hearing the details, her voice caught for a moment.

"You're telling me... someone was manufacturing firearms locally?"

"Yes," Su Ruomei said grimly. "Confirmed by multiple captures. DIY weapon assembly, full underground setup, tunnel escape included."

Cai Ning didn't hesitate. She turned on her heel and stormed toward the central command room.

"Qingyue, we have a situation."

When Yang Qingyue heard the full report, her expression stiffened. Neither of the police chiefs had ever anticipated such a blatant provocation—not in Province N. And certainly not an operation bold enough to manufacture weapons under their noses.

"What was the goal?" Yang muttered. "This isn't just revenge against Spirit Fox."

"No," Cai Ning agreed. "Even if the sky falls, that explanation doesn't hold water."

They stared at the screen in silence for a long beat.

But if the threat shocked them, Spirit Fox's response stunned them even more. The precision. The speed. The ruthlessness. Not that they had never seen before but the current one broadened their understanding limits. Maybe revenge played a big role here.

Within hours, all known threats had been captured, incapacitated, or neutralized.

What remained now wasn't combat—but the hunt for the true mastermind behind the curtain.

"Okay, contact the local police and surrounding stations. Send reinforcements as requested. Spirit Fox executed their part flawlessly while we've barely lifted a finger," Yang Qingyue said, her voice cool but edged with urgency. Then she paused, tapping her pen against the table. "Deploy our SWAT teams too. That slum's been a festering headache for years. This is the perfect moment to assert our police presence."

"Understood," Cai Ning nodded, already pulling out her device to issue orders.

Yang leaned back in her chair, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "And we still don't have a solid lead, do we? Nothing except the suspects' testimonies and the physical evidence from the villa, which all came from Spirit Fox's handover?"

Cai Ning offered another nod, slower this time, her lips pressed into a line.

Yang sighed heavily, the weight of uncertainty palpable. "Alright. You take charge of the department for now. I'm heading to Qingyu's residence. I want to see what's happening there with my own eyes."

She pushed back from the desk and began straightening her jacket and gathering a few files.

But when she looked up, Cai Ning was still standing there.

Yang raised a brow. "What?"

"Seriously?" Cai Ning crossed her arms. "There's no way I'm cleaning up the mess here on my own. I'm coming with you."

Yang blinked in brief surprise, then let out a low chuckle. Of course. Cai Ning had known her too long—and endured being dumped with paperwork far too often.

"Fine, fine. Assign the administrative load to the other deputy. You can ride with me."

"Yes, Chief!" Cai Ning grinned and offered a mock salute before turning on her heel and skipping out.

Yang Qingyue watched her go, a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Poor Zhang," she murmured, lighting a silent candle of sympathy in her heart for the remaining deputy chief—who was, unfortunately, about to inherit a mountain of bureaucracy.

Of all the decisions she had made in her career, Yang Qingyue always felt most gratified by the one to enlist Ling Qingyu as her ally. What once seemed like a devil's bargain—a desperate sip of poison to fight a greater toxin—had instead transformed into the most effective partnership she could have hoped for.

Sometimes, in the stillness between crises, she found herself wondering: What would her world look like if she hadn't taken that risk? If she had chosen safety over strategy, convention over conviction?

Tonight's events only reinforced that belief. The audacity of the criminals—their blatant attempt to shake the fragile stability of the reformed order—was nothing short of appalling. Their challenge had to be answered, not just with force, but with resolve.

And Spirit Fox had delivered everything, with might and speed.

As she sat in her office, shoulders tense and thoughts circling tonight's chaos, Yang Qingyue found her mind drifting—tasting and lingering on the memory of her lover's intimate gifts. A hint of longing rose in her chest. She missed Ling Qingyu more than she wanted to admit.

Hopefully, that infuriating woman wasn't off somewhere charming foreign women with that wicked smile, enjoying her rare overseas trip while Yang Qingyue was stuck here, cleaning up after her subordinates' messes.

The memory of their last night together flared warm and vivid in her thoughts. It was enough to make her breath hitch. She blinked rapidly and cleared her throat, coughing unnaturally when she noticed the subconscious rub of her thighs beneath the desk.

A beat passed. She straightened her back and mentally slapped herself.

Focus, Yang Qingyue.

Alas, thanks to that bastard's subordinates, her stress level was manageable enough to fathom worldly desires.

Chapter 728: Interrogation

Ling Qingyu's residence, somewhere underground.

Tang Ziyi stood waiting in the dim corridor, arms folded as the sound of footsteps echoed faintly through the reinforced halls. The female mercenary—recently captured by Spirit Fox—was on her way, escorted by two operators under Athena's remote guidance.

She arrived with little fuss—quiet, composed, obedient to orders, but not to be mistaken for submissive. Despite the hood veiling her eyes, Tang Ziyi didn't miss the subtle tension in the woman's body: the slight tilt of her head, the calculated placement of each footstep, the measured breaths. She was trying to map the route.

Athena had already anticipated this and adjusted the environmental layout slightly to throw off orientation. Still, the mercenary persisted.

'Smart,' Tang Ziyi mused, observing her. 'Too smart to be underestimated.'

The woman hadn't been blindfolded during transport, so she had a rough sense of her current location. Judging by the shifts in air pressure, the absence of ambient city noise, and the echo of her own steps, she had correctly deduced that they were underground. A partial map was already forming in her mind—one that would be mostly useless thanks to Athena's modular corridor design, but she didn't know that yet.

She snickered quietly to herself beneath the hood. This is their great Spirit Fox? No guards? No security layers? Just a blindfold and a hand on the shoulder? Please.

Of course, she was unaware of Athena's silent presence—watching, recording, adjusting. And she was equally unaware that every step she took, every minor attempt at orientation, had been logged for later analysis.

Still, her confidence wasn't unfounded.

Spirit Fox wasn't trained for this kind of adversary. The original founding was merely to serve as Ling Qingyu's cohort, an arm wing to protect herself and her lovedone.

Yang Qingyue's entry to her life changed that. With Tang Ziyi's help, the transformation was far easy, drawing gains for her group.

Spirit Fox was a direct-action unit—built for kinetic assaults, rescue missions, and interdictions. They moved fast, hit hard, and finished clean. Infiltration, sabotage, long-term surveillance—those were different beasts altogether. And the mercenary was one of them: a specialist in espionage, stealth, and psychological warfare.

Against a seasoned spy like her, Spirit Fox lacked the subtle finesse. They knew it too—and they didn't mind.

Because they weren't supposed to be that.

They didn't need to build underground networks or conduct shadow games. Ling Qingyu didn't want her girls walking in darkness, becoming the kind of operatives who lived off manipulation and lies. She valued their safety above all else. Their training was brutal, their missions dangerous, but their principles were clean.

Intel gathering? That wasn't Spirit Fox's burden.

That was Athena's realm.

She saw everything. Heard everything. Intercepted everything.

In Ling Qingyu's eyes, the risks of turning Spirit Fox into a clandestine intelligence apparatus outweighed the benefits. Why endanger the very women she worked so hard to protect when she had money, technology, and the world's most advanced AI to do the digging?

Manpower was irreplaceable. But money could always buy more men. More spies. More traitors. More whispers.

Before the will of a capital giant, anything was possible.

Tang Ziyi motioned silently to the two operators flanking the woman. They gave curt nods and stepped out, sealing the door behind them. The room they left her in wasn't anything extraordinary—just four plain walls, a small table with two chairs, an electric kettle humming softly, bottled water, and a few packs of instant noodles stacked neatly to one side.

Certainly not an interrogation chamber. More like a breakroom hastily cleared for use.

Once her subordinates exited, Tang Ziyi personally cut the handcuffs off the female mercenary and removed the hood, showing no concern about resistance.

Please—Tang Ziyi's very existence was a bug in this world. It was the opponent who should fear offending her.

The woman squinted, adjusting to the dim lighting, and scanned her surroundings while massaging her wrists to restore circulation after being bound for so long.

She smacked her lips when she saw the red marks left by the plastic cuffs. These operators didn't even show mercy to women.

Well, they were women too, she mused to herself.

Initially, she considered breaking free the moment her hands were released, thinking she could exploit her captors' possible underestimation. But she restrained herself.

She hadn't been hurt or mistreated—only wrongfully apprehended and brought here on the pretext of possessing a restricted firearm.

Without proper intelligence, acting rashly was foolish. Every move had to be calculated to increase the odds of success.

And she, someone whose profession constantly teetered between life and death, understood that better than most.

Just one slight miscalculation on Spirit Fox's part—leaving her alone, uncuffed, with only one woman.

One very calm woman. Well, not uncuffed but more like removed by a single woman. Why was there no guard against her?

She scanned her captor's figure again.

No stance. No aggression. No weapon drawn. Tang Ziyi simply stood there with a faint air of amusement, as if waiting for something mildly entertaining to happen.

And that's what made her pause.

The instincts honed through years in shadowy operations screamed at her—don't do it. There was no room for error here. Not with someone like her.

What she didn't know was that she was lucky she hadn't acted.

Her opponent was none other than Tang Ziyi.

Even a humanoid monster like Ling Qingyu had to yield before her.

On the side, Tang Ziyi waited patiently for the mercenary to finish her little assessment. She felt somewhat bored that the woman hadn't made a move.

She had hoped for a thrilling moment to break the monotony. After all, it was a rare situation—standing alone before an unrestrained detainee.

It was like waving gold around without a care for personal safety.

When she confirmed that the mercenary was, for now, well-behaved, a grin tugged at Tang Ziyi's lips.

Interesting.

"Have you finished recollecting yourself?" she asked, gesturing toward the table with two chairs. "Please have a seat."

The setup was meant for a face-to-face conversation. The woman sat down and prodded her elbow flat on the table.

"It's not every day I get to meet a fellow mercenary," Tang Ziyi remarked casually. "Do you want warm water?"

She didn't wait for an answer and grabbed the kettle. Two cups had already been poured, and she pushed one toward the woman while taking a light sip from her own.

The female mercenary glanced at the cup for a moment. She was thirsty. She knew, of course, that law enforcement sometimes used drinking water to collect fingerprints—but given Spirit Fox's conduct and the nature of her so-called crimes, there was no point in playing that kind of game. Not here. Not with someone like Tang Ziyi.

"Soft interrogation technique, huh?" the mercenary sneered.

Tang Ziyi wasn't fazed. "So, Ms. Murong... I must say, your record is quite impressive."

The use of her name made Murong narrow her eyes, but she said nothing. She understood what Tang Ziyi was implying—this wasn't about questions or answers, not really.

Interrogation, in its classic sense, was a crude tool. It often meant coercing information through force, threats, or psychological manipulation, with little concern for accuracy. The truth obtained that way tended to reflect what the interrogator wanted to hear—not what actually happened.

Sure, such methods could be effective—especially when there was an information gap to exploit. But only against the average detainee.

People with real conviction—strong beliefs or unwavering discipline—could hold out or, worse, feed deliberate falsehoods. It wasn't unheard of. Elite operatives worldwide were trained to endure pain, delay disclosure, and, when necessary, deceive with a mix of truths and lies. Even untrained radicals with fanatical belief could shut down completely under pressure.

Tang Ziyi might not have specialized in professional interrogation techniques, but she had her own... solutions. Her acupuncture-based methods had yielded strong results in the past, if only because they targeted the nervous system with exquisite precision.

But even those techniques would likely fall short against someone like Ms. Murong.

So today, she wasn't playing the predator.

No questions. No pressure.

Just water.

Tang Ziyi understood one thing: asking questions raised defenses. But offering comfort—sharing space, food, water—humanized the captor. That was when people talked.

Real interrogation wasn't about pressing for answers—it was about listening when the target let their guard down and spoke willingly.

Sure, she didn't have formal training in psychological manipulation. She lacked the subtle control of expressions, pacing, and emotional resonance that professional interrogators honed over years. But it didn't matter.

Because that wasn't her goal.

This wasn't about gathering intel piece by piece. Tang Ziyi had come for something else entirely.

And she was patient.

In one word, Tang Ziyi's goal was simple—truth serum.

She had laced the water Ms. Murong drank with a carefully prepared compound. Of course, Tang Ziyi also took a sip from her own cup—to lower suspicion. But the water in her glass and the one handed to Ms. Murong were not the same.

Anyone familiar with ancient techniques would have guessed the trick—hidden mechanisms. With Athena's help and Tang Ziyi's ingenuity, designing such a setup was child's play. She had replicated the principles behind an infamous assassination tool, one that diverted poison and clean water along different channels without a hint of tampering.

Only, the substance wasn't a poison but a drug with temporary effect.

So, in just a short while, Ms. Murong would begin to talk—everything from her secrets to her affiliations. Whether she wanted to or not.

As for her opinion on the method? Tang Ziyi didn't care.

Compared to Athena's original suggestion—an injectable agent—the approach was gentler. Injections acted quickly, but lacked subtlety and left traces. More importantly, they weren't suitable for long-term plans.

Long-term?

Yes. Tang Ziyi had already been evaluating Ms. Murong ever since she arrived. The woman's capabilities, background, and temperament just happened to fill a very particular gap.

A role Spirit Fox had yet to fill. At the same time, this was also an opportunity to study a guinea pig, Tang Ziyi felt amused.

What Tang Ziyi didn't know was that thousands of miles away, Ling Qingyu—on her rare overseas trip—had already begun reaching the exact same conclusion and ordered to kidnap someone.

Chapter 729: Naked

Tang Ziyi began casually—light conversation, harmless questions, warm smiles. It was the type of chat one might have at a café or on a long train ride. To Ms. Murong, it was a transparent tactic: lowering her guard, building a false sense of rapport.

She braced herself for a long interrogation, fully intending to drag it out. It wasn't guilt that made her wary—she had done nothing wrong, or so she believed—but she could guess what Spirit Fox wanted: leverage, intel, the missing thread that could pull apart something far bigger.

But she wasn't going to play along. She had come to Province N on a quiet, personal trip—nothing more. The firearm, while questionable, was a necessary habit for someone in her line of work. She had friends here from high school, people who knew nothing about her life now—only that she had become wealthy. No one asked how. No one knew the price.

Seeing them again had been unexpectedly warm, nostalgic even. But that warmth was exactly why she kept her distance. Involvement meant exposure. Exposure meant retaliation—and she wasn't afraid for herself, but for them.

Tang Ziyi's conversation flowed smoothly for several minutes. Ms. Murong, confident in her mental defenses, kept calm and observant. Spirit Fox can't be this shallow, she thought, mildly amused at how civil everything was.

Then, out of nowhere, Tang Ziyi asked a direct question.

It caught Ms. Murong off-guard—not because of the question itself, but because her mouth started answering.

Unbidden. Without her consent.

Her eyes widened. She gasped, clamping a hand over her lips. What the hell?!

Tang Ziyi tilted her head with mock concern and asked again—another sharp, pointed question.

Again, Ms. Murong responded.

Her voice moved faster than her will. Each answer slipped out with unfiltered truth, without hesitation. Names. Places. Movements. She tried to fight it, to mentally grip the leash on her tongue, but something inside—some compulsion—kept dragging the truth out of her.

Even though the details she spilled at first were minor, mostly unrelated to Spirit Fox, her panic began to rise. She saw Tang Ziyi's smile—calm, knowing, almost affectionate in its cruelty.

This woman had planned everything.

Then came the questions that struck closer to the recent attacks—intel she had been actively avoiding, information too dangerous to share for her friends here if she was exposed.

Who knew whether Spirit Fow was trustworthy? She knew these women took her in to find out what she had inside, during the escort before arriving here.

And she told it. All of it.

Only once did she manage to resist—her body tensed, jaw locked, lips trembling. She refused to answer or so she thought.

But the effort turned her face pale. Sweat glistened on her forehead. Her chest rose and fell in short, shallow breaths.

The silence lasted a few seconds until she conceded and described everything.

Then Tang Ziyi leaned back, amused. "Interesting," she murmured. "I didn't expect you're stronger than most. Or maybe the effect isn't as good as injection. Who knows I have never try?"

"What trying? What do you mean?" Ms. Murong demanded, her voice laced with confusion and alarm.

Tang Ziyi said nothing. She simply watched, unblinking, as she continued her psychological assault—not with fists or threats, but with calm, relentless questioning.

Each word was a scalpel, and Ms. Murong was being flayed alive.

Secrets she'd never told anyone—locked memories, guarded truths—spilled uncontrollably from her lips. She tried to resist. She bit her tongue. She dug her nails into her thighs to maintain control. But the moment she hesitated, a new question would strike, splintering her fragile defenses.

The sensation was unbearable. Her mind felt stretched beyond its limits, as if her thoughts were being unraveled by invisible hands. There was no physical pain, yet the invasion was so thorough, so intimate, it became a form of psychological torture.

"This is sick," she gasped in disbelief. "You're sick!"

Tang Ziyi only smiled brighter, which infuriated her even more. The smile wasn't mocking. It was worse. It was entertained.

Ms. Murong seethed. She cursed, swore, and flung every insult she knew at Tang Ziyi in between involuntary confessions. But her rage was impotent, her resistance crumbling under the weight of whatever was manipulating her mind.

Was this hypnosis? She had heard of deep-layered suggestions, psychological triggers buried in the subconscious and activated later. But no—this was too seamless, too precise.

Conscious hypnosis? Drugs? She couldn't think. Every time she tried, another question slid past her mental barriers and forced her mouth open.

She hated that smile. That polite, calm smile. She'd rather be punched.

She collapsed back into the chair, drenched in sweat. Her muscles ached from tension, and her breath came in broken gasps.

She had told everything—names, operations, contacts, even personal moments she thought buried forever. There were only a handful of trivial details left unsaid, like scraps of paper in a storm.

And Tang Ziyi didn't stop.

Her voice continued, unhurried, cutting straight through what was left of Ms. Murong's defenses. Suddenly—

"What's the most embarrassing thing that ever happened during puberty?"

Ms. Murong's face turned crimson.

"No," she whispered. "Don't—"

But her lips moved on their own, betraying her yet again.

She confessed. Then more followed. Her romantic failures, her moments of insecurity, the color of her underwear today—everything was exposed in raw detail, spoken aloud like a diary torn open in a crowded plaza.

This wasn't just interrogation.

It was violation.

Ms. Murong felt herself unraveling. Her sense of identity thinned. She was a trained mercenary, forged through war and death. But here, stripped of every layer, she felt small, vulnerable, even humiliated.

She wasn't afraid of being killed—but she was terrified of being known.

Tang Ziyi must have sensed the breaking point. She finally stopped and leaned back in her chair, hands resting on her lap. The silence was suffocating.

Five full minutes passed.

Ms. Murong didn't speak. Couldn't speak.

Her eyes stared forward, dull and defeated. Whatever spark had once danced in them was dimmed now, her will crushed under the weight of exposure.

She wasn't just broken.

She was laid bare.

Tang Ziyi coughed softly, a flicker of guilt surfacing.

She had merely intended to tease—poke a little, maybe have a bit of fun with the famous mercenary. But she'd gone overboard. Had Ms. Murong been a notorious criminal, Tang wouldn't have batted an eye. But this woman... wasn't bad. Suspicious, yes. Armed, yes. But evil? No.

Still, Tang Ziyi couldn't deny her satisfaction. The serum's effect was beyond impressive—frighteningly effective, even. She had obtained exactly the information the previous Spirit Fox operators suspected during the apprehension. With the intel confirmed, Athena had already relayed it to Su Ruomei, who would be planning the next course of action.

From there, Athena's vast databanks and analytical prowess began cross-referencing details, gradually stitching together the bigger picture. The motive behind the unprecedented coordinated attack on Spirit Fox was beginning to surface. Unconfirmed, yes—but it made sense now.

Tang Ziyi shifted in her seat, suddenly uncomfortable. She wasn't a psychologist. She didn't deal with minds—she dealt with facts, bodies, combat. Unknown emotional fallout like this... unnerved her.

She hesitated, then asked, "Are you okay?"

Ms. Murong's face was pale, her shoulders trembling slightly. She looked up with glistening eyes, a single tear trailing down her cheek, catching the sterile glint of the fluorescent light.

"Do you think I should be okay?" she hissed.

Tang Ziyi didn't flinch. "Well... thank you for your intel. You helped us a lot."

"By violating me."

"It couldn't be helped." Tang Ziyi shrugged, regaining her usual poise. "The stakes were too high."

Ms. Murong stared at her for a moment, her voice low and flat. "What was it?"

Tang Ziyi knew exactly what she meant. She supposed the woman deserved to know, especially if she hoped to win her over—however coercive that goal might be. At the very least, honesty now was a form of respect.

"Truth serum," she said bluntly.

Ms. Murong blinked. "...What?"

"Truth serum," Tang repeated. "A biochemical verbal compulsion agent."

Ms. Murong froze. The term sounded like something out of a science fiction movie. But suddenly, her instincts screamed that it was real. That everything she'd just gone through was horrifyingly real.

Her heartbeat quickened. The water—yes, it must've been the water. She'd only drunk from the cup Tang Ziyi had given her. "Wait. That water?"

Tang Ziyi nodded.

"But... you drank it too," Ms. Murong said, brows knitting in confusion. "I saw you."

Tang Ziyi gave a half-smile. "It wasn't the same water."

Ms. Murong stared at her. "How?"

Tang Ziyi leaned back, folding her arms. "An ancient mechanism. Diversion-based design. Athena helped craft it. I only copied from famous assassination devices—the kind that splits poison and drink down different channels. In this case, I got the water. You got the serum."

A bitter smile tugged at Ms. Murong's lips. "You really spent that much effort... on me?"

She wasn't sure whether to feel honored or terrified. It meant she was valuable. But it also meant she was in too deep. And she'd been outplayed so cleanly, so effortlessly, she almost respected the deception.

Tang Ziyi noted her rising apprehension and softened her tone. "Don't worry. We're not going to hurt you. I swear."

Ms. Murong narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

"In fact," Tang Ziyi continued, "this might actually be good for your future."

"How? Apart from undressing me? You think I'll ever be the same again." Ms. Murong sneered, her voice low and bitter.

"Hey, only I know the information and I am not the type that will gossip around," Tang Ziyi promised and tapped the table, leaning closer. "I want you to join us."

Chapter 730: Successful recruitment

"How?" Ms. Murong sneered, her voice low and bitter. "Apart from undressing me? You think I'll ever be the same after this?"

Tang Ziyi didn't flinch. "Hey," she said lightly, tapping her fingers against the table. "Only I know the information. And I'm not the type to gossip."

She leaned forward, elbows resting on the edge of the table, her gaze sharp yet sincere. "I want you to join us."

Ms. Murong blinked, caught off guard. "Me?" she echoed with a half-laugh of disbelief. "A mercenary? You're soliciting me?"

That flicker of stunned reaction—pride, confusion, defensiveness—was exactly what Tang Ziyi wanted to see. It confirmed her suspicion: this woman wasn't just capable; she had pride in her craft, in her independence. And her ego had just been wounded deep enough to spark introspection.

Tang Ziyi's lips curved into a grin. "That disbelief tells me you've never considered the possibility," she said. "Which is why you're perfect."

Ms. Murong scoffed. "So, after drugging me and ripping my mind apart, you're offering me a job?"

"Think of it as a redirection," Tang Ziyi said smoothly. "You're clearly skilled—operationally, tactically, even psychologically. It'd be a shame to let that talent be wasted on cheap freelance gigs and sporadic contracts."

Ms. Murong's brows furrowed, suspicion still anchoring her expression. "You don't even know me."

"I know enough," Tang replied. "I know you didn't come to Province N to cause trouble. I know you had chances to flee or fight but didn't. I know you care about people—those friends you quietly visited."

Tang leaned in slightly. "You're not the type who runs without reason. And I think you're tired of running."

Silence settled for a beat. Ms. Murong's jaw clenched. Tang could see the gears turning.

"I'm not saying you have to decide now," Tang Ziyi added. "But let's be honest—you're already in our world. Wouldn't it be better to walk in with purpose than be dragged along blindfolded?"

Ms. Murong clenched her jaw, forcing herself to stay composed as the surnamed Tang casually exposed her connections, a few minor secrets, and even her emotional weak spots. It was terrifying—how much could be unraveled so quickly. Plus, how much she herself had confessed.

Honestly, she never expected the shocking turn of events to end in... a job offer?

Innovative indeed, she thought with a bitter smirk.

"You've persuaded me a little bit," Ms. Murong said at last, her voice calmer now. The worst of the serum's grip was fading, though even she could feel the lingering honesty welling under her tongue. "But what if I refuse?"

Tang Ziyi tilted her head with amusement. "Listening to the first part of your sentence, I'd say you're already halfway on board. Besides, based on the theory, the effects of the drug should last another one to two hours."

"...Theory?" Ms. Murong's eye twitched. "You—! You used me as a guinea pig?!"

"Hmm. Nope. Maybe. Probably not," Tang replied, entirely unbothered. "You have to believe us. There's nothing in the serum that would cause long-term harm to your body."

"Then what was the heat? The racing heartbeat? The—agony?"

"Oh, that?" Tang Ziyi blinked. "Purely psychosomatic. A little... emotional overload, triggering hormone shifts. Essentially, your body betraying your pride. Happens to the best of us."

Ms. Murong groaned and rubbed her temple. "You're seriously saying if I refuse to join, you'll just let me go?"

Tang Ziyi smiled wider. "Oh no. That would be unwise, wouldn't it? How could we let someone who now knows everything just waltz out of here?"

"I knew it." Ms. Murong sighed, lips twitching in resignation. "So I don't have a choice."

"Come now, we're very democratic," Tang said cheerfully. "It's entirely your choice. Nobody is forcing you. But, you know, choices come with consequences."

She leaned forward and tapped the table twice. "Be brave. It's just a simple question. Yes or no?"

Ms. Murong almost flipped the table, if not for the fact that she still felt like a drowned cat—and also, deep down, she really didn't want to find out what Tang Ziyi would do if pushed.

"Oh, I see where you're stuck," Tang added, resting her chin on her palm. "Maybe you misunderstood us. We're not talking about killing you."

"That's not very reassuring," Ms. Murong muttered.

"No, no," Tang said brightly. "If you refuse, you'll just stay here. Forever."

"Excuse me?"

"In a nice villa, of course," Tang continued, gesturing around. "Under surveillance, but with food, water, three hot meals a day—different menus, too. You'll have internet, maybe, exercise time, swimming, movies, whatever. You just won't be allowed to leave. Isn't that cozy?"

Ms. Murong stared at her. "That's called unlawful detention. Also, unethical. Also, insane."

Tang shrugged. "Don't worry. Your digital footprint will be erased. No one will know you're here. Except us."

She snapped her fingers with a smirk.

Ms. Murong blinked. "That's even worse!"

Tang Ziyi's voice softened, almost conspiratorial. "Or... you say yes. You join. You get your life back, and maybe even a better one. Prestige. Resources. Protection. A real team."

Ms. Murong exhaled slowly. She didn't want to admit it, but it was tempting. Especially now, with her past peeled away, her defenses gone. "What's my role?"

Tang Ziyi stretched out her hand with a calm, confident smile.

"Welcome to the team. Spirit Fox is glad to have you. You'll be treated like any other operator—expect the danger, the excitement, and the chaos that comes with it."

Ms. Murong narrowed her eyes, gaze lingering on Tang Ziyi's extended fingers. "Should I say I'm honored?" she said dryly before finally reaching out and shaking the hand.

"I promise you," Tang Ziyi added, her tone almost playful, "after a few months here, you'll beg us not to kick you out, even if we try."

"We'll see about that," Ms. Murong muttered, still dazed from the truth serum, still bitter—but no longer outright hostile.

"Good. For now, stay in the room and let the serum wear off," Tang said. "There are refreshments prepared to suit your needs. Your future teammates will escort you to your new residence once you're clear."

Her expression turned more formal. "Forgive us—but compared to others, you'll be under mild supervision for a while. Think of it as... protective custody, within this complex. You'll have space, freedom, and eventually, autonomy. Just not yet."

She turned and gave a final nod. "I have to act on the intel you gave. Rest well."

With that, Tang Ziyi exited the room. The mechanical hiss of the door closing echoed behind her. Left alone, Ms. Murong slumped into the chair with a sigh, rubbing her forehead with steady fingers.

"...What have I gotten myself into?" she muttered.

Outside, Tang Ziyi briefed the two operators waiting nearby.

"She's one of us now," she said simply.

The two looked at each other and nodded, smiling in silent agreement. Whatever Ms. Murong's background had been, if Tang Ziyi said she would join, then she would join. And she would change.

Every new addition to Spirit Fox learned quickly. Even the most unruly were either reformed... or broken in. There was no middle ground. Besides, recommended one so far sufficed no problems at all among the ranks.

Later that evening, Tang Ziyi sat across from Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning, a quiet meal laid before them.

She'd raised an eyebrow in mild surprise when they arrived unannounced, but greeted them with her usual calm. "It's rare for both of you to come without warning. Hungry?"

"As always," Cai Ning said, already reaching for the plates.

"Well, you did say it'd be hard to return to bland food after Qingyu's cooking," Yang Qingyue added with a half-smile.

Tang Ziyi chuckled softly. "Careful. You're starting to sound like regulars."

The three sat, breaking bread in a rare moment of stillness—though the weight of their meeting was far from casual.

Yang Qingyue wasted no time. "You've got news."

Tang Ziyi nodded. "And you came for it."

"I'm not here to interfere," Yang Qingyue said quickly. "Not in Spirit Fox's operations. But I need to understand the scale of what we're dealing with."

Tang Ziyi relaxed slightly, appreciating the distinction.

"That's why Qingyu and I value working with you apart from our obvious closeness," she replied. "You're not arrogant. You don't assume you're omnipotent. You listen."

Tang's voice lowered as she continued. "Before this, I wasn't keen on the police getting involved. Your department's too exposed. Too soft. A single organized strike like what we suffer, and your people would be swept away. No offense. Being on the offense and on the defense are two absolute differences."

Yang Qingyue nodded in quiet agreement.

"But now that we've neutralized the attackers and gathered critical intel," Tang added, "I'm ready to share. It's important too. Remember Boss Hu."

"Who?" Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning exchanged glances.

Tang Ziyi chuckled. It was the exact same reaction she'd had when Athena first reported it.

She had nearly forgotten the first enemy she encountered upon arriving in this world.

Boss Hu.

He wasn't doing well in prison. Multiple charges had been filed against him—with ironclad evidence. Tang Ziyi had assumed he was already dead on his own term after so much manipulation.

She'd asked Athena why he was still alive. Apparently, his criminal résumé had initially scared the other inmates, buying him time. But as his backing crumbled, attempts on his life began surfacing.

Somehow, his cunning had kept him alive again and again.

What puzzled her was that none of his "friends" from the outside had moved to silence him. It was strange—completely opposite of what she and Ling Qingyu had predicted.