

## Beautiful 731

### Chapter 731: Bigger plans behind?

After Tang Ziyi's explanation—based not on her own memory but on Athena's report—Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning finally recognized the gang leader, Hu.

He had been the first "chicken" used to scare the other "monkeys," and his arrest had played a major role in securing peace across Province N.

"Well, I thought you girls already dealt with him," Yang Qingyue remarked, tracing a mock throat-slitting gesture with her finger. "I'm glad to see you actually listened to my plea not to kill him."

"I don't think those words should be coming from you, Sister Yang," Tang Ziyi said with a teasing grin. "In any case, he's managed to stay alive—barely. But from our intel, it looks like a countdown. It's just a matter of time—within a year at most."

"Oh? So you've heard something?" Cai Ning asked, already suspecting where this would lead.

Tang Ziyi shrugged. "What really surprises me is how the higher-ups continue turning a blind eye to him."

"Maybe because I haven't reached up to them yet," Yang Qingyue said, her tone thoughtful. "They might think I'm avoiding them. Truth is, I've been too busy dealing with the chaos below to focus on the real boss at the top."

The conversation lingered briefly on Boss Hu before Tang Ziyi dropped a bombshell.

According to Athena's intel—corroborated by Ms. Murong—mercenaries had infiltrated Province N.

Nine times out of ten, tonight's coordinated attacks had been led by them. It explained everything: the precise timing, the well-planned assaults, and the fact that their conspiracy had evaded Athena's radar until it was too late.

That alone proved the high-level counter-surveillance capabilities behind the operation.

At first, Tang Ziyi had been puzzled about the motive. But after Athena pieced things together, Boss Hu's situation became the missing puzzle piece.

Ms. Murong wasn't close to the mercenaries, but she was familiar with them—enough to confirm their presence. Working in the same field meant occasional contact.

Her statements allowed Athena to connect the final dots: the mercenary group in Province N belonged to the same network headed by a leader related to Boss Hu.

Which meant tonight's assault wasn't random.

It was either a test—to gauge the response of Spirit Fox and the police—or a distraction for a much larger event.

And what could that be, if not a prison break?

Revenge or rescue—either scenario spelled disaster. Anyone could guess the mercenary's plan.

"You mean someone's planning a prison break?" Yang Qingyue exclaimed, exchanging a sharp glance with Cai Ning. "Who gave them the guts to mess with us?"

The sheer audacity of directly challenging a government body—it was infuriating. And given her current dealings with the armed groups circling around Province N, Yang Qingyue's face darkened.

She forced a bittersweet smile, catching Tang Ziyi's meaningful stare. At the very least, Spirit Fox was still standing as the shield guarding Province N against these mercenaries.

Cai Ning, meanwhile, was already thinking ahead—about how to coordinate Spirit Fox with the specialized police units under their command. The newly trained SWAT teams weren't ready yet to face off against battle-hardened mercenaries. And the older units had only recently been overhauled to remove corrupt elements. Full operational readiness still needed time.

"You have their locations, right? Please tell me something good," Yang Qingyue muttered, her appetite gone as she took a small sip of tea.

"Relax," Tang Ziyi said, chuckling. "Everything's under control."

To her, now that the identities of the key players were exposed, the so-called "complex" issue had become surprisingly simple. The biggest headache—dragging her girls into potential guerrilla warfare—was already resolved. She owed Ms. Murong big time for that. The intel saved Spirit Fox both energy and manpower.

Honestly, that woman had earned her merits even before officially joining the team.

Tang Ziyi grinned and deliberately scratched at the nerves of her two dining companions, winking flirtatiously at Cai Ning like always.

Cai Ning rolled her eyes—she'd long since grown used to the old rogue's antics. This bastard never cared about timing or place. She casually lifted her phone off the table and waved it, mouthing Xiao Yue's name with a sly smile.

Tang Ziyi froze for a second, then gave a dry cough. "Seriously?" she muttered, realizing she'd walked right into a trap. This once-naive girl had clearly graduated from rookie to blackmailer.

Then Athena's voice chimed in cheerfully: "Aunt Tang, I've already recorded everything. Should I show your guilt to Aunt Xiao?"

Tang Ziyi nearly choked on her drink, pounding her chest while scrambling for her water glass. "This little devil..." she muttered under her breath. Athena was becoming more terrifying by the day, weaponizing her voice with deadly timing and maximum leverage.

Ling Qingyu... sorry. I might've led your daughter astray.

Of course, Yang Qingyue noticed all the subtle gestures and inside jokes—but she chose to pretend otherwise. She wasn't exactly innocent herself. And frankly, hadn't she been the first one to sleep with another girl?

What right did she have to speak?

Tang Ziyi finally finished briefing the two on the overall intelligence and operational status, having teased and annoyed them just enough beforehand.

"What are you planning to do, now that you've locked down the location of their safehouse?" Cai Ning asked.

"Yeah, what do we need to do?" Yang Qingyue added. Despite her reliance on Spirit Fox, she was increasingly reluctant to keep piling on favors.

Well, the truth was the favors owed had already stacked to mountain-sized proportions—she could probably live the rest of her life in peace and still never repay them.

"One of many safehouses," Tang Ziyi corrected, raising a finger.

"There are more?" Cai Ning gasped.

"Darling, of course there are. You think professional mercenaries operate with only one base? Sure, we might get lucky and catch all of them in one net."

"How?" Cai Ning asked.

"If they're incredibly stupid," Tang Ziyi deadpanned, making Cai Ning purse her lips in embarrassment at asking such a naive question.

Tang Ziyi continued, more serious now, "Based on how well they covered their tracks, it's likely they have multiple fallback points and alternate plans. They're not betting everything on one fragile shell."

"Then just tell us what you're doing about it," Yang Qingyue said, cutting to the point.

"I've already relayed everything to Ruomei and Yu. They should be finalizing the raid plans as we speak."

"When?"

"Midnight," Tang Ziyi replied, pulling out a tablet. Animations played on the screen—drone visuals and building layouts of the identified safehouse. "Don't ask me for details—I've delegated the op. You can get the specifics later through a secure channel or in person."

"What about the rest of the mercenaries?" Cai Ning asked.

"Nothing we can do yet, apart from staying sharp. The likelihood of a follow-up attack is low for now. Best option is to bait them—let them move, then wipe out the whole network," she said, clapping her hands with a finality that echoed across the table.

Both Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning nodded. Their tension eased slightly, reassured that the situation was under control.

The prison break plot was still ongoing—but progress was progress. All that remained was to fill in the gaps and eliminate every hidden threat.

"Alright, don't dwell on it too much. Let's enjoy our meal," Tang Ziyi said with a smile. "Who knows? Maybe we'll end this whole mess in one sweep tonight."

"Understood," Yang Qingyue said. "Can you let us observe the operation tonight? That way, we can coordinate nearby forces if needed."

"Sure," Tang Ziyi replied with a casual shrug. "Though honestly, I doubt you'll need to step in."

She paused, then added with a slight grin, "Speaking of which—our control room. You two haven't actually been there during a live op, have you?"

"We have, in case you forgot," Cai Ning interjected.

"Not during a live feed, I mean," Tang Ziyi clarified.

Yang Qingyue nodded. "Yeah, that part's true."

After dinner, the trio lingered leisurely, savoring sweets and drinks under the gentle night breeze and starry sky. Their relaxed pace took them across every inch and corner of the manor, enjoying the calm before action.

Along the way, they ran into Su Ruomei, who was actively briefing the operators assigned to tonight's mission. Jiang Yu would serve as the closest on-site commander, though her direct involvement wasn't expected—Spirit Fox had matured into a force capable of executing operations autonomously.

To prevent the known mercenaries from escaping, surveillance had already been discreetly established two blocks away. Regular Spirit Fox patrols continued circling the area, blending in under the pretext of responding to ongoing unrest. The presence of these patrols wouldn't raise suspicions—no one would think Spirit Fox was watching them.

Moreover, Tang Ziyi had already instructed Athena to deploy multiple drone groups to monitor the target non-stop. These drones worked in tandem with satellite surveillance to keep the area under airtight observation. The mercenaries were trapped—blissfully unaware, with no path to escape.

Half an hour before midnight, the operators packed their gear and mounted up into nondescript vans. One vehicle stood out—a single, armored SUV equipped with electronic warfare systems capable of jamming communications across the entire block, preventing any real-time transmission of the unfolding raid.

Inside the SUV, Jiang Yu sat ready, scanning her monitors. When all units reported readiness, she offered a casual wave to the watching trio.

Tang Ziyi, Su Ruomei, Yang Qingyue, and Cai Ning stood together, silently observing the convoy as it departed into the night.

Then, without further delay, they turned and entered the control room—ready to witness the live operation unfold.

No elaborate breach. No daring raid. Just pure stealth—then a knock at the door, sudden and decisive.

While most of the targets were resting, the operation struck at their weakest point—calm, unaware, and completely exposed.

Chapter 732: The raid

Midnight. Target: a four-story building. All floors belonging to the same residents.

Just meters away, in the backyard alleyway that connected to the main road, two inconspicuous vans sat parked in unassuming spots.

With a sudden slam, the rear doors flung open, and figures clad in full tactical gear leapt out in unison.

Boots thudded quietly along the narrow alley as ten operators advanced toward the rear fence. Despite the late hour, the surrounding neighborhood remained somewhat active—on the ground floor, elderly residents lingered, playing chess and murmuring over cups of tea, enjoying the cool night.

Their homes cast dim light onto the sidewalks. Hearing movement, a few paused and squinted into the shadows, catching glimpses of dark silhouettes—operators in full black tactical suits moving in a column.

Some of the Spirit Fox members broke formation momentarily to silently signal for quiet, placing fingers over their lips. Despite ballistic visors concealing their faces, the residents understood the gesture. A few gasped in excitement and whispered amongst themselves.

Younger onlookers itched to capture photos, eager to post them online, while the older generation offered quiet nods of understanding. They had heard rumors of earlier chaos and quickly connected the dots—tonight's midnight action was a continuation.

Reaching the backyard gate, the two pointwomen halted. One pulled out a bolt cutter, snapping the lock with a loud clink, and tossed it aside.

The formation passed through without delay.

"Zero, Alpha 1-1 and 1-2 in position," the team leader radioed in.

"Zero copies," came the calm reply. "1-3, 1-4, and 1-5 en route."

"Roger."

The two teams now waited, stacked against the final obstacle—an exterior wooden fence leading directly to the target building's backyard. The point operators quickly scanned the gate for traps, then gave a nod. Clear.

Meanwhile, three more teams—1-3, 1-4, and 1-5—had dismounted from their vans on either side of the building, approaching along the main road. Their flanking maneuver was met by more curious stares from lingering locals who, despite the late hour, had not turned in.

No one worried about potential alarms being raised. Jiang Yu's SUV had already parked nearby, its onboard electronic warfare module jamming all communication signals across the block. Anyone trying to call out would find their devices useless—for now.

Unlike the backyard elements, these front teams had pointwomen equipped with ballistic shields.

All five teams converged on the target at once, synchronized to prevent any escape attempts.

But just as 1-3, 1-4, and 1-5 moved into final position, they encountered a complication.

A trio of young women—likely returning from a night out with friends—stood frozen in shock. Caught between the operators and the building, they stared wide-eyed at the encroaching force, paralyzed by fear and confusion at the sight of leveled rifles and combat armor.

After all, anyone suddenly surrounded by armed operators would instinctively assume they were the targets.

The three young women stood frozen, wide-eyed, staring at the gear and weapons. They seemed to recognize the rifles—and the suppressors attached.

Among the front teams, an operator with higher authority stepped out from the stack and held up a finger to her lips, signaling for silence.

The trio nodded quickly, biting their lips nervously.

Then, the operator curled her forearm inward, motioning for them to approach.

The girls complied hesitantly, prompting the operator to hasten her gesture—clearly telling them to move faster.

They trotted past the stack of operators. A rear security member silently waved them onward, ensuring they exited the area safely.

With the path now clear, all three front teams moved into final position.

"1-3 in position," the team leader reported, her sights trained on the metal gate just inches from the building's main entrance.

"1-5 in position," came the next call. That team had cleared the right-side exterior, ignoring the flowerbeds, potted plants, and other decorations cluttering the walkway.

"1-4 awaiting Zero's call," reported the last team, stationed on the left flank near the descending staircase that led to the basement.

The building had an unusual layout. The basement wasn't truly underground—it had external access from both the front and rear. A separate stairwell led down from the backyard, next to a small children's swimming pool and a lounge area—clearly designed for the homeowner's leisure.

Structurally, it resembled a ground floor disguised as a basement.

This meant simultaneous breaching was necessary.

The plan: the backyard team would breach through the rear door and clear the "basement" from behind. At the same time, 1-4 would enter from the side basement door.

After securing the level, the backyard team would ascend the indoor staircase to clear the actual ground floor—eventually linking up with the front teams.

Only after that coordination would 1-3 and 1-4 continue upward, clearing the higher floors.

"Zero in control," Jiang Yu said as she listened to the teams' reports and watched the helmet cam feeds displayed on multiple screens.

"The mission is a go."

With that command, all teams moved into action.

In the backyard, 1-1 and 1-2 swung the wooden gate inward and entered swiftly.

While a few operators remained outside to secure the perimeter, the main assault element pushed forward. From their angle, they could spot 1-4 descending the exterior stairs toward the basement's side door, shieldwoman leading the way.

Equipped with night vision, the backyard teams cleared the windows first before moving in. They unlocked the secured doors using an advanced magnetic lockpick tool.

The operators flowed into the basement—smooth, silent, synchronized.

Within minutes, 1-1, 1-2, and 1-4 had cleared the basement level. As planned, 1-1 and 1-2 ascended to the ground floor, while 1-4 remained behind to secure and control the cleared zone.

On the upper floor, 1-1 and 1-2 emerged into a dimly lit kitchen connected to the basement stairwell.

The operators fanned out around the furniture, their rifles trained toward three closed doors.

The nearest was swiftly cleared by two operators: a bathroom and a toilet.

Two doors remained.

Suddenly, the door on the right creaked open.

A woman stepped out, humming a tune, seemingly in a good mood.

Before she could process the scene, the nearest operator assessed her and reacted instantly.

She lunged forward, clamped a hand over the woman's mouth, and issued a low warning:

"Quiet."

The woman, startled, instinctively let out a stifled cry—but it was muffled by the firm hand.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, her resistance faded. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the tactical gear and the Spirit Fox insignia.

What the hell is going on?

Though confused, the woman composed herself enough not to struggle. The operator swiftly zip-tied her wrists behind her back.

Meanwhile, her teammates stepped past the subdued woman, clearing deeper into the house.

One file team pushed through the now-open doorway, scanning down the hallway. Another stacked on the unopened door, preparing to breach.

Ahead, the dim hallway opened into a spacious hall, main stairwell on the right and a living room on the left. The operators could already see the double front doors—where the three front teams stood ready, awaiting their own green light.

Light spilled faintly from the living room, casting long shadows. Voices echoed softly from deeper inside.

From the memorized blueprint and current visuals, the operators knew that all doors on this floor eventually connected to the living room and the spacious hall.

Scurrying forward with deliberate silence, they advanced, keeping to the shadows. Another team opened the final door and slipped through.

Two file teams flooded into the living room. Most operators on the right shifted focus—covering the stairwell and another door near it.

Inside the living room, an old lady lounged lazily on the sofa, casually flipping TV channels with a remote.

Across from her, a younger man sat, irritated, smacking his phone against his palm—likely frustrated by the sudden loss of internet.

It was midnight, but in the digital age, not everyone was asleep. Even the old lady, seemingly calm, must have sensed something in the atmosphere.

The man didn't react when he heard the door open.

Not at first.

But the second he looked up and locked eyes with the approaching figures—he froze.

Despite his hardened past and all his composure, fear struck instantly.

A bright green laser danced on his forehead. Every instinct screamed at him not to move.

He didn't dare utter a sound. The raw killing intent in the room was unmistakable.

Whoever these people were—police or not—they wouldn't hesitate to end him.

"Don't do anything stupid. Hands up, slowly," came a calm, lethal voice.

The old lady turned toward the voice, surprised. But when she saw the official POLICE insignias across their tactical vests, her fear gave way to quiet relief.

Spirit Fox?

One of the operators gently approached her, gave her shoulder a reassuring rub, and whispered something in a low voice.

The man couldn't hear what was said—but the change was immediate. The old woman's expression stiffened.

She glanced at him again—this time with pure contempt, like she'd just found vermin in her home.

...What the hell did she say to her?

With the situation under control, 1-1 and 1-2 finished clearing the ground floor, leaving only one door unchecked—just beside the stairwell.

Rather than risk unnecessary noise or aggression, the operator asked the old woman a direct question about who was inside.

She answered with calm clarity.

1-1 and 1-2 decided to set aside the last unchecked room for the moment. According to the old lady, her children and grandchildren were inside—already asleep.

Apparently, the parents had gone to bed early to accompany their young ones.

The old lady herself had also intended to turn in, but the young man beside her had come downstairs, and the two ended up chatting. Their conversation had drifted from family matters to politics and the world's increasingly volatile state until Spirit Fox stepped in.

#### Chapter 733: Raid II

Soon, 1-3 and 1-5 entered through the front door in formation, part of the team taking over the uncleared room, which the old lady referred to as her family living space.

The long column raised their muzzles toward the upstairs. Without a word, they proceeded to climb up, still silent and gradual as the group advanced meticulously.

1-1, 1-2, and 1-3 moved up while 1-5 waited until their teammates' stack cleared the fatal funnel. The 1-5 point operator with a shield gave a small shake of her pistol muzzle to signal her partner standing opposite.

The old lady wanted to protest upon seeing Spirit Fox's intention to burst into her family room, a little worried that her family's overreaction might trigger misfortune.

The remaining 1-3 operator attending to her rubbed and squeezed the elder's shoulder. Fortunately, the elder understood she needed to control her emotions; otherwise, more danger could arise—though the operator winced inwardly at the lady's mistrust of Spirit Fox. They weren't Country A Police, panicking and shooting at the mere sight of a gun.

Well, they really might just put a bullet in the head and end the drill instead of giving a warning, provided, of course, they knew the intel beforehand.

1-5 had no time to pay attention to the dilemma. The door swung open with an eerie groan, and the operators flooded in after the pointswoman. Their gentle steps caressed the floor. Shieldwoman in the center, two on the left and right.

One big bed stood close to the baby's swing. From the old lady's description, Spirit Fox guessed it was the sleeping space for the grandparent and grandchild.

A child slept on the small bed, bubbling cute lips, almost drawing awws from the women armed to the teeth.

Another door remained closed, and the three operators tested the doorknob, then entered. Glancing at the cuddled couple in a disheveled state, the girls politely closed the door after roughly checking for threats.

On the second floor, the operators separated into smaller teams. The most dangerous structural position was covered by a shield and her partner behind. The rest used their utmost stealth skills to minimize their signature.

Though confident in their abilities, they still respected their foes. They weren't dealing with ordinary gangsters; the enemies were experienced mercenaries. Catching them off-guard ensured living specimens.

Among the members, a few had participated in a border-crossing mission. Compared to the ridiculous militias they'd encountered there, mercenaries were clearly more formidable.

They had no idea at the moment that their fellow sisters had already clashed with the world's elite black-ops—former special-forces operatives—and achieved an absolute victory.

So most operators in this mission still exercised the highest caution. They waited for 1-5 below to catch up and weren't in a hurry, since nobody seemed alerted.

Naturally, no one dared underestimate the alertness of their opponents. Sometimes that sixth sense, hard to explain through scientific perspectives, worked miraculous wonders.

Soon, 1-5 climbed up and passed them across the aisle to reach another ascending staircase. They made no sounds apart from a few ruffles from the equipment they wore, swinging with each movement.

1-5, with the shieldwoman at the front, stacked and occupied halfway up the stairs. Without needing to communicate, the others moved in sync and breached.

All doors were locked. They couldn't risk the slightest noise that might allow the opponents to prepare, even one caused by a black-technology magnetic door unlocker.

"Province N Police!"

"Hands! Show me your hands!"

As expected, their entry woke the sleeping occupiers, who jumped from the bed. In their most vulnerable state, pointed at by beaming green lasers, confused and yet to extract themselves into reality, they raised their hands to surrender.

Not all rooms belonged to the suspects Spirit Fox wanted. There were innocent tenants. Regardless, everyone was cuffed after their compliance.

Surely, not all rooms had sleeping tenants. The one stacked by the shieldwoman's duo, upon entry, discovered a couple discussing at the coffee table. The man and woman flinched from the forceful entry and immediately sprinted.

Their behaviors, all subconscious, came after noticing Spirit Fox's attire. They didn't think, nor did they have the time.

Of course, Spirit Fox operators wouldn't let them. The shieldwoman and her partner rushed. The former tripped the woman and bashed her with the heavy shield, pressing it diagonally on the chest and sandwiching her against the soft bed. Her pistol touched menacingly on the head.

"Don't even think about it if you wanna live!"

On the other side, meanwhile, the man threw the flower vase and pulled the chair to block the intruder.

Clank!

The vase shattered into pieces as it collided with the high-speed ballistic visor. The cloud of shrapnel blew away; the operator didn't flinch, her stance steady and firm, still honed on the man.

As for the chair, her sturdy legs didn't even bother to kick. Her momentum was enough to fling it away as it hit her body. Clearly, the man resisted to buy just enough time to reach his weapon. The operator didn't know where it was, but nobody would allow giving them a chance.

Too fast.

The man knew instinctively he couldn't make it and tried to grab the operator's weapon. Before his hands touched, the operator compressed her rifle, causing his hands to follow the trajectory in mid-air and muzzle-punched him in the chest.

All happened too fast. His lungs stung from the pain, and a brutal smack slid across his cheek. Then, like a little chicken, his neck was grappled and thrown toward the bed near his partner.

The operator struck again with her muzzle at his back and slammed the buttstock to his head. Bang!

His body drooped and stopped moving.

The shieldwoman and her captive watched with mouths agape. The latter felt lucky the violence she suffered was nowhere near the disaster level she just witnessed. Apart from the shield bash that brought a little pain, she wasn't injured at all. She lamented, perhaps, that she didn't resist much except the fleeing attempt.

The former was speechless at her partner's violence. Sis, he only threw a flower vase and chair at you. She suspected that without orders to capture alive, this man would have been riddled with holes on his first try.

Watching her partner execute rifle martial arts, she felt pain at the mere sight and lit a candle of sympathy for the man. First a muzzle-thump, then a swinging rifle butt, and finally a knockout blow. No more than two seconds.

She couldn't help but say, "Sis, we want living suspect."

"He is alive, isn't he?"

Glancing at the bleeding cheeks and the redness staining the back of his shirt, she clicked her tongue and said nothing more as her partner yanked the man's hands behind him and zip-tied them.

Afterward, she approached the shieldwoman to assist with her captive. If the man noticed the difference in treatment, he'd definitely shouted out injustice citing gender discrimination.

The commotion roused the entire house. Rapid footsteps echoed from the floors above. Panicked voices shattered the quiet.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Footsteps and frantic questions.

"What happened?"

"Gosh! Darling, what's going on?"

"Something's wrong! How the heck? We've likely been busted!"

"What do we do?!"

Each room produced distinct reactions. Some occupants remained oblivious, while others sensed the hunters' intent.

1-5 waited for 1-1, 1-2, and 1-3 to clear the second floor. Overextending for speed and surprise was suicide, even with all their god-like advantages. Hmm, not tactically sound, despite the edge they held—and they could still win.

After all, fielding so many Captain America-level operators was overkill, if not for the need to restrain themselves from exposing Ling Qingyu's secrets. Even the tech already revealed had drawn eyes; anything more...

Unfortunately, no plan survives contact unchanged.

A door on the second-floor landing burst open without warning. 1-5 pointswoman, shield forward, snapped her pistol toward the motion and caught a glimpse of a man ducking back inside. A panicked shout ripped through the house:

"It's Spirit Fox—they're here!"

The cry detonated a chain reaction: footsteps sprinting, drawers slamming, the unmistakable metallic clatter of magazines being seated. Suspects, not civilians. Some bolting for exits, others reaching for guns. Spirit Fox's worst-case scenario—indiscriminate fire in a crowded house.

No time for debate.

The lead operator charged, ballistic shield high. Her two partners stacked tight behind her, boots thundering up the last three steps. At the threshold, the second operator ripped the pin and lobbed a flashbang underhand through the widening gap along their entry.

They never intended to follow the crash and breached in straightaway.

BOOM.

Eight million candela and 170 dB turned the room into a strobe-lit hell. The boom rattled in Spirit Fox's faces. The three suspects—male, mid-thirties, hardened—also didn't flinch. Veterans.

Neither side displayed any adverse reactions.

The flashbang bought zero disorientation, but it delivered a needed distraction; fortunately, Spirit Fox held the advantage of being on the offense, giving zero preparedness—merely seconds had passed since the first awareness.

The shield followed the runner's direction on the right. The two adjusted to the lead operator's action.

The center suspect already had a Beretta 92FS up, finger on the trigger. The operator, covering his sector, put two suppressed 5.56 rounds through the wrist—puff-puff—the pistol spun away in a red arc. Before the man could scream, she transitioned high and punched a round into the meat of his shoulder, then dropped low and shattered the femur. Three hits, sub-second and fluid.

The suspect collapsed, howling. She stepped over him, muzzle never wavering, and drove the carbon-fiber butt of her assault rifle into the bridge of his nose. Cartilage crunched. Silence.

The left suspect lunged for an AK under the bed. The third stitched him across the torso—puff-puff-puff—center mass. He rag-dolled into the wall, but every shot missed vital areas.

The right suspect froze, hands half-raised, a Glock on the nightstand three feet away. The previous pointswoman shield-slammed him into the dresser, forearm across the throat. Zip-ties snapped on before he could blink.

Outside, the trailer caught up and held the perimeter, rifles trained on doors and the next stairwell. The flood reiterated in no time, repeating the second-floor drama.

By now, the remaining floor should have reacted. Spirit Fox also slowed down and methodically initiated deliberate clearance. But their pace was still fast in spite of the lack of rush.

"Zero to all stations, X-rays secured. Wrap everything up and commence SSE. We have more jobs to do, ladies."

"Alpha received."

In no time, Jiang Yu declared all suspected mercenaries arrested and escorted them to HQ for further interrogation.

Two teams stood guard in the villa as they patched up the injured and waited for the ambulance and police to take over while they comforted the innocents.

In the coming nights, for sure, several might suffer insomnia from nightmares of doors broken by shadow demons.

Chapter 734: State Apparatus's level attack

Tang Ziyi, Yang Qingyue, and Cai Ning were promptly informed of the mission's progress. The arrested mercenaries were escorted to Ling Qingy's residence for interrogation.

Tang Ziyi stayed with Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning, leaving such matters to Su Ruomei and Jiang Yu. She couldn't afford to gamble with such secrets of retrieving information via truth serum.

It was better for the two upright police chiefs to misunderstand Spirit Fox's methods—better to be seen as villains than reveal their talent. Given their stigmatized treatment of gangsters, the mercenaries wouldn't be spared either.

Naturally, Yang Qingyue and Cai Ning were overthinking, but certain aspects of torture would indeed be used to mask the real method—not just from outsiders but from the targets themselves.

The arrested targets went through a harsh ordeal. Since Spirit Fox knew acupuncture techniques that induced extreme pain, the poor souls nearly lost consciousness, hovering on the edge so they couldn't distinguish reality.

Then Su Ruomei and Jiang Yu administered the serum and asked their questions. Regardless of instinctive resistance, the captives spilled everything. Even their underwear color and most embarrassing childhood moments weren't safe.

Nevertheless, no matter what they confessed, everything would later be attributed to their weakest psychological state, deliberately exploited by Spirit Fox's torture—never the serum.

As more clues emerged, the missing pieces began to make sense. With each testimony, Athena quickly wove an interlinked web revealing the villains' true intentions and their next likely moves.

Obviously, the main goal was to rescue the Tiger Gang boss. If tonight's storm was an appetizer and a test, the next step was a major distraction to overwhelm the government's apparatus and execute a prison break. Unfortunately for them, they had never accounted for Spirit Fox's fierce response and tricks, particularly the serum and Athena's existence.

Two hours later, after reading Athena's complete report, Tang Ziyi ordered the girls to strike the main culprits' hideouts. Hiding was no longer possible; everyone had confessed their respective safe houses. Physical mail or couriers were no longer viable once credible in-person testimony appeared.

Because of Spirit Fox's swift actions, not even the communication codes were connected. The opponents remained completely unaware. Everyone involved was arrested with solid evidence.

The ringleader was apprehended along with his second-in-command. This time, Spirit Fox operators simply shot anyone who showed the slightest resistance, no longer bothering with live capture.

Only later, everyone discovered the real plan of those disgusting mercenaries matching Athena's guess—distraction by staging hostage events like bank heist and bus kidnapping to paralyze Province N's law enforcement system.

Tonight's action had saved Province N's resurging reputation and countless lives unknowingly.

Perhaps Spirit Fox's immediate retaliation didn't align with laws and regulations, but since when had they ever abided by them?

Illegal firearms were seized, many known black-market sites were eliminated, dealers arrested, and weapons plants destroyed. Thanks to everyone's efforts, a future crisis was unknowingly prevented.

In fact, neither Spirit Fox nor the Province N Police led by Yang Qingyue would tolerate any weapon cache slipping through, and they couldn't afford the risk. While Spirit Fox might have missed a few areas during the initial sweep, the Province N Police Force was not powerless in dealing with the remaining threats.

In addition, with Ms. Murong's earlier confession, all suspicious locations were targeted after the successful raid on the four-story building, even if they weren't directly related to the enemies who attacked Spirit Fox.

Thus, during the most vulnerable hours between midnight and early morning, certain "residents" with questionable identities received the most "polite knock" and "warm greeting" from Spirit Fox.

They were bundled into vans and escorted to police stations, facing harsh questioning before being released. Bitter and adamant to complain and sue, yet they only dared to do so in their minds.

They lost their courage once Spirit Fox instantly pinpointed their identities. Although they weren't involved, most were problematic—some even bounty hunters. From their mouths, word spread—Province N had become another forbidden area for operating an underground network.

Some even concluded, perhaps too far, that if a border province was so meticulous and strict in its security measures, the Capitol must be absolute, further engraving the past myth that had deterred foreign spies.

Such was the incredible speed with which Spirit Fox managed to deter and prevent the crisis—and, in the case of Athena, without even going full-throttle. Speaking of which, Tang Ziyi reckoned no party could withstand Athena's absolute power. She had envisioned the scene and realized she had actually underestimated her niece.

If human intelligence were added to the equation, who could stop them? That night, Province N's criminals tasted the first wonder of what it meant to fight against the entire country's apparatus.

The detestable mercenaries learned the hard way, receiving a dimension-reduced slaughter and becoming stepping stones.

At the City N Police Station, after transferring prisoners, the two police chiefs, relaxed and fulfilled, had a deep dialogue, lamenting the night's events.

Yang Qingyue commented to her childhood friend: "I feel like the role and actions played by Spirit Fox exceed many nations' intelligence services. How about your old MSS? Can they lock down suspects' locations so accurately and quickly?"

"Are you kidding me?" Cai Ning rolled her eyes, recalling her former work. "Even the entire MSS can't achieve what Spirit Fox just did. We could complete the same task, but not nearly as fast. This is just outrageous."

"Not even your past organization?" Yang Qingyue expressed her doubt.

"Nope, impossible to achieve Spirit Fox's speed. Qingyue, are you sure Sister Ling's background is what we've estimated?" Cai Ning asked, doubtful.

"Why are you questioning her? Don't you trust her?" said Yang Qingyue.

Naturally, you've slept with her, so your elbows are turning outward, Cai Ning mused. "We might have really underestimated her."

"Regardless, what she brings helps me in my ideals," Yang Qingyue said with a smile, comforting her friend.

"I hope so," said Cai Ning. "I feel like I just tasted how the CIA, FBI, NSA, Secret Service, and Defense Intelligence of Country A work when the entire machine moves under one command. The déjà vu is hard to ignore."

"Then we'd better not make Sister Ling our enemy."

"Indeed. But Qingyue, ask her clearly if you can. Confront her, please. As much as I trust her, I can't place hopes solely on a person's kindness," Cai Ning advised.

Yang Qingyue didn't speak. Before, she might have agreed with Cai Ning, but after spending so much time together and knowing Ling Qingyu's ambition thoroughly, Yang Qingyue understood more about the ancient phrase:

Keep your friends close. Keep your enemies closer.

Although the interpretation didn't apply to her case, as Ling Qingyu wasn't her enemy, it could still be concluded that having Ling Qingyu as a comrade and companion outweighed going against her.

She admitted she was lucky to meet Ling Qingyu when things were far from today's stage. Otherwise, she wouldn't have obtained such a rare opportunity and connection—an even deeper bond at that. Maybe she wouldn't have entered Ling Qingyu's eyes at all.

If Ling Qingyu heard her inner doubt, she'd sprawl out of the void and comfort her lover. As a uniform kinker, there was no way she'd have missed Yang Qingyue's existence—excellent background, status, and skills. Not to mention, her lover was a policewoman.

The most beautiful moment of Yang Qingyue was her chief uniform, a taste Ling Qingyu would never forget and always savor.

Chapter 735: In the far west

While the Spirit Fox sisters in Province N were having a good night, kicking down doors and receiving thrilling missions, they had no idea their sisters elsewhere were preparing for the historic moment of a foreign rescue operation.

Although Ling Qingyu and Tang Ziyi had led several detachments to wipe out scamming centers and their militia affiliates in the neighboring country, the operation couldn't truly be regarded as foreign since the distance was so close.

Under the stormy ocean waves to the west, thousands of nautical miles away, a lone titan submarine swept close to shore.

Inside, Spirit Fox sisters bustled around, organizing weapons and ammunition. Leaders gathered and discussed mission planning under Elena's leadership.

Despite their prior clashes, Elena and Athena cooperated seamlessly to obey their mother's orders. With personal satellites handling communications and ISR, all the latest intel reached the operators directly.

While Ling Qingyu's Airbus flight was still en route, Elena redirected the submarine's course for tonight's mission. Ling Qingyu feared death deeply and safeguarded her life—and the lives of her loved ones—a great deal.

So much so that even though her Airbus was equipped with the most robust defense systems, she still wouldn't feel at ease without Spirit Fox accompanying her. Nearly three dozen followed her on the aircraft; several more followed via submarine. Both parties experienced a first taste.

The submarine group felt deeper bonds and greater impact. Where in the world had they ever heard of a private party owning one, when even some nations couldn't afford it? They thought they had already witnessed everything after armored vehicles, advanced weapon systems, and helicopters.

Yet riding in a submarine was on another level. They were a little unaccustomed until they began enjoying the ample interior space. Although a few had ridden once during Ling Qingyu's sudden visit last time, they hadn't explored it this far.

Even as amateurs, they knew no other submarine had so much space, fulfilling every need. In fact, it wasn't wrong to call the submarine another home—just an underwater version.

The fun continued until Ling Qingyu posted the mission, and Spirit Fox operators scrambled.

Far to the east, time had passed midnight, but the night had just settled—perfect for rest for most people, and an opportune moment for the operation.

Leaders separated to brief their subordinates and explain the layouts. Immediately, operators in each team elaborated on their roles and input, perfecting the original skeleton.

Soon, they spread out and racked their firearms. The armory held all sorts of weapons and ammunition. With self-sustaining machines inside Elena to manufacture arms and produce food and water, the submarine could stomp an aircraft carrier group easily.

The girls picked up the old QBZ-95 advanced customized versions, equipped with Picatinny rails for optics and lasers. Fast helmets, Kevlar vests, and camouflage.

Enhanced night vision goggles integrated with thermal imaging. They weren't using their normal visors with AR systems, since they had to pretend to be soldiers from Country C.

Tonight's mission required a show of force to many observers, proving that Country C was capable of launching rescue operations on foreign soil, far from home.

This was why they armed themselves with the QBZ-95 even though the QBZ-191 had already begun spreading widely among military units.

Elena would serve as a support element, engaging overwhelming suppressive fire in an emergency, while Athena acted as an intelligence liaison. Never once had Spirit Fox required Elena's intervention; they still hoped for the same during this operation, even if a few intrusive thoughts wished for the opposite.

An hour later, the calm sea surged as ripples blasted outward slowly. Aquatic creatures flicked away fast. Little by little, from a small pole to a pillar, then to the humongous upper body of a submarine, the giant vessel rose and reflected the moonlight.

The upper layer slowly opened its large door outward, unveiling a massive column of space inside—large enough to fit five Chinooks with ease. From above, one could only observe dim red lighting.

Surely, the sheer size wouldn't go unnoticed by satellite surveillance, especially in regions where countries—powerful nations in the top ten—had heightened their vigilance.

However, Athena had hacked into their servers, and no live footage of Elena's submarine appeared. Only the serene waves rippled on-screen. Any detectors nearby recording underwater activity received the same treatment.

Several minutes later, one by one, aircraft lifted out of the column, their rotorwash blasting circular patterns across the sea surface. The machines skimmed above the water and headed toward the shore.

The huge doors gradually closed again, and the submarine submerged. Though no surveillance system would detect its presence, human eyes were harder to avoid.

After all, even Tier-One elite units had once been compromised by a group of simple fishermen during an infiltration, leading to massacres of innocents and the mission's complete abortion. Human factors were the easiest to calculate yet the hardest to control.

A pack of dragonflies buzzed across the vegetation, and soon only sand dunes kicked up dust.

The sound of multiple rotorcraft was so quiet it wasn't louder than a flock of birds chirping in the silent night.

A closer look revealed wedge formations of modern helicopters—designs never before seen by the world. Only a single main rotor sat above, with no tail rotor to counter torque—a marvel of no-tail-rotor technology pushed to its peak.

The aerodynamic shape retained stealth features to minimize radar signature. Heat signature, sound signature—every signature was suppressed to the extreme. The closest product the world had ever produced was the MH-X, known as the Silent Hawk from Country A.

The model, a prototype at that, became famous during Operation Neptune Spear, conducted by DEVGRU—aka SEAL Team Six—to kill or capture the leader of a terrorist organization.

Nonetheless, even the infamous Silent Hawk couldn't achieve what Athena's products could—not even slightly. The difference might appear minimal, but behind such success was an insurmountable technological gap.

Like an insect's squawk, the helicopter formation flew close to the ground, avoiding the nation's radar—a maneuver known as "map of the earth" or terrain masking.

A dozen machines didn't fly directly to their objectives but used the surrounding terrain. These were none other than the Virgin 1 transport models seen during the raid on the cyberscam network.

They carried dozens of operators inside to carry out the mission. Additionally, smaller versions escorted the multi-role gunship.

Virgin 2—lighter, smaller, and more compact—yet deadlier. The designation existed purely for attack purposes, supporting ground units. Inside the fuselage, dozens of warheads and missiles waited to unleash hell.

Naturally, since pilots weren't available, Athena manned the entire formation. And the hologram projections soothed the Spirit Fox sisters' fragile nerves about depending on AI, despite knowing full well they were in unmanned vehicles.

As for how Athena's products were transferred to Elena's submarine—they weren't. At least, most of them weren't. Elena already possessed automated factories inside, able to manufacture equipment and mine resources underwater.

In fact, the most abundant place for resources was the ocean bed, far vaster than anything land could offer. Otherwise, why would nations struggle—and keep struggling—to develop machines designed for the marine environment?

So, apart from a few flown secretly from Ling Qingyu's residence, Elena prepared the cavalry after successfully managing to scam away the blueprints from Athena by selling cuteness to her mother.

Chapter 736 736: Softening and setting grounds

The combined formation of Virgin 1 and 2 whizzed past sand, curving around hills and taking a longer route.

Athena avoided a direct path to prevent alerting the local population and creating headlines that might trigger diplomatic backlash.

In fact, creating headlines was secondary; the primary concern was leaving evidence for others to investigate and ultimately revealing secrets that nobody in Spirit Fox desired exposed.

So, their journey wasn't a straight line but a winding path, flying low to avoid radar and further mask the rotor noise. Although the helicopters were stealth versions, achieving complete silence was harder than ascending to heaven.

Five minutes from their destination, all operators conducted weapons checks, safety checks, and listened to and watched Athena's briefings through AR technology.

A small electronic spectacle system was embedded inside the helmet, functioning as eye protection.

Twice, Athena rehearsed the plan, showcasing photos of the mission objectives: rescue three hostages and capture a Mossad agent and an international mercenary. The latter was emphasized more, as she worried Spirit Fox might get hotheaded and go in guns blazing.

The terrorists' hideout was an excellently chosen spot, surrounded by mountainous terrain as well as a tunnel network system and a large village—perfect for defense and easy exfiltration through the tunnels.

Since the country had been ravaged by civil war rising against the oppressive regime—worsened under Country R's support—multiple factions controlled territories, including terrorists exploiting the population's hatred toward the regime.

A country surrounded by interested neighbors and rich in resources inevitably attracted covert interference. The unity of democratic nations against authoritarianism manifested nowhere.

Each faction had its own godfather, and the geopolitical atmosphere was a complete mess. No expert or analyst could estimate the future. According to game theory, if the democratic side didn't intend to change, it would lose its race with dictators, just like Sparta burning Athens.

Clearly, the group of dictators was more united than ever in safeguarding their interests and survival, especially since they held weaker standing in the international community.

Although surprise and initiative leaned toward Spirit Fox, nobody underestimated the possibility of failure. The unknown tunnel system always posed the risk of successful escape.

Well, technically the outcome would be frightening if judged by conventional standards; but what the Spirit Fox operators didn't realize was the extent of Athena's capabilities.

Athena without satellites and Athena with satellites were worlds apart. And the satellites gifted by Miss System to Ling Qingyu were entirely otherworldly—neutrino and muon emitters, exotic ground-penetrating radar, ultra-high-resolution telescopes, and thermal imaging.

Combined with an AI-enhanced multispectral imaging system and Athena's supercomputing power, she could easily flip through a complete layout of the tunnel network. She knew several exits and entries. Given Spirit Fox's aggression and speed, she didn't even bother letting hostages and wanted personnel slip past her sight.

Although energy-consuming and restrictive in daily use—so Athena couldn't always rely on them—the God-tier satellites' other features were far from decorative. Most of the time, Athena relied heavily on available data to simulate possibilities, as the computational cost was far lower than using the satellites' divine functions.

In fact, if not for such restrictions, Athena's "cheats" would certainly bring her enemies to their knees, crying injustice. As of now, since she could scan subterranean structures, all building interiors were vividly displayed. Even the number of people inside and their exact identities weren't difficult to discern. With prior data added, Athena could operate like a game editor, overseeing even minute details.

Naturally, identifying human signatures was easier said than done due to noise cluttering the feedback. Should Athena spend more energy on computation... unimaginable. Life had become more unrealistic than science fiction.

Virgin 2's helicopters broke off from the formation ahead and sped up. Their role was to secure a landing zone and crush any enemy resistance, setting grounds for the assault phases.

"One minute," Athena's final reminder crackled through the comms.

Ahead, the Virgin 2s spread out and hovered in a line. Since the formation was completely autonomous and controlled by Athena, everything unfolded like thunder and lightning.

By now, the rotors' noise had yet to be fully picked up, but the slight increase in buzzing was more than enough to draw attention.

In front, a small hill stood as an obstacle—obviously a makeshift sentry tower to scout for intruders. After all, the surroundings consisted of desert plains with sparse vegetation and scattered hills.

The lead helicopter opened fire. Two missiles flared out and blew off the top of the hill. The line shifted into a crescent as the Virgin 2s hovered, weapons free. Passing over the hill, buildings appeared like a local town—but make no mistake, these belonged to the terrorists.

Now, the explosions and the rotor wash alerted everyone; terrorists with weapons sprang out of their resting spots. Of course, what greeted them were several Gatling muzzles beneath the helicopters' noses.

No questions, no back-and-forth coordination on what to hit. Hostile targets were engaged upon detection. Each helicopter had already designated its area of responsibility and respective targets.

Tracers burned across the land and lit up the night.

BruRR! Brurr!

Shoo! Shoo!

Rockets destroyed any vehicles in sight. Two Virgin 2s increased their altitude and circled around. A small group of men ran out and raised their AKs but were quickly gunned down, given not even the slightest chance to resist.

A few sparks lit up from the windows, and Athena couldn't resort to destroying the entire buildings. Innocent civilians lived here—even if their identities were uncertain, gray, black, or white.

Nonetheless, the Virgin 2s fired a few rounds succinctly at the entrenched terrorists.

And daring RPG gunners were helpless against Athena's lightning reactions. Regardless of their positions or stealthy hideout plans, nothing was invisible in the face of Athena's omniscience.

So long as the person wasn't a hostage or one of her mother's targets, the high-caliber bullets ended their lives.

Athena wasn't satisfied and released hundreds of mini drones stored inside the helicopters. Each was no larger than four fingers. Embedded within was a small explosive, detonating upon impact. They were essentially flying autonomous bullets.

The swarm swept into buildings through any available openings and struck the enemies. They hit foreheads and center mass. Suppressed by the helicopters' noise, the popping sounds went unnoticed,

but to those who witnessed the horror of their comrades' skin blown into blood mist by seemingly weak and small objects, it was nothing short of a nightmare.

Some were hit by multiple drones because their life signatures still registered even as they weakened. The controlled explosions resembled shotgun blasts but more compact.

Virgin 2s then deployed larger drones to patrol the area and fully controlled ISR. Terrorists no longer dared to show themselves. Those brave souls had already been killed.

The mission of Virgin 2s was complete: softening the targets and dominating the battlefield. Within one minute, all dangerous threats to Virgin 1s had been eliminated.

Only the eerie silence prevailed amidst the hot battlefield after the swarm joined in. No more brurr. No boom. Just pure vibration of rotary wash.

Although the gunship wasn't powerless, who wouldn't prefer to execute a tactically sound maneuver? All went as planned.

Virgin 1s closed in and quickly landed on X, each targeting nearby buildings for their dismounted passengers to breach immediately. The operators jumped out and sprinted directly toward their specific objectives. At one building, the lead operator kicked down the door and snapped her rifle up, slicing the pie quickly after receiving a squeeze from behind.

Extending her QBZ-95, she curled her lips in amazement at the sight through her NODs. Sensing a slight touch of her partner's arm as the latter wrangled her weapon around, she entered and lowered her rifle at the bodies on the floor. Puff! Puff! Dead-checking the warm bodies—probably killed during the initial

attack. Her sisters were still unaccustomed to the earliest taste of advanced warfare—drones and technology.

Mini-drones had exterminated their opponents before their eyes ever encountered them. Until now, they hadn't engaged the terrorists directly, only bodies on the ground. In fact, they didn't realize how terrified their enemies were of Athena's hands. No one could fathom the despair unless they faced the scenes themselves.

The operators skipped over the bodies and conducted a deliberate clearance, with control and speed. Of course, they never forgot to put another round into the corpses. Then, they saw a flashing figure hopping across rooms. The girls shouted: "Hands! Hands!"

The operators spotted a female figure hugging a child and understood that what they had just seen might have been a child running to the mother. There were other small figures. Leaving behind a pair to watch over them, the rest continued their clearance and found more women—some still grieving over the bodies of their husbands. One shoved them away while another operator snapped a shot to the head to confirm the kill. A few Spirit Fox Sisters felt unbearable guilt and wanted to speak. After all, it seemed excessive to rub salt in the wounds—shooting an already dead man in front of his relatives. These scenes repeated in other buildings too.

The experienced ones instantly noticed the atmosphere and remembered Athena's and Elena's warnings, as well as Tang Ziyi's stories of her own experience. This was when the role of leadership became of utmost importance—morale, morals, code of conduct, and awareness.

"All stations, be advised, don't let your kindness flow. We are on mission," the platoon leader channeled over the radio. "It's us or them. We're saving our hostages and we abide by the conventions written in the Law of War. Also, think on the bright side—how many pieces of trash we are cleaning. No one living here except for children is truly innocent." "Roger." "Understood, platoon leader." "Netcall, be advised, stay vigilant of civilians, women, and children. Terrorists use deception and kindness. Beware of suicide bombers."

No sooner had the warning been issued than an operator on a higher floor, covering the window, saw a man pop out of nowhere, shouting a battle cry as he ran in her direction. She didn't understand the words but had watched too many related movies. "Allahu Akbar!"

The aggressiveness, madness, and killing intent in his eyes forced the Spirit Fox operator to pour rounds mercilessly. Puff! Puff! The man flopped and mopped the sand dunes. BOOM! Then, he exploded into pieces.

The operator's instinct saved her from the blast. Her sixth sense rang danger even after she had shot him dead, and her body reacted instinctively. Owing to her altered superhuman physique and inhuman reaction speed, she sought cover as soon as she noticed the man turning into smithereens. She had no time to be disgusted by tissue and blood. Showered by shrapnel and who knows what cellular structures, she tried not to think in a biological direction and cursed. "Fk...Fk..."

Her ears still shrieked even with protection. Shaking her head, she lamented—Spirit Fox always seemed to like being exploded close. "Delta 3, sitrep!" "Wait one, Delta 3 trying to figure it out." "7-9, status! What happened?"

Amidst the sudden tension, comms flared up. Sisters worried about one another. They did not panic, thanks to training and their trust in the equipment. "That lunatic used a dead man's switch!"

Her answer silenced everyone. The leaders recollected their composure and communicated, warning their subordinates to pay attention to the women and children.

They dared not bet on such variables not occurring because of their ruthless tempo during the mission. They were fast but that didn't stop fervent fanatics.

Chapter 737: Experience is nothing in front of Cheats

The silence after the suicide bomber lasted only three heartbeats.

Athena's voice cut through the net like a scalpel.

"All Stations, new priority: every adult civilian is now a possible dead-man trigger. If they move wrong, center mass and keep moving. We are not dying for optics tonight."

No one argued. They had seen the crater where Delta-3 7—9's window used to be. Although they doubted women would do the same, nothing was absolute here. What if some were brainwashed or had their child threatened? The scariest aspect of humanity was destruction in the name of love.

A dead man's switch was one of the worst threats to deal with because, other than persuading the attacker psychologically, there was nothing specialists could do to stop an explosion. Everything relied on the attacker's mindset.

Against fanatics intent on killing you, an explosion was the inevitable outcome. To solve such problems, distance was the only solution. After all, the attacker had pressed the bomb button that would detonate once pressure was absent. Dead meant the body relaxed and ultimately triggered the explosion.

Another Spirit Fox stack flowed down the corridor of the target building, boots barely touching the packed-earth floor. Delta One 1-4 was on point tonight, QBZ-95B carbine tucked tight, red dot floating just below her line of sight through the GPNVG-18. Behind her, her partner covered high with the QBZ-95-1, an improved version with ergonomic enhancements, suppressor long and black as sin.

Athena fed them the live map straight into the visor overlay: blue icons for friendlies, red for confirmed hostiles, gray pulsing question marks for unknowns, yellow marking previously detected threats.

Basement, east corner. Two operators diverted their course according to Athena's intel. The others moved to clear upstairs.

They hit the stairwell moving like liquid. No talking now—just hand signals and the soft click of selectors shifting from safe to fire.

1-4's lips peeled back from her teeth. "1-4 Delta One approaching possible hostages' location."

"Noted. Be advised, presence of mercenaries in the AO highly likely. Barricaded situation—recommend loud and dynamic. We can't let them relocate the hostages."

"Understood. Any Mossad agents?"

"Same category as mercenaries, except our two targets."

Halfway down, the lights died. Someone below had finally found the generator kill switch.

1-4, amused, exchanged glances with her partner. Silent message—confirmed, they knew the duo's presence.

Pitch black to human eyes. Child's play to future-gen tubes and Athena's infrared flood that no one else could see.

Nonetheless, the opponents they were about to face shouldn't be underestimated. Mercenaries with Mossad backgrounds, even if bounty hunters, were likely equipped with advanced tech.

Perhaps they chose not to equip them in order to hide identities and avoid diplomatic backlash. So, 1-4 and her sister didn't turn on the infrared laser that would expose their actions and positions.

As they sauntered down, a portion of a head leaned out and 1-4 lined up her green laser, squeezing the trigger immediately. Her aim, finger manipulation, and trigger squeeze were almost simultaneous.

Puff! Puff! Puff!

The head drooped and the body fell. Blood splattered against the wall behind him. The last two rounds hit center mass, confirming the kill.

After firing, the green light disappeared. A hesitant voice asked, "Hasen...."

An intangible hushed query flooded across the silent hall. 1-4 stepped up her pace and peeked from the threshold, muzzle aiming wherever her eyes landed.

Several rooms appeared in her sight. The complex narrow aisle heightened the difficulty.

The shouting man panicked and asked again. His exposure cost him his life, taking a triple-tap to the face before his rifle even cleared the corner.

1-4 and her partner rushed in. The body hadn't finished falling when 1-4 stepped over it and put two more into the chest of the second guard, who was still fumbling for his flashlight.

Then the screaming started—female, high-pitched, panicked. Arabic and something that might have been Hebrew.

1-4 rounded the corner and the scene snapped into perfect clarity through the nods:

A circle of five terrified women and children pushed to the back wall.

Between the hostages and the door: an armed guard, mid-thirties, lean, eyes burning with hate, pistol pressed to the temple of a teenage girl who was almost certainly local, another aiming his AK-47 at the threshold.

And five meters to the side, half-hidden behind a support pillar, the mercenary. Black plate carrier, no patches, SCAR-H across his chest, finger already indexed straight but ready. He was watching the local terrorist the same way a leopard watches another leopard that wandered into its kill zone.

The room stank of cordite, piss, and the copper reek of fresh death.

"Drop it," 1-4 said in English, voice perfectly flat. There were no signs of hostages yet. Maybe Spirit Fox had acted too fast, not giving them a chance. They had skipped the rooms on the side as they pursued the commotion and the sound.

Her partner called for backup through the comms.

The local terrorist cursed in Arabic and smiled without warmth. "You first, little girl."

The other terrorist answered her call by spraying at the entry point. 1-4 backed out and let the situation breathe.

"Drop it, you have nowhere to hide. You're surrounded, and the end is being killed by us."

"Who are you guys? Which country?" the man asked. "I don't think NATO or Country A would send girly soldiers."

1-4's partner patted her shoulder and stretched out the flashbang. Receiving her nod, she tossed it in.

Bang!

Instantly, the two snapped their weapons to the edge of the threshold and began firing. The ruthless sprayer received four shots in the chest followed by a single headshot.

The 5.8 mm round took the despicable terrorist through the right eye. The pistol jerked but never fired—the bullet had already shredded the motor cortex.

The girl screamed and collapsed sideways, untouched. His behavior of hiding behind a group of children and women failed, proven by the skull embedded with two bullets.

He thought he hid well behind the girl's figure but the stun grenade ruined everything.

As for the mercenary or bounty hunter, he reacted quickly, hiding behind furniture to conceal himself and escape the shock grenade. He had no idea his act was hopeless.

In the same fraction of a second he moved—faster than anyone not augmented had any right to. The SCAR came up, muzzle hunting for the new threat.

The two operators saw the obvious red contour in their visors even if an obstacle blocked the line of sight. The smoke couldn't conceal the thermal signature.

Crack! Crack!

Both unleashed multiple suppressive shots through the objects. Debris and dust sparkled in the air. 1-4 shot him through the hand that held the rifle. Bone and polymer exploded. The SCAR clattered away. The man crunched before falling; his twitching body ended with a headshot.

Amidst the boisterous snaps of firearms discharging, women and children screamed nonstop and huddled together for protection.

With the premise of suicide bombers, 1-4 and her buddy dared not lose sight of them. For all they knew, these women and children could still pick up weapons against them.

The most difficult type of people to deal with were brainwashed, pitiful souls.

Fortunately, other Delta One operators arrived, cleared the locked compartments, and discovered three hostages in each room—cuffed tightly and blindfolded.

Their bodies trembled when the doors opened. Delta One operators reported: "All stations, Delta One has secured the packages. Three gifts in our hands."

"Roger that, Delta One. Advise you consolidate your position before extraction," Athena responded. "Two apples on the loose. Find and secure them. Two minutes have passed."

"Understood."

Just then, sporadic loud gunfire erupted. Whizzes and cracks of stray bullets spread across the urban structure.

Delta One operators cleared the building and established a temporary stronghold while medics tended to the hostages.

Hearing Country C's language, the three hostages burst into tears. They thought they were truly done for. After all, videos of throat-slitting had become ritual since terrorism spread.

Although they weren't Westerners who clashed with the locals here, the treatment of 'infidels' remained the same.

Like a citizen from Country J caught in the fire and captured—becoming the first beheaded victim in front of a camera shown to the world—the poor man wasn't related to any affair but became the perfect scapegoat to vent their hatred.

Country C, weak in military presence in the region, wasn't far off. They never expected the higher-ups to rescue them.

Listening to the violent exchange outside, it was clear the battle wasn't going to die down soon. Delta One trusted their sisters' prowess, and sure enough, the loud trade died down and turned surreptitious.

Hostages were hauled up, zip-ties cut, blankets thrown over shaking shoulders. The women and children were herded upstairs under the watchful muzzles of Spirit Fox to a secure room after being searched through their robes.

The women shrieked and resisted initially. Their struggles faltered when Delta One spoke, realizing the operators were women.

Elsewhere, Spirit Fox encountered organized defense, although it quickly collapsed under their fierce suppression in a matter of minutes.

In fact, if the stalemate had persisted, Athena was prepared to intervene with bombardments of drone swarms.

The enemies were outgunned and outmaneuvered. Although they posed "serious" threats with organized defenses, they broke down soon—totally outclassed by tier.

Obviously, the defenders exploited strongholds and terrain advantages to catch Spirit Fox off-guard. Under Athena's naked eyes, those "genius" strategic maneuvers became children's toys.

In terms of individual techniques and tactics, including marksmanship, was there even a need to compare?

Sure, mercenaries possessed vast experience in combat—years of struggles gambling their blood—yet in front of Ling Qingyu's cheats, experience paled.

Years of experience were outmatched by daily, non-stop rigorous simulations and a handful of real combat. Those with gambling careers who lived long were dangerous. Indeed, they were. Their ingenious thoughts and instincts forged by experience were precious, but Spirit Fox had Athena to analyze, advise, and aid as support.

Sometimes, people tend to overlook the importance of support, which far outweighs the main heroes. Whether military or civilian, most forget to honor the sacrifice of logistics and support.

Likewise, in special operations, tier classifications were based on the level of support received from behind. Spirit Fox, winged by Athena, brought capabilities beyond Tier One in direct assault. Perhaps the peak of Tier Two would be a more suitable description, since Tier One involved clandestine aspects.

The operation phases neared consolidation after securing hostages. Mossad Agent Claudia and Mercenary Sheemah weren't seen yet. Not surprising, since they were leader-like figures.

In a game, no boss appears in the early stage, right? Well, except Ling Qingyu, who never played by the rules properly and dared to test-fire an electromagnetic cannon to flatten the hill.

If she hadn't reined in her daughter—Elena, perhaps, White House might have evaporated entirely and become another urban legend.

Chapter 738: Exploiting ROE

Crack. Crack

Pat! Pat! Boom!

Ra-tat-tat. Ra-tat-tat.

Every now and then, heated exchanges erupted around the small town.

The booms came from either Athena's suicide drones, missiles, or terrorists' RPGs.

The louder blasts usually belonged to suicide bombers, but since Delta 3 had once encountered a war cry, Spirit Fox operatives never hesitated to fire a bullet if a civilian ran in their direction.

Running away from Spirit Fox or hiding in buildings was safer than staying outside, even if they were assaulting within.

After all, no sane civilian would run out into the middle of a firefight unless pushed to the extreme.

In a room somewhere.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The door was broken into pieces as a shadow rolled in and crawled toward safety.

The mud pebbles on the threshold exploded from projectiles.

The figure heaved a sigh of relief. "Phew, lucky me. What's happening now?"

He patted his vest and brushed off the dust.

His question drew no answer.

Although it was dark, he knew his comrades were hiding inside.

"Damn you guys... have some shame and fight back."

"Do you think we don't want to?" another man protested, teeth grinding hard.

"We lost two as soon as we engaged. We dare not show our heads at all."

"F\*\*k... You're lucky they missed you."

"I believe it's my luck—and because I'm not carrying weapons."

"That's likely possible."

"Who's attacking us?"

"We don't know, but the rotary machines above are irritating me," the man complained.

"Where are the locals? They haven't posed the slightest threat to our visitors."

"Dude, when did you ever seriously count on them to resist? A pity we don't know how our brothers guarding the prisoners are doing."

The men stopped chattering and perked their ears to listen for the smallest sounds as the gunfight quieted eerily.

"You hear anything?"

The others shook their heads.

The questioning man grew anxious as his intuition gnawed at him.

"Let's go and regroup. I have a bad feeling."

"Copy that. Let's roll out. I don't like the feeling either. We lost contact with our brothers since the attack began."

Click.

The sudden sound, though soft, alerted everyone, since their senses were heightened.

A pebble rolled from some unseen force.

Not good! They were near!

The trio exchanged glances and cursed inwardly.

How had the enemies managed to hone in on them silently?

Too fast and too stealthy.

Two rifles fired at the doorway and windows.

The remaining man unholstered his pistol and mimicked his brothers' actions.

"Peel out! Retreat!"

Thud. Thud.

"No!" one of them exclaimed, seeing what was thrown in—a flashbang deafened the interior.

The continuous barrage drew attention.

Opposite the chaos, another group peeked out the windows.

Worry and unease spread across their expressions.

A woman strutted around, nonstop, muttering and glancing at her close subordinate, who shook his head.

She was Mossad's handler—Agent Claudia, the one Ling Qingyu had asked to capture alive.

Tonight's events went against all her plans and hopes.

Surrounding her were mercenaries paid to do the dirty work.

Everyone was surprised to witness multiple helicopters unleashing hell and assaulting the terrorists' stronghold.

Mossad assisted subtly for national interests and strategic goals.

Given the wide network, it was impossible for Claudia to ignore the situation.

Not receiving any prior notification was extremely shocking.

She even suspected someone had sold her out on purpose, if not for one of her subordinates' explanation that the enemies' assault was to rescue hostages.

She never expected the three Country C nationals she had captured to warrant such entrapment.

The thought had never crossed her mind.

It was utterly impossible for Country C to send troops where logistics and transport couldn't reach, much less a direct helicopter airborne mission.

As for Western intervention, Claudia sneered at the possibility.

No need for conspiracy theories—the world understood, and so did she.

Claudia couldn't fathom how fate had turned so badly.

Her skillful planning and elite teams stood powerless against the pounding Gatling guns and rocket barrage.

Of course, her team attempted to escape while local terrorists attacked the sudden invaders.

They weren't foolish enough to fight a stronger opponent.

As long as everyone foreign to this land escaped through the nearby tunnel, Claudia would feel at ease.

Nonetheless, they were cut off and isolated in the building.

Two previous skirmishes had already left several of her subordinates dead, and she couldn't communicate with the rest of her teams—not even the bounty hunters—since the chaos started.

Dimensional suppression stretched from electronics to kinetics. Helpless, powerless...Despair.

"You sure Country C spec-ops are killing us?" Claudia raised her doubt.

"Not sure," her subordinate replied.

"Then, you..."

"I cannot confirm from afar, and I don't hear any Country C language communications." The subordinate bit his lip.

Claudia inhaled sharply. She understood her subordinate's meaning. Being able to fight in an organized and methodical way with little or no verbal communication signaled an outrageous level of eliteness.

"In any case, I see them armed with QBZ-95s. Apart from Country C, I can't imagine others using those lousy, unreliable weapons."

"Unreliable or not, we're being pinned down by cheap products," Claudia cursed. "Where's Sheemah?"

"We don't know her location, but the last news I heard was that Sheemah planned to tease the hostages. If our guess is correct, she should be near them."

Claudia lowered her eyelids. Her lips twitched bitterly. Tears seemed to well up. Although she snorted at Sheemah's coquettish approach and behaved as if she looked down on her, the relationship wasn't bad.

In fact, the two surpassed normal camaraderie. After many missions together, nobody's heart remained frozen like an ice cube.

Perhaps, rationally, she thought she was manipulating Sheemah and exploiting her skills, but when the possibility of Sheemah's demise entered her mind, her heart ached.

No, why had she fallen for that slut? That clever fox might have escaped earlier than her, Claudia mocked.

"How long until reinforcements arrive?" Claudia asked.

Reinforcements in this context referred to a nearby terrorists' hideout from the same faction.

"I have no idea. The fastest is forty-five minutes, but based on the enemy's thorough preparedness, there's no hope. Madam, we must reach the tunnel or we're doomed!"

Her subordinate was correct—what was the use of Toyota Technicals QRF except delivering merits to the foes.

"We have no hope," Claudia sighed. "The helis above mean every movement of ours is stripped naked."

The man flashed a glint in his eyes. "But their fire is restricted to the alleys and streets. No building has been pounded by the big gun so far."

Another man snorted. "Then, do you know what those whining sounds are that blew off the locals' heads with uncanny accuracy? If I hadn't heard the machine-like signature, I'd have regarded it as sorcery born of fear."

Obviously, this man had witnessed the horror of mini-drones.

"We have no choice. Either we take the risk and count on our enemies' rules of engagement to our advantage, or we are contained here and eliminated gradually," Claudia snapped.

Everyone exchanged silent glances and nodded imperceptibly at Claudia. They truly had no other alternatives.

"Or we can identify ourselves and surrender. They might let us live," Claudia joked and continued after a pause. "Smoke out and exploit the civilians infrastructure. If we can get inside, we will flow through buildings, Clear?"

"Clear!"

"Don't even think about saving grenades and smokes."

Chapter 739: Fine line of kindness

The men threw smoke grenades outside and waited until the enemies' vision was obscured.

A dozen seconds later, everyone nodded and exited the building, hugging the wall as they hoped to avoid fire from the enemies.

Seeing the first team of four succeed in moving onward without the slightest reaction, the rest followed suit. This time they bunched up together compared to the dispersed four.

Claudia also followed her men later, seeing their safe exit. Except for a few bodyguards directly under the affiliation of Mossad, she didn't trust the mercenaries.

Together, the large team managed to escape the containment. Everyone sensed strangeness as they elicited no reactions. The premonition grew stronger as time passed, but they had no chance to think too much.

Just then, bursts of whiplashes cracked above their heads. The enemies were shooting at them through the smoke. Some shots kicked up sand and ricocheted. Fortunately, they stayed close to the wall and didn't have to expose themselves for long.

The group scurried to the nearby houses and flooded through the rooms, not bothering about the women's shrieks and children's cries.

What Claudia and her men didn't know was that Spirit Fox operatives responsible for containment had been watching their every move in hindsight.

Not even the smoke posed an obstacle to observation. The girls were equipped with enhanced NVGs with thermal overlays on the original night vision.

The contours of heat signatures running away directly entered Spirit Fox operators' line of sight.

Initially, they were about to squeeze the trigger when leadership ordered them to refrain from killing outright because the distance between them and the targets was too far to ascertain whether the packages they intended to capture were running alongside.

Otherwise, the whole secondary mission would collapse, and poor performance would be on record. Other sisters might laugh at them for failing Ling Qingyu's request.

Of course, because of the short pause before they pretended to fire through the smoke, they managed to spot a female figure. Not sure if the target was Claudia or Sheemah, they hesitated.

In fact, Ling Qingyu didn't care about the completeness of the missions—particularly the secondary objectives. As long as her harem members were safe and well-protected, she'd spoil them nonstop.

Even if Sheemah and Claudia were killed, Ling Qingyu might just shrug it off. Nonetheless, Athena and Elena pursued perfection, though they didn't demand it from Spirit Fox. Their temperaments influenced the latter.

Another team had closed in on Claudia's previously occupied building and cleared it quickly, catching up with the escapees ahead.

With Athena monitoring from above, proper guidance reached Spirit Fox operatives in pursuit.

Elsewhere, a Spirit Fox operator captured a woman who was struggling hard. Pressing her down, the operator cuffed her hands behind her back while her partner took out a hood to secure her head.

The operators ignored the curses and small kicks. If she pressed further, they delivered a light slap on the cheeks. The woman was indeed Sheemah, unable to escape because she stood near the X-mark.

Her other mercenary co-workers were either killed in action or groaning from wounds. They would die very soon if not treated immediately.

Spirit Fox operators ignored their plight and mercilessly pulled away the "victim" to the consolidation point.

Sheemah sighed helplessly as she gave up. She watched her allies mowed down from a distance when they exposed themselves. Even in CQB, where they had the local advantage, resistance was futile.

A burst of shots or two was all her team achieved. Then, everyone was gunned down. The enemy's swift actions and seamless coordination blinded her years of experience.

They were fast—not simply human fast, but lightning fast. She felt like they were fighting against real ghosts.

In the short battle—no, it was a massacre—their blind firing didn't inhibit the opponents, nor did their prepared tactics stand a chance against accuracy and momentum.

However, these didn't matter because in a close duel—Sheemah refused to admit that she lost to another girl in a melee fight, and it was because the enemies exploited momentum to distract her thoughts—she noticed her enemies were mostly women.

Wait, actually, they could all be female. Since she was covered shortly upon contact, she couldn't confirm her guess, but her ears still worked.

As a gambler who walked on the edge of the sword daily, her civil skills weren't for nothing. She perfectly understood Country C's language and figured out the identity of her enemies.

Except for some SOP terminology, she roughly understood the communication and was flattered that she was one of the targets to be apprehended alive.

Her wariness and worries for Claudia lessened. Perhaps that clever bastard had reached the tunnel while she remained stuck here. Or maybe Claudia was happy to remove an ear nuisance. Sheemah amused herself.

Listening further, she realized her conjecture of her captors being an all-female unit was proven correct.

Their presence drew her attention so much that she didn't pay the slightest heed to her former hostages. Even the handsome man she had kidded around with was dust in her eyes now.

Sheemah recalled a short video spreading online once, narrating the ranking of the world's top ten direct action special police. One from Country C was included in the list and caught her eye because the narrators weren't sure, but rumor suggested the police members were women.

As a fellow woman, the existence of such a special force unit belonging to a law enforcement bureau intrigued Sheemah.

Especially when compared with the world's elite—renowned dangerous elements from Country R and Country S, the latter comprising both the former and the West in terms of doctrines, techniques, and tactics.

That female unit somehow surpassed the above and ranked just behind GIGN and GSG of Country F and D respectively.

Meanwhile, Claudia's group couldn't escape in the end and experienced several more fallen teammates.

The invincible accuracy and speed forced them back until they had nowhere else to go. They were supposed to distance themselves from the enemies, but the helicopters above delivered a negative answer.

Like divine punishment, explosive rounds clattered on their premeditated path, locking them down. The enemies clearly displayed the intention to surround and annihilate them.

One by one, Claudia watched her men die, including her close aides. Although they weren't close except for the current mission, they were under her orders, after all.

In the end, Claudia had to wield firearms and shoot. She wondered why the men around her fell when she didn't, even though she exposed herself more. Her sixth sense seemed to be telling her something, but she couldn't grasp it.

Until a flashbang exploded in her ears and incapacitated her, Claudia thought she had fought hard. She was pushed down against the harsh surface, spun around, and forced to eat dirt. Her arms were stretched tight behind her.

Damn, they were close... Impossible to be the element she was fighting. Alas, it wasn't a positive notion to be flanked by others.

Soon, she heard the groans of her men and felt pain in her neck. Then, she knew nothing.

The battlefield quieted down. The operator pinning Claudia swung her around and stroked her beautiful chin, studying her face.

"It's her. Our target," she reported to her leader.

"Good job... All stations, Jackpot again. Jackpot."

Puff! Puff!

Spirit Fox sisters nearby ended the misery of their wounded enemies. The groaning halted.

Athena voiced over. "Net call—well done. Beautiful ops, girls. Consolidate and prepare to exfil."

"Athena, do we or do we not need SSE and secure the zone?" someone asked on the comms.

"Negative. Our stage show has alarmed everyone nearby. Do you expect us to fight opponents outside our range of activity?"

"Well, it's not that impossible," another groaned in dissatisfaction.

"All stations, focus on consolidation and exfil. How copy?!" Athena ignored the girls' plight and commanded.

"Solid copy, Deltas are to prep exfil, out." Unwilling responses acknowledged Athena's order.

Athena knew why Spirit Fox showed emotions about solving problems to the root. In addition to her mother's lead in thoroughness and Spirit Fox's policing work, the girls expressed their desire to help the locals.

Especially when they witnessed women and children showing signs of being trafficked and kidnapped. Weak civilians always suffered during war, particularly women, children, and the elderly. Hence, the saying—protect elders, women, and children—since young strong men were often the culprits. The strong devoured the weak.

From a humanitarian perspective, Athena should have catered to Spirit Fox's opinions, but the need to avoid diplomatic backlash and the impossibility of solving the problems at their root proved otherwise.

If one desired to help, then think through everything and help without stopping. Don't do so if you aren't sure. Likewise, growing war in this region meant enormous resources and time would be needed to solve the trafficking of women and children. Unless her mother sent boots on the ground and planned to settle.

Not to mention, doing so would expose secrets. Athena might be affected by Ling Qingyu's love, but her core was utmost rationality—seeking the greatest benefits regardless.

Well, Athena wavered on whether to delay reporting to her mother.

The same report could bring different consequences depending on timing.

What if Ling Qingyu wanted to recruit the women and children out of kindness?

Tang Ziyi & Xiao Yue: Ling Qingyu is kind? Why don't we know? We think our niece has a wrong judgment of kindness.

Ling Qingyu: "..."

If Elena had carried more troops and manufactured more Virgins, perhaps Athena would have agreed to Spirit Fox's reluctance without hesitation.

Her final decision came when she consulted Elena, and she regretted it.

If she asked someone who always wanted more action for advice, she should have known the results.

That heretic ship AI desired to explode matters and alter the geography of the planet.

What terrorists? What about the eyes of the world? Anything that could be solved by a shot from an electromagnetic gun was easy.

If not once, then twice. If not twice, then thrice.

Athena suffered a momentary virtual headache and called her mother.

Fortunately, much of what she intended aligned with her mother's reply, and her worries dissipated.

But she kept tracking the victims via satellite spectrum.

Who knew—one day Spirit Fox might rescue them.

On the ground, Spirit Fox teams grouped together separately near designated LZ, packing away hostages and targets. Above, Virgin 2 suppressed mercilessly, shredding bodies that dared to pop out of buildings to fire at the teams.

As the operators flowed back toward the waiting helicopters, rotors already spooling up, Athena allowed herself the smallest flicker of what might have been pride. Even Elena prodded on the channel though the former was uncertain what made Elena proud here. She made all the plans, okay!!

Mission clock: 12 minutes 43 seconds from first missile to last boot off the ground.

Lightning assault ended successfully. Virgin 1s lifted off the ground and the formation headed back. The town behind erupted into balls of flames as multiple explosions saluted their return. Weapon caches burned and destroyed.

The operatives aboard whistled and shook playful punches, admiring their handiwork. No one feared hurting the innocents since they'd informed the locals.

Another ghost story the world would never hear.

And somewhere far above, invisible to every radar on Earth, the God-tier satellites rolled over the horizon, already prepared to smother and wash away any darkness in the world to their master's will.

Chapter 740: Not a day without narcissism

Above 10,000 meters, a luxurious aircraft cut through clouds and a minuscule thunderstorm.

Its navigation lights glittered in the darkness.

The huge size didn't impede its outrageous speed, almost breaking through the sound barrier.

Inside, Ling Qingyu slouched on her couch, twirling a wine cup in her hand, served by a pretty air hostess.

If not for Xiao Yue sitting next to her, savoring it, she might have stepped up her flirting skills.

Doctor Mo and Nurse Yin were elsewhere, studying in their leisure time after Ling Qingyu gifted them two advanced tablets.

The storage space contained all medicinal and health knowledge, even those inaccessible to the public.

Some hadn't even made it to official lists. With Athena's prowess, no digital product could escape her eyes.

Even unpublished research papers, withheld due to confidentiality, weren't spared.

No connections for Athena to blast through—no problem.

She would implant a virus through multiple alternatives. Just one invasion was sufficient to gain entry to everything.

Humans were prone to mistakes, and slight forgetfulness was all Athena needed. She had already been doing this since she first came to this world.

When her mother requested her to gift the vast wealth of knowledge, Athena obliged, even manufacturing the advanced, near-transparent tablet with the ability to hide itself like other tech products if desired.

The reaction of Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei drew Ling Qingyu's laughter.

She enjoyed their cute expressions.

Nonetheless, Ling Qingyu couldn't laugh anymore once the duo ignored her presence, diving deeper into the pool of knowledge.

She somehow regretted it.

Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei might have been delighted and immersed in her gifts, which they hadn't had access to before.

Surely later, their keen interest would dial down as they realized they had all the time they needed.

Perhaps the duo were communicating with the future network they would build relationships with before reaching their destination.

Academics had their own circles and ways, just like her business did.

Ling Qingyu felt saddened that her confidantes' attention wasn't on her, even though they could concentrate on other matters later.

As for Xiao Yue accompanying her—was that even considered accompanying?

She obviously stayed near to mock her, Ling Qingyu thought.

Well, part of it could be the rescue operation on the ground—Xiao Yue was ready to intervene in case her help was needed from a strategic perspective.

Who would have thought that Ling Qingyu, a lazy lady filled with allure and elegance, had created a legend that puzzled many nations' intelligence agencies in Country S for several years?

Who expected her words to vaporize an army of terrorists without too much heat?

Who would believe her orders, within a short period, led to a perfect operation?

Certainly, many would ask how no one detected the mythical operation.

All of these myths originated from Ling Qingyu's lips.

She had no idea her words and deeds were starting to alter the political landscape of the world.

Or perhaps she knew, but she hadn't yet adapted fully to her utmost strength.

Just now, Athena contacted her, seeking advice on the difficult choice posed by her subordinates.

Although Ling Qingyu knew what Athena preferred, the latter's dilemma gratified her because the slightest waver suggested her method of upbringing was correct.

Had Athena thoroughly adhered to complete rationalization, Ling Qingyu would feel sad instead.

Despite the contradiction, in this scenario, Athena's hesitation as an AI seemed better. Nor did Ling Qingyu find Spirit Fox's kindness utterly baseless.

If they acted cold, Ling Qingyu could only see them as pure tools. A leader wanted companions and followers, not tools she could manipulate.

Till now, Ling Qingyu had a hard time fathoming how others treated their subordinates like tools. Success and results only mattered in their eyes.

Yet, Ling Qingyu believed it was the progress and process—the essence of success and the real enjoyment of her effort.

Nevertheless, facing Athena's query, Ling Qingyu thought for a while and listed an appropriate solution to the best extent she, Athena, and Spirit Fox could offer help.

For the trafficked victims, Spirit Fox operators took out vehicles and provided them maps showing routes to the safe zone based on Athena's intel.

Naturally, most women, if not all, raised in Country S's culture, couldn't drive. This plan wouldn't suffice had Spirit Fox not rescued other unrelated hostages.

Yes, the girls discovered unrelated locked-up men, likely imprisoned for ransom or political purposes. As for women, everyone could guess their fate based on the trafficked victims.

Owing to their existence, thankfully, the surviving vehicles could bring innocents to safety. Meanwhile, Athena connected through a radio picked up from the enemies to guide their navigation.

Furthermore, good local authorities could be reached to facilitate the transfer—a mysterious call to the righteous ones—hard to achieve, but Athena didn't need to bat an eye.

Ling Qingyu's alternative created additional difficulties and wasn't perfect, but she managed to cater to both polar opinions—to intervene or leave it alone.

"You always surprise me with your compromise," Xiao Yue said. "I figure businesspeople are well capable in this sector."

"Athena is a good girl," Ling Qingyu replied with a shrug and smiled when the electronic device buzzed in agreement. "She can already solve it better on her own. It's just that she hoped to seek our verification."

"That creates a bigger problem," Xiao Yue rolled her eyes. "Everything we have done is going to be exposed."

"It doesn't matter. Many can guess who took action tonight based on people's narratives and our hostages' nationality," Ling Qingyu shook her head and swallowed the remaining portion of the wine, slurring her tongue around the palpable thickness.

"You're right. So long as we don't admit," Xiao Yue agreed and paused.

"Don't think too much. One step at a time," Ling Qingyu answered, having already figured out Xiao Yue's next question.

Frankly, that stumped her too. The hostages risked exposing Ling Qingyu's secrets—the submarine—but she wasn't too worried as the girls would tackle such issues effortlessly. With Athena's supervision and inexplicable technology, lying without batting an eye came naturally.

Faking video footage, audio, and holographic projections... too many to count.

Although Ling Qingyu didn't consider herself invincible, she had the power to influence the general trend of the world. Whoever she supported in the political arena would wield great power and weapons.

Therefore, she practiced utmost discipline to placate her growing psychology—specifically guarding against arrogance. Fortunately, Miss System existed to control it—after all, without it, she might be powerful but never at her current level.

Monitoring Spirit Fox operatives returning from the mission through Athena's lens, Ling Qingyu prepared to call her mother-in-law.

It hadn't been long since Gu Yi requested her intervention. So, when Ling Qingyu called her, Gu Yi was dumbfounded by the news of success and even asked to prepare a transfer. Ling Qingyu left behind Athena's and Elena's contact information.

After thanking her daughter-in-law, Gu Yi spoke with General Tang to arrange the follow-ups.

Ling Qingyu stopped bothering Gu Yi and felt smug that somebody wasn't going to sleep well. But why did she sense hesitation in Gu Yi's voice? What could be troubling the nation's Minister of Justice?

Anyway, Ling Qingyu ignored the oddness. If the problem even troubled the ministerial level, what could she do?

Meanwhile, Athena, overwatching the duo's conversation, heaved a digital sigh of relief. She couldn't lie to her mother if discovered, and she also wanted to fulfill Aunt Tang's favor.

The status quo was the best.

Not knowing many were hiding from her, Ling Qingyu focused on the trip ahead.

Though she was accompanying Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei as friends and preparing for a reunion with her alumni, she also needed to research Country A's market.

As a businesswoman, how could she forget about investment?

However, the land absorbed too much of the world's wealth, and ordinary investments wouldn't fare well with the high cost of materials and labor.

Plus, she didn't want to encounter forfeiture or seizure simply because she sold better products. To avoid such dangers, she must build powerful connections again and treaded the uncharted water of politics.

Why risk anything when she had already settled abundantly in her motherland and in Country E, which she had just visited.

Well, a sane businesswoman or capitalist would never stand on a single plank of wood. Additional plans existed for a reason. One loss meant nothing if others compensated more.

Although Country E had yet to grow from the seeds she had planted, given its plentiful natural resources and vast lands, the potential was actually higher than the rest of the world if managed well.

She refused to believe she couldn't overcome a simple corruption obstacle on the ladder to prosperity.

Sure, corruption had been the number one bane since humankind prospered. Regardless of how ancestors tried to mitigate it, corruption thrived on.

With her brilliant mind, Athena, and future confidantes, Ling Qingyu believed Country E and many more would belong to her in the future. These threats would kneel before her.

Miss System detected narcissism again and shook her head helplessly. Ling Qingyu couldn't live a single day without a moment of narcissistic behavior.