

The Mechanic 31

Chapter 31: Silenced

Kai Li had managed to take cover in time, but he did not escape unscathed. A few bullets had grazed past his face, leaving him all bloody.

He had been so close to perishing with his squad mates.

“What the hell was that monster?”

The long-haired man had also survived, but his condition was far worse. He had been shot in the abdomen and was bleeding profusely. Kai Li could hear him groaning in pain.

Suddenly, two red lights began to glimmer in the darkness, terrifying the duo who thought that some kind of savage beast was approaching. Paralyzed with fear, they could only watch on as... Rover 1 appeared!

“A robot?”

Kai Li stared at Rover 1 in disbelief. He regretted not trusting his instinct.

What should I do now? Kai Li’s immediate thought was to retreat, but the long-haired man suddenly went berserk and opened fire on the rover.

” **Die! Die! Die!** ”

Clink! Clink! Clank! Clank!

Rover 1’s thin armor was slowly dented by the barrage. Seeing that his attacks were effective, Kai Li and his other remaining teammate began to join the counterattack.

[Rover One (Tank-style)] has lost 14 points of armor...

[Rover One (Tank-style)] has lost 17 points of armor...

As Rover One’s armor was made with inferior materials, it was not tanky at all, and its armor integrity plummeted under the trio’s assault. In just a few seconds of barrage, the poor rover was reduced to a useless hunk of metal.

It couldn’t be helped! As Han Xiao had to work with limited funds, all he had equipped the rover with were the finger guns.

“Damn it! Where is Division 13?”

Suddenly, as if in answer to his prayers, the sound of a marching troop began to fill up the night.

“Disarm yourselves!” someone roared out.

“Quickly retreat!” ordered Kai Li immediately.

The long-haired man emptied a final magazine onto the rover furiously before he relented.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

However, right as they were about to flee, the rover suddenly started to charge towards them as it began to glow!

Self-destruction!

The deafening explosion set the night ablaze, engulfing the trio.

About 50 meters away, Li Hui and his agents were shocked by the massive explosion.

“Damn it,” cursed Feng Jun, “this was supposed to be a covert operation!”

He could already imagine tomorrow’s headlines.

From the moment that the battle between Han Xiao and Raccoon had begun, the situation had already gone out of control; the gunshots alone had already caught the attention of many civilians. However, as they were ordered to act only after the Bee Sting Squad appeared, they could only continue waiting in anguish, and it was now too late.

Han Xiao got to his feet and brushed the sand off his hair. Things were not over yet.

Although the other two mercenaries were not as fortunate, Kai Li had managed to escape the blast in time. He hastily scrambled to his feet to make a run for it when, suddenly, someone other than Han Xiao began to open fire on him! The shooter was none other than Li Hui!

“Want to steal my kill?” Han Xiao frowned. He had to be the one to finish Kai Li off for the bonus reward!

Han Xiao began to give chase, and he managed to intercept him effortlessly from the side.

Kai Li looked at the man who appeared before him with trepidation. The current Han Xiao felt like a completely different person than before.

“Die!”

Kai Li gritted his teeth and raised his gun to fire. However, before he could pull the trigger, Han Xiao suddenly began to sway from side to side as he closed in on him like a veteran boxer!

Flustered, Kai Li fired multiple shots, but they were all either evaded or blocked by the mechanical arm.

“Not even a single one hit?”

Kai Li was completely overwhelmed. By his estimations, no matter how strong Han Xiao was, he would at best be at the level of an elite mercenary. Only a superhuman could possibly move faster than a bullet! However, what Han Xiao was doing was equally frightening and hard to believe; he was predicting the trajectory of his shots from just the angle of the gun! It was a feat that only the most experienced of veterans could perform, and even throughout the entire mercenary world, there were only two he knew of that were capable of it.

The look of disbelief on Kai Li's face amused Han Xiao. Compared to that time he piloted a mobile suit through the crossfire of entire fleets, this was just a piece of cake.

Click!

Kai Li inevitably ran out of bullets and he fumbled to reload. However, it was too late as Han Xiao had closed the gap, suddenly appearing in front of him.

Paralyzed with fear, Kai Li could only watch on in horror. He could hear Han Xiao's muscles bulge as he stretched his left arm back to prepare for a mighty swing.

Han Xiao twisted powerfully, transferring all the force and momentum in his body into his left arm as he unleashed a devastating hook, simultaneously shouting, "Overload!"

Black smoke billowed out as the engine of the Lightweight Mechanical Arm blared loudly, sending its gears and piston into overdrive. Its power was boosted by 30%.

And Han Xiao smashed it directly into Kai Li's face.

Critical Hit!

Crushing Blow!

Blood splattered everywhere.

Kai Li may have survived a number of close calls, but he never stood a chance against this one.

When Li Hui and his team arrived, they were greeted by a blood-curdling scene.

Kai Li's corpse lay limp on the ground beside a blood-soaked, expressionless Han Xiao, whose mechanical arm was covered in pieces of flesh. Half of his face was illuminated by the fire while the other half was grimly enshrouded in darkness.

As experienced as these agents were, they were unable to remain calm.

You have completed the E-Class Quest [Hunted!], gaining 10,000 experience.

You have completed the bonus condition: Kill all 6 Assailants.

You have gained a Skill Level-up Card (Basic). Accept Reward: Y/N

No, selected Han Xiao. He could accept it later on.

"Don't move!" shouted Li Hui after taking a moment to regain his senses from the initial shock. He raised his gun and pointed it at Han Xiao.

Han Xiao calmly took off the Lightweight Mechanical Arm before raising his arms in the air. Two agents slung a black bag over his head to block his vision before leading him away, presumably to bring him to Division 13.

About time! thought Han Xiao to himself.

Feng Jun gasped when he looked around to see aftermath of the battle.

“6 mercenaries taken out so easily. Is that the power of his machines?”

“Go gather whatever parts he’s left behind and notify the police to follow up,” ordered Li Hui sternly, after which they escorted Han Xiao to a car.

Han Xiao sat in the backseat sandwiched by two agents. Although he couldn’t see, he could sense that they were on their toes.

Although one or two things didn’t go exactly as planned, everything was still within Han Xiao’s expectations.

It was a quiet ride. The atmosphere amongst the agents was extremely tense, and only the sound of driving could be heard. They had been ordered not to converse with Han Xiao. On the contrary, Han Xiao had looked calm from the very moment that they appeared, which bewildered them. It almost seemed like he had expected them.

...

Raccoon’s face darkened as he looked at the aftermath of the battle.

“Bring me a laptop!” he barked.

As soon as he logged in to the underground network and clicked on bounties, he was greeted by Han Xiao’s face.

“Zero, 1 million bounty. He’s wanted by the Germinal Organization?”

Raccoon’s face instantly paled and he slammed the laptop onto the ground in frustration.

Damn it, he really did have a bounty on him! And it was issued by the king of the underworld no less, the Germinal Organization!

Sometimes, ignorance isn’t bliss.

Now that the dust had cleared, Ma Jie and Huang Mao finally emerged too. Just the sight of the aftermath alone caused them to shake uncontrollably.

Raccoon erupted with anger when they came to him. He kicked Ma Jie to the ground, screaming, “Damn you! It’s all your fault! I will make you pay for this!”

Ma Jie clutched his stomach in pain as he shivered helplessly on the ground. *What did I do now?*

Suddenly, Raccoon heard the blaring of sirens and he turned to see seven or eight police cars arriving at the entrance.

“Hmph, the ever late police.”

Raccoon tidied himself a little bit before going up to receive them. He was not the least bit flustered by their appearance as, from his perspective, he was a victim and he also had connections with them.

But before he could say a word, the fully-armed officer pressed him to the ground to handcuff him.

Raccoon panicked, and as he struggled to break free he shouted, "What are you guys doing to me! I am the victim here, okay? I know your commander's secretary..."

"Stop wasting your strength," replied the officer plainly. "This is Division 13's order."

Hearing 'Division 13' caused Raccoon's eyes to widen with disbelief.

Division 13 was involved with important matters relating to the country's security, why would they come after me? It must have something to do with that damned Han Xiao!

Division 13 is helping him? Why?

Germinal traitor... Division 13... Stardragon... Intel...

The truth dawned on him.

They want to silence me!

From the moment that Han Xiao had shown him his face, Raccoon's fate was sealed.

He set me up!

Realizing his impending outcome, Raccoon began to tremble in fear and rage.

"Han Xiao! I curse your ancestors!"

Meanwhile, Ma Jie, shocked badly by the sudden turn of events, fainted and dropped to the ground.

Chapter 32: A Load of Crap

When the bag over Han Xiao's head was finally removed, he found himself in a bright room. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the light.

He was seated on a cold metal chair in front of a table. It was a typical interrogation room with a one-way mirror to Han Xiao's side.

Two people sat across the table: Li Hui and Feng Jun.

"Allow me to introduce myself, I am an intelligence officer from the Strategic Defense Division of Stardragon," spoke Feng Jun. "This is not the first time we have met. Do you remember me?"

"I remember," replied Han Xiao nonchalantly. "The man with the very big wallet."

Feng Jun was speechless. *Can you not bring that up?*

"Division 13, Li Hui," introduced Li Hui. Both his expression and his manner of speech were stone cold.

Stardragon's Strategic Defense Division consisted of 13 sections in total and was referred to as Division 13.

"Should we call you Han Xiao, or Zero?" Feng Jun asked.

"Whatever you like."

"Cut the crap," interrupted Li Hui. "Explain why the Germinal Organization has a million dollar bounty on you and tell us everything you know."

"Why should I tell you?" asked a bemused Han Xiao.

Li Hui laughed coldly in response.

"What do you think this place is? If we want you to talk, you have to talk!"

"So what if I don't?" taunted Han Xiao. "Shoot me?"

"Do you think I wouldn't dare?" barked Li Hui.

"Enough, enough! Calm down. Han Xiao, you should know we are with the government. If you cooperate, we won't treat you badly."

Han Xiao smiled and shifted in his seat to adopt a more comfortable posture before replying. "Good cop, bad cop. How outdated is this tactic? Can you at least try something different? I, for one, have a thing for pretty girls. Having to talk to two stern old man is such a turn off. Service with a smile, understand? Come on, smile."

Han Xiao hit the nail on the spot, taking Feng Jun aback. Feng Jun coughed dryly and communicated with Li Hui through a glance, who understood the message. He abruptly stood up in an act of anger and pointed at Han Xiao as he shouted, "This is not a place for you to try and act funny! I have the power to imprison you for as long as I want!"

"How scary," mocked Han Xiao before suddenly wiping the smile off his face and adding, "I'm from the Germinal Organization. Threats? Do you think such things will work on me? Come on, you're making fools out of yourselves. If you want us to cooperate, sure! Show me your sincerity! Get someone qualified enough to speak to me. You two aren't!" As Han Xiao finished his sentence, he tugged onto his restraints, slamming the chair so loudly that it echoed out in the tiny room.

Feng Jun and Li Hui looked at each other. Their task was only to get a grasp on Han Xiao's position, and Han Xiao knew this well, which was why he was acting fearless on purpose to declare that he still had something up his sleeve.

Suddenly, a deep voice was transmitted through the speaker in the interrogation room. "As you wish, I will talk with you."

"Who are you?" asked Han Xiao as he turned to the obvious one-way mirror.

"Division 13, intelligence director. Do I qualify to speak to you?"

"I guess you will do," Han Xiao nonchalantly replied.

Both Li Hui and Feng Jun's eyes twitched. What a shameless person!

The intelligence director let it slide and started to ask, "You just said that you are from the Germinal Organization—"

"I was." Han Xiao corrected him mid-speech.

"So, you have deserted?"

"Yes."

"What was your position?"

"A logistics research personnel."

"What did you research?"

"Machinery and weapons."

"You are lying," cut the intelligence director. "How can that explain your million dollar bounty?"

Han Xiao smiled – he had expected this very question.

"Rather than call me a liar, haven't you guys already assumed that I possess some kind of valuable intel? Isn't that why you've been investigating me from a distance?" he replied. "Intel can indeed be used as a weapon – but only in the right hands. I left my trail exposed to prove my willingness to cooperate. I am not your enemy. The Germinal Organization is. And they are my enemy too."

"Why should we even bother to cooperate with you?" asked the intelligence director in reply. "Look around you – you are in our territory. We have all sorts of tools to make you talk!"

Han Xiao paused to smile calmly for a moment before suddenly saying, "Message log: Galaxy Calendar Year 687, 14th of June. Signal location: Planet Aquamarine. Destination: Planet Blackstar's 8th base. The contents of this message are top secret."

The intelligence director remained silent for a full ten minutes.

Li Hui and Feng Jun gave a start when they realized that although what Han Xiao had spoken of made no sense to them, it was clearly valuable intel to the director who in turn had to go relay the information to the top brass for further instruction.

After the long wait, the intelligence director spoke through the speaker again. This time though, he sounded extremely serious.

"Are you sure?" he asked directly.

"How would I know of Blackstar otherwise?"

"...Fine."

The intelligence director was wearing a grave expression. If the intel that Han Xiao had given him was actually true, it was extremely crucial to not only Stardragon, but the entire planet.

Han Xiao smirked. He had obviously come well-prepared.

In the exploration era, there existed three galactic powers who had been warring for tens of thousands of years. Although it took a long time, the three powers eventually came to an agreement and ceased their fighting. They agreed to work together for peace, order, and advancement.

The universe was extremely vast; it was filled with countless stars and far more life-forms that thrived in every corner. Large amounts of data and information were constantly being broadcast throughout the universe via technology, and the amalgamation of the thoughts and wills of all life in the universe gave rise to a phenomenon known as 'the whispers of the universe'.

Although the universe did appear calm and static on the surface, it was, in fact, bustling with activity.

All kinds of civilizations underwent the same phase – from admiring space to wondering if they were the only ones. In their hubris, they would conquer their respective galaxies before entering the vast universe, thinking that they were the destined ones – only to find that they were not alone, and definitely not special at all.

The explored universe could be seen as divided into numerous sectors. For example: the Shattered Belt, the Ancient Starfield, the Silver Spiral, and the Sea of Purity. A sector comprised of dozens of star clusters, each containing numerous galaxies that in turn housed planetary systems or star systems that were number-coded, homes to the innumerable planets. Together, they formed the thrilling universal landscape of the game 'Galaxy'.

Shattered Belt – Colton Group – The Garden – 9th System – Planet Aquamarine. This was basically Aquamarine's place in the vast universe. Its precise coordinates would take a combination of words and numbers derived using complex math to describe.

The interstellar power that had come into contact with Aquamarine was an advanced civilization of The Garden, the Kedolas. The 'Blackstar' that Han Xiao referred to was originally a part of the Kedolas, but they broke away in an attempt to seize power and were now bitter enemies.

The world of 'Galaxy' was massive, and many powers and civilizations were constantly at odds with one another. A civilization's degree of advancement largely depended on its space travel capabilities. As the Kedolas could freely travel between systems without relying on wormholes or stargates created by even advanced civilizations, they were considered a galactic civilization – a few levels higher than Planet Aquamarine.

If the Germinal Organization had actually come into contact with Blackstar and gained their support, things would be extremely grim for the Six Nations. An evil power like them paid no heed to the exploration rules laid down by the Three Powers: The Universal Treaty (currently in its 7th revised edition).

The fact that Aquamarine had been contacted by an interstellar power was top secret information withheld by the Six Nations. Hence, the intelligence director believed Han Xiao to be speaking the truth, and this was what made him extremely nervous.

However, the truth was that the Germinal Organization had made no such contact with Blackstar. Han Xiao simply made it up because it was impossible to verify anyway. It was a sly tactic to get them to not

only value him, but also take action against the Germinal Organization. Furthermore, it would help him complete his main quest, so why not?

All the beginner planets were situated quite far away from each other. However, there were specialized galactic tourism services that one could get in touch with as long as he had a device capable of interstellar transmission. They would automatically locate the transmission and come to the buyer. As long as one had enough money, even having a full tour across the entire universe was not impossible. After all, if players on different planets weren't able to come together, how would competitions and tournaments be held in Galaxy? Most game events were held on neutral or uninhabited planets.

"Get me a map of Stardragon and a pen," asked Han Xiao suddenly.

Feng Jun went to fetch the items and put them on the table. Han Xiao picked up the pen and circled three locations on the map, saying briefly, "These are three of the Germinal Organization's secret bases in Stardragon. Treat it as my proof of sincerity."

"You only know 3?"

Han Xiao rolled his eyes inwardly.

"Of course not. But you can go check these ones out first. We can talk more after."

"What are your conditions?" asked the intelligence director at long last. Feng Jun and Li Hui closely watched Han Xiao in anticipation.

"I just want us to work together against Germinal," replied Han Xiao with a mysterious smile.

That's all? thought the director to himself.

"I will relay our conversation to the higher-ups. Sorry, but you'll have to continue staying here for the time being."

Click!

The mic was turned off.

Han Xiao frowned as he shook around his handcuffs.

"Don't take too long. I only have a day off."

Chapter 33: His Worth

The director, vice-director, 13 section heads, and some other top brass of Division 13 quickly assembled in the conference room to discuss how to proceed with Han Xiao.

"Han Xiao possesses knowledge of vital information. With his help, we will be able to launch precise attacks on the Germinal Organization's bases. He is a mechanic, and has demonstrated combat ability on par with elite agents. He is willing to cooperate..." read the intelligence head from a compiled report.

"I believe that we can put some trust in him and work together," he added.

After a few seconds of uncertain silence, the Internal Affairs Minister was the first to raise his objection.

“No way. What if the intel he gives us is false?”

Division 13 was split into two factions: the hardliners, led by the Internal Affairs Minister, and the conservatives, led by the Intelligence Minister.

The two factions sat separately.

“That is very unlikely,” answered the Intelligence Minister. “He is a deserter of the Germinal Organization, and only stands a chance to live if he gains our protection. There is no reason to doubt his willingness to cooperate.”

“For all you know, it could just be an elaborate act!” The Internal Affairs Ministers shot back. “I suggest we detain him and extract the intel from him by force! Division 13 doesn’t need to negotiate with anyone.”

“You are being ridiculous! Such measures are uncalled for! Han Xiao has already demonstrated his sincerity to us, what we should be doing is accepting it and working together against the common enemy!”

“That is what a coward would do!”

“You are the definition of brainless!”

Under the leadership of their respective spokesmen, the other members from the two factions began to engage in an exchange of insults. Although both factions valued the intel that Han Xiao possessed, one faction wanted to befriend him and work together, while the other faction saw him as a potential threat. The squabble looked like it was almost about to escalate into a brawl.

The director and vice-director simply watched on. The director was the person with the most power in Division 13, while the vice-director was actually a bureaucrat tasked by the higher-ups to perform supervision. He was also referred to as the administrative director.

It wouldn’t be unusual for there to be power struggles for the director position in an institution like Division 13, but the vice-director actually couldn’t be bothered with much at all. Take now for example: he had been sitting still from the start without uttering a single word, as though his spirit had left his body and was on a tour of the world. He was probably even more concerned with what he would have for dinner later on. Well, if you consider that his ambitious predecessor had ended up mysteriously charged with treason, wanting to maintain a low profile was understandable.

The director, on the other hand, was a dignified-looking man who commanded respect. He contemplated for a moment before speaking his mind, “Since you want to both cooperate with him and control him, isn’t there a perfect solution? Let’s recruit him to the department.”

The bickering crowd instantly broke up; silence ensued. The hardliners stared at the director blankly.

What the heck?

“Absolutely no way!”

“What if Han Xiao’s motive was precisely to infiltrate us?”

“That goes against our secrecy policy!”

The director suddenly bellowed, “We’ll settle it the way we always do; we’ll have a vote!”

The conservatives rejoiced. Aside from the one neutral minister, each faction had exactly 6 people. With the director’s vote, they would most likely win it. On the other hand, the hardliners were panicking.

Suddenly, the Internal Affairs Ministers spoke, “I think that the logistics department will suit him well. Not only will it maximize his usefulness as a mechanic, we will be able to keep him under close watch since he will be inside the headquarters.”

He had already resigned himself to the inevitable.

For once, the conservatives agreed with him. The logistics department was indeed the best option as Han Xiao would be confined to the HQ.

However, the director suddenly cut in, “Since we are going to make use of his talents anyway, might as well assign him to the covert ops department!”

The atmosphere in the conference room suddenly froze. All the ministers turned and looked towards the neutral minister – the covert ops minister who had been in the middle of yawning.

“Ahhh— eh, what? Me?”

“Then it’s settled!” decided the director as he slammed the table. “Words and actions may be deceiving, but motives are not. We’ll let him join the covert ops department after verifying the locations he’s disclosed.”

The ministers all face-palmed themselves. Whatever makes you happy, boss.

The vice-director yawned to break the silence.

“Time to finish up already? What’s on the canteen menu today?”

...

After the conference, the intelligence minister and the logistics minister proceeded to the logistics department together to examine the Lightweight Mechanical Arm.

They were interested to see Han Xiao’s craftsmanship to gain insight on him.

The personnel they had tasked with conducting the examination was Luo Xuan, the ‘ace’ of the logistics department. He was the top machinery studies student of his year at the Western Capital University, and had been recruited directly into Division 13, where his continued excellence earned him the favor of his higher-ups. There were plans to transfer him to the covert ops department.

He was flawless – apart from being too arrogant.

“Begin.”

Luo Xuan began to get to work with the Lightweight Mechanical Arm, but he suddenly stopped and reported, "It's encrypted."

Machines were commonly installed with encryption to prevent unauthorized disassembly and reverse engineering. The [Basic Assembly] knowledge that Han Xiao possessed came with the method to install such encryption. The encryption that he had installed would take an E-class mechanic to crack. Evidently, Han Xiao had anticipated this series of events.

Rover One was also encrypted—not that it mattered, since it had self-destructed.

"Can you crack it?" asked the intelligence director.

"No problem," replied the confident Luo Xuan. He didn't think that it was possible for an unknown mechanic to make a lock that he, a genius, couldn't crack.

Twenty minutes later, however, he had not made any progress, and was sweating profusely. "Four-layered encryption? Is the bastard who made this machine crazy or something?"

A four-layered encryption was extremely complex to crack as the slightest error would cause the machine's internals to disintegrate, rendering it useless. Luo Xuan was at a loss of how to proceed.

The intelligence director's face had long since darkened.

"Can you crack it or not? Don't waste my time."

Luo Xuan suppressed his irritation and, through gritted teeth, replied, "This encryption is too complex. I— I need more time."

"Enough. I don't have the time to wait for you. Just tell me your thoughts on the arm."

Luo Xuan face darkened in displeasure and he replied, frustrated, "The craftsmanship itself is nothing special. Only the encryption was well made. Feels like the creator is some bumpkin who treats garbage like treasure."

The intelligence director's eyes twitched, but he left without saying anything else. His men retrieved the Lightweight Mechanical Arm. His next plan was to perform actual combat testing at the Germinal bases that Han Xiao had revealed to them.

He was actually more interested in the rover; it was a shame it was burnt beyond recognition.

Division 13 may have been powerful and mighty, but one could never have enough new weapons.

"The research department is always allocated with the largest cut of the budget, yet those useless fools only know how to create useless crap like double-sided sticky bombs, curved guns that don't work at all, and fake nipples to hide poison needles! They even have male and female versions!"

The covert ops department had borne a grudge against the research team ever since two of their agents were self-poisoned due to a 'wardrobe malfunction'.

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Meanwhile, the director was making a phone call to the tall old man.

“I have ensured that Han Xiao will join the covert ops team.”

“Good work. Thank you.”

“Old man, is he really worth doing all this for?” asked the director curiously.

“Heh heh. Intel is not all he has to offer. I have a feeling that he will play a crucial role in the battle against the Germinal Organization.”

Chapter 34: Covert Operation

Elsewhere, ruined skyscrapers crawled with vines. Below, the streets were cold and empty, and fragments of broken glass littered the line of stores. The stores were in an utter mess; clearly, they had been plundered.

A piece of yellowed newspaper from who knows what year danced about on the streets, carried by the faint wind.

Moonlight filtered through the thick cloud of dust to lend the city some of its luster—the city’s only source of light.

This was an abandoned city. It had once belonged to a great nation, but even this great nation no longer existed, and its people had moved to other places. The living conditions here were so poor that even wanderers avoided this place.

Countless other cities had been similarly abandoned over the last few decades of change. As soon as the people left though, these forsaken jungles of concrete and steel became flourishing grounds for vegetation.

According to Han Xiao’s intel, the Germinal Organization had three bases within Stardragon territory. One of them was located here. The nation’s top brass had been both shocked and angered to learn of the presence of Germinal bases in the country. Within 24 hours, troops had been dispatched from the nearest military bases to attack.

Currently, the city was being bombarded. Over a dozen armored military vehicles had entered the city, and the sound of gunfire and cannon fire was incessant. Screams filled the night.

However, the surface battle was just a diversion.

3 covert ops agents had been tasked to infiltrate the base. They’d just arrived at a side entrance.

Li Ya Lin was an agent with level 4 clearance. A beautiful, young woman with extremely fair skin, she wore a yellow hoodie on top of black compression tights that accentuated her sexy, nose-bleed-inducing body. She had an athletic build.

Li Ya Lin held her hands up in the air as she stretched her back, demonstrating impressive flexibility in the beautifully arched, well-proportioned body of hers. She was clearly the most carefree and energetic of the trio.

She stopped chewing on her bubblegum to complain, “I was finally able to take a break because of my leader’s injury, but they call me back so suddenly for an emergency mission. Are agents not humans?”

Lambert continued to polish his dagger silently. Lambert was the ‘ace’ of a top-secret, unofficial squad during his time in the military, and he had been secretly transferred to the covert ops department after his ‘discharge’. He wore a military-style uniform, and on top of the dozen or so daggers strapped across his waist, there was a black sniper rifle across his back.

“This... this mission... seems to be very important,” stammered Li Yao, a 1.7 meters tall man who looked extremely young. He was the hacker of this three man cell, and carried a bag filled with the team’s tools. He was in the midst of hacking the door. It didn’t take him too long.

The trio exchanged glances before entering.

Li Ya Lin led the front while Lambert took the rear. They hacked through numerous high tech gates effortlessly as they made their way to the server room.

The Germinal Organization was very careful with its information. Once a base was compromised, they would cut off its access to their network, delete all traces of data, and activate an EMP blast to destroy the hardware. Hence, they had always remained elusive to the Six Nations – until Han Xiao arrived.

The trio swiftly arrived at Basement 2, where the server room was located. Suddenly, Lin Yao, who was monitoring the hacked feed, began to exclaim, “There are guards approaching from behind the...”

Before he could finish his sentence, a team of guards appeared in their sights!

Li Ya Lin was the quickest to react. She burst forward so quickly that the guards weren’t even able to draw their guns in time. Leaping gracefully into the air, Lin Ya Lin performed a mid-air split to kick the front two guards in their heads, snapping their necks instantly.

Her power was just as impressive as her flexibility.

She landed on her hands and used them as a pivot to spin her entire body. Her legs began to glow yellow as she extended them while spinning, easily sweeping through the crowd of guards.

“Pugilist!”

The last remaining guard was about to call for reinforcements when a streak of silver flashed across the corridor. A dagger pierced his throat, ending his life.

Lin Ya Lin and Lambert had effortlessly eliminated the fully-equipped squad of guards.

Suddenly, the lights in the corridor turned red as sirens began to wail.

“We’ve been discovered! There is a large number of guards heading towards us. The base is being locked down!” exclaimed Lin Yao.

“Hurry up and hack the server room’s doors!”

“I’m already on it! I need at least three minutes, but the guards will arrive in less than a minute! I can’t bypass the firewall in such a short time. Sor-sorry...” replied a profusely sweating Lin Yao as he frantically typed away at an unbelievable speed.

Very soon, they could hear the sound of footsteps coming from both ends of the corridor. There was no place to hide in the corridor. Although Li Ya Lin and Lambert were confident of killing their way out, the mission seemed like a lost cause.

“Oh right! Didn’t they give us some new equipment?” recalled Li Ya Lin suddenly. She hastily retrieved a long black case from Lin Yao’s bag and opened it to reveal a metallic mechanical arm.

The Lightweight Mechanical Arm!

“How is this thing supposed to be used? Did you guys read the manual?”

“Slide your left arm through it and activate it with your thumb!” replied Lin Yao hastily. “I don’t know if it will explode though... I mean, it is the research department...”

It was well known throughout Division 13 that anything the research department produced was risky to use.

“We don’t have a choice!” Li Ya Lin gritted her teeth as she slid her hand into the mechanical arm.

The mechanical arm started to whirl!

“I’m fine!” she rejoiced, a look of amazement on her face.

She smashed the mechanical arm into the steel door and discovered to her surprise that it had caused a huge dent, so she continued to throw punches at it.

Twenty seconds later, right as the guards arrived, the door was blasted open.

The trio hurriedly entered the room.

“That was close.”

Li Yao immediately got to work. Digital lockdown was 57% complete. If he were fast enough, he would not only be able to make a backup of the base’s data, but also use its access to hack directly into Germinal Organization’s vaults.

With the room acting as a fort, Li Ya Lin and Lambert were able to put their fearsome combat abilities to full use.

Li Yan Lin glowed with a yellow aura as she swiftly and gracefully dispatched of the invading guards with a metal baton on top of the Lightweight Mechanical Arm. Her blows were so powerful that they shattered the guards’ bones through their bullet-proof armor.

Meanwhile, Lambert was throwing his daggers out from inside the room. They rebounded to find their marks with frightening accuracy.

The pair was causing a massive number of casualties. Although the guards numbered over a hundred, they were unable to do anything.

Suddenly, the network access and power supply were cut off, and the whole place turned dark.

“Charge out!” yelled Li Ya Lin.

Lambert and Lin Yao followed closely as they battled their way out.

Screams filled the base.

When they finally escaped, Lin Yao collapsed feebly to the ground, still shaking in fear. Li Ya Lin and Lambert seemed accustomed to the sight.

Li Ya Lin fiddled around with the Lightweight Mechanic Arm. She had grown fond of it.

“I wonder who invented this mechanical arm. Could it be that Luo Xuan?” she wondered aloud.

“Who knows, but I did hear that he is slated to join covert-ops. It’s possible,” conjectured Lin Yao as Li Ya Lin gazed lovingly upon it.

Chapter 35: Han Xiao

The battle lasted for two hours, and it was Stardragon’s most successful operation to date; not only did they destroy an entire Germinal base, they also managed to collect large amounts of data. The top brass in Division 13 were pleased, and it wouldn’t have been possible without Han Xiao’s intel.

However, Han Xiao’s past and the Blackstar issue remained a mystery as the information that Lin Yao had collected naturally had no mention of them—the Blackstar message log was fabricated, while the Valkyrie experiments were top secret.

Back at headquarters, Li Ya Lin reluctantly returned the Lightweight Mechanical Arm.

“Was the mechanical arm useful?” her superior asked.

Li Ya Lin nodded.

“It’s all thanks to it that our mission was a success. Who created it?”

“That, I can’t tell you.”

Ya Lin’s eyes sparkled.

“That will depend on the higher-ups.”

Li Ya Lin gave up with harassing her tight-lipped superior and headed to the logistics department to look for Luo Xuan.

The covert-ops insignia on her chest ensured her smooth passage, ignoring the ongoing commotion caused by her very presence.

Although all the departments in Division 13 were equal in status, the covert-ops department was full of beautiful women—cough—elite agents, so they were looked up to by all the other departments.

Li Ya Lin suddenly turned around to the crowd following her and loudly declared, “I’m looking for Luo Xuan.”

Everyone looked towards Luo Xuan enviously, singling him out.

Is secret-ops here to recruit me? he wondered.

Suppressing his excitement, he answered, "I am Luo Xuan. How should I address you?"

"Li Ya Lin."

"What can I help you with?" asked Luo Xuan.

"Are you the one who invented that mechanical arm?"

Mechanical arm? Luo Xuan immediately thought of the Lightweight Mechanical Arm that had caused him to lose face.

Could it have malfunctioned? Luo Xuan celebrated inwardly.

"Was there some kind of problem?" he asked with a straight face.

"Nothing like that. I just found it very useful. I want to make a personal order."

Luo Xuan froze in embarrassment as snickers broke out in the crowd—he had been ranting loudly about how worthless he thought the mechanical arm was to the whole department.

"I didn't invent it," he replied with a forced smile.

"Then say so earlier! What a waste of my time."

Luo Xuan's face darkened.

Suddenly, Feng Jun, who had been passing by, came over and said, "The inventor's identity is top secret. Please refrain from guessing or discussing it."

Li Yan Lin was startled. *Top secret?*

As the crowd dispersed, all Luo Xuan could think about was the threat that this mysterious mechanic posed to him.

"I will not let him have a good time if he joins the logistics department!"

...

Elsewhere in a secret facility.

"Boss, base 45 has been destroyed."

"By whom?"

"Stardragon."

"How did they learn of our base?"

"Not sure."

The Germinal Organization's bases were scattered all across the globe. However, only a few of them were situated within the territory of the six nations, and those key bases virtually hibernated all year round to prevent detection!

"How could they have discovered our base? Is there a spy amongst us?"

Only a handful of higher-ups in the organization knew the locations of their secret bases. It would be devastating if any of them turned traitor.

The boss decided that he would have to conduct a purge.

Of course, Han Xiao did come to his mind. However, he ruled him out as it didn't seem possible for Han Xiao to have accessed top secret information as a lowly test subject.

Still, the thought of Han Xiao caused his blood to boil. It had been a while since the bounty was issued, yet there was still no news of him.

"You sure can run fast, but I'll squash you sooner or later. Enjoy your remaining days while you can."

The boss laughed coldly.

...

"Han Xiao has been missing for three days now. Where did he go?"

Lu Qian was anxiously pacing up and down.

"Did he lose his way? It's all my fault! I should have gotten him a mobile phone. You said he's a foreigner, right? He doesn't even know this place well! What should I do!"

"Be optimistic. Maybe he just died," consoled Old Man Lu.

"..."

"Grandpa! Why are you so biased against him?"

Old Man Lu continued picking his nose leisurely.

An idea crossed Lu Qian's mind.

"Grandpa! Help me ask someone to look for him!" she pleaded.

"You wish," snorted her grandpa. "Ha! When you stole my books, did you remember that I am your grandpa?"

"That's not important at all! I'm sorry. Forgive me?"

"No way."

"You really won't help?"

"I won't help!"

Suddenly, Lu Qian smiled shrewdly.

“Then I’ll help you sell all the fine wine that you’ve been hiding underneath the floor in your bedroom!”

“What are you talking about? Is your grandpa such a petty person? You just want to find him, right? I’ll do it, I’ll do it.” Old Man Lu instantly changed his tune.

“Thank you, grandpa,” replied Lu Qian with the widest smile.

Old Man Lu sighed. He proceeded to make a phone call to the tall, old man.

“Oi, old man, was Han Xiao taken away by you guys?”

“...You guessed?”

“What did he do?”

“He didn’t do anything; we just want to work with him.”

“If he didn’t do anything, then let him go right now, or else my granddaughter is going to ruin my wine collection!”

“I can’t. It’s against the rules.”

“Cut the bullshit! You are the one who sets the rules. You still owe me one for the last time, remember? I don’t care! Just release Han Xiao now!”

The tall, old man rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Alright, alright. I got it.”

Old Man Lu unhappily put the phone down.

“Why do I have to help that bugger?” he sighed, reminded of his own past.

Chapter 36: New Blueprints and New Terms

Han Xiao had been living in a luxurious one man cell for the past three days. He didn’t seem the least bit worried about his situation; instead, he was more concerned with getting stronger.

He was currently consulting the interface. Having accumulated a total of 90,000 experience recently, he decided to level Basic Combat (Lv. 8) to Lv. 9 before redeeming the Skill Level-up Card.

A glowing bronze card appeared in Han Xiao’s hand. With a thought, it dissipated into countless light particles that entered his forehead.

Han Xiao shuddered as a surge of energy welled up from within. When it stabilized, Han Xiao could feel that he had become stronger.

[Basic Combat Lv. 10 (max)]: +10% damage (unarmed), +2 STR, +1 END

Many skills gave stat bonuses at certain levels.

The level cap is just the beginning, eh.

Although Han Xiao's character level couldn't be increased any further for now, there were other ways to become stronger.

[Basic Combat] has been raised to max level! You have gained 1 talent point!

Alright! I have 16 talent points now!

Han Xiao also used some experience to raise Basic Shooting to Lv. 8, leaving him with 20,000 experience that he intended to gamble on blueprints.

While blueprints could be sold to other players for money and experience back in the game, NPC trading was monopolized by unions and guilds due to quotas.

Of course, that was not a problem for Han Xiao now, since he literally had no competitors. He intended to develop a large clientele, starting with Division 13.

Proceed with talent fusion:

[Basic Weaponry + Basic Assembly]

Y/N

(This combination will use 10,000 experience)

Confirm.

Congratulations! You have discovered [Foldable Machete]!

Proceed with talent fusion:

[Basic Weaponry + Basic Material Composition]

Y/N

(This combination will use 10,000 experience)

Confirm.

Congratulations! You have discovered [High-Explosive Gunpowder]!

Han Xiao's eyes lit up. [High-Explosive Gunpowder] was one of the better discoveries possible. Not only were its applications manifold, it was not hard to craft at all with the required knowledge. It had been one of the most traded goods back in the game.

The [Foldable Machete], on the other hand, was a disappointing discovery. As its name suggested, it was simply a machete with a foldable blade. It was clearly a weapon for beginners, and Han Xiao could have easily come up with something like this even without the blueprint!

If only I had discovered some long-range weapon instead of this... At least I got something decent.

Nevertheless, as it was something new to Aquamarine, it was not completely worthless. Just because all Mechanics learnt the same knowledge did not mean that they would create the same things. Before Han Xiao had transmigrated, tons of discoveries and inventions were still being made on a regular basis. Granted, not all of them were practical, but they at least gave rise to possibilities.

Han Xiao would have to make do and work with these two blueprints. During his time in the Germinal Organization, he had managed to accumulate 60,000 experience. He would definitely be able to earn much more here in Stardragon after joining Division 13.

Suddenly, the interface lit up.

Class-A Mission: [Fall of the Germinal]

Progress Rate: 1.6%

Looks like Division 13 has made their move!

Han Xiao was surprised by the number. Logically speaking—with how massive and powerful the Germinal Organization was—even destroying one of their bases shouldn't have that much of an impact on them as a whole.

In the game, the war between the Germinal Organization and the Six Nations had mostly been a back and forth, with neither side being able to hold a clear advantage. There was, however, a point of time in which the Six Nations were able to corner the Germinal Organization, and victory seemed all but assured. Yet, they were unable to end the war as the Germinal Organization had a trump card up its sleeve: Protocol Doomsday.

Hence, completing the mission would be impossible... unless Han Xiao could somehow shut the protocol down.

The doomsday protocol was a last resort, and although it saved the organization from destruction, many Germinal members were disillusioned and swayed as a result. Most of the people who join the Germinal

Organization are people who hold a grudge against the Six Nations, and believe in the promise of a new government. However, none of them would truly want to see the world burn. If I could expose the truth...

Han Xiao shook his head. It was way too early for him to be thinking of such things.

...

A few moments later, Feng Jun finally returned. He brought Han Xiao back to the interrogation room where the intelligence minister came to talk with him again.

“The locations of the bases have been confirmed. We believe in your sincerity now. The higher-ups have decided to make you a member of Division 13!”

I did it! Inwardly, Han Xiao sighed in relief.

Looks like getting on good terms with the tall oldie has paid off, he thought to himself. He knew that the tall old man definitely had a hand in this.

“...And the department has decided that you will join covert-ops. You will be assigned to a squad.”

What? Han Xiao’s expression spoke of his grievances.

The dawn of the new era had seen the loss of countless lives, resulting in a lack of manpower and talent. While this resulted in the Six Nations having to loosen their recruitment criteria across the board, the covert-ops department could never be compromised!

This definitely has to be the tall old man’s doing! thought Han Xiao. *Does he like me that much?*

Of course, being able to join covert-ops was a good thing. Not only would Han Xiao be able to get to know stronger, more influential people, he would also be able to directly partake in key events that would occur in Stardragon!

The interface lit up.

You have unlocked reputation with a new faction!

Your reputation with Stardragon Strategic Defense Division has increased by 300!

Stardragon Strategic Defense Division (Division 13): Neutral (300/1000) – Level 1 Clearance

There were 8 levels of reputation: Hated, Hostile, Opposed, Unfriendly, Neutral, Friendly, Honored, and Revered.

300 Reputation was ‘Neutral’. Most factions required a ‘Friendly’ reputation to access contribution benefits.

Feng Jun passed a black mobile phone to Han Xiao as he coughed, saying, “From today onwards, I will be your liaison. Never turn this off.”

“Oh, okay. It’s not actually important, right?” remarked Han Xiao aloofly.

“Why are you always so unpleasant to talk to?”

It was a plain looking phone with a plain looking interface, and was only capable of making calls and sending messages. Han Xiao played with the phone in his hands as he asked, “It’s secure, right?”

“Rest assured. It’s encrypted.

“One more thing,” interjected the intelligence minister. “I hope that you can give us your machinery blueprints, including the ones for the Lightweight Mechanical Arm and that rover you used.”

Although giving them the blueprints would earn him contribution points, it would also result in him losing monopoly over them. Division 13 would definitely mass produce them.

Han Xiao shook his head in refusal, and the minister simply shrugged.

At the end of the day, what they truly valued was the intel that Han Xiao possessed. If he was unwilling to give them the blueprints, then so be it.

“Oh right. What if an agent makes a private order with me?” he asked.

“We have no rules against that,” answered the minister, to Han Xiao’s delight.

Feng Jun proceeded to pull a black bag over Han Xiao’s head once more.

Chapter 37: Dirty Mind

The car stopped, and Han Xiao was pushed out with the black bag still over his head. When the car began to speed off, Han Xiao removed the black bag to find himself a few streets away from the workshop.

When he looked up, he could see several glistening moons in the night sky.

“Tsk. Why all the secrecy?” he muttered to himself.

Nevertheless, Han Xiao was feeling quite pleased for having accomplished his goal. He hummed merrily as he made his way back to the workshop. It was only when he reached the entrance that it dawned on him that going missing for 3 days would be hard to explain.

Han Xiao stepped inside the workshop to see an anxious Lu Qian pacing back and forth.

For some reason, she became enraged at the sight of him.

“Why did you only come back now? Do you know how worried I’ve been? You’re a foreigner! I thought something might have happened to you!”

Han Xiao put on his ‘huh, did something happen?’ expression and stared at her blankly.

“What exactly were you doing?”

“Taking a stroll.”

“Can you at least try to come up with a better excuse?”

“I thought... it’s quite a good excuse?”

“A gunfight at the junkyard was reported on the news yesterday. I thought you got caught in it or something and...” Lu Qian began nagging.

Being nagged at did not irritate Han Xiao at all; on the contrary, it gave him a warm and fuzzy feeling.

However, Old Man Lu appeared to ruin the moment.

“You came back alive? How disappointing.”

“I’ll get you a mobile phone over the next few days. The cost will be deducted from your salary,” said Lu Qian.

“There’s no need. I already have one,” replied Han Xiao as he whipped the black mobile phone out.

Although they had told him not to share the number with anyone else, screw Division 13!

When he saw the black phone, Old Man Lu gave a start. He pulled Han Xiao away to a corner.

“This is a Division 13 phone. You joined Division 13?”

“So you know what this is.”

“Hmph. Since you’ve joined Division 13... get the hell out of my workshop!”

“You can leave if you want to; I’m not leaving.”

“How dare you talk to me like that? Why would you even want to-”

Old Man Lu suddenly paused.

“Are you... trying to woo my granddaughter?” He glowered.

“No!” Han Xiao hastily answered.

Suddenly, however, Old Man Lu’s expression grew strange.

“Hey Little Han, now that I think about it... my granddaughter is not that young anymore. What do you think about her?”

Han Xiao immediately stiffened up.

“Old Lu, as the saying goes, a stolen melon is not sweet!”

“But at least you would have a melon! Besides, we need a boy to carry on the family name.”

We? Don’t drag me into your family tree!

“...”

“Heh heh. Strike while the iron is hot! There is only so much I can help you with,” he added while patting Han Xiao on the shoulder before heading upstairs, leaving Han Xiao utterly bewildered.

Old people who want descendants are scary!

Han Xiao turned around, and to his horror, Lu Qian had been standing behind him the entire time. She stared at Han Xiao with big, bright eyes that seemed to be on the verge of tears.

“This is a misunderstanding!”

“J-jerk!” Lu Qian covered her blushing face and ran upstairs.

“It’s not like that...”

...

For Luo Xuan, the next few days were restless ones. He was afraid that Han Xiao would join the logistics department and steal the limelight from him.

When it finally got to his head, he went to find a director to ask about Han Xiao.

“His information is classified,” the big-bellied logistics director, who always wore a smile on his face, said when he asked. “All I can tell you is that he’s joined Division 13.”

Luo Xuan’s heart sank when he heard the news.

“Will he join logistics, or research?”

The director shook his head.

“Neither. He’s joined covert-ops. He’ll start in a few days.”

The news stunned Luo Xuan.

How could some unknown guy who popped out of nowhere be directly recruited into secret ops? I’ve worked my ass for so many years, yet I’m still in research?

This is unfair!

...

One week after the junkyard incident, the underworld bosses of the six other districts gathered together to discuss an important issue, the disappearance of Raccoon.

Through piecing together bits of the puzzle, they were able to uncover that Division 13 had a hand in it, and this shocked all of them.

What exactly did Raccoon do to incur the wrath of the mighty lion?

“Raccoon must have offended Division 13 somehow. He is probably dead already,” declared the boss of District 2, who had initiated the meeting.

All of the bosses present had grave expressions. Although they usually acted high and mighty in front of their subordinates, they all knew that Division 13 could easily wipe any one of them out. They were really just small-time hoodlums.

After all, the Western Capital was the seat of the government, and they were just sewer rats hiding around. In fact, they could not even be compared to the intelligence and firearms brokers in the slums! At least those people had powerful backers.

“Who wants to take over District 7?” asked the District 2 boss.

Everyone remained silent.

“No one?”

Although the bosses usually fought amongst one another for territory, none of them dared to take over District 7 without understanding why Division 13 had taken action.

“Fine, then we will leave it open to new blood.”

Now that Raccoon was removed from the picture, there would definitely be ambitious people in his gang rising up to seize power. Of course, it was not that they were willing to let a new rival emerge. Instead, as the situation in District 7 was still unclear, they were just waiting to see what would happen. It would not be too late to get rid of the new boss as soon as everything stabilized.

...

Han Xiao’s life in the workshop returned to normal. After a few days, he asked for an advance of his first month’s pay to order some materials from Division 13.

At present, he was examining a dark red bullet lying on his palm. It was carved with flame patterns.

[High-explosive Bullet]: Causes an explosion in a 3 meter radius upon hitting the target.

Although it was a very simple description, it was actually extremely powerful.

High-explosive bullets incorporated extremely flammable incendiary gels and gases that could ignite far easier than traditional armor-piercing ammunition. They would explode immediately upon coming into contact with air, and the bullet itself would also be consumed in the explosion, leaving nothing behind.

The method to craft the incendiary agents was described in detail in the blueprint, and although Han Xiao was not able to understand it well, as he had not learnt [Basic Chemistry] yet, he was still able to craft it by following the instructions.

From handgun bullets to sniper bullets, over the next few days, Han Xiao crafted dozens of high-explosive bullets.

He also used some good quality metal to craft a 2.5kg, 0.65m Foldable Knife with 13-19 Damage. It was an entirely black knife with a triangular-tipped edge, and while it was not really ideal for combat, it did have some practical uses.

Han Xiao used the experience he gained from crafting the high-explosives and the foldable knife to raise [Machinery Affinity (Novice)] to Lv. 4.

[Machinery Affinity (Novice)] had a level cap of 5, which would take Han Xiao 15,000 experience. His [Basic Shooting] was now Lv. 8, and that would take another 45,000 experience to level up. In all, Han Xiao just needed 60,000 more experience to gain 2 more talent points.

Each of the Six Nations possessed different types of advanced knowledge that they used to entice powerful people to work for them. On Planet Aquamarine, there was only advanced knowledge for three of the five main classes: Pugilist, Mechanic, and Esper.

While no beginner planet possessed advanced knowledge of all 5 main classes, newcomers were always sent to planets based on their inputted preferences.

While Division 13 possessed advanced Mechanic knowledge, it was only accessible to 'revered' allies.

There was still a long way to go before Han Xiao became revered with Division 13.

Ever since the night that Han Xiao returned to the workshop, Lu Qian had not once looked at him directly in the eye, and would blush and run away from him after just a few sentences, making Han Xiao feel extremely irked. It did not help that Old Man Lu would pop up from time to time to give him knowing looks.

As for Lu Qian herself, she actually had mixed feelings about Han Xiao.

Of course, she did not hate Han Xiao. However, it was not like she liked him either.

Instead, she was more worried that Han Xiao would pack up and leave if she rejected him. After all, where else would she be able to find such a good (cheap) employee?

Suddenly, Han Xiao's mobile phone lit up.

The message read: 'The paperwork has been completed. Report today. – Feng Jun.'

"Finally."

Chapter 38: Covert-Ops Squad

Stardragon Tower was a top-secret government facility where the headquarters of Division 13 was located at. The inside of the tower was like a maze. Han Xiao followed Feng Jun through passageways and tunnels for half an hour before finally reaching the HQ. This time, he wasn't blindfolded.

"This place is so damn hard to access," complained Han Xiao.

"That's why it's safe," replied Feng Jun as he swiped his security pass over the sensor to unlock the giant automatic gate.

Han Xiao stepped through the gate into an extremely spacious hall bustling with people. To his surprise, despite being underground, Division 13 HQ was both well-lit and well-ventilated.

Feng Jun handed Han Xiao his security pass and a mouth mask.

"It's better not to reveal your face to too many people. Wear this."

Han Xiao was about to put it on when he noticed that there was a picture of a naked bodybuilder printed on it. He frowned and turned to see Feng Jun stifling his laughter.

“Why are you looking at me? Put it on quickly!”

“Hmph.”

Han Xiao suddenly yanked Feng Jun’s arm to rip out a piece of fabric from his sleeve.

“This thing suits you better,” he casually said as he tied it over his face and threw the custom mask back at him.

Feng Jun almost broke out into tears.

“This is my newly issued uniform...”

Suddenly, Han Xiao felt someone watching him. He looked around to find an unfamiliar young man wearing a white coat glaring at him hatefully.

“What’s he so angry about?” asked Han Xiao, bewildered.

Feng Jun laughed bitterly.

“He... just ignore him.”

Luo Xuan had never seen Han Xiao’s face before, but he knew for certain that the person beside Feng Jun was him.

...

The covert-ops department had a single floor all to themselves. It was noticeably less crowded than the other departments.

Feng Jun brought Han Xiao to a meeting room before leaving.

Han Xiao stepped through the door to see that there were already three people seated inside. They were none other than Li Ya Lin, Lambert, and Li Yao.

“You’re the logistics guy that the director gave special permission to join our team?”

Li Ya Lin rose up to circle around Han Xiao as she examined him.

Han Xiao raised an eyebrow. Special permission? Logistics guy? Suddenly, he noticed that the woman who had spoken to him was not only slender and perky, but extremely pretty. In Han Xiao’s books, she was easily up there with Hila. She was wearing a yellow sports-style jacket on top of black tights.

“I am Han Xiao, a mechanic.”

Li Yao abruptly stood up, knocking his chair down in the process.

“Ni-ni-nice to meet you. I am Li Yao, the team’s hacker,” he introduced, stretching out a hand.

“I am the sniper, Lambert,” introduced Lambert plainly without getting up.

Han Xiao shook Li Yao's hand and casually acknowledged Lambert with a nod. He was obviously the silent type.

"Hey, why are you wearing a mask?" asked Li Ya Lin with big, bright, curious eyes as she reached out to pull Han Xiao's mask off.

Han Xiao dodged.

"Why are you hiding your face! Don't you trust us?" Li Ya Lin questioned unhappily.

"My identity is top-secret," Han Xiao replied.

Although being assigned to this team would have to mean that these people were trustworthy, Han Xiao still felt that not revealing his face would save him some trouble. He could imagine the questions they would have for him after learning of his face...

"Aren't you that wanted fugitive?"

"Why would Division 13 want you?"

"What did you do to the Germinal Organization?"

Answering all those questions would be a real headache.

Besides, Han Xiao did not plan to stay in Division 13 for too long.

"Your identity is top-secret? Hold on..." Li Ya Lin seemed to recall something, and she jumped in front of Han Xiao, asking, "Were you the one who made the Lightweight Mechanical Arm?"

Han Xiao gave a start.

"How do you know?"

"Ha ha! So it's you!" Li Ya Lin jumped about excitedly before slinging an arm over Han Xiao's shoulder.

"Make another one for me!"

Han Xiao's mouth twitched.

"It won't be free."

Li Ya Lin laughed loudly before asking softly, "Can I have a discount?"

"No."

"You miser!"

"I still don't know your name." This overly friendly pretty lady was giving him quite a headache.

"Li Ya Lin, in charge of close combat," she reluctantly answered.

"So the four of us are a team?"

"No, there's still our leader."

"Where is he?"

“He’s not here. He’s recovering from an injury.”

“Even the leader gets injured. Covert-ops must be some dangerous work,” remarked Han Xiao.

The trio exchanged awkward glances.

“The leader is sick from food poisoning,” explained Li Yao.

“...”

Han Xiao was speechless.

Li Yao coughed dryly.

“The covert-ops department takes on special high difficulty missions. Each team contains 4-7 people, and other than completing the missions assigned to us each month, we are basically free to do whatever we want in our free time,” he began to explain.

“Covert-ops personnel are the cream of the crop. Some of us, like Uncle Lambert, are recruited from other organizations. He was recruited in from a special forces squad. Your designation is field support. You will be in charge of equipment, scheduling, and, during operations, gathering and organizing intel. You’ll be our eyes and ears from now on.”

That’s nice and all... thought Han Xiao, but I want to hunt monsters!

Nevertheless, he could understand why Division 13 arranged things like this – they would rather not put a valuable asset like him in the face of danger.

Well, at the end of the day, Han Xiao not only gained their protection, but also a platform to make some money, so he was satisfied.

Mechanics were really too weak early on compared to pugilists or espers, so crafting was much more efficient for them to earn experience.

“Does our team have a name?” asked Han Xiao.

“Team name? What use would that have?” replied a still displeased Li Ya Lin.

“That’s true...” muttered Han Xiao.

Suddenly, Li Yao interrupted, “We were just issued a mission to take in Black Spider. Apparently, he’s still hiding here in the Western Capital.”

Han Xiao raised an eyebrow. The timing of the mission was too sudden. It was probably deliberately assigned by the higher-ups.

“Black Spider?” Li Ya Lin wondered aloud. “I know him. He’s infamous for being a solo bounty hunter. The last time those field agents tried to bring him in he blew up two whole streets. Why would he still hide here in the capital?”

“When will we depart?” Lambert asked.

“There’s no rush. Since they’ve already confirmed his location, let’s just act at night.”

“Since this is your first mission, just familiarize yourself with the logistics preparation.”

Although it was their first meeting, the trio did not inquire too much about Han Xiao’s identity. To be assigned to covert-ops already meant that the higher-ups trusted him, and that was enough.

[You have triggered the Class-E mission, [Black Spider]. Accept/Decline]

Accept.

Mission Hint: Black Spider is a notorious murderer and bounty hunter. This is your first mission with the covert-ops department. Your responsibility is to help the team succeed.

Mission Requirement: Defeat Black Spider

Reward: 5,000 experience

Bonus Reward: 40,000 experience or Mind Stabilizer

Chapter 39: First Operation (Part 1)

Black Spider? Isn’t that a mini-boss? thought Han Xiao to himself.

Black Spider was an Esper who was regarded as one of the ‘Hardest Bosses to Kill in Version 1.0’.

Normally, a mini-boss quest at Han Xiao’s current level would be at least Class-D, and reward way more experience. However, in Galaxy, quests rewards were automatically adjusted according to character level and roles.

Generally, in a party quest, players who contributed the most damage or healing would earn the most experience. It was a system that prevented experience leeching.

I guess it’s still better than nothing, Han Xiao consoled himself.

From what Han Xiao knew about Black Spider, this mission would be a piece of cake for his team. However, the bonus reward was a different question. Han Xiao knew for sure that the condition for the bonus reward would be to take Black Spider in alive, but it could prove difficult to accomplish as Black Spider was in fact a superhuman, and his abilities made him much harder to catch than to defeat. As of now, only Han Xiao knew about the fact that he was a superhuman. In the game, it would only be revealed later on after launch.

On the other hand, since Han Xiao had a complete understanding of the extent of Black Spider’s abilities, it was still possible to catch him.

“How much will you charge me?” asked Li Ya Lin all of a sudden. She was clearly still hung up on the Lightweight Mecha Arm.

“One Lightweight Mecha Arm will cost 20,000. 10,000 upfront, plus materials, and I’ll make you one in two days.”

Li Ya Lin pouted. Although it was almost a month of her wage, she was still bent on having it.

“Do you have anything else for now?”

Han Xiao pondered for a moment before whipping out what seemed to be a 10 centimeter black knife handle without a blade.

“What’s this for?” asked Li Ya Lin uncertainly.

Han Xiao chuckled and pressed a small switch on the handle. Instantly, a blade shot out from within it, transforming the stick into a 70 centimeter sharp knife.

“This is a retractable knife.”

For Li Ya Lin, it was love at first sight. The reason she favored her baton was due to its portability, and the retractable knife took it one step further. It was as concealable, yet stronger. Just as she was about to grab it out of Han Xiao’s hands, Han Xiao dodged.

“1,000 for one,” he stated with a straight face. In truth, it had only costed him 300 to make.

“You stingy miser! Money-face!” Li Ya Lin scolded as she forked out the money.

As she started to play around with the knife, Lambert suddenly spoke.

“I want ten but shorter. Around 30 cm.”

Han Xiao was overjoyed.

“No problem!”

“I want them ready for tonight.”

“As long as I have the materials.”

“I want one, too!” Lin Yao exclaimed, to Han Xiao’s surprise. For some reason, this beginner weapon was turning out to be quite the hot item.

What Han Xiao did not know was that innovation was stifled in Division 13 – and it probably had something to do with the research department. Furthermore, the type of complex missions that secret-ops typically performed restricted their choice of equipment.

Most agents’ preferred weapon of choice for close combat was the dagger, so Han Xiao’s retractable knife was quite a game changer. Imagine if, during a mission, your enemy whipped out his 10 cm dagger, and you whipped out your meter long knife.

Longer is always more impressive.

...

After acquiring the materials from Lambert and Li Yao, Han Xiao headed over to the private workshop at the logistics department to get the knives crafted.

In one afternoon, Han Xiao earned 11,000 Aquamarine Dollars and even earned quite a bit of experience in the process: 8,000 in total.

“Not bad at all. Looks like Division 13 will be the goldmine that I expected it to be.”

After getting suited up, the trio departed for the city to hunt Black Spider. Han Xiao, though, stayed behind in the HQ to provide support, intel, and instructions.

Li Ya Lin, Lambert, and Li Yao all had cameras and mics attached to them, and their feeds were directly wired to Han Xiao. He could clearly see whatever they were seeing, and in some sense, his job was to act as a director of sorts.

Of course, as Han Xiao was new to the squad, he did not expect them to fully trust his judgement. Furthermore, it was an easy mission that all of them knew the higher-ups meant as a trial. While they did not object to Han Xiao playing captain, whether they would listen to him was another matter. They would still follow their own judgement no matter what, and Han Xiao fully knew this.

Nonetheless, Han Xiao was not only quite experienced as a captain – having led 50 men raids back in Galaxy – he was basically omniscient, and this alone made him the best person for the job.

...

Night had fallen.

Three people arrived at the dirty, wet streets of District 8. As it was night, the streets were empty, and the streetlights flickered ominously.

District 8 was vastly different from the other districts. The buildings here were shabby, and some did not even have proper roofs – instead, metal sheets and cloth could be seen covering the houses. Laundry was hanging up all over the place, and the streets were uncleaned and full of litter. This was a place that could hardly be called safe. Drug dealers and the like all thrived in this district, and it was to no one’s surprise that Black Spider would hide here.

The trio were fully equipped – even Li Yao. Although he was a hacker – and also a coward – he was still able to wield a gun.

Chapter 40: First Operation (Part 2)

“That apartment building ahead is Black Spider’s hiding spot. He should be on the third floor. We need to approach silently,” said Li Ya Lin to Lambert and Li Yan.

“There’s no point in acting stealthy,” interrupted Han Xiao through the intercom. “Black Spider has already discovered you all.”

“How do you know?” Li Ya Lin frowned.

Suddenly, gunfire pierced the silence of the night as a storm of bullets rained upon the trio. They immediately jumped into the nearest alley to seek cover.

The trio exchanged serious looks as they leaned against the wall.

Since when did he notice us?

While a simple ambush like that would never have been enough to do them in, they would not have been able to react so fast without Han Xiao's warning. Li Ya Lin put her game face on and clamped her earpiece tighter.

There was a man standing on top of the tall building from where the shots had come from smiling frenziedly upon the trio's location with an assault rifle in his hands. On the left side of his face was a tattoo of a black spider. With a wave of his hand, ten masked men armed with guns suddenly jumped out of their hiding spots in the nearby streets and alleys to converge on the alley that the trio was in.

"Our intel was wrong! Wasn't he alone?" Lin Yao's eyes were wide with disbelief.

Li Ya Lin's heart sunk.

Black Spider began to laugh coldly.

"Did you think that I would continue staying here if I was not prepared? You guys got me good the other time, but now that you have all kindly offered yourselves up, I shall have my revenge!"

Black Spider was widely known to be an independent bounty hunter, and his modus operandi was to set up traps before the battle even broke out. The trio were akin to prey stepping into a spider's web.

Li Ya Lin suddenly turned to face the wall and, as her leg began to glow yellow, smashed it down with a powerful kick to obstruct the enemy's vision.

Low level pugilists relied mainly on their abnormally huge power. Li Ya Lin was a Lv. 25 E-class superhuman with over 300 on.

Black Spider and his agents suppressed the trio with overwhelming gunfire as they converged onto the alleyway.

Li Ya Lin and Lambert dragged Lin Yao with them as they made use of their surroundings to evade the gunfire. While they were able to dodge all the bullets, they soon found themselves cornered in a dead end; Black Spider and his men had sealed off the alley.

Black Spider closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"My insects, you must be trembling with fear now," he said frenziedly.

"Do you think you've won?" replied Li Ya Lin tauntingly as she shot a glance at Lambert.

Black Spider turned around to face his men as he opened up his arms.

"I just need to say give the order and you will become minced meat in an instant. I do think I've won, don't you?"

"Then what are you waiting for?" glowered Li Ya Lin.

Black Spider waved a finger.

"Killing you all will do me no good. I'll ransom you for a tidy sum!" he proudly declared, knowing full well that Division 13 could hear him through the trio's intercom.

“But only one of you is enough!” he suddenly broke out in maniacal laughter.

Just as he was about to give the order to fire, Li Ya Lin jumped onto the wall, and, as her legs began to glow yellow, she sprung forward, soaring in the air like a graceful swallow to close in on Black Spider and his men.

“Kill her!” Black Spider frantically ordered. His men began to fire at Li Ya Lin, and while a few bullets managed to find their mark despite her being fast to the point of becoming a blur, they simply flattened into metal pancakes upon hitting her clothes.

Not only was the fabric of Li Ya Lin’s bodysuit weaved with bulletproof ceramic fiber, her own body itself was tough enough to deflect bullets. From the start, the trio had only been fleeing to bait in Black Spider and all of his men.

As Li Ya Lin distracted them, Lambert whipped out two knives with each hand and threw them out, killing four men instantly.

Li Ya Lin drew the sheathed retractable knife from her waist and slashed at the nearest agent. The agent threw his head back slightly, thinking that it would be enough to dodge, but, suddenly, a 10 cm blade extended out to rip his throat open.

“Excellent weapon!” remarked Li Ya Lin with shining eyes.

What happens when a gunman comes into the range of a pugilist goes without saying. Thirty seconds later, there was blood splattered everywhere, and only Black Spider, with both hands chopped off, remained.

Li Ya Lin exhaled as she sheathed the retractable knife. She clearly looked pleased with it.

“Well done,” praised Han Xiao. He had chosen to remain silent during the fight so as not to bother them.

“Thank— thank you,” Li Yao stammered.

“Not you.”

Li Yao lowered his head in depression. He had truly not contributed anything at all during the fight.

The heavily wounded Black Spider began to laugh hoarsely as he glared at Li Ya Lin without a single trace of fear in his eyes.

“Little brat, you guys can’t kill me,” he taunted.

Suddenly, Lambert whipped out his gun to shoot Black Spider in the head. Blood splattered across the floor as Black Spider’s body collapsed to the ground.

Li Ya Lin and Li Yao turned to look at him speechlessly.

“Can’t know until you try,” he stated plainly.

“Ay... whatever. They didn’t tell us to take him in alive anyway,” said Li Ya Lin as she lazily stretched her back. “Ah! I want to go back to take a shower! All of this blood is so smelly.”

Suddenly, however, Han Xiao spoke.

“Don’t let your guard down. He’s not dead yet.”

Li Ya Lin almost stumbled backwards in her stretch.

“How can he be alive?” she fumed as she pointed at what remained of Black Spider’s head.

“He is a superhuman with some tricky abilities. Unmask the corpse next to him. You will understand,” replied Han Xiao calmly.

“But there isn’t any piece of news on the dark web that says Black Spider is a superhuman,” hesitated Li Yao. “You might be mistaken.”

“Not might, he is definitely mistaken,” added a disgruntled Li Ya Lin. “Hey, newbie, I know you want to earn some credit, but don’t make these kind of things up!”

Han Xiao was speechless.