

First Order 1001

Chapter 1001 - Bullying With Numbers

A huge fire suddenly broke out in the garrison base of Stronghold 73. The Zhou Consortium had used a lot of fireproof materials during the initial construction of the base to prevent fire outbreaks.

It was not a natural disaster this time but someone deliberately setting the base on fire using highly flammable explosives. At this moment, the garrison troops in the military base started rushing to the scene of the fires. A soldier had witnessed only five arsonists that he said were responsible for the fire, but all of them were extremely agile and could not be caught by ordinary people.

After the five arsonists set the garrison base on fire, they left while an entire company of troops chased after them.

Outside of the base was a residential area. The five arsonists easily scaled an apartment complex and got onto the roof.

The Zhou Consortium's troops behind them stared at the five-story residential building in disbelief. Although it was not very tall, they could not figure out how to climb it.

Normally, they would also undergo professional climbing training to cope with complex terrain operations.

But there weren't even any external pipes on the walls for them to grab onto. They could not understand how those five people had managed to climb up!

The officer in charge of the pursuit shouted, "Don't bother climbing up. We'll just pursue them on the ground. We can block them at the small street up ahead. They can't continue leaping across the roofs."

As he spoke, hundreds of Zhou Consortium soldiers started running quickly. One of the combat platoons even advanced at full speed just so they could intercept the other party when they reached that street junction.

The street that lay between the five arsonists' escape route was at least 12 meters wide, so it would be impossible for normal people to leap across the roofs of the buildings to reach the other side.

The pursuing troops on the ground could occasionally see some figures bounding across the rooftops of the buildings in front of them. To the officer's surprise, they were moving much faster than expected!

Although both parties were about to reach the street up ahead, the Zhou Consortium's troops were still unable to close the distance between themselves and the arsonists.

The officer said, "Don't be anxious. Wait until they're down on the ground before shooting right at them! We'll get an angle on them then!"

But the moment he finished speaking, the group of five on the rooftop jumped at the same time when they reached the last residential building facing the street!

The 12-meter wide street was like an abyss, but they crossed it as though they were wild geese soaring over!

The Zhou Consortium's officer was stunned. Were they still normal people? Could all five of them be superhumans?!

But which organization dared to wreak havoc in Stronghold 73 so wantonly? They even found five superhumans to carry out a mission together?

While they were momentarily stunned, a Zhou Consortium officer rushed out from the side. He had the rank of lieutenant colonel on his uniform.

A soldier exclaimed, "It's Zhou Lin, the superhuman from the garrison troops. He's chasing after them!"

This lieutenant colonel of the Zhou Consortium's troops named Zhou Lin strode forward in large strides. As he passed through the streets and continued his pursuit, he could hear the exclamations of the soldiers behind him. He sneered without looking back.

Zhou Lin plunged after them into the alley across the street. But he suddenly realized he had been followed by a young man who was right behind him.

Meanwhile, the five arsonists he was pursuing had stopped in their tracks and turned around to look at him mockingly.

One of them even smiled at the young man behind him and said, "Qin Sheng, block his escape route so he doesn't get away."

"Got it, Brother Qingxi," Qin Sheng answered.

Zhang Qingxi said to Li Yinglong nearby, "Qin Sheng is really gifted. Ever since becoming a Rider, his physical condition has improved much faster than ours. His martial aura is also more ferocious than ours."

Li Yinglong lamented, "Yeah, this kid didn't look like he had any talent back then."

There was also a difference in strength between the Riders, and this was determined by their individual talent. After they became Riders, some of their physical attributes would be locked at close to a T5 combatant's level while others might continue getting stronger.

Qin Sheng had already surpassed Zhang Qingxi and Li Yinglong in less than a year after becoming a Rider.

Zhou Lin sized up the six people coldly before asking a very dumb question. "Why aren't you guys fleeing anymore?"

"We only have to flee if we can't beat you. But since we can, there's no need for us to run." Zhang Qingxi explained with a laugh, "I'm more curious about you. What gave you the courage to pursue us by yourself? Do you think we're pushovers?"

Honestly, if the Riders wanted to wreak havoc in a stronghold, they would be very tough to deal with.

Standard troops couldn't catch up to them, and even superhumans could get killed if they went after them in fewer numbers and got outfought.

Nowadays, the 12 Riders always acted together whenever there was a mission. All across the world, there were no consortiums that could keep 12 superhumans stationed in a stronghold to deal with the threat of the Riders.

If it were any other superhuman, they might not be able to freely travel through the city and might even get surrounded by troops on the ground.

But since these people were into extreme sports, traversing across rooftops was almost like running on flat ground to them.

At this moment, another two Riders appeared in the alley. They were Xu Ke and Wen Meng.

However, Xu Ke and Wen Meng were still wrapped up in bandages. Xu Ke had his left arm in a sling, while Wen Meng limped about. It seemed they had been injured while assisting the evacuation of the Pyro Company and the refugees.

When Zhou Lin saw their numbers increasing, he felt a little helpless. More importantly, they were asking each other about the progress of their missions while utterly disregarding him.

Zhang Qingxi said, "I wonder if Wu Dingyuan has completed his mission yet. Should we go and assist him?"

Just as Zhou Lin was about to say something, he felt a brush of wind behind him. Reflexively, he backflipped to dodge the attack. But all the Riders around him suddenly rushed forward and beat him to the ground. It happened so fast he did not even have time to use his power.

Whenever he tried to concentrate on using his superpower, a fist would land on him and disrupt his power!

Even with the Riders outnumbering him seven to one, they still resorted to unorthodox tactics like distracting him and attacking from behind!

How dishonorable!

It wasn't until Zhou Lin was beaten to death that Wu Dingyuan and Huang Xiaoyu finally rushed over and joined them. The two of them said, "Target eliminated."

The person they had killed was the highest-ranking military commander, Zhou Yifei.

During this operation, five of them were in charge of starting a fire to distract the reinforcements, while Qin Sheng and two other wounded Riders were responsible for providing support. Meanwhile, Wu Dingyuan and Huang Xiaoyu were responsible for carrying out the decapitation strike on their target.

Li Yinglong nodded. "According to Xiaosu, Zhou Shiji will definitely head to the safe house after receiving news of what happened to the garrison."

"Where are we heading next? Should we go join up with him? And when should we tell him about what we discussed previously?" Zhang Qingxi asked.

"Let's deal with the Zhou Consortium first," Li Yinglong replied.

Before this, the Riders had split from the Qinghe Group completely. Moreover, they sent a warning to the rest of the world that they would fight anyone who tried to target Luoyang City to the death.

Iff they just stuck to their role of defending the stronghold, their strength would be very weak since they could not take on the main forces of the consortiums. But if they were used for causing destruction, no consortium could withstand their attacks.

The reason why the Zhou Consortium paid so much attention to concealing their identity in the assassination of Jiang Xu was that they were worried the Riders would take revenge on them.

Now that the Riders had found out who their enemy was, they had to teach them a bloody lesson to live up to their declaration so others would not dare target Luoyang City again.

Chapter 1002 - Wait For Him On The Bridge

Stronghold 73 was in complete chaos now. The garrison base that was set on fire, and the assassination of the highest-ranking military commander, Zhou Yifei, had a much greater impact on the stronghold than the Riders had expected.

Suddenly, alarms went off everywhere inside the stronghold. The bell used to signal the time in the center of Stronghold 73 was struck 12 times to alert the Zhou Consortium's troops.

The garrison troops who were scattered across the stronghold started mustering while a large number of staff members started burning documents in Zhou Shiji's official residence.

They sent truckloads of documents to the incinerator at the official residence's backyard, along with computers, flash drives, and paper documents. All confidential documents above Class C had to be destroyed.

Ren Xiaosu, Yang Xiaojin, and the 12 Riders, a total of 14 people, had come to Stronghold 73. No one expected them to arrive so quickly, nor did anyone expect that just the 14 of them could cause such a huge impact on a stronghold.

These were 14 supernatural beings, and everyone was finally reminded of Ren Xiaosu's nickname as well.

They also remembered the threats made by the Riders when they left Luoyang City.

When the Riders left, they attacked some military facilities of the Zhou Consortium, the Kong Consortium, and the Wang Consortium before disappearing without a trace. The Riders knew full well that only by working behind the scenes would they be most threatening.

However, they still did not expect that someone would assassinate Jiang Xu in Luoyang City when they had already issued those threats. This made the Riders exceptionally furious.

Perhaps the Riders were not enough to destroy the entire Zhou Consortium. But after this incident, the Zhou Consortium would definitely decline under pressure from the Wang Consortium.

In the era of the "Rise of Gods," a single person's rage could cause blood to be spilled across hundreds of miles.

Before Xu Ke took over the Qinghe Group, Jiang Xu remained true to his belief in that old and run-down newspaper firm that the truth had to be reported. At that time, Xu Ke's father had even brought young Xu Ke to the newspaper firm and said to him, "Greet uncle. This uncle is a really impressive man."

At that time, Hope Media was still an impoverished newspaper firm. Jiang Xu and Ji Yi had to endure the extremes of winter and summer while working in their office. Although Xu Ke's father wanted to help Jiang Xu, he did not have the courage to face the pressure from the various consortiums.

It was only after Xu Ke took over the reins of the Qinghe Group 14 years ago that the current Hope Media was established. He used the Qinghe Group's seven satellites to help Jiang Xu deliver his

manuscripts on time. Only then did Hope Media become widely known and was able to publish their newspapers to every stronghold.

As Xu Ke was a Rider, he was more courageous than his father.

Xu Ke still had feelings for Hope Media and Jiang Xu. If he knew that someone would assassinate Jiang Xu, he would definitely have remained behind at Luoyang City.

Unfortunately, there were no "ifs" to speak of in the world. At that time, there were too many escapees in the north who needed their help.

It was extremely tough for the women and children escapees during an evacuation, as their safety could not be ensured, and the Pyro Company troops might even be attacked by the expeditionary army's guerrilla troops. Since the Riders were aware of all these matters, they had to go and help them.

There was already a garrison of over a 1,000 soldiers standing guard outside Zhou Shiji's official residence.

Zhou Shiji was sitting in his office and brooding over something. He wore a tight-fitting suit and did not have a hair out of place.

His aide-de-camp knocked on the door and entered. "Sir, we should leave. The safe house in the official residence is no longer going to help us deal with the enemy this time. We must go now."

There was a safe house in the basement of the official residence, and there was plenty of water and food inside to last Zhou Shiji until the main forces arrived.

However, everyone knew all about the enemy they were facing this time, so it was decided it would be too dangerous to remain here and defend from a fixed location.

Zhou Shiji stood up. He arranged all the papers and pens on the table neatly before walking out calmly.

As the highest-ranking official of the Zhou Consortium, how chaotically would the people under him react if he started panicking first?

The outside of the official residence was covered with loosely laid white pebbles and beautiful pine trees around it. The stone pebbles were washed on a fixed schedule weekly, so they always looked smooth and white.

Zhou Shiji walked out of the official residence and got into a bulletproof car. The long convoy of vehicles then advanced towards the south of the stronghold under the protection of the garrison troops.

Zhou Shiji asked, "Is Zhou Yifei confirmed dead?"

"Affirmative, sir."

"And Zhou Shoushi as well?"

"Yes."

Zhou Shiji thought for a moment before saying, "Then we can't head to Safe House 7 anymore. This retreat route was personally drawn up by Zhou Shoushi. Right now, the enemy will definitely know that's where we're heading."

Zhou Shiji's secretary was taken aback. "You think that Zhou Shoushi will betray you?"

Zhou Shiji laughed. "You think he won't? Let's reroute. We'll leave the stronghold in the opposite direction and join up with the main forces directly. I believe the enemies have already gathered at Safe House 7."

The secretary picked up the walkie-talkie. "We're shifting to Plan C. We'll leave the stronghold via Mulan Avenue. Tell the main forces rushing over from the North to hurry up and ask them when they can pick us up!"

Zhou Shiji looked out the car window. He and Zhou Shoushi had worked together for nearly 20 years and would often second-guess one another's intentions. They even sometimes plotted against each other. It wasn't all united within the consortium.

In his opinion, Zhou Shoushi was a spineless man, so it would not be unusual if he betrayed his comrades in the face of danger.

Therefore, Zhou Shiji could not follow the contingency plan drafted by Zhou Shoushi to retreat now that real danger had arrived. This was especially so when the enemy had gotten to Zhou Shoushi first.

But at this moment, when the convoy of vehicles passed under the Sanjintan Interchange, a huge shadow suddenly leaped down from the bridge.

The garrison troops at the rear shouted over the convoy radio, "Vehicles in front, take avoidance measures! There's an armored being attacking from the bridge above!"

The armored being they were referring to was naturally Ren Xiaosu in his nanomachine suit.

Not only was Ren Xiaosu already waiting here in his armor, he also had his black saber drawn. He was intending to pull Zhou Shiji out of the bulletproof car.

Although the car might be bulletproof, it would not stop the black saber from cutting through it.

Not only that, but the sound of a sniper rifle firing in the distance also rang out. The sniper who was stationed atop a tall building also started taking revenge.

The 12 Riders appeared on the periphery of the battlefield. Instead of engaging in close combat, they had hidden in a residential building and were shooting at the enemies through the windows.

Perhaps Zhou Shiji had not expected Ren Xiaosu to actually appear here.

Just as Zhou Shiji understood Zhou Shoushi, so did Zhou Shoushi.

Before dying, Zhou Shoushi specifically told Ren Xiaosu, "Remember, Zhou Shiji and I have worked together for over 20 years, but we've also fought for as long. If he knows you've already gotten to me, he definitely won't head for the safe house in the south. Because I was the one who prepared that location for him.

"The main forces of the Zhou Consortium's reinforcements currently on their way over from the North are an armored brigade, so they are definitely the ones closest to getting to Stronghold 73. Zhou Shiji will definitely head north and pass through the Sanjintan Interchange!

"I'll leave you to wait for him on the bridge while I wait for him in hell."

At the time, Ren Xiaosu felt those two people were probably a couple in their previous lives.. They had such a love-hate relationship with each other that before Zhou Shoushi died, he even insisted on bringing Zhou Shiji down with him, even if that meant destroying the Zhou Consortium.

Chapter 1003 - Cheers

The armored being dropped from the bridge like a rock and landed precisely on top of the bulletproof car Zhou Shiji was riding in. Everything appeared to be executed with extreme precision under Ren Xiaosu's control.

In the vehicles at the rear that were responsible for escorting Zhou Shiji, the soldiers raised their guns and got ready to shoot when they saw the armored being dropping down from above.

But it was too late to do anything. Ren Xiaosu raised the black saber in his hand high. The moment he swung it down, he channeled his strength from his hips, abdomen, and arm at the same time, gathering all of it at the tip of the saber.

With a screech, the sound of metal being cut could be heard. Many of the soldiers could not help but clap their hands over their ears. The screeching sounded as though it could pierce everyone's hearts.

The driver's terrified screams could be heard coming from the bulletproof car. After the black saber pierced the roof, it immediately stabbed into Zhou Shiji's chest.

However, Ren Xiaosu still could not put his mind at ease. He forcefully cut open the top of the bulletproof car and confirmed that Zhou Shiji was really dead through the hole in the roof.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Shiji, who was lying in the vehicle with his heart pierced. Zhou Shiji's blood flowed out from his chest and stained his spotless white shirt red, dirtying his neat suit as well.

"The target is dead. Let's pull back. Xiaojin, retreat towards Zone 28. I'll pick you up on the way." After saying that over the radio, Ren Xiaosu sheathed his saber and turned around.

The entire highway was surrounded by the garrison troops, and a dense hail of bullets formed a huge net of firepower around Ren Xiaosu. However, Ren Xiaosu did not intend to continue pestering them. Instead, he turned around and ran towards a residential building near the road.

His tough, armored fingers of his armor dug deep into the walls as he climbed up towards the roof with his bare hands before disappearing.

This assassination attempt started and ended quickly. Ren Xiaosu did not waste time debating Zhou Shiji, nor did he even give him a chance to scream before he ended his life.

This left the garrison troops who had wanted to engage in an intense battle with Ren Xiaosu's armored being a little dumbfounded. They looked in the direction where Ren Xiaosu had disappeared and thought, 'You're leaving just like that?'

Before this, many of them thought the other party would surely not be so bold as to assassinate the head of a consortium.

But it was only now that they realized that in this era of "individual" power, it was no longer a myth that a general's head could be taken despite being protected by 10,000 soldiers.

It was no wonder Qing Zhen had concealed his own whereabouts. That move could only be attributed to his foresight.

Currently, there were also a lot of people who wanted to assassinate Qing Zhen. Unfortunately, they could no longer track where he was. Some of these people who wanted to kill him were even members of the Qing Consortium.

The garrison troops started chasing in the direction Ren Xiaosu and the Yang Xiaojin had disappeared off to. Some of them even surrounded the building where the Riders were hiding in an attempt to capture them.

But the Riders scattered and escaped even faster than rabbits ran. They were just like monkeys returning back to nature as they disappeared from the sight of the garrison troops.

The garrison troops could not understand what they were seeing. Why did one of the Riders have a bandage wrapped around his arm? How was someone with a broken arm able to run so quickly?! What kind of training did these people go through in normal times?!

Within a day, all of the Zhou Consortium's top three figureheads had died. When the Hope Media reporter at Stronghold 73 found out about this, he was so elated he nearly cried. He quickly relayed this news back to Luoyang City.

In Stronghold 73, a grand sting operation began. This was a disgrace to the Zhou Consortium. No matter who would take over at the Zhou Consortium next, they would have to capture the perpetrators to convince the masses to win their support.

A spokesperson of the Zhou Consortium started denouncing the Northwest and insisted that this was done by one of their key figures. They called for the Northwest to take responsibility for it.

The media quickly turned their attention to the Northwest. The reporters at Stronghold 144 swarmed over to the garrison base and hoped the Fortress 178 troops would come out and give a statement.

After waiting for nearly three hours, Zhang Xiaoman slowly walked out of the military base.

A reporter held a microphone to Zhang Xiaoman's mouth. "The Zhou Consortium claims this operation was likely carried out by the Northwest Army. We'd like to know if it's true that the Stronghold Destroyer has really become the candidate for the next commander of the Northwest?"

Before Zhang Xiaoman came out here, he had already communicated with Zhang Jinglin to see how he should answer the media's questions. However, Zhang Jinglin did not give him any explicit instructions other than telling him to just answer them truthfully.

Zhang Xiaoman decided he would just tell the truth then. If anyone wanted to pursue the matter, they could just go and look for Commander Zhang for answers. He would take no responsibility.

Zhang Xiaoman replied, "Yes, he's indeed in the running to become the future commander of Fortress 178's military corps. However, he still needs to be assessed over a longer period and undergo more training."

"Does the Northwest have any other candidates?" the reporter asked.

"No, he's the only one," Zhang Xiaoman replied.

"Commander Zhang is only 40 years old now, so why are you all considering the candidates so early?" the reporter asked.

"If there's a suitable candidate, we should just confirm him first so that he won't be able to run away," Zhang Xiaoman replied.

The reporters were confused. This answer stumped the reporters. They could never have expected to be given such an answer.

Most press conferences were held in a very official manner, so it was rare to see such honest answers being dished out like that.

At the side, the Great Hoodwinker could not bear to watch any further. He felt that if Zhang Xiaoman were to continue taking the questions, they might just end up with a press incident on their hands. So he quickly pushed Zhang Xiaoman aside and answered the reporters' questions himself. "Hahaha, I'll take everyone's questions instead."

A reporter asked, "Then based on the Zhou Consortium's claims, the events of their top three figureheads all being assassinated on the same day was indeed the Northwest's official stance, right? After all, the perpetrator is the candidate to become the Northwest's future commander, and it's most likely that he will take over as the fortress commander. So the Zhou Consortium is asking that the Northwest Army take responsibility for this matter. How do you plan on responding to the Zhou Consortium's statement? And how do you plan on responding to the Zhou Consortium?"

The Great Hoodwinker remained silent for two seconds before saying with a simple smile, "There's no need to stand on ceremony. It's what we should have done."

The reporters were speechless.

On the same day, the transcript of the Northwest's press conference was quickly relayed back to the Central Plains. When some of the Zhou Consortium's high-ranking officials saw it, they flew into a rage. "How arrogant! They're simply too cocky!"

But they suddenly realized that even though the other party was so cocky, there was nothing they could do about it.

If the Zhou Consortium wanted to attack the Northwest, there would still be the Wang Consortium standing between them.

The Northwest was too far away from the Zhou Consortium, so they couldn't declare war on them!

Ren Xiaosu, Yang Xiaojin, and the others had already safely left Stronghold 73 and entered the wilderness outside the stronghold.

A campfire was burning in the valley. Ren Xiaosu and the Riders caught some wild boars and wild rabbits in the mountains and roasted them over the fire. It was a delicious meal.

Ren Xiaosu handed a roast rabbit to Yang Xiaojin and then asked the Riders, "What plans do y'all have?"

Li Yingyun had a look at everyone before saying with a laugh, "When we did our research, we discovered that the world's highest mountain is further west of the Southwest. It's said the mountain is covered in snow all year round and stands at 8,848 meters tall. If we want to climb that mountain, we'll have to go through countless difficulties. A Rider ascended to the peak twice before and described the scenery at the top of the mountain as very magnificent. So we'd also like to make a trip there and see what the view looks like."

The Rider Li Yingyun was referring to was probably Ren He, the founder of the Riders organization.

Nearby, Zhang Qingxi added with a laugh, "But the Earth's crust has changed a lot since The Cataclysm, so we're not sure if that mountain is still around. If it is, we're gonna climb it. If it isn't, we'll just have to search for other mountains to climb. After that, we'd like to travel around the region. We believe there's still some survivors there."

"By the way, Xiaosu, we'd like to settle down in the Northwest after we finish our mountain climbing adventures. Would you all welcome us?" Li Yingyun asked.

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. "Of course you're welcome! Come and join us in the Prosperous Northwest!"

Li Yingyun and the others looked at each other and smiled. It looked as though they had some sort of plan.

However, Ren Xiaosu was a little curious. "Weren't y'all searching for the Qinghe Group's heir? Are you not gonna look for him anymore after settling down in the Northwest? Have y'all given up?"

Li Yingyun smiled. "We've already found him. He's doing very well now and has not failed to live up to the reputation of the Riders, so there's no need for us to worry anymore."

Ren Xiaosu grunted in affirmation and asked, "How'd you find him?"

Off to the side, Wen Meng, who had been silent all this while, suddenly said, "We'll keep that a secret for now."

"Alright." Ren Xiaosu did not probe any further. He said to the Riders in seriousness, "I'll be returning to the Northwest with Xiaojin tomorrow. At that time, I'll be waiting for all y'all in the Northwest to contribute to our cause. Here, let's toast to the Prosperous Northwest!"

"Cheers!"

All of a sudden, the satellite phone in Ren Xiaosu's pocket rang. Ren Xiaosu glanced at the number and was surprised to see it was from Wang Shengzhi.

But after hesitating for a long while, he did not answer the call. Instead, he stuffed it back into his storage space.

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End of Volume Six: Breached Walls

Next volume: The Prosperous Northwest

Chapter 1004 - Rankings

There was a hullabaloo throughout the Alliance of Strongholds.

After the Wang Consortium successfully took over all of the Kong Consortium's strongholds, only one stronghold situated along the east coast still remained under the Kong Consortium's control. Everyone was guessing when the Wang Consortium would take over this stronghold as well.

At first, everyone felt the war in the North would definitely affect everyone that resided there.

But in fact, after the Wang Consortium took over those strongholds, they immediately distributed relief food to all the residents. Then they quickly rebuilt the Public Order Division and installed surveillance cameras in the various strongholds. Immediately after, the artificial intelligence took over judicial management.

These strongholds were completely unregulated at the beginning, and the residents who remained behind were subjected to the abuse of evildoers and gang members. When the Wang Consortium arrived, the entire stronghold suddenly regained order, and the residents who were initially scolding the Wang Consortium started speaking of them in good light.

Actually, this was all normal. Whoever could ensure the people had a good life would win the support of the majority.

As for the conflicts between those at the top, what did that have anything to do with them?

It was not only the Kong Consortium's strongholds that had been taken over but the Pyro Company's strongholds as well. The Pyro Company's current forces were no longer capable of contending with the Wang Consortium, so it was only a matter of time before they were annexed.

Before the discussion of the Wang Consortium's total war against the Kong Consortium and the Pyro Company had died down, a fierce verbal exchange between the Zhou Consortium and the Northwest Army erupted again. This excited all of the onlookers once again.

It was not that this verbal sparring was more intense than the Wang Consortium's total war, but that the statements made by Zhang Xiaoman and the Great Hoodwinker were simply too explosive.

The Zhou Consortium spokesperson had just issued a condemnation when the Great Hoodwinker said, "There's no need to stand on ceremony. It's what we should have done."

To be honest, the common folk had never seen a rebuttal like the Northwest's official stance before.

However, with the Zhou Consortium's assassination of Jiang Xu, everyone was on the side of the Northwest Army and watched the Zhou Consortium get mocked.

After all, if the Zhou Consortium dared to assassinate Jiang Xu, they should be punished accordingly for it. Perhaps the Zhou Consortium did not expect the assassination would lead to such a painful lesson.

In just one day, the deaths of the Zhou Consortium's top three figureheads also showed everyone just how powerful supernatural beings were in this era of the "Rise of Gods."

Some people even marked this event as a new milestone in the world of supernatural beings. It symbolized that the era of the Rise of Gods had come to an end and was now officially entering the "Era of the Gods."

Without the word "rise," it signaled that the gods had already risen.

Correspondingly, everyone started to get even more curious. Just how many supernatural beings were there in the world now? Which organizations did they work for? Just how powerful were they? And what events had they been involved in?

At this moment, a documentary about the world of supernatural beings, directed by Mu Wan'ge, started promoting itself. The theme for the trailers was: "We have personally experienced the battles between superhumans, and we'd like to show everyone how wonderful the real world of superhumans is. We've had the opportunity to tag along with the future commander of the Northwest, and he'll make a special appearance at the end of the movie in the post-credits scene."

As such, even before the movie was screened in the Alliance of Strongholds, it started receiving wide-ranging expectations. Mu Wan'ge was currently stationed in Luoyang City. On the second day of the movie's promotions, the door to Mu Wan'ge's studio was trampled down by investors. It was truly a spectacular sight.

The investors offered to invest a lot of money, so Mu Wan'ge's movie had already made back its production budget before it even started screening.

He registered a new company and incorporated the movie under the entity as an asset. Then he sold 5% of its shares to Company A for an extremely high price, and 6% shares to Company B. In the end, he sold the shares to more than a dozen companies. With 30% shares remaining under Mu Wan'ge's name, Mu Wan'ge had already made a profit. Furthermore, the profits utterly exceeded his expectations.

This was a normal practice in the film industry, and it was like this since before The Cataclysm.

The investors attended an early screening of the movie. It was indeed very well made and covered a lot of supernatural beings, including the complete events of the cave-in at East Lake and the escape from Stronghold 74 before it was destroyed.

And the fact that the well-known female singer, Li Ran, was participating in the film was also an attractive selling point.

But actually, a lot of the investors were here for the post-credits scene that featured the future commander of the Northwest. In the end, everyone realized the post-credits scene only showed the back of Ren Xiaosu as he led everyone out of Stronghold 74 when it was about to be destroyed.

The investors were speechless. "You didn't even manage to get a frontal shot of him?"

Mu Wan'ge held his teacup up and said calmly, "If I managed to film it, this movie would definitely have been destroyed. Do you all understand what I mean? It's already good enough that we got those shots."

An investor suddenly said, "I saw in the movie that you and the Northwest's future commander seemed to have gone to Stronghold 74 together. Li Ran was in the same group as well, so does that mean that something's going on between Li Ran and this future commander?"

The investors immediately perked up. This was a huge talking point. If it was handled well, it would definitely bring in a lot of benefits.

To them, gossip was equivalent to profit!

However, Mu Wan'ge shook his head. "No, it's not what you all think. I feel that the future commander doesn't really like Li Ran and even despises her a little. As you all know, the future commander's maid is a very powerful superhuman..."

It was also at this moment that a rankings publication that rated supernatural beings and was said to have originated from the mob started appearing in the various strongholds and was put on sale.

The selling price was not expensive either. It only cost about a yuan per copy, around the same price as a newspaper, so it was something everyone could afford to buy.

The rankings publication had appeared very suddenly, and it seemed like the other party had prepared the distribution channel in advance as though it was planned.

Someone bought it and read it. There were a total of 100 superhumans featured in the publication. Furthermore, the rank order was footnoted in a striking font: "Rankings are listed from strongest to the weakest, with a minority of the listings assessed as groups."

First place was shockingly Li Shentan and Si Liren. The reason for their grouped ranking was very simple. These two superhumans were inseparable, so their overall strength had to be assessed based on their combined powers.

Then examples of Li Shentan's deeds, such as his huge impact on the war in the Southwest, were listed. By manipulating a full combat brigade, he was able to instantly disrupt the order and stability of a consortium.

Many people were truly convinced that superhumans like them had made it to the top of the rankings. After all, the name of the Demon Whisperer was well-known throughout the Central Plains since long ago. Furthermore, as an iconic figure of the era of the Rise of Gods, it was only natural that he would make it onto the rankings.

In second place was Chen Wudi. Among the examples of Chen Wudi's achievements was his final state of awakening in the Li Consortium's stronghold. Someone had previously estimated that Chen Wudi's final form at that time would be enough to take on the entire army of an organization.

It was just a pity that this peak individual combat strength was only a flash in the pan.

In third place were Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Chapter 1005 - A New Intelligence Agency Emerges

The reason Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were on the rankings was because there were more narratives of them than the others. It could even be said that the combined narratives of Li Shentan and Chen Wudi were not as many as these two.

The main reason was that Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were involved more often in public incidents than the others, and their interpersonal relationships were also relatively complicated.

The pricing of this publication was very interesting as it only cost one yuan per copy.

Many people thought they might as well just save the money and not buy it since they only wanted to check the rankings. But when they saw a copy of it in other people's hands, they realized it was actually

filled with a lot of content and felt that listening to others describe it did not seem as interesting as reading it for themselves. When they wanted to borrow a copy to read, they could not even get their hands on one as the others had not finished reading it yet.

Seeing that a lot of people were enthusiastically discussing the rankings and that they did not have a copy themselves, those who did not buy it immediately felt awkward.

Since it was not expensive, they might as well get a copy.

Multiple incidents that Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin had participated in were recorded in the magazine. Many people from the world of superhumans could tell from the descriptions in this publication that they had to have been written by someone who was also a superhuman. Otherwise, they would never have found out about those matters.

Most people still did not know what Ren Xiaosu looked like. With the news of Ren Xiaosu's background also spreading like wildfire, no one knew the truth from the rumors.

Some people said he was Zhang Jinglin's godson, while others said he was just an ordinary refugee. The most exaggerated ones even said he was born out of a rock...

In this magazine, Ren Xiaosu's origins were actually recorded. It listed his time as a refugee at Stronghold 113, the period when he was a member of the Li Consortium's 1st Military Corps' Special Investigations Division, to the time when he spied for the Qing Consortium, then how he went on to serve in the Northwest Army's Razor Sharp Company where he became known as the Stronghold Destroyer, and finally taking the reins as the future commander of the Northwest Army.

Although the write-up was very simple, it allowed many people to clearly understand how Ren Xiaosu rose to power.

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were involved in many of the incidents, such as the cave-in at Stronghold 73's East Lake, the incident in the Pyro Company's Sacred Mountains, the battle to defend Luoyang City, the crisis at Stronghold 74, the Pyro Company's resistance of the northern barbarians, and the Battle of Mt. Zuoyun.

It could be said that Ren Xiaosu was involved in most incidents that could affect the stability of the Alliance of Strongholds.

This made the readers suddenly wonder why the future commander of the Northwest did not remain in the Northwest but ran everywhere instead.

The future commander of the Northwest had only been in the Northwest for a few months. For the rest of his time, he had spent it outside fighting here and there.

Moreover, what was strange was that Li Shentan was described with very simple words in the author's writeup of him in the magazine. But when it came to Ren Xiaosu, the wordings suddenly became very elegant. It was as though the author regarded Ren Xiaosu very highly.

But when he wrote about the multiple strange identities Ren Xiaosu had, he gave him a negative evaluation: "This kid is very cunning and does whatever he likes. After he was conferred those identities, he used them as cover to do all sorts of illegal things."

Then, in fourth place was Yan Liuyuan. His description was a little simpler. It only mentioned that Yan Liuyuan had unified the Northern Plains and that he was the one who breached the walls of Stronghold 176. During the war with the foreign enemies, he reinforced the Northwest Army at Mt. Zuoyun and would be defending the North from further attacks in the future.

In fifth place were Yang Anjing, Vanilla, Tang Hualong, Cheng Yu, Luo Xinyu, and the other key members of the Anjing House.

There was quite a bit of information missing here, but one of the main points brought up was the relationship between the Anjing House and the Saboteurs. The assessment of Yang Anjing's actual strength was a little vague because the head of the Anjing House rarely made a move personally.

Number six: The Riders.

Number seven: Zhou Yingxue and the Eight Vajras.¹

Number eight: Luo Lan and Zhou Qi.

The rankings went on until 100th place, and the magazine was over 50 pages thick. Reading it left the common folks of the Alliance of Strongholds in awe.

Then, when it was flipped to the last page, fine print appeared where it should have been signed off: "This was a Nonsense1 writeup."

When many of the residents saw this, they did not know whether to laugh or cry. However, a lot of the superhumans realized Hu Shuo and Zhang Baogen's names did not appear in the top 100.

Anyone who had experienced the battle in Luoyang City would know that Hu Shuo had also been involved and that he was very strong as well.

Since the author knew so much about the details of the battle in Luoyang City, there was no reason why Hu Shuo and Zhang Baogen were left out of the rankings.

Therefore, this magazine was clearly written by Hu Shuo!

Some of the strongholds started investigating the origins of the publication. In the end, the printing factory said the job was custom-ordered ten days ago by a young child.

The other party negotiated a conveyance fee with the printing factory and left after agreeing on a price, and the author did not participate in the subsequent sales of the publication.

The person who printed this run of magazines had disappeared somewhere.

The situation was the same at almost all of the strongholds. Some of the more discerning people went to the welfare home in Luoyang City and observed from the outside if there were any activities. However, they realized the welfare home was empty. Meanwhile, the hundreds of children of all ages living there had also disappeared along with Zhang Baogen and Hu Shuo.

Someone suddenly realized that a completely neutral intelligence agency would probably emerge soon. As for the purpose of this intelligence agency's creation, no one knew.

Hu Shuo was originally the director of the Li Consortium's intelligence agency and held the rank of lieutenant general.

After the destruction of the Li Consortium, his network of field operatives in the Central Plains did not suffer much of a disruption. Right now, they were all being supported by Hu Shuo.

An organization like this still caught the attention of a lot of those who wanted to find some clues about them. However, Hu Shuo seemed to have evaporated into thin air and gone into hiding among the shadows.

This was a very experienced intelligence agent. He was a sly old fox.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were walking on the streets of Stronghold 144 with a magazine in their hands.

After they returned to the Northwest, they did not alert anyone that they were back. Because they both wanted to rest up and lead a peaceful life. They did not want to be disturbed by anyone.

Ren Xiaosu chuckled as he read through the magazine, "Look, the description of me in the rankings list was pretty good. I was worried earlier that if an outsider had written this, they wouldn't know how to praise me properly."

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. "This person knows too many of your secrets."

"Don't worry, it's obvious that this was written by Grandpa Hu Shuo. Other than him, almost no one else knows of my identity as an officer in the Li Consortium's Special Investigations Division." Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly, "Moreover, he was also quite careful with what he wrote. He did not mention any details of the battles that I partook in. He still bothered to write about the types of powers that the others have, but he did not give any description of my powers. I guess that's his way of protecting me."

Yang Xiaojin scoffed, "Isn't that because you have too many superpowers? Not even the old man's sure of what powers you possess."

No one recognized these two people as they walked down the streets of Stronghold 144.

However, two pedestrians could be heard saying, "I think our future commander should be ranked first. This magazine got the rankings wrong!"

Chapter 1006 - Buying A House!

"I also think that our future commander should be ranked number one. Look at those other supernatural beings. None of them can take the head of an enemy general who's protected by a 10,000-strong army, right?" The pedestrians on the street said excitedly, "The Zhou Consortium is also one of the three biggest consortiums in the Central Plains, but look what happened in the end? They were still easily taken down by our future commander!"

Of course, the Zhou Consortium was not going to collapse immediately because of Ren Xiaosu. Although three of their leaders had died, a successor was put in place in the aftermath. Although a series of internal power struggles had also started, the consortium did not collapse.

But that was what the Northwesterners enjoyed saying. In their opinion, it was only a matter of time before the Zhou Consortium was annexed by the Wang Consortium.

If it were any other place, Ren Xiaosu would just be seen as a normal superhuman and everyone's impression of him would be, "Wow, he's so powerful. But is it really OK to assassinate so many big shots of a consortium?"

But it was different in the Northwest. Here, they would say, "As expected of our future commander!"

When the Zong Consortium was still standing in the Northwest, the loyalty of the people under them had started leaning towards Fortress 178. In the early years, a lot of people even secretly fled there.

Now that Fortress 178 had taken over all of the Northwestern strongholds, everyone could see that their days were getting better. As such, they naturally felt that they were also Fortress 178's people and gradually started to get a sense of belonging.

Actually, the rankings list was still a little inaccurate. For example, Luo Lan knew that Li Shentan was unable to hypnotize Ren Xiaosu. Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue's ranking was a little too low.

That was because Zhou Yingxue was not involved in that many battles to date. When she fought on Mt. Zuoyun, the Experimentals who witnessed her power all died. When she took action in Luoyang City, the hitmen who saw her were also wiped out.

It was not Hu Shuo's fault since Zhou Yingxue had indeed been too ruthless on both those occasions.

However, the accuracy of the entire list was pretty good. Previously, when someone announced they wanted to rank all the supernatural beings, it caused a buzz among many people. And now, the publication of this magazine truly did not let anyone down.

On top of that, Hu Shuo must have also earned a lot from this publication.

That old man wanted to establish a large, covert intelligence network but funding had always been a problem. Although he still had some savings in the Southwest, it was not enough to run something like an intelligence network.

Li Shentan's power should be able to make him money very easily, but that grandson of his was not interested in making money at all and only knew how to spend.

In fact, he was really generous when it came to spending.

When he intercepted the Zong Consortium's gold, he actually gave all of it to Ren Xiaosu. This made Hu Shuo's head throb just thinking about it. He was even tempted to include additional details in Ren Xiaosu's description in the rankings!

A pedestrian in Stronghold 144 also had some doubts. "I wonder who created this rankings list. How are they so well-informed? We Northwesterners don't even know that our future commander has done so many things. This is just like reading a novella. This is awesome!"

"Who cares who wrote it? The future commander's ranking is definitely wrong!"

When Ren Xiaosu heard the pedestrian say that, he broke into a smile. However, Yang Xiaojin rolled her eyes and pulled him along as she continued walking forward. "What, do you plan on joining their conversation? Hurry, let's go buy the house. Otherwise, we'll have to stay at the hotel again tonight. We arranged to meet the owners at 2:30 PM, so let's not be late."

Since the two of them did not even have a place to stay after arriving here, they would definitely have to first buy a house that was suitable for them to live in for the long term. They would definitely still have to go to Fortress 178 in the future, but since this place was also under the Northwest's rule, there was no fear that it would go to waste.

Even Wang Fugui did not know they had come to Stronghold 144 this time. All they wanted was to have some peace and quiet to live their lives for the time being.

Having been in the Central Plains for so long, all they did was fight and kill enemies every day. As such, both Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were starting to feel a little tired. Both of them just wanted to lead normal lives.

Speaking of which, they even missed the times when they went to school together.

However, Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered something. "Hey, what do you think the group name 'Zhou Yingxue and the Eight Vajras' means? I can understand that the 'Eight Vajras' refers to Wang Yuchi and the other students, but why does it sound like a mafia nickname? It's like the Eight Legions, or the Four Guardians,¹ that sorta thing.... Do you think she earned that nickname for the group by bossing her way around in the Northwest?"

"Are you very curious? Then why don't you ask her yourself?" Yang Xiaojin shot him a glance.

"Hahaha, no, not at all," Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh.

The two of them walked along Anning East Road towards the west. They did not intend to buy some standalone, luxurious villa. Instead, they got a real estate agent in the stronghold to find them an older courtyard house to view.

Yesterday, the realtor said the courtyard house neighborhood used to house the families of the Zong Consortium's military personnel. Due to its old age, the houses here had changed hands several times and been converted into private residences.

This place was not as prosperous as the affluent neighborhood of Stronghold 144, but its selling point was that it was more secluded and quiet.

Every house was a two-story brick building, and there was a small backyard that measured more than 200 square meters.

The family that lived here was an old couple whose children had bought a house for them in a more upscale residential area after making some money doing business.

There was one thing that was particularly good about this courtyard house. Two peach trees had been planted in the backyard by the owners, so there would be plenty of fruit to enjoy every year when they ripened.

It was already spring, and the season of the peach harvest was not far away anymore.

There was a university and a high school in the vicinity. A marketplace sat two hundred meters to the left of the entrance of the property, and there was even a food street nearby. It could be said that this house was situated in an extremely lively location.

When Yang Xiaojin heard this recommendation, she immediately decided she wanted to buy this house.

After meeting up with the realtor at Anning East Road, Ren Xiaosu casually asked, "Is the business sector in Stronghold 144 very prosperous these days?"

"Of course." The realtor said politely, "You two don't look like locals. Why've you come here to the Northwest?"

"Oh, we also thought that there would be a lot of opportunities here, so we wanted to come and set up a small business," Ren Xiaosu remarked.

"Then the two of you have come to the right place." The realtor said with a smile, "In the past year, Stronghold 144 has become the distribution center for goods throughout the Northwest. It's way too busy there. So many people have suddenly become tycoons. There's really quite a lot of big merchants in Stronghold 144, and they're not inferior to those in the Central Plains at all. Moreover, the Central Plains is in a state of war now, so a lot of refugees and rich people have migrated here. They say this place is a utopia. Two days ago, a businessman from the Wang Consortium wanted to settle down here. With so many people arriving, property prices in Stronghold 144 will definitely skyrocket. The two of you definitely won't make any loss if you buy a house here."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and nodded. "Alright, hopefully, what you say will come true."

When they arrived at the courtyard house, the old couple who were selling the house and their children were all present. Everyone was very polite when they saw each other. Both sides roughly negotiated the price of the house: 300,000 yuan.

The old couple's eldest son said, "You will definitely not be losing out at this price. Although it's slightly higher than market price, you all should know that the value of property in Stronghold 144 is still increasing. Even if you buy it, you won't incur any losses."

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin took a tour of the house.

It was clean and tidy, although the decor was a little old-fashioned, and the corners of the walls were slightly moldy. Other than that, everything else looked great.

It was clear the old couple loved cleaning their place.

The old lady smiled and said, "Our neighbors are all young people now, so they're all very easy to get along with. You don't have to worry."

Ren Xiaosu glanced at Yang Xiaojin. At this moment, she was standing under a peach tree in the yard and looking up at the tree's crown in a trance.

He immediately said, "Oh, I'll buy it then."

The owner was taken aback. "You're buying it just like that?"

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu nodded.

Everyone thought Ren Xiaosu would haggle over the price, but he did not do that. In fact, he even behaved very generously.

Ren Xiaosu could tell that Yang Xiaojin liked this place a lot. They had come a long way in their journey, and he also wanted to give Yang Xiaojin a stable home. Therefore, he decided to skip all the negotiations and get the deal done.

Although he loved money, he never hesitated when it came to spending money.

"However, I don't have any of Fortress 178's currency on me. I'm only carrying gold. Can you all convert the property price to gold?" Ren Xiaosu thought that since he had plenty of gold bars, there was no need for him to be thrifty with it.

Based on how good he was at plundering gold, he could afford to support Yang Xiaojin no matter how big of a spendthrift she was. In any case, she was not someone who would squander his money at all.

The old lady's eldest son seemed to be shocked by Ren Xiaosu's attitude when he heard that he wanted to pay in gold. Although this house was not worth that much money, it was really rare to see someone readily offering gold as a form of payment.

The other party thought for a moment and said, "It's not a problem to accept gold. After all, gold can be used anywhere now. It's just that I need to verify the authenticity of it.... It's not that I don't believe you, but it's something that needs to be done these days."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "I understand, but where will you go to check?"

"One look and I can tell you two have just arrived at Stronghold 144. Fortress 178's bank can directly buy gold at market price. They have a department over there that specially deals with gold transactions, because there's a lot of merchants traveling from everywhere to this place, so the department was set up just to facilitate transactions between everyone." The old lady's eldest son said, "And they don't even charge a transaction fee."

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. "That's very convenient."

It looked like Zhang Jinglin and those managing Fortress 178 had put in a lot of effort to facilitate trade in the Northwest to make it more prosperous. They knew just what the merchants needed.

He took out a few gold bars. "Go ahead then, I'll wait for you here."

The old lady's eldest son was surprised again. "You're not coming with me? Aren't you afraid I'll run away with all these gold bars you gave me?"

Ren Xiaosu smiled. "Aren't your parents still here? Where can you run off to? Hurry up and go."

The young man gave Ren Xiaosu a close look before turning around to leave.

Ren Xiaosu went into the yard. "Do you like it here?"

Yang Xiaojin said, "I've always wanted to own a small courtyard house like this. There'll be a bustling crowd not far away from the doorstep of the house, and I can enjoy peace and quiet when I get home. Xiaosu, I'm a little tired. We fought our way from Luoyang City to the Kong Consortium, then from the Kong Consortium to the Pyro Company, and again from the Pyro Company to Mt. Zuoyun. It feels really good to have a quiet place to rest now."

"Oh, then let's rest up here. After we buy the house, let's go grocery shopping together," Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

"Aren't you afraid the others will get worried if they can't find you?" Yang Xiaojin chuckled and said, "You're the future commander of the Northwest. Many people are waiting to see you, and Mr. Zhang will probably want to have a chat with you as well. But you ended up hiding here after all you've done in the Central Plains."

"That's alright, it's not like I'm the center of the world. Even without me, the world won't stop spinning," Ren Xiaosu said.

After a while, the young man who went out to exchange the gold bars for cash returned. He placed more than 2,000 yuan on the table. "The market price of gold has gone up again today, so there's still some money left after you purchased the house."

Ren Xiaosu happily pocketed the money. "Then let's get the title deed transferred."

At the side, the realtor took out the contract. Based on it, Ren Xiaosu was required to pay the intermediary a sum of money as well. The process of purchasing property in the Northwest was relatively simple. The owner only needed to hand over the title deed to Ren Xiaosu so he could bring it to the stronghold's administrative center tomorrow for registration. After that, the transaction would be deemed complete.

After everything was settled, the old lady's eldest son hesitated for a moment before saying, "I think you two must've just arrived here. Are you here to start a business?"

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Yes, why?"

"My name is Ma Youjin. This is my business card," the old lady's eldest son introduced himself. "I have a network of local contacts. If the two of you are interested in working on any ventures together, you can look for me."

When Ma Youjin saw that Ren Xiaosu was such a generous buyer, he got the idea to befriend him.

After all, there was definitely no issue with making friends with someone who paid up so readily by tossing out a few gold bars.

Ma Youjin was a businessman, so he loved making friends the most.

Ren Xiaosu took the card from him. "Project Manager of Yunsu Trading Company?"

Ma Youjin smiled and said, "That's right. I'm in charge of the lipstick business at our company. Now that I've become highly regarded by the higher-ups, I'm in charge of all of the lipstick in the Northwest."

"Lipstick?" Ren Xiaosu felt like laughing.

"Young man, have you heard of our company?" Ma Youjin asked.

"No." Ren Xiaosu shook his head.

Ma Youjin said proudly, "Then let me give you a proper introduction. Our Yunsu Trading Company is currently the top import/export company in the Northwest. In terms of capability, we're second to none."

"That's really great," Ren Xiaosu praised sincerely.

"But that's not the best part." Ma Youjin's tone turned mysterious. "Do you know who our boss is?"

"Please, do explain," Ren Xiaosu said.

"Our boss is Wang Fugui. He's a very well-connected person, so much so that even Stronghold 144's garrison commander, Zhang Xiaoman, is very polite towards him. He keeps addressing him as Uncle Fugui." Ma Youjin's face lit up as he spoke.

Ren Xiaosu had a strange expression on his face. When he saw the word "Yunsu" earlier, he found it a little strange. As Wang Fugui did not have the chance yet to tell him he had set up a company, he did not know that Yunsu was actually Wang Fugui's business.

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu really did not expect that Wang Fugui would become the most influential businessman in the entire Northwest in just a year.

Moreover, he had used the word "Su" in the company's name, so it was clearly another business that was set up to make money for Ren Xiaosu.

Back then, Wang Fugui said he was only a shopkeeper while Ren Xiaosu was the boss.. Ren Xiaosu did not expect Wang Fugui to still honor that, but his actions proved it was still how he thought.

When Ma Youjin saw that Ren Xiaosu was deep in thought, he was sure he had convinced him. He chuckled and said, "So if you have any business ventures in the future, you're welcome to partner with us. As long as it's not illegal, we are down to do anything here in Stronghold 144."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "You don't do illegal stuff?"

"But of course." Ma Youjin turned serious. "Our company's margins can be lowered, but we definitely mustn't do anything to tarnish our reputation. Whoever tries anything funny will be asked to leave."

"Why?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

"I guess you're not aware of it. Previously, my superior got his hands on a batch of lipstick from somewhere and claimed we could make a very high profit margin on it. But when Uncle Fugui found out, he directly fired him." Ma Youjin said, "Uncle Fugui said we're not only representing ourselves through our actions, but we also represent the reputation of the boss above."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment. "The boss above? Which boss?"

"It seems like you're really unaware." Ma Youjin lowered his voice and said, "Do you see the word 'su' in our company's name?"

"Yes, I see it." Ren Xiaosu suddenly understood.

"And isn't the future commander of the Northwest called Ren Xiaosu?" Ma Youjin said mysteriously, "Actually, before our future commander became the future commander, Uncle Fugui had already started working for him. So they're tight, and this business is actually also the future commander's private business arm."

Ren Xiaosu had a strange expression. "Is this known throughout the Northwest?"

"Of course it is." Ma Youjin said, "That's why Uncle Fugui said that even if we have to sacrifice our profits, we can't embarrass our future commander and affect his future in the Northwest. If anyone

dares to tarnish our future commander's reputation, we'll tell them to beat it. Yunsu does not want to keep such employees around!"

Wang Fugui's business had become very big now. On one hand, it was because he was really good at running a business. On the other hand, it was because the entire Northwest knew about the relationship between Wang Fugui and Ren Xiaosu. Therefore, no matter what he did, there would always be people giving him a pass on the things he wanted to do.

Meanwhile, Wang Fugui also played his part and never did anything that would make them worry. Outsiders would not be able to nitpick on his dealings at all.

Ma Youjin said in a low voice, "I heard that our future commander will be returning to the Northwest soon. At that time, our Yunsu will only get bigger and achieve eternal glory!"

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. Although he liked hearing others speak well of him, he still felt a little awkward when Ma Youjin praised him so seriously in his presence.

Ma Youjin said, "By the way, I haven't asked for your name yet."

"Oh," Ren Xiaosu answered, "my name is Lü Xiaomi."

"It sounds like you and our future commander are destined for each other based on your names." Ma Youjin chuckled and said, "So what business are you doing? Do you want me to introduce you to Uncle Fugui?"

"There's no need for that." Ren Xiaosu waved it off with a smile. He was just enjoying some peace and quiet with Yang Xiaojin. As there was nothing urgent on Wang Fugui's end, he was not in a hurry to see him.

Moreover, even if he really wanted to meet Wang Fugui, he would not need anyone to link them up. He could just go and meet him himself.

"Why?" Ma Youjin wondered, "Could it be that you're not here to do business?"

"Your Yunsu can't do the business that I'm doing." Ren Xiaosu winked and said, "Mine's shady."

Ma Youjin was enlightened. "You should have said so earlier. Although our Yunsu doesn't dip its hands into such businesses, our sister company does."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Sister company? Who's running it?"

"Although I say it's a company, it's actually the black market outside Stronghold 144." Ma Youjin lowered his voice even further. "While everyone knows about this black market, they don't really like talking about it openly. Everything is sold there, including firearms, antibiotics, fur hides, and antiques too. The merchants from the grasslands conduct their transactions there."

"Then what has this black market got to do with all y'all?" Ren Xiaosu asked. He picked up a cup and took a sip of water.

Ma Youjin explained to him, "You don't know, right? The person in charge of the black market is called Zhou Yingxue, and her followers are the Eight Vajras—"

"Pfft." Ren Xiaosu did a spit-take.

Ma Youjin continued, "Didn't you read the recent publication? They're very famous. Zhou Yingxue is our future commander's maid, and she has eight armored young men at her command. All of them are extremely brave and no one dares to provoke them. But don't be too afraid either. The security at the black market is very tight, so no one dares to cause any trouble there."

Ren Xiaosu wiped his mouth. "How's Zhou Yingxue's reputation?"

"It's pretty good. She's very fair when dealing. It's just that the transaction fees in the black market are a little high. Everyone says that she's too greedy for money," Ma Youjin answered. "But it's the only black market in the Northwest, and some transactions can only be carried out there. But think about it, she's the future commander's maid. This means that she has official backing, so you don't have to be afraid if anything happens. As long as you pay the transaction fees honestly, there'll be someone to help you handle things."

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself that it was no wonder Hu Shuo's publication ranked Zhou Yingxue and the Eight Vajras as a group. They sounded like they were really part of the underworld.

In the end, she had really become the mob boss of the Northwest.

He had been wondering if Zhou Yingxue had abused her authority in the Northwest.

From the look of things, it seemed the maid did feel a little guilty when answering him back then.

Ren Xiaosu smiled at Ma Youjin and said, "Thanks for the explanation, bro. I'll make a trip to the black market when I have time."

"Alright." Ma Youjin said, "When you get to the black market, you can use our Yunsu's business card as an introduction. Don't worry, they'll definitely treat you well since they'll know you were recommended by Yunsu."

Actually, what Ma Youjin did not tell Ren Xiaosu was that if he were to use his business card at the black market, Ma Youjin would get a cut of the transaction fees once a deal was done.

Putting everything else aside, Zhou Yingxue had really put in quite a bit of effort into creating this black market.

After the owner of the house and realtor left, Ren Xiaosu headed to the backyard. Yang Xiaojin was leaning against a peach tree and said, "Earlier, the old lady told me that if I want the peaches to be delicious, I'd have to prune the branches and leaves diligently. She was even touching the peach tree reluctantly. It seemed like she'd grown attached to them."

"How many years had they lived here?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"23." Yang Xiaojin smiled. "She said that when the Zong Consortium was still running the place, the people were constantly living in fear and anxiety. But now that the Northwest Army's taken over, everything's gotten better."

Yang Xiaojin muttered to herself, "Ever since my parents passed away, I no longer felt like I had a home in the Yang Consortium. At that time, my aunt took me out to train me, so my time was split between living in the stronghold and the wilderness. But no matter where I went, I didn't feel like I belonged.. Now that I'm in the Northwest, I don't know why, but it feels really homey."

Chapter 1009 - First Meal

Yang Xiaojin was born into a wealthy family. Other people's children would attend kindergarten while she waited for private tutors to come and homeschool her.

The tutors were all carefully selected by the consortium. Even though she was just a little girl, the tutors still needed to possess knowledge of everything in the world.

She did not have any playmates, nor did she have a teacher who would bring her out to play games. The scholars would never let her play Drop the Handkerchief.

Only Yang Anjing would occasionally appear at the Yang Consortium's manor and read her fairy tales, teach her nursery rhymes, and jump rope with her.

Yang Xiaojin cherished her time with Yang Anjing very much because those were the rare times she got to enjoy herself.

After attending elementary school, she went to an elite school in Stronghold 88. Although she did not really like her classmates there, she still enjoyed school very much. Because at school, she did not have to face the strict atmosphere at home.

Yang Xiaojin had lost all concept of home in childhood. The Yang Consortium's manor was more like a hotel to her as she did not have to clean the place. Every day, a servant would just hand her the clothes after they were washed. She saw the servants very often, but she rarely saw her family.

Actually, Yang Xiaojin also felt that there was nothing to complain about. She was born into one of the best families in the world, and there was no need to worry about the basics, such as food, clothing, and shelter, or worry about not being able to afford her school fees. As long as it was something related to money, she did not have to worry.

The first thing Yang Anjing did when she brought her out of the stronghold was to show her how tough life was for the refugees. She even took her to live in town for a month.

Therefore, Yang Xiaojin knew very well that even though her childhood was boring, it was never tragic. There were many others who were much more miserable than her.

On the day she turned 12, Yang Anjing said to her, "Don't ever think that it's very unfortunate to have been born into the Yang clan. There are millions of people in the world who'd want to swap places with you. While you're sitting in boredom in front of your brightly lit window, they have to carry bamboo baskets on their backs and go to the coal mines to earn their daily keep. I hate the Yang clan for their hypocritical behavior. I established the Saboteurs because I know that everything that's happening now was caused by The Cataclysm. You'll also have to understand what you want someday and start working hard to gain the strength and courage to defend it. At that time, you'll have fully grown up."

Yang Xiaojin would occasionally feel lost too. What did she want? The existence of the Saboteurs was Yang Anjing's will, not hers.

The Yang Consortium's ambitions belonged to those adults and had nothing to do with her.

That was until this moment. She watched Ren Xiaosu pace back and forth in the house before saying to her, "After the peach tree bears fruit, the two of us can go to the marketplace and sell off the excess harvest, or give them to our neighbors."

As there was not enough kitchenware at home, they had to go out to buy some. They would also need to stock up on some spices.

Ren Xiaosu would handle the cleaning of the house on the odd days of the week, while Yang Xiaojin would take care of it on the even days.

There seemed to be a leak in the building's roof, so Ren Xiaosu said he would go out tomorrow to buy some water-repellent felt to repair it.

At some point, Yang Xiaojin suddenly felt like she kinda knew what she wanted. All she wanted was a home. She could join Ren Xiaosu outside to fight and kill, but once they were home, this young man would immediately become the light of the house.

Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu, who had suddenly become naggy, and said with a smile, "I'll cook you a meal tomorrow."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Then he asked knowingly, "I thought you didn't know how to cook?"

"Don't worry, I won't poison you," Yang Xiaojin said.

This was the first time that Yang Xiaojin had volunteered to cook. Ren Xiaosu noticed that Yang Xiaojin's mentality seemed to have changed a little. He smiled and replied, "Sure, let's go grocery shopping tomorrow morning. I'll eat whatever you cook even if I might get poisoned to death."

Yang Xiaojin rolled her eyes. "You already know that I could cook, don't you? I can remember the strange look you had in your eyes when you were cooking for me last time!"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. "As expected of a sniper. You're really sharp."

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The next morning, the two of them woke up early to wash up.

There were quite a few bedrooms in this small, two-story building. Ren Xiaosu was starting to regret it a little. He felt that he should have just bought a one-bedroom apartment instead.

But on second thought, that wouldn't seem right either. If they really lived in a one-bedroom apartment, based on how cowardly he was, he would probably end up sleeping on the couch.

After the two of them finished unpacking, they each took a bamboo basket and headed out.

Just after stepping out, they happened to bump into their next-door neighbor. It was a middle-aged couple who looked like they were about to go to work.

Ren Xiaosu took a close look at them. The couple was slightly plump and both of them were quite well-dressed. The man was wearing a spotless suit and probably held a decent job.

The middle-aged woman greeted them with a smile, "I heard from Mrs. Wang yesterday that we were going to have new neighbors soon, but I wasn't expecting you guys to move in so quickly. I didn't even drop by to say hello yesterday, how rude of me! I'm Hu Xiaobai, and this is my husband, Wang Yuexi."

The middle-aged man nodded as a form of greeting. He did not seem to want to interact too much with Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "That's alright, Mrs. Hu. We should be the ones dropping by your place instead."

"Are you going out to buy groceries?" Hu Xiaobai said with a smile, "I heard from Mrs. Wang that the two of you aren't from Stronghold 144?"

"Mhm, we came from the Central Plains," Ren Xiaosu said.

"It's good that you came to the Northwest. The Central Plains has become so chaotic now, unlike our Northwest where it's so safe!" Hu Xiaobai said with a smile, "Welcome, we're all fellow Northwesterners now!"

Ren Xiaosu gave a grateful sigh. The consortiums in the Central Plains were still building their strongholds to prevent refugees from entering the cities, but the people in the Northwest were already starting to call those who came to settle down here their fellow "Northwesterners."

It was obvious the Wang Consortium would not stop on their warpath, so more and more people would be migrating to the Northwest in the future.

Hu Xiaobai smiled and said, "Have you two found a job after coming to the Northwest?"

"No, we'd like to rest for a while first," Ren Xiaosu replied.

"Mhm, it's good to take a break too." Hu Xiaobai said enthusiastically, "My husband works at the stronghold's administrative center. If you two encounter any difficulties, you can let us know. He's quite influential in the stronghold."

Hu Xiaobai was just like many warm-hearted older women. She looked like she was quite helpful and liked chatting about random matters at home. From time to time, she would even unintentionally boast about her husband.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu saw the man quietly tug at Hu Xiaobai's sleeve. As such, he smiled at Hu Xiaobai and said, "There isn't really anything we need to trouble the two of you with. We're both very carefree people."

"Alright, we'll talk again when there's time. Since we're neighbors, let's keep in touch." Hu Xiaobai then went to work.

When they got farther away, Wang Yuexi grumbled softly to her, "Why are you telling them so much? More and more immigrants are coming to Stronghold 144, so there's a lot of people looking for work. They're either seeking approval for their business operations or asking to be recommended to a good job. If those two really come to me for help, how am I supposed to reject them?"

Hu Xiaobai whispered, "I was just being polite, wasn't I? Besides, we're neighbors, so what's the big deal with helping them a little?"

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"Do you think it's that easy to help them?" The man snapped at her, "Those who have just migrated here are usually in lots of trouble themselves, so don't make empty promises to others."

"Alright, I got it." Hu Xiaobai said nonchalantly, "By the way, I heard that a new batch of lipstick has arrived at Yunsu. Can you get some for me? Their lipstick is always in high demand, and I can't get any even if I really want them. Since you're so close to Wang Fugui, it shouldn't be a problem to get your hands on some, right?"

"Don't be calling him Wang Fugui this, Wang Fugui that. You should be addressing him as Mr. Wang instead. Don't just name-drop him in front of strangers." Wang Yuexi said, "I'm only familiar with him because we have dealings with each other professionally, but he doesn't ask me for any favors. I still have to take cues from him."

"Why would a civil servant like you need to listen to him? He's just a businessman," Hu Xiaobai muttered.

"What do you know?" Wang Yuexi got anxious. "Brigade Commander Zhang even addresses him as Uncle Fugui, so who do you think I am? He's the president of the Northwest's Chamber of Commerce now; his influence is greater than you can imagine. Both the political and business spheres have to take cues from him. Haven't you heard? The future commander will be coming back soon. When the time comes, Mr. Wang will be one of the most influential people in the Northwest. How can he possibly be at my beck and call? Besides, he's not only influential among the officials. Another group of bandits appeared again some time ago and robbed the Northwest's Chamber of Commerce of their goods. In the end, with just a phone call from Mr. Wang, the person running the black market outside the stronghold immediately flattened the bandits' mountain hideout."

"Say, why doesn't anyone do something about that person running the black market?" Hu Xiaobai was a little puzzled.

"Do something about it?" Wang Yuexi said with a bitter smile, "Who's going to do that? I was there on the day the black market opened. Brigade Commander Zhang Xiaoman even personally went down to congratulate her with a flower basket in hand. Who the hell can possibly interfere with her affairs.... Why is a woman like you poking your nose into such things? You wouldn't understand."

Hu Xiaobai raised an eyebrow. "Wang Yuexi, you're really something. I've suffered together with you for over a decade. Now that you've started working as a civil servant for a short while, you're already talking back to me with such bureaucratic airs? When I married you, did I ever complain about you?"

Wang Yuexi's expression turned bitter. "Forget it, forget it, I won't say it anymore, alright?? I'll buy you the lipstick!"

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Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin carried their baskets and walked to the marketplace. It looked very lively as the entire stronghold was bustling with activity early in the morning.

"Mrs. Hu was quite enthusiastic just now," Yang Xiaojin said with a smile.

"But her husband felt rather cold to me." Ren Xiaosu said softly, "It seems like he's quite worried that we'll really trouble them."

"Well, we aren't that close yet, after all," Yang Xiaojin said.

"But I'm still quite unused to Mrs. Hu's enthusiasm." Ren Xiaosu said, "If anyone in town suddenly turned enthusiastic towards you, it wasn't a good sign."

"But, Xiaosu, you're in a very different situation from when you were living in town." Yang Xiaojin said, "You might not have realized it yourself, but you'd probably not have gone and sought revenge for Mr. Jiang Xu if it were the old you."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought. "Probably not. But after experiencing so much, I somehow feel that I should do something regarding his death, and I was able to do it too."

"Y'know, I read a book that talked about the origins of human civilization. It changed many of my views on things." Yang Xiaojin said, "What do you think symbolizes the starting point of human civilization?"

"When tools are used? Slavery?" Ren Xiaosu said, "When there's inequality in the means of production..."

"No." Yang Xiaojin shook her head. "You're talking about the origin of society, not the origin of civilization."

"Then what's the origin of civilization?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"The origin of civilization is when a broken femur heals." Yang Xiaojin said, "When an animal breaks its femur in the wilderness, its fate has already been decided. It won't be able to hunt for food or drink water by the river anymore. In the vast wilderness, it's destined to become food for other wild animals. And when a person's femur breaks and heals, it means someone's accompanying them over an extended period to take care of them, help them heal their wounds, and help them find food until they can move around again. Xiaosu, helping others in times of danger is the starting point of civilization."

Ren Xiaosu pondered this. "But I somehow feel that I don't have to help those who are unrelated to me. I'm only lying low here while I think through some things. Everyone says that I'm the future commander, but I haven't yet thought about how I should take on this responsibility."

"It's the same even if you only help those who are related to you and protect your family." Yang Xiaojin said, "I won't persuade you to be a good person or even a saint. Let's just protect those around us."

As Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were walking side by side, the crowd around them was bustling with activity.

Yang Xiaojin wondered, "It has to be said that Stronghold 144 is no different from the other strongholds, but why do I keep getting the feeling there's more of a 'human touch' here?"

This was also a stronghold with thick walls, and the residents were no different from those of other strongholds. On the streets, young people went to work; the middle-aged and older people shopped for groceries and greeted each other. Logically, it should be the same in every stronghold, but Yang Xiaojin felt there was a slight difference.

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Perhaps it's because your mindset has changed."

"Maybe?" Yang Xiaojin nodded.

When they arrived at the marketplace, Ren Xiaosu lowered his voice and asked, "You haven't been to the market before, right?"

"You're making it sound like you've shopped in a market before." Yang Xiaojin said disdainfully, "You've always been a refugee outside the stronghold, so which stronghold's market have you been to before? Don't act so secretive and make it sound like you're very experienced."

Ren Xiaosu said unhappily, "But I've consulted Wang Fugui about it before. Back when we were at the Li Consortium, he would go out to shop for groceries every day. Big Sister Xiaoyu even praised him for buying groceries that were fresh and cheap."

"How did he shop?" Yang Xiaojin said.

"He told me that as soon as we enter the market, we should first identify a loud auntie with our discerning eyes and follow her to buy stuff." Ren Xiaosu said, "The aunties are extremely picky when it comes to buying groceries and they also haggle a lot. Once they're done buying their groceries, we'll just buy the same ones. We won't even have to haggle over the prices anymore."

"That makes sense." Yang Xiaojin nodded.

There were actually not many people of Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin's age in the marketplace. People their age in the stronghold were either still attending school or working, so not many of them would come here to shop for groceries.

However, there were still some youngsters shopping among the peddlers.

Ren Xiaosu stared at a middle-aged woman and said to Yang Xiaojin, "See that? She's the one. Let's follow her!"

Yang Xiaojin watched excitedly as Ren Xiaosu followed the older woman. She thought that not a lot of people had probably seen Ren Xiaosu act so.

Who could have expected that the Stronghold Destroyer who terrified so many enemies would actually haggle over some grocery prices?

The Stronghold Destroyer did not look like the Stronghold Destroyer anymore.. Of course, she did not resemble a sniper now either.