

First Order 101

Chapter 101: Leaving Stronghold 113

While Wang Fugui was talking to them, they suddenly heard a commotion come from town. Wang Fugui curiously walked out of the school and said, "What's the uproar this time?"

All of a sudden, he felt that something was wrong. Then he saw the sky was turning gloomy.

That gray smog in the air did not change from light to dark. It turned into a strange dull yellow instead, and the wind was getting stronger as well.

All of the refugees in town were carrying their valuables and running out onto the streets. Some of them were even holding onto their shacks and trying to stabilize them in case the wind blew them down.

At this moment, someone from outside the town ran in shouting, "I think a volcano in the Jing Mountains has erupted. The entire sky above the Jing Mountains is filled with smoke!"

The town administrator stared at him and said, "What are you panicking for? What has the volcano in the Jing Mountains got anything to do with us? We're so far away from it! Where did you come back from?"

"I just came back from the coal mine." That person said, "The factory manager made me come back to report to the stronghold about what is happening at the Jing Mountains. I'm a safety officer at the mine."

"Alright, go and do what you need to do," the town administrator snapped. "Everyone else, be careful and pay attention. Get back into your shacks after the earthquake is over."

Only Yan Liuyuan thought there was something wrong with those words. That was because the birds in the sky were all flying south, and the bugs in the ground had all crawled out as well. Could a volcano so far away have so much power? Yan Liuyuan felt something even more terrifying would happen after this.

There was a river running through Stronghold 113, but no one had ever delved into where this river's source was and where it ended.

The important people in the stronghold had set up several iron fences at the river to prevent any refugees from sneaking into the stronghold. In fact, refugees did so in the past.

But at this moment, the people in the stronghold were also panicking due to the earthquake. As a result, no one noticed that the fences at the river had been knocked down by something in the river. That strange thing kept swimming towards the city, and the fish in the river were all alarmed as they swam in the opposite direction of it. It was as though they were exhibiting an instinctive fear.

At this time, many people from outside of town came running back. Everyone was wondering, "Weren't y'all working at the coal mine? Why did y'all come back?"

The people who came back shouted, "The entrance to the mine has collapsed. There are also many strange bugs running from the Jing Mountains with faces of people on their back shells. They even eat people!"

Everyone was stunned. There was once a bug epidemic that happened in this world, but that was put to a stop very quickly by humans. But for the people of this era, they had only heard of the bug epidemic but did not see it for themselves.

Was history going to repeat itself?

Suddenly, Yan Liuyuan heard someone jump into the yard behind them. He turned around and was surprised to see Ren Xiaosu. Ren Xiaosu signaled for them not to speak and whispered, "Quick, pack up our belongings!"

Although Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu did not know what was going on, they did as they were told by Ren Xiaosu.

Yan Liuyuan decided that something must've happened that made Ren Xiaosu come back here to bring them out of Stronghold 113.

After living here for so many years, were they finally going to leave this place? However, Yan Liuyuan was not really bothered by this. Wherever Ren Xiaosu was, that was home for him.

It was just that Ren Xiaosu had returned too suddenly, so he felt undecided between joy and urgency.

When Wang Fugui came back into the school, he saw Ren Xiaosu holding a gun in his hand that was pointed at him. Ren Xiaosu said, "Old Wang, stay here until we leave, I'm sorry."

Wang Fugui gave a bitter smile and said, "Are y'all leaving? There's a lot of people outside keeping watch over this yard. Perhaps you could walk out without any trouble, but what about Yan Liuyuan and Li Xiaoyu?"

"They won't be able to stop me," Ren Xiaosu said.

After returning to the town, he did not rush over to the school immediately. Instead, he went to check on the spot where he had buried the gun. When he found that it was gone, he went to check on the cave he had prepared for Yan Liuyuan. When he realized that Yan Liuyuan had not gone there, he finally returned to town.

But before he could make it to the school, he discovered people outside the school keeping watch. Moreover, several of them gave him a familiar feeling. They were from the Qing Consortium's combat troops!

It was very easy to tell the difference between the stronghold's private troops and the consortium's combat troops. The soldiers from the private army were like ruffians without any proper bearing. Meanwhile, the soldiers of the combat troops under the Qing Consortium were always standing with their backs straight. It clearly showed they had gone through a lot of training.

Because of these people keeping watch, Ren Xiaosu chose to sneak into the school. Now that it was getting chaotic in town, it was the best opportunity for him to bring Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu away.

Wang Fugui said curiously, "Actually, with Mr. Zhang around, the Qing Consortium wouldn't dare do anything to you, right?"

Ren Xiaosu was startled. "Mr. Zhang?" At this time, Ren Xiaosu realized Zhang Jinglin wasn't around the school anymore. He still didn't know what had happened at the school.

But there wasn't any time to talk about this now. Ren Xiaosu said, "I'm not leaving because of the Qing Consortium. It's just that demons and monsters have started appearing in the Jing Mountains, and they're heading here now!"

When Ren Xiaosu was passing through the canyon, he heard the sound of the wild animals running behind him. The wild animals, Experimentals, and face bugs were all probably being forced southwards by that sea of fire.

At that time, it wouldn't be him alone who would be in danger. Everyone in town would end up in danger as well.

But Ren Xiaosu didn't have any time to explain. He said to Wang Fugui, "You heard them talking about those bugs, right? The number of bugs is terrifying, but they're just a small part of the danger."

Wang Fugui said in surprise, "Just what did y'all encounter in the Jing Mountains...No, Ren Xiaosu, you have to let me go. I have to go back and get my son. We'll leave together with you!"

"Leave with us?" Ren Xiaosu said doubtfully, "Your family business is here, but you want to leave with me?"

He never considered the possibility of bringing Wang Fugui with them. Normally, even if Ren Xiaosu were to try and persuade Wang Fugui to leave together, he should be unwilling to believe Ren Xiaosu's words.

But as it turned out, it was the complete opposite. Ren Xiaosu didn't even have to persuade Wang Fugui and he made the decision instantly.

Wang Fugui thought about it and said, "I don't know about other things, but I know that we can survive as long as we follow you!"

When Luo Xinyu and Yang Xiaojin came out of the stronghold for the first time, Wang Fugui had said to them that no one but Ren Xiaosu would make a good guide for their expedition into the Jing Mountains.

Of course, this did not mean that Old Wang believed Ren Xiaosu was really good at what he did, but that he felt Ren Xiaosu was tough enough.

A child who survived an attack by a pack of wolves and also brought another child with him to grow up and survive together, that was not something a normal person could do.

Right now, there was something Wang Fugui understood: Only Ren Xiaosu knew what had happened in the Jing Mountains. He was someone who had witnessed the changes in the Jing Mountains personally. If he did not believe him, who else could he believe?

Chapter 102: A love gone dead

If Ren Xiaosu went out into the town now and shouted, "The wolves are coming, the Experimentals are coming, the face bugs are coming, and maybe even that monster in the volcano is coming too!" probably half of the people in town would stare at him dumbfoundedly like they were looking at a fool, while the remaining half might be skeptical of what he had just said.

But Wang Fugui was different. He felt that if he didn't believe someone who had personally experienced what had happened, then who else could he believe?

Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Fugui seriously for a moment. He suddenly understood why Old Wang had managed to live safely up til now.

Wang Fugui was neither a capable person, nor was he ruthless enough. All he knew was how to act in front of those important people from the stronghold by behaving slickly, but that shouldn't have been enough to keep him alive for so long.

In the past, some esquires enjoyed a good relationship with the important people in the stronghold too, but didn't they also get harmed or killed all the same?

It had to be said, Wang Fugui possibly had a peculiar survival instinct that allowed him to make the most correct of choices in the face of danger.

Wang Fugui reiterated, "Perhaps no one else believes you, but I do. I'm going with you."

To tell the truth, Ren Xiaosu was also thinking about it. Most people would be a burden to Ren Xiaosu if escaping. But Wang Fugui was different. Old Wang was still a businessman at heart, but he had shown enough goodwill to Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan.

Being the shrewd businessman he was, Wang Fugui noticed Ren Xiaosu's hesitation. He said, "I won't go with you and add nothing. First of all, I have money and medicine. Second, I'm better at dealing with people than y'all are, so I'm not going to be a drag."

At this critical juncture, Wang Fugui made his value known. Only by having value would someone else want to bring you along with them. He did not pin his hopes on depending on their previous friendship to convince Ren Xiaosu because he didn't think that friendship was worth much in times like this.

Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought before saying, "I don't care about your money. Go and come back quickly!"

Ren Xiaosu wasn't a devout person. If it had been someone else, he definitely wouldn't allow that person to leave at such a time. What if that person reported his presence to the Qing Consortium?

But the goodwill Wang Fugui had shown to Ren Xiaosu made him trust Wang Fugui this one time. Moreover, the Qing Consortium was probably too busy to do anything about Ren Xiaosu. The people keeping watch outside were nowhere near enough to take him on.

Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu quickly packed their belongings. Yan Liuyuan handed a copper coin to Ren Xiaosu and said, "Mr. Zhang said that if we have no place left to go, we can head to the Northern Frontier to look for him. But if we still have a chance of survival somewhere else, don't go there. He says that the Northern Frontier is a very tough place to live."

Ren Xiaosu looked at the coin and asked, "What happened here?"

Yan Liuyuan proceeded to relate the events of that night, including Luo Lan's attitude towards Zhang Jinglin and also some of the things Zhang Jinglin said.

He concluded, "Uncle Fugui was also the only one who stood up for us that night."

"OK, I understand." Ren Xiaosu asked again, "Did Mr. Zhang mention what his identity was?"

"No." Yan Liuyuan shook his head. "I don't know what his identity is, and he didn't answer me either when I asked. But one thing's for sure; he's definitely an important person in Stronghold 178."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu said, "If we really have no place to turn to, we'll go look for him at the Northern Frontier."

Xiaoyu said, "Our belongings are packed. There isn't actually a lot to bring."

Ren Xiaosu took a look and saw that Xiaoyu and Yan Liuyuan had basically only brought along foodstuffs. Even the cabbage that was planted by Zhang Jinglin in the school's backyard had been picked. They were quite similar to him, very practical.

"Bring the buns and cornbread." Ren Xiaosu said, "But the cabbage is unnecessary. We can always pick wild vegetables along the way while we're escaping. Eh, what's in that bag?"

"Smoked meat." Sister Xiaoyu said, "You didn't bring any dried food with you the last time you departed, so I thought I'd make some smoked meat to store away for whenever you needed to go out again."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu stayed silent for a bit. "Thank you, Big Sister Xiaoyu. This has really come in handy."

"Bro." Yan Liuyuan looked up at Ren Xiaosu and asked, "Is it really dangerous this time?"

"The people in the stronghold can depend on the walls to keep them safe, but the townspeople can't defend themselves against those creatures. There won't even be a place for them to hide." Ren Xiaosu said, "Actually, the best thing to do now should be to open the stronghold to everyone so they can go in. But I doubt that those who're in the stronghold will allow that to happen."

"Then let's wait for Uncle Fugui to come back before we leave. We can head southwest to where Stronghold 109 is," Yan Liuyuan said.

Ren Xiaosu sized up Yan Liuyuan and said with a laugh, "You look pretty handsome with your face cleaned up. It's like you're one of them in the stronghold."

"Hehe." Yan Liuyuan smirked.

These two brothers' faces had always been dirty. But ever since Yan Liuyuan went down with a fever for some time, Xiaoyu helped him wipe his face clean.

Suddenly, the town broke into an uproar. But this time, it wasn't the sound of people watching a commotion but the sound of cries for help by many.

The entire town had descended into chaos!

Ren Xiaosu strode out of the school's entrance. The soldiers keeping watch immediately reached for their guns when they saw Ren Xiaosu. They had been distracted by the events in town, so they didn't expect to see Ren Xiaosu walk out from the inside.

But before they could even draw their guns, Ren Xiaosu made the first move. He started shooting as he made his way outside. None of those who had been keeping watch managed to run away, and they all ended up dying to his pistol.

At this moment, Wang Fugui ran over to the school with his silly son, Wang Dalong. When he saw Ren Xiaosu finishing off around seven people without any hesitation, he felt quite shocked. Although Ren Xiaosu was known to be ruthless, he never expected he would be this ruthless. It was as if Ren Xiaosu had changed after his trip into the Jing Mountains.

When Ren Xiaosu turned around and looked at Wang Fugui, Wang Fugui nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the coldness in Ren Xiaosu's eyes. However, Ren Xiaosu lowered his gun when he saw that it was Wang Fugui who had come. "Let's go, we'll head over to Stronghold 109."

"Wait." Wang Dalong suddenly said, "Can we bring Li Youqian along?"

Ren Xiaosu seriously pondered this question. "...Who is Li Youqian?"

"She's Old Li's strapping daughter," Yan Liuyuan provided.

"I won't bring her along with us," Ren Xiaosu said and shook his head.

Wang Dalong got ticked off. "You're the school's substitute teacher. How can you abandon your students without a care? If Mr. Zhang were here, he definitely wouldn't just leave her here."

Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Fugui and sighed with emotion. "Seeing how anxious your son is, it feels just like love.... Actually, they're quite compatible."

Wang Fugui was astonished. "Why would you say something like that at this time?!"

Then Ren Xiaosu turned to look at Wang Dalong and said, "Too bad I'm not Mr. Zhang."

When Wang Dalong heard this, his heart broke. He didn't expect his relationship to end just like that.

Chapter 103: The walls collapse

the north of town were already in a state of disarray. Before the group left with Wang Fugui, Ren Xiaosu jumped atop a roof and looked north. He was shocked to see a dense, dark cloud of bugs were currently overwhelming the town.

That sight made it look like the town had suddenly been dyed black with an inkpot. The originally colorful town was getting taken over by the invading swarm of insects.

The wild animals were further out and running over. Ren Xiaosu did not spot the wolf pack or the Experimentals, so the face bugs were probably the first wave of creatures to reach the town. But he thought that it wouldn't take too long before an even greater danger arrived.

The refugees were all fleeing to the stronghold's gate and crying as they begged outside the walls for those in the stronghold to save them.

"Open the gate, quick!"

"Please, open the gate and save us! Don't you all see those bugs?!"

"Please, just let my child in!"

The refugees outside the walls were all begging on their knees, but the private troops guarding the walls only gave some token fire with their automatic rifles at the dense cloud of bugs. At no time did they ever think of opening the gate to let the refugees through.

Besides, their action of firing at the bugs was no different from trying to put out a forest fire with a bucket of water.

Seeing that the bugs were about to arrive and the gate was still firmly shut, some of the refugees started cursing. But before they could swear much, they were forced to leave. Otherwise, the bugs would be here!

Ren Xiaosu had never had expectations of anyone, so his initial reaction was not to go to the stronghold to bargain but to leave immediately.

He didn't care if other people lived or died. All he wanted was to take care of Yan Liuyuan and the others first.

At the beginning, Ren Xiaosu was worried that Wang Fugui would bring along many cumbersome items. But then he discovered that Wang Fugui and Wang Dalong were only carrying one backpack each. Although Wang Dalong looked a little stupid, he was very strong. He did not look careless at all carrying his belongings.

There was even a moment when Ren Xiaosu wondered if Wang Dalong was a supernatural being himself. Ren Xiaosu opened Wang Dalong's backpack and took a look inside. He found it was filled with

hardtack that had circulated from the stronghold, while Wang Fugui's backpack was filled with medicinal supplies.

The medicinal supplies had been taken out of their packaging and stored into plastic bottles according to their function to make them easy to carry around.

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked Wang Fugui as he led everyone in their escape to the southwest, "I thought you would bring gold or something similar."

"I would have liked to, but I don't have the strength to carry them. If my stamina doesn't last, I'll end up dead," Wang Fugui said with a bitter expression. "But I did bring quite a bit of money with me. However, they're all issued by the Qing Consortium. When we get to Stronghold 109 and exchange them for the Li Consortium's currency, they're probably going to be devalued by half."

Wang Fugui was panting as he ran. As he usually didn't exercise, he ended up being the most tired as they were making their escape.

Ren Xiaosu glanced at him. "Quit complaining. The medicine you've brought with you is valuable stuff. Those thousands of anti-inflammatory pills you have are worth 200 yuan each."

There was also another thing. Now that they were escaping, money was useless when compared to medicine.

Zhang Jinglin had once said that gold was a hard currency. However, he didn't mention another hard currency, medicine.

In fact, Wang Fugui had made the smartest decision this time.

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Not every refugee in town was foolish enough to cry for help at the stronghold walls. Some also understood the important people in the stronghold did not care about the lives of the refugees. As such, they decided to escape straight into the wilderness.

When Ren Xiaosu and company left, they could still hear the cries of the refugees who stayed behind and gunshots fired from the top of the walls. Soon after, an even more thunderous sound rang out. Ren Xiaosu turned back to look and saw that the private troops atop the wall had started throwing grenades and bombs down!

There were still a lot of alive people below the walls!

Some of the smarter refugees were running frantically for the wilderness. When some of them tripped, they just rolled over and got up again in one swift motion. No one dared lay on the ground for even one second.

It wasn't only Ren Xiaosu and company who were escaping southwest. Several hundred others were doing the same as well.

As Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu were unable to run as fast, Ren Xiaosu had to run together in a group with those few hundred others.

Fortunately, Ren Xiaosu was able to carry all of their luggage by himself, so that made it easier for Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu.

After running for a while, everyone started to slow down when they realized the face bugs did not come chasing after them. Everyone other than Ren Xiaosu was exhausted from the running.

Some of them turned around to have a look and saw that the town had now become a purgatory of sorts. Their shacks were all burning up in flames.

“Our home is gone,” someone muttered.

Some of those who had just lost their families couldn’t hold it in any longer and started crying. Ren Xiaosu witnessed earlier that some of these people had even abandoned their young children so they could run a little faster.

But there were also others who held onto their children protectively before eventually getting killed by the swarm of face bugs. The back shells of those face bugs seemed to become clearer, and the sound of their mandibles chewing on their victims was a nightmare many would find hard to forget.

By this time, their group had reached a relatively safe zone having left the town earlier. The face bugs seemed like they were more interested in the stronghold, so they did not bother to catch up to the humans who had escaped into the wilderness.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly had a feeling that the stronghold would help attract attention from the humans who were escaping. After all, those wild animals and face bugs would go to wherever there was more “food.”

At that time, when the Qing Consortium’s combat troops joined the battle with their firearms and heavy weapons, they shouldn’t have a problem holding off the wild animals and monsters with the help of the stronghold.

If it weren’t for the fact that he needed to avoid the Qing Consortium, Ren Xiaosu might just have waited for a while here in the wilderness until the Qing Consortium finished off those monsters. Then he would bring Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu back to the stronghold’s town.

But right now, he needed to steer clear of any Qing Consortium-controlled areas.

But it was at this time that Ren Xiaosu started frowning as he looked out into the area. Everyone could feel it as well. “It’s another earthquake!”

This earthquake was even more violent than the previous one, and some people who were unprepared for it fell to the ground!

“Look, what’s that!” someone said as they pointed north.

They saw a giant, dark line quickly approaching southwards from the direction of the Jing Mountains, which then went straight into the stronghold like a knife!

The grand and curved wall made a loud crackling sound like an iceberg breaking off. There were even thin cracks appearing from the bottom and going up on the sturdy walls.

Ren Xiaosu was so absolutely stunned by this scene that he could not speak. The giant fissure did not form a trench but broke the entire stronghold up into two semicircles. In addition, the ground on the west side was suddenly raised by over ten meters!

It was as if someone had suddenly pulled up an entire piece of the plain to form a stair!

It was here that two tectonic plates converged, and it only took an instant to break the stronghold's walls into two halves!

The walls had collapsed!

Chapter 104: A real disaster

Ren Xiaosu once posed a question while chatting with Yan Liuyuan. What would happen if the walls that protected the humans collapsed?

At the time, Ren Xiaosu didn't really pay much attention even though he was the one who raised the question. After all, they would just rebuild the walls if they collapsed. The important people in the stronghold would still be important, and the refugees in town would still remain refugees.

But it was different this time. The walls could collapse at any other time but now. There were wolves waiting outside of the walls; wild animals and poisonous insects were also escaping out of the Jing Mountain range. There were face bugs and the Experimentals!

The tectonic plate movement that caused the earthquake was like a black swan that flapped its wings and brought a disaster upon the stronghold.

This stronghold seemed like it was situated right on two fault lines. With the violent movement of the plates, they tore it apart.

But that was not the only disaster brought on by the earthquake. The houses in the stronghold also crumbled, and countless people were buried alive under the buildings!

Ren Xiaosu was watching all this unfold from a faraway hilltop. The walls that had protected the residents of the stronghold for decades, or even over a century, was crumbling piece by piece like a melting glacier. In the end, the entire place was reduced to ruins.

This was perhaps the most shocking and insane sight Ren Xiaosu had ever witnessed in his life. The private troops atop the walls did not even have time to withdraw and fell to the ground along with the walls. Their bodies were all crushed!

These walls were at least 50 meters tall. A normal person who fell off would die for sure.

The wave of face bugs that couldn't get past the walls started swarming into the city within the stronghold. Those "important people" in the city who were unable to recover in time from their panic caused by the collapsed buildings were eaten by the face bugs.

Wang Fugui and the others also stopped in their tracks and turned around to watch this sight with deep fear in their eyes.

"Xiaosu, will the people in the city survive?" Xiaoyu asked under her breath.

Ren Xiaosu turned around and continued heading in the direction of Stronghold 109. "It's enough that we survive."

In Ren Xiaosu's opinion, there would still be a portion of the stronghold's residents who could make it out alive. With a population of several hundred thousand, it was impossible that there weren't any smart people in the stronghold's city. Moreover, the Qing Consortium's combat troops were still in there.

But all of that didn't have anything to do with him. In this era, if it was of no concern to you, you didn't have to care about it. In the past, none of the important people ever cared about the life and death of the refugees. As such, no one would care about their lives now.

Besides, it wasn't like anyone could do anything about this disaster.

Suddenly, someone said, "Look, there seems to be some kind of strange light in the stronghold."

The next moment, Ren Xiaosu turned around and was surprised to see a gigantic bubble drifting towards the face bugs. Shortly after, the bubble burst, and it forcibly pushed the swarm of bugs back by dozens of meters. Furthermore, the bugs closest to the front looked like they had been killed by the blast.

The others might not know what that was, but Ren Xiaosu immediately thought of the person who had been caught and sent into the stronghold, Zhang Baogen.

This bubble was also larger than the one he had seen, but its appearance and effect were exactly the same.

Ren Xiaosu was uncertain. It looked like Zhang Baogen wasn't dead yet. In fact, his power had grown even stronger.

"It's a supernatural being!" Someone exclaimed, "A supernatural being in the stronghold has made their move!"

"What the hell is that bubble?"

Ren Xiaosu looked at the surprised people and thought, "If I say that it's a saliva bubble blown by Zhang Baogen, none of you will believe me...."

Wang Fugui's son, Wang Dalong, muttered, "How I wish I were also a supernatural being."

When the stronghold arrested the supernatural beings, everyone distanced themselves at the mention of the words "supernatural being." They were all afraid they would get implicated due to these two words.

But if they were honest with themselves, who wouldn't want to have extraordinary superpowers? Even someone who had already entered middle age, Wang Fugui, had also fantasized about it.

This was the ultimate desire human beings wanted from this world.

However, supernatural beings were rare. From the looks of it, there were probably only a dozen or so among several hundred thousand people. Ren Xiaosu knew there must still be other hidden supernatural beings in the stronghold, but their number would definitely not be too high.

"How does one become a supernatural being?" Wang Dalong asked his father.

Wang Fugui said in a speechless manner, "I don't know either."

Yan Liuyuan remarked, "There are probably some conditions, like luck or bloodline, things like that?"

Wang Dalong became dejected. "Well, my dad is no supernatural being either."

Yan Liuyuan consoled, "Don't despair, maybe he's not your biological father?"

Wang Dalong was confused. While he was making his escape, Wang Dalong did not even cry over his lost love. But with this, he started wailing.

"Ren Xiaosu, you and your brother have such potty mouths." Wang Fugui was nearly cursing. "That Zhang Baogen is a supernatural being, but does his father look like he has any supernatural bloodline in him?"

By this time, Zhang Baogen had spat out about five saliva bubbles and forced the bugs back, helping quite a few people finally get a chance to catch a breather. They immediately made use of this window to escape out of the stronghold. They were heading for exactly where Ren Xiaosu and the others were.

The walls of the stronghold that had crumbled formed large obstacles on the path that made it difficult for the people on the inside to get out. But luckily for them, there was an opening large enough to let several people through at once in the direction of Ren Xiaosu.

In times of distress, people would tend to blindly follow others. The people who had been caught in this disaster had lost their ability to think normally and could only run to wherever the others ran to.

When one person ran towards this opening, the other lucky survivors followed. The number of escaping survivors started to snowball.

Wang Fugui could only make a rough estimation of the numbers. There were probably at least upwards of several thousand people making their escape right now, and it was only going to get higher.

They couldn't wait anymore. The face bugs were probably not going to give up on so much food, and neither would those wolves.

The sound of sporadic gunfire was getting weaker and weaker. Ren Xiaosu had thought the Qing Consortium's combat troops would be very effective here. But surprisingly, he didn't even see the combat brigade joining the battle.

Could it be that the military base was too far away?

Eventually, some people from the stronghold tried escaping into the river to avoid the face bugs. Normally, bugs were afraid of water.

But just as some people jumped into the river, something in the murky water suddenly opened its mouth and swallowed them. Right after, a dense trail of blood appeared under the murky waters.

The entire stronghold city was filled with smoke and the scent of blood. Ren Xiaosu had never seen such a savage sight before. Even he felt that this was too cruel.

He frowned and said, "Let's get out of here. Those people who escaped from the stronghold might attract danger."

Many of the refugees around them were so tired they didn't want to move anymore. When they were felling from the town, they didn't feel it. But now that they had stopped, they could feel all the muscles in their bodies aching.

Much more physical energy is consumed when running at full speed compared to jogging.

Wang Fugui, Wang Dalong, Yan Liuyuan, and Xiaoyu were all not as physically fit as Ren Xiaosu. But when Ren Xiaosu called for them to continue, none of them said a word in protest.

They would only survive if they listened to Ren Xiaosu.

Xiaoyu and the others clenched their teeth and caught up with Ren Xiaosu's pace. Ren Xiaosu said softly, "A lot of lactic acid will accumulate in the body after an intense workout. You must keep going, or else you'll aching even more if you rest any longer."

When the other refugees saw Ren and company leaving, some of them followed. But others thought that since the face bugs hadn't noticed them here, there was no hurry for them to leave. It wasn't that they didn't want to go, but that they wanted to rest for a few more minutes.

No matter the situation, there were always people who counted on their luck too much.

Suddenly, Xiaoyu and Yan Liuyuan realized that of all those who were here, Ren Xiaosu looked the most relaxed. It was as though he didn't feel tired at all.

Chapter 105: The wolves are coming

Some people thought they had gotten lucky and that the face bugs would not come after them anymore. However, Ren Xiaosu knew the true danger in this disaster might not be the face bugs.

Be it the Experimentals or that terrifying monster in the volcano, they were all creatures Ren Xiaosu wanted to run away from.

Around 400 people, all of whom were refugees from town, continued escaping towards Stronghold 109. Ren Xiaosu led Xiaoyu and company to join the crowd but did not have any interactions with other people.

Many of the people could recognize Ren Xiaosu, Yan Liuyuan, and the others, but everyone was too busy fleeing to care about it.

Someone suddenly thought of something. "Say, shouldn't there be a factory along the route to Stronghold 109?"

A buff young man said, "That's right, there's a sand factory over there. I've worked there before."

"How many people work at that factory?"

"Around 200 people. It's mostly the machines digging for sand in the sand fields, so there isn't a need for too many people. But they do have a vegetable farm, so maybe we can look for something to eat over there?" Having escaped a short while ago, everyone was starting to feel a little hungry.

"Now that the stronghold is no longer standing, does it mean we can detour back to the pig farm and kill some pigs for pork?" A man said, "There won't be anyone there to stop us anyway."

"I wonder if the women in the stronghold are all pretty." Someone remarked, "I've seen that Luo Xinyu before, and she's particularly good-looking. Now that the people from the stronghold are in trouble..."

Ren Xiaosu sized them up. Perhaps these people thought they were no longer in danger, so they also became more relaxed.

These people weren't really affected by those who died.

The majority of the town's refugees were unfeeling and antisocial. On most days, it was enough if no one made things difficult for others. As such, none of them really felt sad about it when the others died.

In addition, they were even more unaffected if it were those important people in the stronghold who had died. In fact, they were probably cheering for this at heart.

Only a minority of those who had lost their families appeared to be in very low spirits at this time.

Of the 400 or so people here, slightly less than half were female. They were warily watching the men around them. Some of their husbands had just died, so they all knew what kind of danger they were in this time.

“Xiaosu, are we going to the sand plant to rest for a while?” Xiaoyu asked in worry.

“No.” Ren Xiaosu shook his head. “We must stay away from them when we rest at night. When danger approaches, it will surely get attracted to the largest group of people first. On top of that, these people could also become a new source of danger.”

Xiaoyu was relieved to hear that. “Mhm, we brought some food, so you don’t have to worry about the food. I know these people from town too well. They’re capable of anything.”

“OK. Of course, there’s no need to get too worried. They’re just a mob.” Ren Xiaosu nodded. Then he looked to Yan Liuyuan and said, “Hide the gun.”

When Ren Xiaosu killed the people who were watching them, he had fired the gun. Even if it was very chaotic in town at that time, a lot of people would still have noticed.

He wasn’t worried that this mob would dare get any ideas about them. But it was still necessary to be careful in case they tried any tricks.

“The people at the sand plant might not know what happened in town. They probably felt the strong earthquake, but they won’t know that the stronghold has already fallen,” Ren Xiaosu said.

The epicenter of the earthquake was in the Jing Mountains, with the seismic waves spreading out several hundreds of kilometers. Ren Xiaosu was wondering if Stronghold 112 would also have collapsed since Stronghold 113 had been shaken so badly.

After all, Stronghold 113 and Stronghold 112 were about the same distance from the Jing Mountains.

The fleeing group of people arrived at the sand plant in the afternoon. In the end, they saw that the factory building and the workers’ dormitories had all collapsed. A large group of the sand plant workers were busy driving excavators around to clear the ruins of the factory building.

When the sand plant workers saw such a large group of people arriving, they were confused. In the end, when they heard that the stronghold was in ruins, they did not know how to react.

If the stronghold had fallen, what was the point of rebuilding the sand plant?

Most of the escapees sat on the ground. They really could not walk anymore and were planning to rest for the night here at the sand factory. At least there was food here.

Some of the people wanted to leave with Ren Xiaosu, but when they saw the majority staying behind, they stopped following him. After all, wouldn’t it be safer if everyone stayed together?

With the addition of these workers from the sand plant, the crowd had grown to around 600 people.

Ren Xiaosu wasn’t bothered by this. Instead, he had a look at the sky and continued leading Yan Liuyuan and the others forward. There was probably only two or three hours before it turned dark, but it was enough time for them to get further.

Wang Dalong was grumbling along the way, “Can’t we rest for even a bit?”

But before Ren Xiaosu could even say anything, Wang Fugui had already slapped his son upside the head. "Keep going if you're told to! Stop complaining!"

Wang Fugui gave Ren Xiaosu a smile and said, "He's just a kid, don't mind him."

"It's fine." Ren Xiaosu shook his head. He definitely needed to remember Wang Fugui's friendship with Yan Liuyuan and him. As such, he didn't take Wang Dalong's grumblings to heart.

Even if Wang Dalong kept speaking rudely, Ren Xiaosu would still get Wang Dalong to Stronghold 109.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a bit more before adding, "Let's keep going for a little more before we find a place to rest. But each of you will have to properly rub down your muscles before fully resting. Otherwise, none of you are gonna be able to go on tomorrow. You won't be able to get away if there's any danger."

This was based on Ren Xiaosu's many years of wilderness survival experience.

At this moment, the people who were making their escape together with Ren Xiaosu sat on the ground and watched them continue off into the distance. Someone laughed and said, "Isn't that Ren Xiaosu afraid that he'll tire the people with him to death?"

"Wang Fugui looks pretty smart himself and has always enjoyed his status in town. But why has he decided to follow a few brats?" Someone scorned, "When I saw him leaving so anxiously at the beginning, I caught up thinking that there was still danger lurking behind us. But there isn't even anything catching up to us!"

"Wang Fugui must've brought quite a bit of money with him." A shady man whispered, "He's been running a grocery store for so many years, so he must have taken all of his family belongings with him when he escaped."

"And that Li Xiaoyu..."

"Don't even think about it." Someone said with a sneer, "Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan both have guns with them. Surely, you know that?"

"What are you afraid of? We have so many people." Someone said unconvinced, "Why would so many of us be afraid of a gun? How many bullets can he have?"

"Oh, then are you going to attack first?"

With that, no one else made another sound. Although Ren Xiaosu had a limited amount of bullets, they only had a life each. Whoever attacked first would die.

Ren Xiaosu's assessment of them was not wrong at all: They were just a mob.

Someone waved it off. "Don't talk about these useless things. Let's rest here for the night and set off again tomorrow."

But as night fell, they suddenly heard the howling of wolves in the distance. Everyone who was resting immediately stood up and looked in the direction of the howling in fear.

They knew how scary the wolf pack was, but they never expected them to be here as well!

Based on the howls, the wolf pack was at most three to five kilometers away!

"Hurry and run! I didn't really think that there would be danger!"

"We should have followed Ren Xiaosu and left together, fuck!"

This group of people now regretted it. But when they stood up and got ready to make their escape again, they discovered their legs had become as heavy as lead! They were aching all over their bodies!

Chapter 106: Roaring engines

Before the wolves arrived, almost everyone felt that Ren Xiaosu was being too cautious. The danger had already passed, so why did he still insist on continuing on?

But when the wolves arrived, they finally understood how Ren Xiaosu managed to survive all those years in the wilderness.

"Run, quick!"

"Those who don't want to die, hurry and run. Don't fall behind!"

The majority of the people picked themselves up and ran in the direction of where Ren Xiaosu had gone. They finally recalled the fear they felt when they first saw the face bugs!

It had been less than a month since the wolf pack destroyed the factory and the stronghold's overseers had issued an order for the refugees to go and bury the dead there. Many of these refugees puked when they saw the bloody scenes at the factory.

Even these refugees, who were used to seeing death, couldn't stand the sights at the factory. Of the bodies that were cleared out from the factory that day, none of them were intact. Every single one had been torn apart by the wolves.

Ren Xiaosu was away from town at the time, so he didn't know this happened. But for the refugee, they got a fear of wolves.

But the faster these refugees wanted to run at this moment, the more they found it difficult to do so.

Far away, Ren Xiaosu was sitting beside a campfire and adding firewood to it. As they were too distant, they did not hear the howls of the wolves.

There was steam emitting from a small pot hanging over the campfire. Ren Xiaosu had cut off two pieces of the smoked meat Xiaoyu had prepared, and thrown it into the pot. The instant he did so, the aroma

of the meat drifted out from the clear porridge that was being cooked while Wang Dalong looked at it hungrily.

Ren Xiaosu looked at everyone else and said, "Don't just sit there and wait. Use this time to massage your muscles. We still have to run tomorrow."

"Smells good." Yan Liuyuan sniffed the food.

"I even saw some wild coriander along the road. Let's crush it later and throw it into the porridge to make it even better," Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

The coriander found in town were usually just saplings. However, coriander could grow up to half the height of a human being. In fact, a lot of people wouldn't even recognize it once it grew beyond the sapling stage.

"Coriander?" Wang Dalong squirmed and pouted, "I don't eat coriander!"

"You don't eat coriander?" Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. "But it's such a fragrant herb. Why don't you eat it?"

"Don't you find that coriander has a bedbug-like smell? It makes me want to vomit whenever I smell it." Wang Dalong said, "How can you guys even eat it?"

Ren Xiaosu looked at the coriander in his hand and mused, "Maybe because I've never eaten bedbugs before?"

Wang Dalong was confused. "I've also never freaking eaten it before, alright!"

Wang Fugui was peeved as he ladled out a tiny bowl of porridge for his son. Then he said to Ren Xiaosu, "If you want to put in coriander, just put it in. But can you not gross out my dear son?"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled at that. However, he realized Wang Fugui had taken too little porridge for Wang Dalong. He purposely didn't take a single piece of smoked meat for him and left it for everyone else.

"Old Wang," Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, "I'm very grateful that you stood up for Yan Liuyuan and Big Sister Xiaoyu that night. Also, you were always great to me whenever I sold my catch in town. I remember all of that, so you don't have to be so polite since we're all trying to escape together." Ren Xiaosu took Wang Dalong's small metal bowl and ladled out some more porridge for him. He also added a piece of smoked meat for him.

Xiaoyu had brought several metal bowls along. In the early winter, every one of them was holding the metal bowls as they waited for the porridge to cool down while it warmed their hands.

Ren Xiaosu often sold his sparrow catches to Old Wang and often mentioned he could also sell it to Old Li's grocery store as an excuse to raise Old Wang's offers. But in fact, Ren Xiaosu had been to Old Li's

shop before and knew that he only bought sparrows for 900 yuan. Meanwhile, Wang Fugui sometimes paid him up to 1200 yuan.

Whenever winter arrived, Wang Fugui's offer to buy the sparrows would go up by a few hundred yuan, and those few hundred yuan was often enough to afford a new coat.

Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu felt that even in such difficult times like now, there were still some people who glowed with kindness. It was like a charcoal fire burning in snowy weather.

Wang Fugui looked at the smoked meat in Wang Dalong's bowl and said with a sigh, "I'm glad I didn't misjudge the two of you brothers."

Although Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan could be very annoying, Wang Fugui knew well that these two brothers were both very sentimental.

"Uncle Fugui, don't worry." Yan Liuyuan smiled and said, "Once we get to Stronghold 109, we'll help you rebuild the grocery store!"

"We're in such a desperate state. There's no need to talk about the past." Wang Fugui waved it off with a smile.

Actually, Wang Fugui was more open-minded than Ren Xiaosu imagined. It was as though he wasn't particularly attached to the family business he operated at Stronghold 113.

But right at this time, Ren Xiaosu and the others heard footsteps in the distance. There seemed to be several hundred people running here towards them. Ren Xiaosu drew his gun and looked at the others. "Hurry up and finish your porridge."

Yan Liuyuan and the others did not care about how hot it was anymore. They gulped down the porridge in one go per Ren Xiaosu's instructions. It was fortunate that it had already cooled down a little, or else everyone would have scalded their tongues.

Ren Xiaosu frowned as he watched the crowd of several hundred people running over. "Something's wrong. These people are fleeing for their lives. We've got to hurry and leave too!"

At the beginning, Ren Xiaosu was quite curious as to why this mob was suddenly on the move again. Didn't they say they were going to rest at the sand farm for the night? But he immediately figured it out. The only thing that could get these people moving again was danger!

Ren Xiaosu and the others were also decisively quick. Before this crowd of people could get close to them, they had already continued to escape.

The mob behind them were all achy and hungry, while Ren Xiaosu and company had massaged themselves for some time and even ate hot porridge. Although everyone was trying to escape, the circumstances of their situations were entirely different.

And in times of real danger, Ren Xiaosu could carry the luggage of everyone, so his group had it easier.

Suddenly, Ren Xiaosu turned around and looked at the top of a hill in the distance. The silvery Wolf King he had seen before was currently overlooking the escaping crowd in the wilderness. It was quietly watching its prey.

Wolves usually followed behind their prey and waited until they get exhausted before launching their final attack on them.

If the mob kept running away in fear, soon they would probably lose all strength to keep escaping. When that happened, it would be time for the wolf pack to capture their prey.

Ren Xiaosu frowned. "We have to get as far away from those people as we can. Although it may sound bad if I say they're our shield, we don't have a choice here."

Wang Fugui hurriedly said, "It's not too bad to use others as our shield...."

But just as he finished his sentence, Ren Xiaosu heard the roaring of engines and was stunned. Why were there vehicles out here?

The sound of the engines was very abrupt in the wilderness. It sounded like the roar of a wild animal.

Before long, Ren Xiaosu realized what had happened. It was the sound of the people who had escaped from the stronghold!

From the looks of it, their escape route was also in this direction. However, he didn't know just how many people had managed to make it out of the stronghold.

Chapter 107: The grace of dripping water

When the off-road vehicles and military transport trucks of the Qing Consortium appeared on the horizon, Ren Xiaosu suddenly thought that this might also be why the wolf pack was not in a hurry to carry out their hunt.

Ren Xiaosu was quite familiar with the logo of the Qing Consortium on those vehicles, having just seen it in the past few days.

The logo of a white ginkgo leaf was visible on the vehicles. According to Mr. Zhang, this world had already gone through hundreds of millions of years of change. However, only the ginkgo tree of all the plants in the world retained its original appearance since the Quaternary glaciation.

This was one of the world's oldest genus of tree, as well as the species with the most powerful "genetics."

When Ren Xiaosu first saw the Qing Consortium's logo in the Jing Mountains, he wondered if they had chosen to use the white ginkgo leaf as their logo because they hoped to stay around forever.

The vehicles were roaring as they arrived. But when they approached, Ren Xiaosu felt there were too few of them. They were so few in number there wasn't a need to count them—there were just three off-road vehicles and two military transport trucks.

Didn't Xu Xianchu say that the Qing Consortium's combat brigade had a strength of 4,500 soldiers? Why did so few people make it out then? A single truck could take up to 50 people at least, right? Then did it mean that only about a hundred of them managed to escape from the stronghold?

What exactly happened?

In reality, Ren Xiaosu had underestimated the horror of this disaster. As there were much fewer brick and mortar structures in town, Ren Xiaosu did not consider the consequences of them or even the high-rise buildings collapsing. Most of the structures in the stronghold were made of brick and mortar.

You could say that Ren Xiaosu's imagination had been limited by his poverty.

This earthquake had even caused the land to crack open, splitting the stronghold into two as it forcibly turned the river into a waterfall.

This was the power of nature, and humanity could do nothing about it.

After the brick and mortar structures in the stronghold collapsed, a large number of humans were crushed to death under the buildings. Countless people had died, including those who were from the Qing Consortium.

What was most unfortunate was that the military base was situated right across the fault line, as it got split in half.

Luo Lan was panting in the off-road vehicle. The most embarrassing fact was that he was only dressed in a pair of flowery boxers. When the earthquake occurred, he was still fast asleep. It was fortunate that the barracks he was living in was hardy and strong, and the structure was low to the ground, letting him survive.

As it was winter now, there was heating in the barracks and inside the off-road vehicle. However, there wasn't any in the wilderness.

Right now, Luo Lan was most worried about what would happen if the vehicle ran out of gas before they could reach Stronghold 109. At that time, he might have to get out and hoof it as they made their way towards Stronghold 109!

Thinking of this, Luo Lan said, "How much gas does the car still have?"

The soldier in the driver's seat said, "There's still a third left. We can keep driving for about 130 kilometers."

"Can we make it to Stronghold 109?" Luo Lan asked.

The soldier said awkwardly, "We're still 210 kilometers away from Stronghold 109. There's definitely not enough gas, but we can actually have the people in the off-road vehicle behind us get out while we siphon the gas from their vehicle...."

"Eh?" Luo Lan's eyes lit up before he sighed. "Forget it, the people in that off-road vehicle are all injured, and so are those in the transport trucks."

The soldier was silent for a moment before saying, "Sir, both you and Mr. Qing Zhen treat us very well, unlike the other big shots of the consortium. We don't mind if we have to suffer a little."

"Enough, don't bring it up anymore." Luo Lan waved his hand irritably. "You're speaking like I'm a good person. I'm not. Don't you know that the good die young?"

"Sir, there's a group of people up ahead running," the soldier said when he saw the fleeing refugees.

Luo Lan disdained, "There was also a group behind us just now. What's the big deal? Pass them and make them eat our dust!"

When the refugees saw the convoy of vehicles passing them, they got rather jealous. How great it would be if they also had such vehicles to ride in.

There were actually vehicles at the sand plant as well, but as they were deployed to transport the sand, only the excavators remained at the plant. They couldn't go fast and were gas guzzlers!

At this time, someone from the group of refugees suddenly ran out. "Boss Luo, I'm the manager of the sand factory, Wang Yiheng. Please bring me along with you! I've met you before!"

Luo Lan's driver asked, "Should we bring him with us?"

"I don't even have enough space for the injured. Why would I bring him?" Luo Lan scolded, "Ignore him."

When Wang Yiheng saw the convoy getting further and further away, he got so angry that he almost wanted to shoot that Fatty Luo dead with the gun in his hand. But on the one hand, he did not have the balls to do so, so he could only think about it. On the other hand, he couldn't catch up to them.

...

Ren Xiaosu watched the convoy as it approached from afar. He told Wang Fugui and the others, "I believe that there'll be quite a lot of people from the stronghold making their way here. Don't worry too much. There'll be enough people to attract the attention of the wild animals on our behalf. If there are still wild animals that might attack us, leave them to me."

Wang Fugui was a very smart man and could sense the confidence in Ren Xiaosu's claims.

Ren Xiaosu should know all about the kinds of danger following them, but he wasn't afraid at all. Wang Fugui thought about it and wondered if Ren Xiaosu could also be... a supernatural being?

How else could he be the only one to return when so many people went on the expedition to the Jing Mountains? Moreover, could Ren Xiaosu also have killed people in the Jing Mountains? If not, why was Ren Xiaosu able to kill those people keeping watch at the entrance of the school without batting an eye?

"Um, Xiaosu, I'm not sure if I should ask this?" Wang Fugui said with some hesitation, "But what on earth happened in the Jing Mountains? Where did the others go?"

"20 of us went on the expedition." Ren Xiaosu thought about it as he said, "But there should only be only four of us who made it out alive."

These four were Xu Xianchu, Yang Xiaojin, Luo Xinyu, and Ren Xiaosu himself.

"As for what happened in the Jing Mountains, I'm not sure either. There are bugs that eat humans and humanoid Experimentals whose intelligence has been dumbed down." Ren Xiaosu said with a sigh, "But actually, those aren't the scariest things out there."

The monster whose claws came out of the crater was like a bad memory for Ren Xiaosu. The monster was simply too enormous, and it even lived in magma.

At this time, the Qing Consortium's convoy of vehicles passed Ren Xiaosu and company. Ren Xiaosu saw Fatty Luo through the windows and wondered if this was the legendary Boss Luo who gifted him that banner with the words "Magic hands restore spring."

"No matter what, we're fortunate to have you with us." Wang Fugui said with a sigh, "If you didn't bring us out with you in time, Dalong and I might not have made it out at all. I don't even know how to thank you."

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Fugui seriously and said, "The grace of dripping water should be reciprocated by a gushing spring..."

Wang Fugui was confused. 'Shouldn't we be a little more polite with one another?!'

However, Ren Xiaosu didn't say anything else. He found a high vantage point to look into the distance and saw that there were still many others who escaped from the stronghold.

"We'll find a place downwind and get ready to rest." Ren Xiaosu said, "It seems like there are several thousand people in the group that's to the rear of us. so we're safe for now. Besides, I think y'all are gonna collapse if we still don't get any rest."

At present, the moon was hanging high in the night sky. Everyone had been fleeing since the morning and were on the verge of collapse. Ren Xiaosu felt that they had to reintegrate with the larger group of people again and use them as their shield.

If it were a group of several hundred people, they might get attacked by the wolves. But with a several thousand-strong crowd, even the wolves should have second thoughts about attacking, right?

And if they encountered any danger, all he would have to do was have Yan Liuyuan and the others escape faster than the crowd of several thousand.

It might sound a little cruel, but the others were probably thinking likewise.

Moreover, if they followed the crowd to Stronghold 109, would there be any possibility that they could pretend they were residents of Stronghold 113 and sneak into Stronghold 109?

Ren Xiaosu wondered if Stronghold 109 would agree to let them in.

Chapter 108: Sneaking into the stronghold

It was getting darker. Since Ren Xiaosu had the idea to sneak into Stronghold 109, he started to come up with some crooked ideas. He called everyone together and whispered, "What do y'all think of sneaking into Stronghold 109 by passing off as residents of Stronghold 113?"

"That won't work." Wang Fugui shook his head and said, "The stronghold residents have ID papers. We don't have anything like that."

"I can just say that I lost them while we were escaping, right?" Ren Xiaosu replied. "It should not be surprising since we traveled over a 100 kilometers to escape from such a big disaster."

Wang Fugui said, "It's difficult to say since there isn't information sharing between the strongholds. Even if you say that you were a Stronghold 113 resident, there isn't a way for them to verify it. In the past, an authorization letter would be required to travel between the strongholds, and the letter would have to bear the official seal of the stronghold overseer. But now that Stronghold 113 is no more, and with Stronghold 113's overseer, Old Liu, sent away to the Northern Frontier by the Qing Consortium, who knows whose hands the official seal has ended up in..."

Ren Xiaosu clicked his tongue. "He would've died in the stronghold if he didn't get shipped off to the Northern Frontier. What a blessing in disguise..."

"Now that you say it, it sounds like the Qing Consortium saved his life," Wang Fugui said in a speechless manner. "But you have to consider other factors, too, if you want to sneak into Stronghold 109. For example, there are still more than 600 refugees here who recognize you. Besides, if Stronghold 109 were to refuse every single person from entering, even the big shots of Stronghold 113 would end up becoming refugees, not to mention us."

"That's a possibility." Ren Xiaosu said, "Stronghold 109 most likely won't allow anyone in."

No precedent had been set for a matter like this. As no stronghold had collapsed before, there was nothing Ren Xiaosu and the others could compare it to. They could only take it one step at a time.

It would be good if they could get into the stronghold, of course. But even if they could not get in, Ren Xiaosu and company would still be able to live well.

However, it would be tough for those big shots who escaped from the stronghold. It was at least another 100 kilometers from Stronghold 109 from where they were now. To get there, the distance alone might be enough to exhaust them to death.

In the event they did arrive at Stronghold 109, many of these people would probably break down if they found out they weren't allowed in.

Ren Xiaosu and his group found a spot downwind and decided to rest there for a while. Even if Ren Xiaosu could go on, Wang Fugui, Xiaoyu, and the others would not be able to bear it for much longer.

When the other refugees who escaped walked past them, they discovered that Ren Xiaosu's group had stopped moving and were rather surprised by it. They asked, "Why have y'all stopped walking?"

Ren Xiaosu looked up at them. "We can't walk anymore." Ren Xiaosu, who was sitting on the ground, lowered his head again and started massaging his leg muscles.

Seeing that Ren Xiaosu did not want to bother with them, the refugees didn't say anything further and continued moving forward.

"Are they really unable to keep walking?" a few people asked after they walked away.

"Didn't you see them massaging their legs? We had some rest in between, but they probably had none at all, right? They were being too smart for their own good."

"I think he was so far ahead that he didn't hear the wolves howling." Someone sneered, "If he heard it, he would definitely be running away faster than us."

This group of people kept whispering as they continued to walk. They were not planning to tell Ren Xiaosu about the wolves at all.

However, Ren Xiaosu did indeed know about the wolf pack that was following them. It wasn't only the wolf pack; there were even more terrors like the Experimentals!

After those refugees walked away, Ren Xiaosu whispered, "I have a bottle of water here. All of you take a cloth, wet it, and wipe your faces. The faces of the stronghold residents are all clean, but our refugee faces are too dirty. We would get recognized straight away. Put on whatever better clothes you have as well so that we can assimilate with the stronghold residents."

The refugees lacked water, as even the families of esquires like Wang Fugui did not have enough water rationed to them.

Ren Xiaosu had retrieved this bottle of water from the storage space in the palace. Even during the period he was stashing away the gold, he did not forget to place the two bottles of water inside. It was exceedingly important to have clean water when you were out in the wilderness.

Of course, the water in the bottle was refilled at a later time. The water that was originally in it had been drunk long ago.

As refugees, they were used to not washing their faces on most days. But now that they were planning on assimilating with the group of stronghold residents, they would have to look it. If there were really a chance to get into Stronghold 109 when they arrived there, it would be terrible if they were denied based on this detail.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu had the chance to wash his face clean. After all, it wasn't particularly difficult to find a water source out in the wilderness. But his dirty face at that time had served as protection for him.

If Xu Xianchu, Yang Xiaojin, and Luo Xinyu saw Ren Xiaosu after he wiped his face clean, they would probably not recognize him if they didn't scrutinize him.

His face before could be considered beyond dirty.

When the other refugees passed by them, Ren Xiaosu deliberately had Yan Liuyuan lower his head. In their group, Yan Liuyuan's face was clean, so it would make him easily recognizable to any refugees who saw him.

Now that they had wiped their faces clean and changed into better clothes, they might just be unrecognizable once they mixed with the crowd of stronghold residents. After all, there were several thousand of them behind and it was a sea of people.

They dusted off the dirt on themselves and cleaned their faces a bit more. At this moment, the large contingent of residents who had escaped from the stronghold finally arrived.

As a result, Ren Xiaosu was stunned when he saw them. Why were this group of people's faces even dirtier than theirs?

The fuck!

What a miscalculation!

He had the mindset that the stronghold residents' faces were all very clean. And since Yan Liuyuan's face stayed clean even after escaping all the way here, Ren Xiaosu did not think about how these people did not have it as easy as Yan Liuyuan did when they fled for their lives.

He saw these people appearing before him who each looked more wretched than the last. The grime on their faces was so dark it looked like they had just been through a battle.

The dust generated from the collapse of the buildings after the earthquake stuck to their faces. As they made their escape, they started sweating, which made all of their faces look black and dirty!

At this moment, the faces of Ren Xiaosu and company were extremely clean and it made it seem like they were the big shots of the stronghold. Meanwhile, these people in front of them ended up looking like refugees.

The earliest batch of stronghold residents that arrived was taken aback when they saw Ren Xiaosu. However, no one said a thing at all. Everyone was busy escaping right now, so who would care whether some people's faces were clean.

Xiaoyu started laughing from beside him. Ren Xiaosu said expressionlessly, "Ahem, let's dirty our faces a little again...."

What a waste of half a bottle of water! Ren Xiaosu found it somewhat regretful to have cleaned their faces.

When the main group of stronghold residents passed by, Ren Xiaosu successfully blended Yan Liuyuan and the others into the crowd. Everyone was in a state of confusion at this time, and no one noticed them joining in.

"We'll stay in the middle of this crowd." Ren Xiaosu whispered, "Try to minimize contact with the refugees."

Worried, Wang Fugui said, "Will this really work? There'll surely be some refugees who can recognize us."

"Don't worry." Ren Xiaosu was not bothered about that. "We're just trying out our luck. Just think about it. If all of those refugees die, then no one would know our identities."

Wang Fugui looked at Ren Xiaosu in shock. Could that even happen?

But all of a sudden, it seemed a conflict broke out among the fleeing crowd up ahead. Ren Xiaosu jumped up a little to have a look. It appeared that there was an argument going on between the crowd of refugees and stronghold residents. The sand plant's manager, Wang Yiheng, was holding up a gun to someone's head.

Chapter 109: I want to thank myself again

Due to the commotion, many people were attracted as they wanted to see what was going on up front. Ren Xiaosu told Yan Liuyuan, "Hide the gun and wait for me here. I'll go and have a look to see what's happening."

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan nodded. Ren Xiaosu could not possibly protect him at every moment, so he would have to learn to protect himself and even the others.

Ren Xiaosu squeezed to the front of the crowd. With his current physical fitness, no one was able to stop him from pushing his way to the front. When he got there and furtively started watching the commotion, he heard Wang Yiheng say ruthlessly, "I said, hand over your food to me! Can't you understand human language?"

"But I'm very hungry as well," said the bespectacled middle-aged man who had a gun pointed at his head, choking up. It seemed he had never met some as fierce as this in the stronghold.

The managers of the various factories, like Wang Yiheng, were actually residents of the stronghold as well. But as they had been stationed outside for a long time, there was always going to be a little bit of unruliness to them.

They were the "imperial" envoys sent out by the stronghold. Since they were equipped with guns, they had long since gotten used to having things go their way.

By this point, everyone had descended into a world without order. As such, they started behaving like wild animals. But just some time ago, this fellow wanted to kneel down and beg Luo Lan to take him along with them.

Wang Yiheng said to the people beside him, "Search him and those two fatties next to him too. Their pockets are bulging!"

The people standing with Wang Yiheng were his workers at the sand plant, so they were used to carrying out his orders. As he had a gun with him during this time, and because he had promised to help them get settled upon reaching Stronghold 109, Wang Yiheng became the mainstay of this group.

But to carry out a body search on the stronghold residents? How would they as refugees dare to do something like that?

Seeing these people around him not moving, Wang Yiheng raged, "What? Are you all deaf to my words now? I have a gun, so my word is law! Search them without worries! They're not armed!"

Ren Xiaosu understood from this statement that there were some gun control laws within the stronghold, which was why Wang Yiheng was so sure the others did not carry any guns.

At a glance, he saw the refugees subconsciously stood on the side of Wang Yiheng. One of the reasons for this was that Wang Yiheng had already made a name for himself in town. The other was because he was carrying a gun.

At this moment, a middle-aged man came to the front of the crowd. "Wang Yiheng, you had better put the gun down. We won't condone your tyranny."

"Chief Ma!" Wang Yiheng looked startled. "What are you doing here?"

Chief Ma sneered, "What? Did you think that we're all dead? Hand the gun over!"

Gun? Wang Yiheng turned to look at the gun in his hand as if making a decision. Then a cold smile appeared on his face as he raised his hand and fired the gun at Chief Ma.

Bang! Chief Ma fell to the ground in a pool of blood. There wasn't even a chance for him to react. He had not expected Wang Yiheng to shoot!

The people watching the commotion started screaming and wanted to retreat, but where could they retreat to?

Wang Yiheng had hesitated for a moment because he used to live under the rule of Chief Ma. But he soon came around and remembered that Stronghold 113 was no more, so what power did Chief Ma have over him?

Wang Yiheng said in a cold voice, "Stronghold 113 is no more. When we get to Stronghold 109, everyone will get a fresh start. I'm not a cold-blooded killer, but if anyone disobeys my orders, don't blame me for being unkind."

Of the several thousand people escaping, there must have been some high-ranking officials in the stronghold among them. But even then, so what? They were nothing the moment they left Stronghold 113!

Ren Xiaosu stepped back and withdrew. When Wang Yiheng killed that person, none of the refugees dared to even make a sound. As such, Wang Yiheng would probably get even more unreasonable with his gang of refugees later on.

But what business was that of Ren Xiaosu's? None at all! As for the gun Wang Yiheng carried around, Ren Xiaosu was not the least bit bothered by it. Just by the stance Wang Yiheng held when he fired the shot, it looked beyond amateur to Ren Xiaosu. If Wang Yiheng fired off another few shots in succession, the recoil might even cause him to lose grip of the gun and send it flying out of his hands.

As he made his way back to Yan Liuyuan and the others, Ren Xiaosu noticed a group of teenage boys and girls wearing light blue uniforms. He was taken aback by the sight because he saw the words "Stronghold 113 No. 2 Senior High School" written on the back.

Were they students? Ren Xiaosu once heard Zhang Jinglin say there were dozens of schools in the stronghold, consisting of elementary, junior high, and senior high schools. There were even such things as "universities" in the larger strongholds too.

Zhang Jinglin also mentioned that teenagers around Ren Xiaosu's age were able to sit in clean and well-lit classrooms while attending their classes. There would be many teachers teaching them basic knowledge of subjects, and there wasn't a need to go out into the wilderness or go to work. The strongholds even offered some subsidies for the students.

At that time, Ren Xiaosu felt really envious of their situation and thought how good it would have been to be born in the stronghold.

When Ren Xiaosu passed by these students, they took a look at him and did not think much of it. They did not know that what was so easily accessible to them was something Ren Xiaosu badly wanted in the past.

The students seemed to have been frightened by the gunshot. A young woman beside them said, "Don't be afraid. Your teacher will deal with anything that happens. We've already escaped from the stronghold."

So this was a teacher of the stronghold? Ren Xiaosu glanced at the young female teacher and thought she was much better looking than Zhang Jinglin. If they had a teacher like her at the school, perhaps even a child like Wang Dalong would start studying hard.

Seeing so many of these students here, his thoughts shifted to the second side quest he was given. A 1,000 gratitude tokens! In the past, Ren Xiaosu wouldn't even think about it. Where was he supposed to earn so many gratitude tokens from?

When he first heard about this side quest, his reaction was to earn them at the school. After all, he had only managed to complete his previous quest with a large portion of the gratitude tokens coming from the students.

But now that the stronghold had been destroyed, he didn't have any idea of where he would earn these gratitude tokens from.

Ren Xiaosu remembered the time he killed the Experimentals where he thanked himself seven times. If he could thank himself and earn the gratitude tokens, did that mean that he could do it again until he completed the quest?

The black saber was floating quietly within the palace in its display cabinet at this moment. Once his mind focused on it, it would materialize in his hands. Even now, Ren Xiaosu couldn't forget the pleasure of slicing through those Experimentals with a single slash!

So, if the basic form of the black saber was this powerful, what would it be like when he unlocked the next stage?

When he came back to where Yan Liuyuan and the others were, he tried out the thanking in a whisper. Yan Liuyuan was quietly watching Ren Xiaosu as he mumbled, "I want to thank myself for not killing the innocent?"

"I want to thank myself for raising Yan Liuyuan to this age?"

"I want to thank myself for not spitting out the grape skin when I eat grapes!"

Yan Liuyuan was confused.

Ren Xiaosu sighed. The palace was seemingly dead. It had no reaction at all!

Chapter 110: Robbery

Perhaps it was because he was sincere at that time, or perhaps it was because the palace didn't want Ren Xiaosu to die, the seven thanks he gave were all returned with gratitude tokens. But this time around, none of his thanks managed to gain any tokens.

Ren Xiaosu found this a little regrettable. If he had known, he would have thanked himself more while he could!

But Ren Xiaosu didn't notice that Yan Liuyuan, who was next to him, was totally confused by this. Other people might not have heard what Ren Xiaosu said, but Yan Liuyuan did.

The psychological impact he had gotten from being asked by Ren Xiaosu to thank him for an entire night had not been completely forgotten yet. And now, his brother was even resorting to thanking himself? And what was that about thanking himself for not spitting out the grape skin when eating grapes? Could he get more insincere than that?

Suddenly, a commotion broke out in the crowd again. Wang Yiheng had ordered the refugees to conduct a search on everyone present there. It seemed like he intended to confiscate and collect everyone's food supplies.

Wait! It wasn't just food.

Ren Xiaosu saw those refugees taking the watches off the wrists of others and their jewelry as well. They didn't miss out on a single item.

These residents who had escaped from the stronghold were really unfortunate. They had just lost their properties and families this morning, and by nighttime, they were stripped of everything they owned. By the time they reached Stronghold 109, they might even end up with nothing on them that they could sell for money.

Wang Fugui was a little nervous. "Xiaosu, will they take everything of ours for themselves?"

As a matter of fact, Wang Fugui was carrying his life savings, medicinal supplies, gold jewelry, and cash on him. These things were all extremely valuable, so those refugees would definitely not miss out on taking it for themselves.

But Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "Don't worry, no one's gonna take anything from us."

In fact, Ren Xiaosu had no intention of crossing paths with Wang Yiheng and his group. He only wanted to arrive at Stronghold 109 safely. That was it. But the problem was, even though he did not trouble trouble, trouble troubled him.

The escaping crowd of people were like an obedient bunch of sheep at this moment. More than 3,000 people were getting body searched by over 600 refugees, but no one resisted, nor did any of them dare to say a word. They didn't even have the balls to escape from here and just stood in their spots.

Ren Xiaosu found it a little difficult to understand this. If the 3,000 of you raised your arms against those refugees in protest, what could the 600 of them possibly do?

The refugees were indeed more fierce than those from the stronghold. But two fists would find it difficult to overcome four hands, so what was there to be afraid of?

Ren Xiaosu looked into the crowd and saw the female teacher sneaking her students towards the back. It seemed like they were trying to escape from being searched.

When the refugees first started searching the stronghold residents, they were holding back a little due to fear. After all, they were facing those from the stronghold. In their minds, these people had always been lofty existences to them.

But when they realized the people from the stronghold did not dare to stand up to them, they became even more bold. Some of them even got touchy when they were searching the women!

It was at this moment that the female teacher led her students next to Ren Xiaosu's group and stood behind them, apparently to observe the situation to see if they should continue moving further back.

But some of the refugees had already come this way.

Ren Xiaosu looked at those refugees and wondered whether he would get recognized by them. Since they had changed clothes and mixed into the crowd, it shouldn't be obvious, right?

A dozen or so refugees walked over holding big and small bags. They were all wearing the watches they had just confiscated from the stronghold residents.

Watches were very valuable items in both the town and stronghold. When the town still existed, only Old Li from the grocery store owned a watch. Not even Wang Fugui had one!

It looked like there were quite a few rich people of high standing in this group of escapees. But right now, the authority and standing they used to enjoy had all but disappeared.

Ren Xiaosu quietly watched as those dozen refugees came over. However, those refugees froze when they saw Ren Xiaosu. Ren Xiaosu could only let out a mental sigh as he wondered how the fuck he got recognized so easily. His disguise was an absolute failure.

While Ren Xiaosu was thinking about how to deal with the refugees, the person who was in charge of searching and confiscating people's belongings decided to detour around them and went towards the others.

Those near Ren Xiaosu looked over in surprise. What was with this? Why had those fierce refugees bypassed this teenager all on their own?

Why did they do something like that? Wasn't he just a 16 or 17-year-old kid?

In fact, they had all seen it. When the refugees saw Ren Xiaosu, they had expressions of deep fear on their faces as though they were terrified of Ren Xiaosu.

They couldn't figure out why these refugees were afraid of him.

But what they didn't know was that no one dared to provoke Ren Xiaosu even when they were still in town, much less now when they were making their escape. This guy was famous for being ruthless, and he even had a gun on him!

Although the refugees knew there would be a lot of valuable items in Wang Fugui's and Wang Dalong's bags, it was not worth risking their lives for it!

The group of students and the female teacher behind Ren Xiaosu silently observed all that happened. The female teacher was looking at Ren Xiaosu's back and appeared deep in thought as she pressed her lips together.

Just as the refugees were turning away to conduct a search on the others, Ren Xiaosu suddenly said, "Ahem, you guys, come here."

The refugees froze on the spot. They turned their heads slowly to Ren Xiaosu and said stiffly, "What..."

“Those watches ain’t bad,” Ren Xiaosu said.

The refugees looked at each other. They had fucking robbed over a 1,000 people so far. But now, they were going to get robbed by Ren Xiaosu of all people?! What the fuck!

This time, the people around them were left even more speechless. So there was someone even more ruthless among them?!

Then, one of the refugees quietly slipped off his wristwatch and handed it over to Ren Xiaosu in humiliation. Coincidentally, he had witnessed how Ren Xiaosu killed those people at the school...

The refugees were ready to turn away and leave. They wanted to get as far away as possible from Ren Xiaosu, but his voice rang out again. “You! You! You! You! Your watches are all pretty nice!”

The four people Ren Xiaosu pointed at scowled. It hadn’t ended yet?

But what could they say? All they could do was obediently hand over their watches to Ren Xiaosu. Everyone around them was shocked. How ruthless was this teenager?!

Ren Xiaosu didn’t continue to rob them. After all, he didn’t really want to take on these refugees. It was better to keep the peace. He waved his hand and said, “Carry on then.”

The refugees slipped away, their newfound confidence evaporating.

Ren Xiaosu handed over the four watches he had just taken off them to Xiaoyu and the others. He said proudly, “Here, we can see the time from now on.”

This was Wang Fugui’s first time wearing a watch. He took the watch meant for Wang Dalong with a smile and said, “Quick, thank your Uncle Xiaosu!”

Wang Dalong nearly cried. Why the hell had he suddenly been relegated a generation below Ren Xiaosu?!

Ren Xiaosu started to get endless fantasies. He wouldn’t usually resort to robbing other people, but it wouldn’t be a bad thing if he committed crimes against a villain, right?