

First Order 1011

Chapter 1011 - The Lazy Ren Xiaosu

Yang Xiaojin's culinary skill was at the master level. Initially, Ren Xiaosu wondered what the dishes prepared by a master chef would taste like. Would it taste different from those that were whipped up by normal people?

But when he tasted the food, he realized that Yang Xiaojin's heat control while cooking was extremely precise.

Ren Xiaosu was a little curious. "Why are you such a good cook? You don't look like someone who was specially trained in cooking."

"My aunt hired someone to teach me during my assassin's training," Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu was shocked. "What does this have anything to do with assassination?"

"I could go covert either as a chef or kitchen help to kill a target by lacing their food when I get the chance." Yang Xiaojin said, "But I didn't even manage to put my culinary skills to use after my training as my aunt didn't allow me to go undercover in such a way."

"Why's that?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"When I first started learning how to cook, I was still young and growing," Yang Xiaojin explained. "I became prettier as I grew up, so Aunt said that I wouldn't pass as a cook with my looks."

Ren Xiaosu was left speechless for some time. The girl in front of him was praising her own looks, and she said it as naturally as sipping water.

"Can't you be a little more humble?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Aren't I telling the truth?" Yang Xiaojin replied.

"Alright, alright, you're not wrong." Ren Xiaosu said, "It's Tuesday today, so it's your turn to wash the dishes."

Yang Xiaojin corrected him, "I cooked, so you should wash the dishes. From now on, I'll cook at home and you'll wash the dishes."

Ren Xiaosu carried the cutlery into the kitchen while Yang Xiaojin remained seated at the table. She leaned her chin on her hand and gazed at Ren Xiaosu's back as he washed the dishes. "I think the peach trees are gonna bear fruit soon. I estimate we can eat them in another few weeks. These two trees have really been well taken care of, so they should bear lots of fruit. We definitely won't be able to finish them all."

"If we can't finish them, let's set up a stall to sell the excess. We can buy you a new wok with the money after that," Ren Xiaosu said.

"That'll be great. The current wok is way too small to cook with," Yang Xiaojin said.

"But when I went shopping for groceries today, I realized the prices of vegetables and other foodstuffs have increased by quite a bit. I thought that it was because the prices in the Northwest were different. But after I asked around, I found out it was due to the poor harvests in the past two years either due to floods or droughts in many places." Ren Xiaosu said, "I wonder if Mr. Zhang took any measures to mitigate the effect of the natural disasters."

Yang Xiaojin thought for a moment before saying, "I'm afraid it won't be easy to solve. I heard that in the trade agreement between the Northwest and the Central Plains, the goods provided by the Wang Consortium don't include food. The Wang Consortium had probably taken into consideration the situation in the Northwest at that time. Of course, there's many minerals in the Northwest that weren't made accessible to the Wang Consortium either. This was the strategy adopted by both sides against each other."

"I wonder if their wasteland recultivation efforts are proceeding smoothly or not." Ren Xiaosu muttered, "Didn't we see a lot of refugees cultivating the land on our way here?"

"I doubt it'll be easy." Yang Xiaojin analyzed, "You see, there's not many stable river basins in the Northwest, and the terrain has many gullies running through it as well. Crops planted in a place like that don't have any good growth conditions, so they'll have to work hard to solve the irrigation issues first."

"Yes, it's a heavy price to pay to recultivate the land. But even so, if we want the residents to have enough food to eat, we'll have to challenge the natural environment." Ren Xiaosu sighed.

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While the two of them spent their days at home and enjoyed the peace together, all of the Northwest's higher-ups were thinking, 'Where has our future commander gone?'

It had been more than half a month since the assassination of the Zhou Consortium's three figureheads, so logically speaking, the future commander should have already come back.

Some high-ranking commanders had never seen Ren Xiaosu before. Although they heard stories about him, they did not have a chance to meet him yet. As a result, they were really looking forward to seeing him.

Therefore, they wanted to wait for Ren Xiaosu to return to Fortress 178 before rushing there to meet him. It wasn't exactly important, but they just wanted to get to know him first.

But after the Zhou Consortium's leaders were assassinated, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Not even the Riders were anywhere to be found.

This left the Great Hoodwinker and everyone else absolutely confused, and they wondered if the future commander had run away.

Zhang Xiaoman had said at the press conference, "We confirmed him as the future commander so that he won't be able to run away."

At that time, many people thought Zhang Xiaoman was just joking. But the Great Hoodwinker and the rest knew Zhang Xiaoman was completely serious!

Wang Fengyuan even approached Zhang Jinglin specifically regarding this matter. "Commander, what should we do if Xiaosu doesn't want to come back? Should we go and look for him?"

But Zhang Jinglin remained calm. "There's no need for that. I would guess he's just lying low somewhere for a while to get some rest. Once he's ready, he'll naturally return."

When everyone heard Commander Zhang say there was no need to be anxious, they calmed down as well. They just had to patiently wait for Ren Xiaosu to return.

While many people did not object to Ren Xiaosu's candidacy as Commander Zhang's successor, they were actually still watching to see if any developments occurred.

In taking revenge for Jiang Xu, it indirectly reflected Ren Xiaosu's character. Disregarding how others might feel, the people in the Northwest found it really placated their anger.

Gradually, more and more people within the Northwest Army publicly supported Ren Xiaosu.

By taking revenge for Jiang Xu, he showed his character. Killing the Zhou Consortium's head was down to his capability. Honestly, he was truly impeccable other than being inexperienced at military strategies.

But with regards to that, he had poached P5092 and Wang Yun to mitigate his shortcomings in this area.

As the Northwest's commander, he did not have to be a military genius. Being able to command and deploy military geniuses effectively was also a skill, right?

Over half a month later, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin got up early and went to the backyard to pick the peaches. The peaches in the Northwest were big and sweet. A blend of orange, yellow, and white colors suffused the surface of the fruits, making them look exceptionally beautiful.

After picking two basketfuls of peaches, they went to the marketplace to set up a stall. For this, they even had to pay a rental fee of five yuan for the space.

Ren Xiaosu said excitedly, "It's the weekend today, so more people will be coming to the market than usual. I think our peaches will sell out very quickly."

Normal people would find it difficult to carry a basket of peaches, but Ren Xiaosu could carry two baskets all by himself.

After settling down at the stall, Ren Xiaosu said to Yang Xiaojin, "We haven't had breakfast yet. I'll go and buy some buns to fill our stomachs."

"Mhm, I want the ones stuffed with chives and eggs," Yang Xiaojin answered with a smile.

But not long after Ren Xiaosu left, an acquaintance came to the stall. It was Hu Xiaobai.

Hu Xiaobai was stunned when she saw Yang Xiaojin. "You set up a stall here?"

Yang Xiaojin smiled as she picked up two peaches and stuffed them into Hu Xiaobai's hands. "The peaches growing at home have ripened. We thought the two of us couldn't finish eating them, so we came out to sell them."

Hu Xiaobai looked like she wanted to say something. Yang Xiaojin was confused by her behavior. "What's the matter, Mrs. Hu?"

Hu Xiaobai grumbled, "Your boyfriend has been in the Northwest for some time now. Instead of looking for a job, he's actually making a delicate girl like you sell peaches and support the family? Is this what a man should do? A beautiful girl like you will have no qualms finding a good man, so why stick to a lazy bum like him of all people...."

Yang Xiaojin was taken aback. Then she covered her mouth and laughed. "Mrs.. Hu, it's not like that at all."

Chapter 1012 - Feeling Sorry For Yang Xiaojin

Hu Xiaobai was well-known for her warm-hearted personality in the neighborhood. The stronghold was not that big or small, and due to a lack of human flow in, everyone's social circle was kept to within the stronghold.

Disregarding everything else, the relationship between neighbors had become much more close.

Before The Cataclysm, everyone would have friends all over the world just by logging onto the Internet. No matter how far they might be from each other, it was enough to satisfy the social needs of humans.

But things were different now. They could only make calls from their home to others in the same city. Without satellite phones, normal residents couldn't chat if they were from different strongholds.

When an auntie nearby saw Hu Xiaobai chatting with Yang Xiaojin, she said, "Little Hu, is this your friend?"

"Yes, she's my new neighbor." Hu Xiaobai said, "She just moved here about half a month ago. This girl has a good character and is mild-mannered."

The auntie said with a smile, "I was wondering where a beautiful girl like you popped out from. So why did you come here to sell peaches?"

Yang Xiaojin explained with a smile, "The two peach trees in our backyard have matured, and we can't finish eating the peaches by ourselves."

Hu Xiaobai glanced at Yang Xiaojin and did not say anything more in the presence of the woman.

However, Yang Xiaojin felt that she had to explain herself. After all, Ren Xiaosu was the closest person to her. Even if she knew Ren Xiaosu did not care about such gossip, she wanted to clarify.

Yang Xiaojin said in seriousness, "My partner is actually quite capable, but he just wants to rest for a while now. He's not a lazy bum at all. Mrs. Hu, you've misunderstood him. To be honest, a lot of people even hope he doesn't work anymore."

The latter half of her sentence left Hu Xiaobai and the auntie a little confused, but Yang Xiaojin was really telling the truth. For example, if the Zhou Consortium and the Wang Consortium found out that Ren Xiaosu was now living in seclusion, a lot of people would be thanking the gods and praying for Ren Xiaosu to retire permanently. They really hoped that he wouldn't return to the Central Plains to "work" anymore.

That guy's job was really too fucking scary!

Hu Xiaobai laughed. "Alright, alright, I'll end it here. Keep working. It's the weekend today, so I'll go back to prepare lunch after getting some groceries." With that, Hu Xiaobai walked out of the marketplace.

However, someone pulled Hu Xiaobai back and asked in a low voice, "I noticed you were hesitating to speak just now. What's the matter? Is there something wrong with that girl?"

"There's no problem with her. She's definitely a good girl. Her boyfriend is the main issue. Do you know that ever since they moved here, that young man has been lazing at home every day, not bothering to look for a job? And now, he actually made her come out to sell peaches." Hu Xiaobai lamented, "Just look at how pretty she is. It's such a pity that she has to come to the market and set up a stall to sell things."

A busybody who overheard the gossiping also muttered, "That's really too outrageous."

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu came back with some buns and handed one to Yang Xiaojin. He said with a smile, "Hurry up and eat it. I kept it warm in my arms. Here, I bought you a cup of soy milk too."

"Mhm." Yang Xiaojin nodded and took it from him.

However, Ren Xiaosu suddenly realized that since coming back to the stall, he could feel the gazes of people constantly on him.

Ren Xiaosu was puzzled. He whispered to Yang Xiaojin, "Why are there so many people stealing glimpses at me? Am I too good-looking?"

Yang Xiaojin laughed and said, "You really have the cheek to say that. It's like this: Mrs. Hu ran into me when she came to buy groceries just now. However, she mentioned you not looking for a job again. From her description, I was the poor girl who was being leached off of while you were that lazy parasite who does nothing all day."

"Hehe." Ren Xiaosu was amused. "Mrs. Hu is really zealous. She probably thinks that you're too good to be with a guy like me and was just speaking up for you."

"Aren't you angry?" Yang Xiaojin took a bite of the bun and teased Ren Xiaosu.

"What's there to be angry about? I can't possibly go up to her and tell her that I'm the future commander of the Northwest Army, so she oughta show more respect when talking to me next time!" Ren Xiaosu chuckled, "That'd be too arrogant of me. Anyways, it's fine as long as we know what we're doing."

"It's good that you're not angry." Yang Xiaojin said, "Our peaches have grown well. We've only just started selling them, but we've already sold half of everything. I think they'll be sold out very soon. I'll buy some groceries home to cook in a while. What would you like to eat?"

"Pork ribs?" Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "And another fish dish, maybe?"

"Braised or steamed?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"Why not one of each?"

"Alright then."

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When the two of them returned home, Yang Xiaojin went into the kitchen and got busy. Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu lay on the recliner chair in the yard and started reading a book.

Nowadays, Ren Xiaosu did not even have to go to the library to look for books to read. After all, he had placed all the books in Stronghold 88's library in his storage space.

The backyard was surrounded by a low wall that stood about a meter high. While Ren Xiaosu was reading, his middle-aged neighbor, Wang Yuexi, was sitting in the yard next door reading a newspaper. He even had a cup of brewed tea on the stone table.

Neither of them greeted each other. It was as though they had never spoken before or knew each other.

Actually, if it weren't for Hu Xiaobai, they might not even have had any interaction with one another in their lifetimes.

It seemed like it was time for lunch next door. Hu Xiaobai went out into the backyard and called for Wang Yuexi to eat.

Wang Yuexi put down the newspaper and went straight into the house. When Hu Xiaobai saw Ren Xiaosu lying in his chair and reading a book, she instinctively peered into their house and heard the sizzling of Yang Xiaojin's cooking.

Hu Xiaobai thought for a moment before greeting Ren Xiaosu with a smile, "Lü Xiaomi?"

Ren Xiaosu almost did not remember that this was the alias he was using now.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a second or two before looking up and greeting Hu Xiaobai from across the courtyard wall, "What's the matter, Mrs. Hu?"

"Is your girlfriend making lunch?" Hu Xiaobai asked.

"Yes, I specifically asked Xiaojin to make pork ribs and fish for lunch. Mrs. Hu, would you like to join us?" Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

Hu Xiaobai was taken aback. She thought to herself, 'You aren't even working, yet you dare to keep asking Ms. Xiaojin to cook you a feast every day?!'

In fact, there were already signs of a food shortage happening in the Northwest. The prices of rice, noodles, vegetables, and meat were all increasing. Even though her husband, Wang Yuexi, was working at the stronghold's administrative center, their family only got to eat meat once or twice a week.

Thinking of this, Hu Xiaobai inexplicably started feeling sorry for Yang Xiaojin. She said nonchalantly, "That sounds quite sumptuous."

"Mhm, our peaches sold out pretty fast this morning. So we used the money earned to buy ourselves something better to eat." Ren Xiaosu started making up a story.

Hu Xiaobai got even angrier when she heard this. 'Did Ms. Xiaojin work so hard to sell the peaches all morning just so you could have meat to eat? Never mind that you aren't working; you don't even know how to live frugally!'

But Hu Xiaobai did not tell Ren Xiaosu about this. She changed the subject and said, "By the way, you've been sitting idle for a while now. Why don't I get my husband to recommend you a job?"

Ren Xiaosu smiled and shook his head. "There's no need for that, Mrs. Hu. It feels quite good not needing to do anything."

Hu Xiaobai's face darkened.. She returned to her house and slammed the door behind her, leaving Ren Xiaosu dumbfounded in his backyard. Wasn't everything fine just a moment ago? Why did she suddenly get so angry?!

Chapter 1013 - Job Recommendation

After Hu Xiaobai went back into her house, Wang Yuexi asked in surprise when he saw that she did not look right, "What's wrong with you now? Didn't I buy you the lipstick?"

"This isn't about the lipstick!" Hu Xiaobai said, "I just asked you to buy some lipstick for me. Why do you keep harping on about it as though you've done me some great favor? I'm angry because when I told that young man next door that I would recommend a job to him, he ended up telling me that it felt quite good not needing to do anything."

Wang Yuexi took a bite of his food and said, "I would like to do nothing as well. He's not wrong to say that."

"You don't understand..." Hu Xiaobai related the incident of Yang Xiaojin setting up a stall to sell peaches that morning.

Wang Yuexi was surprised. "But that has nothing to do with you, right?"

"Aren't I just concerned that Ms. Xiaojin's happiness will be delayed if it goes on like this?" Hu Xiaobai sighed and said, "She's such a nice girl."

"Then why don't you introduce her to someone else?" Wang Yuexi remarked. "I don't think they're married yet."

Hu Xiaobai raised her eyebrows. "As the saying goes, it's better to tear down ten temples than to break a couple up. How can I sow discord between them behind their backs? What does that make me? Matchmaker Wang? The one who helped Ximen Qing hook up with women? I don't do things like that. Although that young man doesn't have a proper job, they still have quite a good relationship. So I want you to see if you can recommend him a job."

Wang Yuexi's expression turned bitter again. "Why do you keep talking about this? Why don't you go and uphold world peace since you're so nosy?"

"There's our future commander for that. As if I can do anything about it." Hu Xiaobai said happily, "Just say if you want to help them or not. Otherwise, enjoy sleeping on the couch. You're always bragging about how great you are, but when it comes to getting things done, you're just helpless!"

Wang Yuexi was at a loss. "Alright, alright, I'll ask around at the reception lobby tomorrow and see if there are any vacant temporary positions so he can at least work a more stable job."

"That's the way!" Hu Xiaobai beamed. "I knew you could do it. I'll go and talk to Xiaojin tonight and get her to persuade Xiaomi. Although that young man is lazy, I don't think he's a bad person."

"And how do you know that?" Wang Yuexi snapped.

"How bad can someone who's always reading books be? In the morning, Xiaojin said that he's actually quite capable. Perhaps she's telling the truth," Hu Xiaobai said.

"Whatever!" Wang Yuexi did not want to continue the conversation.

Hu Xiaobai suddenly thought of something. "By the way, wasn't there talk in the stronghold that the future commander should be coming back to the Northwest soon? Why isn't there any news about that yet?"

"Why are you worrying about the future commander's matters? Does he know you? I say, why are you always worrying about everything!" Wang Yuexi said.

"I just wanted to see what kind of person our future commander is, OK?" Hu Xiaobai suddenly became much livelier. "Look at what that magazine says. Our Northwest's future commander is really one of the rarest men in the world. I'm sick of seeing you every day. When our future commander returns, I'll definitely go and have a look."

Wang Yuexi choked on his food. "Go look, look, look! Go and look all you want! But no one's gonna be looking at you!"

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"Mrs. Hu was talking about recommending me a job again." Ren Xiaosu picked up a pork rib and said, "She sure is a nice person, but she's just a little too enthusiastic in helping others. She probably started thinking about this because she felt bad for you when she saw you setting up the stall."

"It's quite interesting that the future commander of the Northwest has suddenly become a bum in the eyes of the stronghold's womenfolk," Yang Xiaojin said with a laugh.

"Hey, why don't you stop running the stall? Otherwise, who knows what that Mrs. Hu might think next?" Ren Xiaosu said.

"That won't do. I find running a stall and selling things quite interesting. I've never earned any money before. This is the first time I've experienced the joy of making money," Yang Xiaojin said.

When she was at the Yang Consortium, she did not have any financial issues to worry about. It was the same after joining the Saboteurs. Yang Anjing had been operating among the mafia for many years and

had a mature intelligence network and bounty system. Therefore, the Saboteurs had never lacked any funding.

Including the time Yang Xiaojin was attending school in Luoyang City, her monthly living expenses started from some tens of thousands of yuan.

Now that she had suddenly started earning her own keep, she found it extremely interesting and fulfilling even though she only pocketed a few cents to a few yuan from the sales of the peaches.

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu could not quite understand why Yang Xiaojin was so interested in this bit of money when it didn't matter to her given her current net worth.

Yang Xiaojin said, "But the harvest from the peach trees won't be enough for selling. We only have two trees after all."

It even sounded like Yang Xiaojin was lamenting when she said that.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Then let's sell potatoes. I'll plant five Potato Shooters in the backyard so that you'll have something to sell every day. We can use a shed to cover the yard so that no one will see the Potato Shooters. But before that, you'll have to take the extra step of pretending to go to the wholesale market located a few kilometers away. Only then can you explain where our potatoes came from."

Ren Xiaosu felt that this was actually quite troublesome. After all, Yang Xiaojin would probably not like going through all that trouble of pretending to go to the wholesale market every day to purchase goods.

However, Yang Xiaojin's eyes lit up. "Let's do that then."

Over the next few days, Yang Xiaojin went out to set up the stall excitedly. Then Ren Xiaosu sat at the stall and accompanied her while reading his books.

After earning some money, Yang Xiaojin used the earnings to buy pork ribs for Ren Xiaosu to eat. She even whipped up a secret braised pork recipe for him.

Gradually, all of the vendors in the market learned that a young couple had arrived. The girl was extremely diligent while the boy was lazy.

Everyone privately said it was such a pity that a nice girl like her was married to a bookworm like him.

In their opinion, Ren Xiaosu was always reading books every day even though he was at the stall. He never bothered to help run the stall. Whenever a customer asked for the prices, Ren Xiaosu would just let Yang Xiaojin handle it.

To strangers, it was as though Ren Xiaosu did not care about his livelihood. They assumed he must have turned stupid from studying too much.

However, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were very calm. It was as though they did not notice the questioning gazes at all.

In the end, it was still Hu Xiaobai who could not stand by and watch any longer. After dinner that night, she went over to look for Yang Xiaojin and cut straight to the point. "Xiaojin, I've always felt it wouldn't be good for you two to carry on like this, so I had my husband find a job for Lü Xiaomi."

Yang Xiaojin asked curiously, "What kinda job?"

"It's just a temporary position at the reception lobby of the stronghold's administrative center." Hu Xiaobai said, "Although it's only a temporary job, a lot of people can't get any work even if they begged for it.. Can you talk to Xiaomi so he won't keep lazing around at home? As a man, he has to understand that the responsibility is on him. How can he let a girl like you support the family?"

"I'll have to discuss it with him first, Mrs. Hu," Yang Xiaojin said with a smile. After all, it was still up to Ren Xiaosu whether he wanted to go even if Hu Xiaobai did recommend him a job. She would have to get Ren Xiaosu to agree to it first.

Hu Xiaobai said anxiously, "Why do you need to discuss this with him? Just look at how lazy he is. It would be a wonder if he agreed to it! So don't discuss anything with him and force it on him. Let me tell you, men are all like that. When they're young, they idle their lives away. When my husband was younger, he did not work a proper job either. He just cooped himself up at the school every day to teach. After the Zong Consortium was defeated, I had to force him to go and interview for a job with the Northwest Army. Look, isn't he doing pretty good now?"

"That won't do, Mrs. Hu." Yang Xiaojin shook her head with a smile. "My partner is very opinionated, so I can't persuade him easily. How about this? I'll talk to him about it. Give us three days to consider, alright? But no matter what, I want to thank you for being so helpful."

"Alright then." Hu Xiaobai sighed and said, "I'm just afraid that he'll set you back."

After that, Hu Xiaobai went home. Yang Xiaojin suddenly felt this place was even more homely now. Not only was she earning her own keep, but there were also all sorts of neighbors, like the aunties and old ladies not far away who were chatting about their daily lives while playing mahjong.

Charcoal briquettes were piled up at the entrance of every household. If any households had their briquettes stolen in the morning, the neighbors would even start shouting "thief" in the morning.

But it was relatively rare for briquettes to be stolen. Otherwise, everyone would have moved them into their backyards.

In Yang Xiaojin's opinion, this was all about human compassion.

Yang Xiaojin went back into the house and said to Ren Xiaosu, "Mrs. Hu recommended you for a temporary position at the administrative center. Do you want to take up the job?"

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. "Why would I go there? The administrative center is where the residents get their paperwork done. I've got no such experience."

"It's up to you. Anyway, I told her we would take three days to consider. If you don't want to go, I can just turn her down after three days." Yang Xiaojin smiled. "But I feel that it's not a bad idea for you to work in the administrative center. That way, I can also be considered to have a backer in the stronghold. When the time comes, I can hold very respectable conversations with the older women."

"Alright, you've become great at mocking people now." Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh, "But I feel that you've been smiling more since you came to the Northwest."

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The two of them still woke up early each morning and headed to the marketplace to sell potatoes. At the beginning, Yang Xiaojin sold their potatoes at a cheaper price than the other stalls. She was hoping to sell out quickly, but Ren Xiaosu told her not to do that, because their business was just a form of experience for them. But for the other stall owners, it was their main livelihood to support their families.

It was very tough work for the stall owners to transport the groceries back from the wholesale market on their trikes, and they did not make much money in a single day of sales either.

Their wives and children at home were waiting for them to put food on the table. Their children's school fees were also slowly accumulated from every single cent they made.

If Yang Xiaojin were to disrupt these stall owners' normal business because of her interest and desire to experience life, it wouldn't really be good.

Yang Xiaojin was not someone who refused to listen to advice. As such, she decided she would sell their potatoes at 20 cents more per kilogram than the other stalls in the future.

When Yang Xiaojin returned home at night, she even lamented, "Although I've also been through very tough times before, it was always for the sake of honing my willpower. It's only now that I'm truly starting to understand the ways of the world."

During the day, Ren Xiaosu would stop reading his books and just wander around the market.

The stall owners would look at him in confusion, not knowing what he was walking around for.

Ren Xiaosu went to the various stalls to inquire about the prices of vegetables and meat. He even went to the provisions stalls to ask about the prices of rice and noodles. In any case, he just strolled around like he had nothing more important to do.

But when Yang Xiaojin closed for the day, he would go around to buy some vegetables and meat. However, the ingredients he bought were always the best quality ones, and those were often the most expensive.

In Ren Xiaosu's opinion, there was absolutely no need for him to make things difficult for himself now. When it was time for war again, he would have to go back to eating and sleeping in the wilderness. If he did not treat himself to something good at this time, when else would he do that?

But in the eyes of the other stall owners, Ren Xiaosu was a complete wastrel. After all, why would a person like him who relied on his wife to sell potatoes to support the family deserve to eat so well?

He was probably wasting all the money earned from selling potatoes every day on his meals! He didn't even bother to keep any savings. What would he do if they had a child?

On the third day, Ren Xiaosu returned to the stall with a frown and whispered to Yang Xiaojin, "Have you realized? The prices in the market are different every day. Yesterday, the string beans only cost 20 cents to buy, but today, it's risen to 22 cents. And this is only the vegetables. The prices of rice and noodles are even worse. Yesterday, it was only two yuan per kilogram, but today, it's almost 2.20 per kilogram. Although price fluctuations are quite normal, the prices have been increasing for several days in a row now. I'm afraid that there's some problem. It looks like the food shortage is probably getting more and more serious."

"Then do you think we can buy some food from the Wang Consortium if there's a famine in the Northwest?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"I doubt it. You also know how ruthless the Wang Consortium is. The times that they tried to sabotage the Pyro Company during the war are still fresh in my mind. They were also indifferent to the large number of escapees fleeing south back then, so how could they possibly disrupt their plans over such a trivial matter?" Ren Xiaosu said, "But it's alright, I still have a plan if it really comes to that."

Although it might not be the best solution, it could at least ensure that no one in the Northwest would starve to death.

When Yang Xiaojin saw Ren Xiaosu's serious expression, she thought that while others might think Ren Xiaosu was just wandering around aimlessly, she knew he was stepping up to the role of the Northwest's future commander and starting to think about how to solve the current problem.

"By the way," Yang Xiaojin suddenly said, "it's time to give Mrs. Hu an answer today. Are you going to take the job she's recommending?"

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I can also go and observe how the stronghold's administrative center is run."

In the past, Ren Xiaosu did not have too many opportunities to deal with the so-called stronghold administrative centers, though there might have been one or two instances where he accidentally blew up a stronghold administrative center or ran across the roof of one.

As he had only lived in a stronghold for a short period, he did not know much about how a stronghold was run. For example, the people in town would only resort to oral agreements when it came to the transference of a property. Sometimes, there would even be cases of ruthless people forcefully occupying other people's houses as there were no such things as title deeds, and neither did the stronghold acknowledge the legitimacy of property rights in town.

Also, no one in town would ask if a couple was married like how Hu Xiaobai had recently asked them. Once two people started living together and became interdependent, they would be considered a couple. There was no need to apply for a marriage certificate with anyone.

This made Ren Xiaosu feel that he still needed to gain a better understanding of this place, because he might be spending the rest of his life here in the Northwest.

Moreover, he also wanted to see how Stronghold 144 was going to resolve the issue of the food shortage. He wanted to make some observations first, and working undercover at the administrative center was the best way to do it.. Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu's interest was piqued.

Chapter 1015 - No Virtue

"Have you ever worn a suit before?" Yang Xiaojin asked Ren Xiaosu from the room across his during the night.

Both Ren Xiaosu and she lived on the second floor of the house constructed from brick and wood. Only a few wooden planks separated the two rooms, so they could hear each other very clearly.

Ren Xiaosu lay on the bed with his arm acting as a pillow. "When would I have had the chance to wear something like that? It's actually quite interesting. Back when I was living in town, Wang Fugui was constantly reminding me not to provoke those who came out of the stronghold dressed in suits, because they were definitely big shots."

At that time, Ren Xiaosu made up his mind that he would get himself a suit to wear someday. But it was just a thought. After all, suits were not exactly suitable for the activities like hunting that he did.

As time passed, he met many people who wore suits. But the so-called big shots had gradually become insignificant in his eyes.

Yang Xiaojin laughed and said, "Then you're going to become a big shot as well. Earlier this evening, Mrs. Hu reminded me that you'll be starting work next week. At that time, her husband will bring you to your workplace. She did not make any requests other than saying that you'd have to get yourself a set of formal wear. You have to look presentable when you go to work there."

Ren Xiaosu wondered, "There's a rule like that in the administrative center?"

"It's not a rule." Yang Xiaojin explained with a laugh, "It's just that Mrs. Hu feels that if you don't dress formally, you might get looked down upon at that place."

Yang Xiaojin mimicked Hu Xiaobai's tone and said, "You don't even know that the people working at that place are all smart people. If you don't go there in formal attire, who knows how they'll talk about you behind your back!"

Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "I'm not afraid of them ostracizing me."

"That won't do." Yang Xiaojin said, "Although I don't care about the rules, I won't allow them to belittle you."

"Alright, then let's go and tailor me a set of formal wear." Ren Xiaosu chuckled, pleased by Yang Xiaojin's sweetness for him.

"No, you'll need two sets," Yang Xiaojin said. "So that you can alternate between them."

The next morning, the two of them did not go out to the market to sell their potatoes but took Streetcar 48 to the center of the stronghold instead.

When the streetcar started moving, it would make a rattling sound as it drove shakily through the city. Pedestrians on the street were reading newspapers as they walked, and students were chewing on buns as they ran to school.

As they were running too fast, the students' backpacks fell off their shoulders and remained slung from one arm.

As the two of them boarded from the first departure station, they got to choose the best seats in the middle of the streetcar as soon as they got on.

After a few stops, a middle-aged man boarded as well. Seeing that there were no more seats in the carriage, he aimed his gaze at Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin, thinking the young couple looked quite friendly.

He walked up to Ren Xiaosu and coughed twice. "Ahem, ahem."

However, Ren Xiaosu looked up in surprise. "Are you sick? Please stand away and don't infect us."

Yang Xiaojin giggled. She whispered, "When taking the streetcar in the stronghold, the younger people should give up their seats to their elders. This is a traditional virtue."

Ren Xiaosu said unhappily, "He's only in his forties, so why should I make way for him?"

When the man saw Ren Xiaosu did not have any virtue, he gave up his moral coercion and went off to look for other young people who might give up their seats to him.

"By the way, where are we going to tailor the suits?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"I've asked around. There's an extremely famous tailor in the city center. Apparently, all the important people in the stronghold go there to tailor their suits," Yang Xiaojin said.

"I don't need something that good, right?" Ren Xiaosu muttered.

"Of course you do. It's going to be my gift to you, so it has to be of good quality," Yang Xiaojin said with a smile as she looked out of the window.

The tailor at the suit store said it would take two weeks to process the order, but Yang Xiaojin could not wait that long. She offered more money and got them to rush the suits out within three days. Truly, the power of money was exceptionally great. It managed to shorten the workload that required two weeks to complete to just three days.

On the third day, after Yang Xiaojin went to collect the suits and came back, she pushed Ren Xiaosu into the house to try them on. Then she personally helped him tie his tie. "You look quite good."

Ren Xiaosu felt a little awkward. "Really?"

"It's quite nice." Yang Xiaojin took a close look at Ren Xiaosu and helped flatten the wrinkles on his clothes. "But don't wear this at home. I still find you nicer to look at in your normal clothes."

On Monday, Hu Xiaobai was shouting outside the door early in the morning, "Xiaojin, urge your partner to follow my husband and head to work!"

When Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu stepped out, the sharp-eyed Hu Xiaobai immediately noticed the suit Ren Xiaosu was wearing. "Eh, isn't this suit from Golden Links? Look at those cufflinks, that's their trademark."

Yang Xiaojin explained with a smile, "You said he should go to work in formal wear, so I tailored two suits for him."

Hu Xiaobai raised her voice and said, "You even ordered two sets?!"

She knew the suits from Golden Link were extremely expensive. Why was Ms. Xiaojin so good to Lü Xiaomi?

This Lü Xiaomi was way too much. To say nothing of him always lazing around at home, he even made Ms. Xiaojin spend so much money to buy him such expensive suits!

These young people really did not know the seriousness of their situation. How were they going to survive in the future if they kept being so extravagant?

Ever since Wang Yuexi started working at the administrative center, their family was considered to be above average, financially speaking. However, Hu Xiaobai still could not bear to buy such expensive clothes for Wang Yuexi.

She felt it was more important to save up some money and quickly upgrade to a better house.

Wang Yuexi looked at Ren Xiaosu and felt a little awkward. This kid was so much better dressed than him for work.

However, Wang Yuexi and Hu Xiaobai were not mean people, so they let the matter slide.

On the way to work, Wang Yuexi instructed Ren Xiaosu, "I've arranged for you to work at the Civil Affairs Division this time. You'll have a direct supervisor, so listen to your boss when you get there. Do whatever you're told to do and don't be stubborn."

"Mhm, alright. Thank you, Mr. Wang," Ren Xiaosu answered with a smile.

At this moment, Wang Yuexi hesitated for a moment before saying, "Um... if there's any trouble, you can find me at the Policy Research Office."

Although Wang Yuexi did not want to interact too much with Ren Xiaosu, he was still his neighbor, after all, so he felt he should still watch out for him.

People were already lining up outside the administrative center to get their paperwork done. However, they could not go inside as it was not office hours yet.

Wang Yuexi led Ren Xiaosu in. "In the early years, the Revenue Agency had its own office building, while the Marriage and Divorce Registries were in a different office building together with the Civil Affairs Division. As for the Title Deeds Registry, that was at yet another place. It was very troublesome for the residents to get their administrative errands done. But it's good that they're all housed together now, as it's very convenient for everyone. The motto of the administrative center is to be a one-stop service center for all the people so they won't have to run all over the stronghold to do their paperwork. We don't want them to have to make a second trip either. This is one of my main civic achievements that has gained wide support from the people.." There was a hint of pride in his tone.

Chapter 1016 - Dismissed

"You know, the things the people are critical of the authorities for are behaviors like indolence, sloppiness, and passing the buck?" Wang Yuexi said, "But as long as everyone is working under the same roof, with an inspection board appointed, which doesn't need too many members on it, it's enough to make the employees who try to slack off behind the counter put on their best behavior."

Ren Xiaosu took a good look at Wang Yuexi and thought to himself that he had not expected this chubby middle-aged man to be such an ambitious person.

Wang Yuexi continued, "Of course, this was all thanks to Fortress 178. When the Zong Consortium was still running this place, the various departments were all headed by their own relatives. Even if the department heads didn't work hard, there was nothing we could do about them. But it's different now. If the department heads don't stand up to scrutiny, they'll be fired. So, Xiaomi, remember this. Although I recommended you for this job, you had better not cause any trouble. Otherwise, I'll personally fire you."

"Don't worry, Mr. Wang. I'm not that sort of person," Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

"Mhm." Wang Yuexi nodded. "I heard the new director of the inspection board will be taking office soon. Some people say he's an even stricter person who abhors unnecessary bureaucracy. There's still some parasites left behind by the Zong Consortium in the ranks of the management. When he gets here, he'll probably be able to get rid of all of them."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Who is that? He's that powerful?"

"I heard that his name is Ji Zi'ang." Wang Yuexi said, "That man is a superhuman and fought alongside the future commander at Mt. Zuoyun. He's a hero of the Northwest. Rumor has it that he was persecuted by the Zhou Consortium's officials and their relatives back then. After he was saved by the future commander, he remained by his side since. He's the future commander's trusted aide. As long as

he gives the word to dismiss those who are just wasting resources, I'm sure it'll be carried out. He's someone who kills people like flies, and it's said that his nickname in the military is Qin Shihuang.¹ I don't know why they gave him that nickname. Maybe it's because he really believes in legalism and is stricter than most?"

Wang Yuexi looked at Ren Xiaosu and realized he had a strange expression on his face. Then he said, "Don't worry, as long as you work hard, no one can do anything to you."

Wang Yuexi thought Ren Xiaosu was just afraid, but what was going through Ren Xiaosu's mind was amazement that Ji Zi'ang's nickname had become so well-known.

Besides, didn't Ji Zi'ang go to Fortress 178 to reunite with his wife and child? Why was he going back to work so quickly?

Actually, according to the original plan, Ji Zi'ang was supposed to remain at Fortress 178. But after he went there, he felt a little lonely without the Great Hoodwinker, Wang Yun, and P5092 around him. He felt he was lacking the partners he had built chemistry with. So he decided to bring his wife and child to Stronghold 144.

Ren Xiaosu wondered when Ji Zi'ang would take over his new role. When Ji Zi'ang arrived and saw him, he would probably go, "Hey, isn't that the future commander? Why's he sitting behind the counter?"

It would be really interesting if that happened.

Ren Xiaosu wondered if he should cook up an excuse and go back to doing nothing for a while longer. Ren Xiaosu was already conceiving the thought to do so. After all, his leisurely life with Yang Xiaojin had only just begun!

Wang Yuexi led Ren Xiaosu to the Civil Affairs Division's counter window and said to a woman inside, "Ms. Li, I've brought the new guy to you. You can allocate some work to him. Feel free to assign the tough tasks to him. There's no need to take me into consideration. If he doesn't do his job well, please report it to me immediately."

Ms. Li greeted Wang Yuexi enthusiastically, "Don't worry, I'll arrange work for him right away."

It was now office hours in the administrative center. When the residents lining up outside entered, Wang Yuexi made a few remarks before leaving.

Ms. Li took Ren Xiaosu to his station and said, "There isn't much to handle here other than making registrations for divorces and marriages. We originally had four employees working on rotation, but two of them are pregnant and went on maternity leave at the same time. That's why we hired a temporary staffer. Let's wait for the residents at the counter. If someone comes to register their marriage, you can handle it for them. If they're here for a divorce, I'll handle it. After all, getting a divorce is a more complicated process, so it's better to leave that to me. Getting married is much simpler. You just have to fill out the forms for them, then take them into the room for photos and have them recite their vows."

As they spoke, a couple came to the counter pushing and shoving at each other. Then they said coldly, "Applying for a divorce."

Ms. Li picked up their marriage certificate and read it. Then she asked, "Why are you two getting a divorce?"

"I can't stand this person anymore!" The woman said, "How unlucky of me to be married to this good-for-nothing!"

Ms. Li advised, "You two have been married for over a decade. Do you want to reconsider?"

Ren Xiaosu looked on and felt that everything was very new to him. So it turned out there were certificates issued for marriages and divorces in the stronghold. There were no such practice in town.

Ms. Li tried to persuade them out of goodwill, but the couple insisted on getting a divorce. No matter how hard Ms. Li tried to talk them out of it, it was to no avail. As such, she could only handle the divorce proceedings for them.

After they were done, the two of them did not leave the administrative center. Instead, they headed further inside. Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Where are they going?"

"Oh, they must've gone to handle the estate division and ownership transfer." Ms. Li sighed and said, "The administrative center makes everything really convenient. Now that the Civil Affairs Division and Estate Affairs Division are housed in the same building, once a couple gets a divorce, they can go straight to the next department to divide their assets. How efficient."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. Ren Xiaosu thought that Wang Yuexi probably did not expect that someone would lament the efficiency of the administrative center from such an angle.

While he was in contemplation, several people came to the counter. Some of them were here to get a divorce, while others were applying to get married.

Ms. Li said to Ren Xiaosu, "Go serve the couple who wants to get married. I'll handle the rest. Don't panic, just do as I did just now. Make some small talk and then guide them to fill out the forms. After that, take them to the back room for photos and recital of their vows."

Ren Xiaosu nodded and said to the couple, "Are the two of you here to register your marriage? Please fill out the form here."

Ren Xiaosu recalled what Ms. Li had told him. "Make some small talk."

While the couple in front of him was filling out the form, Ren Xiaosu asked curiously, "What does it feel like to get married?"

The man said with a smile, "We've been in a relationship for six years, so we're ready to commit ourselves. I'm ready to give her a family. Here, the form's filled out."

Ren Xiaosu took the form and started going through the motions just like Ms. Li. "Um... since you two have been dating for six years, do you want to reconsider?"

The couple was surprised.

As such, Ren Xiaosu was dismissed on his first day of work. To be precise, he was dismissed after less than an hour at work.

Ren Xiaosu felt a sense of relief. But it was such a waste of the suits Yang Xiaojin had bought for him.

When Ren Xiaosu returned home and told Yang Xiaojin about everything, she kept laughing for over an hour. Her hands were trembling as she stir-fried vegetables.

Later, Yang Xiaojin even stopped cooking and just sat on the couch to laugh. She laughed so hard Ren Xiaosu's face turned dark.

Chapter 1017 - Found The Future Commander!

In the evening, when Wang Yuexi returned home from work, Hu Xiaobai was still unaware that Ren Xiaosu had been dismissed. She hurriedly asked, "How did the young man next door do on his first day of work?"

When Wang Yuexi heard his wife mention this, he got so angry he laughed on the spot. "How did he do? I guess you don't know yet, but he got the sack immediately this morning."

Hu Xiaobai was shocked. "Why? What happened?"

"News of this has almost spread throughout the entire administrative center. During lunch, in the cafeteria, everyone was laughing so hard they nearly flipped tables." Wang Yuexi said, "In the morning, I arranged for him to be attached to the Civil Affairs Division to handle the marriage registration process. In the end, when a couple went over to apply for their marriage certificate, he said to them that since they had been dating for six years, maybe they should reconsider getting married...."

"Hahahaha." Hu Xiaobai laughed hard. When she saw Wang Yuexi's expression, she realized she shouldn't be laughing now.

"This is outrageous." Wang Yuexi said, "Did he even intend to work? It's obvious to me that he doesn't want to work and didn't know how to reject your good intentions. That's why he played such a trick. What a pity for Ms. Xiaojin. How did she end up with a person like him?"

Hu Xiaobai also sighed and said, "He intends to have Xiaojin support him for the rest of his life."

Ren Xiaosu starting work after lazing around for such a long time was a subject of discussion among the neighbors.

But by the evening after Ren Xiaosu was dismissed on his very first day of work, this became new gossip material for them.

Everyone's focus was on what a pity it was for Yang Xiaojin to have met such a person.

...

At this moment, in the garrison base outside Stronghold 144, Zhang Xiaoman welcomed Wang Yun into the conference room with a smile.

After more than a month of recuperation, Wang Yun's complexion was finally looking better again.

In order to identify Jiang Xu's murderer, Wang Yun's health was affected after staring at monitors for six days straight.

After recuperating, Zhang Xiaoman and the Great Hoodwinker immediately had other plans for him.

Zhang Xiaoman personally brewed a pot of quality tea for Wang Yun and said with a smile, "How's your recent break been?"

"Not bad, it's just been quite boring." Wang Yun took a sip of tea and said, "By the way, have you heard any news from Future Commander? If he doesn't show up soon, everyone will feel like there's no one to lead them. I wonder what he's up to."

Zhang Xiaoman said with a smile, "Since you're bored, why don't I find you something to do?"

Wang Yun looked at Zhang Xiaoman from the corners of his eyes. "Oh, and I was wondering why you suddenly called me over. Go ahead, what is it?"

"Awesome!" Zhang Xiaoman shouted to the outside of the conference room, "Carry the stuff in!"

With that, a large group of soldiers came in. Some of them started installing screens on the wall while others adjusted equipment.

Seeing that this situation was exactly the same as when they were looking for the murderer a month ago, Wang Yun was instantly shocked. "What are they doing? Is the future commander launching another sting?"

"It's not our future commander launching another sting but that we want to find all the spies hiding in Stronghold 144. So we collected all the surveillance footage from the past month and brought them here." Zhang Xiaoman said with a smile, "Now that Stronghold 144 is under my watch, I can't possibly let those spies operate under my nose, right?"

After experiencing what happened a month ago, Wang Yun felt a little nauseated when he saw the screens. He thought for a moment and said, "Can you let me take a longer break?"

Zhang Xiaoman said righteously, "Think about it, we're Northwesterners now, so how can you bear to see people with ulterior motives operating under our noses? The future commander has disappeared for almost a month, so isn't it better that we sniff out the spies now and give him a surprise when he returns?"

"Then surely it's no hurry and we don't have to do it in the next few days, right?" Wang Yun rejected.

"Have you forgotten our aspirations?" Zhang Xiaoman said solemnly, "The Prosperous Northwest!"

The Prosperous Northwest referred to a place where everyone performed their duties, focused on improving infrastructure, paid attention to the livelihoods of the people, raised the level of the military, and captured all spies.

P5092 also came into the conference room with great interest. He said to Wang Yun with a smile, "I agree with Brigade Commander Zhang's plan. You also know the Wang Consortium is progressing very quickly in their annexation of the Central Plains. Once they complete the unification of the entire Central Plains in half a year, the Wang Consortium's next target might be the Northwest and Southwest. So we have to find all the spies in advance and carry out our strategic deployment. If the spies are not found and our strategic deployment plans get leaked, that'll be a huge threat."

"That's right." Zhang Xiaoman applauded in agreement. "Look at the Wang Consortium. They clearly know that we're experiencing a food shortage, yet they still cut off all food trade with us. This indirectly shows that the Wang Consortium has some designs on the Northwest."

Wang Yun gave it some thought and sighed. "Indeed. Let's get to work then!"

The screens in the conference room were refitted on the wall and would probably not be taken down again for some time. After the spies from Stronghold 144 were found, there would still be other spies to identify from Strongholds 145, 146, 143, 142, and others.

In short, the Great Hoodwinker and Wang Fengyuan's idea was to have Wang Yun plow through all the security footage of the entire Northwest first.

Before the spies were aware of what Wang Yun was capable of, the Northwest would have to act quickly!

Zhang Xiaoman said to Wang Yun, "We don't have to be in such a rush this time. You can take your time to go through the footage. The higher-ups' plan is to identify all the spies within a year, so we're in no hurry."

"It's good as long as it's no hurry." Wang Yun heaved a sigh of relief.

All the screens on the wall lit up with images from Stronghold 144.

Compared to the previous time, the mission this time was much easier. Wang Yun only found three suspicious people after checking through the footage over and over again. "Pause Screen A11. That person is carrying a gun. Investigate and see if there's a problem with him."

"C31, pause. The middle-aged man in the surveillance footage looks a little suspicious..."

Wang Yun slowly went through all the surveillance footage. However, there were many fewer spies in the Northwest than in the Central Plains. This was probably because the various consortiums did not prioritize their intelligence gathering efforts here.

But the next day, while Wang Yun was eating the food Zhang Xiaoman had personally brought him, he suddenly stopped moving and fell into a daze.

When Zhang Xiaoman realized Wang Yun's chopsticks had stopped moving, he asked, "What's the matter? What did you discover?"

However, Wang Yun ignored him and said to the soldier assisting them, "A16, pause! A28, pause!"

After a while, he said, "C29, pause!"

Zhang Xiaoman had a look of confusion on his face. There were too many screens on the wall, and he did not even know the positions of the screens Wang Yun mentioned.

"What's the matter? Have you discovered a spy ring?" Zhang Xiaoman asked, "Should I lead my troops into the city? Are there many of them—"

Before he could finish speaking, Wang Yun suddenly stood up holding his boxed lunch in hand. "It's Future Commander! He returned to Stronghold 144 over half a month ago!"

When Zhang Xiaoman heard this, he jumped to his feet. "Where? Where's Future Commander?"

"Anning East Road!" Wang Yun said firmly, "It's the old military neighborhood!"

Right afterwards, everyone in the military base heard Zhang Xiaoman shout at the top of his voice, "Prepare the vehicles, quickly get the vehicles running! Hurry up, don't delay me from meeting with the future commander!"

Chapter 1018 - Please Do Not Approach

After dinnertime, a convoy of vehicles suddenly sped out of the garrison base at Stronghold 144 and headed straight for the stronghold nearby.

The strongholds in the Northwest did not shut their gates at night anymore. The garrison troops changed shifts and allowed anyone to pass through as long as they didn't carry any prohibited items, be they refugees or stronghold residents.

A large number of patrolling troops and Public Order Division officers were also within the stronghold to maintain peace and order.

To maintain internal security, police hotlines were even set up in the Northwest. As long as someone called to report a case, the stronghold's administrative center would guarantee that officers from the Public Order Division would get there within 15 minutes to resolve matters.

The security forces had already received a call from the garrison troops. When they saw Zhang Xiaoman's vehicle, they immediately let it through. However, nobody could understand why Brigade Commander Zhang would suddenly enter the city when it was late into the night.

In the past, Zhang Xiaoman would not have entered the city at this time.

Zhang Xiaoman sped into the stronghold, but there were others who drove even faster than him.

Hu Xiaobai was sitting in Ren Xiaosu's house and nagging, "I didn't want to say it last time, but I really can't hold it in any longer today. Xiaomi, don't you know how to feel sorry for Ms. Xiaojin? Do you know how tiring it is for her to carry such a large basket of potatoes to the market herself? As for you, you lost your job after just one day!

"It's not like I want to poke my nose into this matter either, but look, everyone is really concerned for Ms. Xiaojin. Doesn't it make your heart ache to see her suffer?"

Off to the side, Yang Xiaojin pursed her lips and held back her laughter. Hu Xiaobai looked at her angrily. "You're way too indulgent of him. If you didn't spoil him, he wouldn't be so lazy!"

Ren Xiaosu patiently explained, "It's like this, Mrs. Hu. We still have some savings, so I don't think it'll be a problem for me to stay like this for a while longer."

Hu Xiaobai raised an eyebrow. "What? Do you intend to sit around until your savings dwindle? More importantly, you aren't even doing anything at home every day while Ms. Xiaojin is working hard out there. I think she probably already has calluses growing on her hands!"

Hu Xiaobai went over to grab Yang Xiaojin's hand. However, she was stunned, because Yang Xiaojin's palm and fingers were as smooth and soft as ever. There were no calluses on them.

Yang Xiaojin said with a smile, "Mrs. Hu, you don't have to worry so much. We're aware of our situation. He's really very capable, but he just wants to rest for a while."

Hu Xiaobai was a little annoyed. "Whatever, forget it! I'm the one who's being nosy here."

Hu Xiaobai started to walk out. "You two are still young. You don't know how much money you'll have to spend in the future."

Seeing that Hu Xiaobai was going back to her house, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin walked her to the door.

But before Hu Xiaobai could enter her own house, she heard the sound of engines roaring on Anning East Road. It sounded like people were speeding down the street.

The sudden clamor made many of the neighbors poke their heads out of their windows in curiosity. Hu Xiaobai also stopped in her tracks in confusion to see what was going on.

Then Hu Xiaobai watched in surprise as a black convoy turned from Anning East Road into the old military neighborhood and headed straight for them.

Hu Xiaobai got anxious. She banged on her front door. "Old Wang! Old Wang! Come out and see what's going on! Don't tell me that someone found out about your corruption and bribery at the administrative center? Are they here to arrest you?!"

Wang Yuexi opened the door angrily and said, "What nonsense are you rambling about? I didn't embezzle or take bribes!"

Wang Yuexi discovered that the black convoy was almost at their doorstep. The vehicles in the convoy were all luxury cars.

Wang Yuexi was surprised. Hu Xiaobai might not know where these vehicles came from, but how could he not know them when he dealt with these people daily?

This was the convoy of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce. Why were they looking for him in the middle of the night?

However, the convoy did not drive up to the entrance of his house. Instead, it stopped right in front of Ren Xiaosu's residence!

What was going on? Wang Yuexi could feel his mind spinning.

When a car door opened, a well-dressed middle-aged man got out of the vehicle and ran enthusiastically towards "Lü Xiaomi" next door.

"President Wang?!" Wang Yuexi called out in confusion.

Wang Fugui turned around and looked at Wang Yuexi. "Eh, Director Wang, you're here too? Sorry, but I have something urgent to attend to. Let's chat another day."

Ren Xiaosu also looked at Wang Yuexi and greeted him with a smile. Then he said to Wang Fugui, "Let's go in and chat."

With that, Ren Xiaosu and Wang Fugui entered the house together with schoolteacher Jiang Wu.

The door closed, leaving behind Wang Yuexi, Hu Xiaobai, and the onlookers whose heads were sticking out of their windows.

Hu Xiaobai was stunned. "Old Wang, did you just call him President Wang?"

"That's right, he's the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce, Wang Fugui." Wang Yuexi said, "President Wang lives in Stronghold 144, but he hasn't headed out much recently. Why has he come all the way here today? What kind of person is that Lü Xiaomi? Didn't you say that he's just an uncultured nobody?"

Hu Xiaobai muttered, "They resorted to selling peaches in the market, so how could they be anyone important? Which big shot would go to the market to set up their own stalls to sell things? But why do you think President Wang is here? Could our next-door neighbor really be important people?"

"How would I know?" Wang Yuexi said, "But Wang Fugui lives in seclusion. Whoever can make him pay a personal visit must not be ordinary. I saw his eager expression just now, so they probably have a very close relationship."

As they were talking, the sound of engines came from Anning East Road again.

When Wang Yuexi saw the convoy that drove into the neighborhood, his jaw slowly dropped in surprise. The vehicles that arrived this time were all green military off-road vehicles!

Whoever dared to drive such vehicles in the Northwest were definitely from the Northwest Army. Moreover, from the looks of it, it was someone very high-ranking too.

When Zhang Xiaoman got out of the vehicle, Wang Yuexi questioned again, "Brigade Commander Zhang?"

Zhang Xiaoman glanced at Wang Yuexi. "Who are you?"

Zhang Xiaoman was not as smart and empathetic as Wang Fugui. He had forgotten many of the people he met in the stronghold. Although Wang Yuexi held an important position now, there were still two rank levels between him and Zhang Xiaoman.

"Oh, I'm Wang Yuexi from the administrative center's Policy Research Office," Wang Yuexi introduced himself.

Zhang Xiaoman nodded. "Oh, I remember you. Can I ask you something? Does a young couple live at this house?"

Wang Yuexi nodded blankly. "Yes."

Zhang Xiaoman became excited. "This is the place. Wang Yun, you've done a great deed this time. Hahaha, we've been waiting for him for so long, but who could have expected our boss to be hiding right under our noses all this while?"

Knock, knock, knock. Zhang Xiaoman walked over and knocked on the door. Wang Yuexi walked over to try to ask what was going on, but he was stopped by a heavily armed soldier of the Northwest Army. He said politely, "I'm sorry, but this is a military order.. Please do not approach the future commander's residence."

Chapter 1019 - The Future Commander Actually Lives Next Door?

"The future commander's residence?" Wang Yuexi was stunned. No matter how slow his reaction was, he realized the status of the young couple next door.

It was no wonder that even though Wang Fugui was the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce, he still rushed over so anxiously in the middle of the night.

And Brigade Commander Zhang Xiaoman, who usually did not enter the stronghold at night, also suddenly came to their neighborhood.

Like the others, Wang Yuexi was also very curious about where their future commander had disappeared off to after attacking the Zhou Consortium.

Hu Xiaobai and the neighbors were gossiping about this. Even Wang Yuexi and the other men in the Policy Research Office would also talk about this topic during their free time at work.

Some people said the future commander had gone to carry out other, more important missions, while others said that he did not enjoy wielding authority. They figured he did not want to take Commander Zhang's role, so he decided not to come back.

There were all kinds of speculation, but no one guessed Ren Xiaosu had already returned to the Northwest and was hiding right under everyone's nose.

Hu Xiaobai stood anxiously at the entrance of her house. She waved at Wang Yuexi with all her might. "Come back here. Why did you run over there?"

She had not heard what the soldiers said, but she was worried something might happen if Wang Yuexi got too close to them.

Wang Yuexi walked back to his house and quietly watched the soldiers who had placed the surroundings of their neighbor's residence under heavy security. Hu Xiaobai whispered, "Who are they? Why are they here in the middle of the night?"

"It's the future commander." Wang Yuexi said in a low voice, "They're here for the future commander."

Hu Xiaobai raised her voice in surprise. "The future commander?! What future commander?"

Her voice boomed like a sudden clap of thunder, which all the nearby neighbors heard!

A woman poked her head out and said, "Xiaobai, I heard you mention the future commander? Is he here?"

Looking at the crowd in the yard downstairs, just the military off-road vehicles parked there numbered at least a dozen. Vehicles from the Northwest Chamber of Commerce were parked there as well, so it was a grand sight to behold.

Hu Xiaobai asked Wang Yuexi softly, "What on earth is going on? What did those soldiers say? I think I saw Brigade Commander Zhang just now?"

"That was Zhang Xiaoman, and those soldiers are from the 6th Combat Brigade. You can tell by just looking at their shoulders." Wang Yuexi sighed and said, "When I walked over just now, a soldier told me that the future commander's residence is next door, so I'm not to approach it. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Wang Yuexi watched as his wife's jaw dropped. He quickly covered her mouth with his hand and said, "Don't shout! Aren't you afraid the others will find out what's going on?"

Hu Xiaobai said in disbelief, "The future commander is next door? I've been criticizing the future commander for being a lazy bum every day?"

Wang Yuexi said with a gloomy expression, "That's the case, isn't it? Now that I think about it, with the status of our future commander, why would he even need to work? The entire Yunsu business belongs to him, so even if he spends his entire life being lazy, he can't spend all his money. Damn you, woman, you're way too much! You kept saying the future commander was a lazy bum and that you felt bad for Ms. Xiaojin. Look at what happened now! Who knows if the future commander will take this matter to heart?"

Hu Xiaobai looked at Wang Yuexi. "Don't blame me. You're the one who sacked the future commander from his job."

When Wang Yuexi heard this, he could even feel his liver starting to hurt.

Goddammit!

Hu Xiaobai muttered, "But they're so rich. Why did they go to the market and sell peaches and potatoes?"

"Can't he live life?" Wang Yuexi said, "By the way, have you ever noticed what he usually does?"

"Reading, that's about it. When I went to the market with Ms. Xiaojin, he was also just reading books."

Hu Xiaobai said, "But I don't think he's been reading much in recent days. All he does is randomly wander around the market. I heard about that from Mrs. Liu."

"Wandering around?" Wang Yuexi wondered.

"Mhm, he went to every stall and asked them about the prices of vegetables, rice, and noodles every day. That's all he ever does," Hu Xiaobai said.

Wang Yuexi fell silent. If this were before, he would also think the person was really a lazy bum. But if his status as the future commander was confirmed, Wang Yuexi would have to think deeper.

"It looks like the future commander has also noticed the change in the food prices." Wang Yuexi said firmly, "He's concerned about the food shortage that's coming to the Northwest."

Hu Xiaobai said with a smile, "That's what I thought! How could the future commander of our Northwest possibly be a lazy bum?"

Wang Yuexi looked at his wife silently. 'That isn't what you said previously.'

While he was pondering things, the sound of car engines came from Anning East Road again. All the onlookers turned in that direction to see who it was this time.

Tonight, there was not a moment of peace on Anning East Road.

A convoy of black off-road vehicles sped over and appeared in everyone's sight. When Wang Yuexi saw the vehicles, he recognized them. "Those vehicles are from the black market. It's Zhou Yingxue."

This convoy looked much more fearsome than the earlier ones. Every vehicle was a full-sized SUV with an unusually large and wide front body.

When the convoy came to a stop, Zhou Yingxue, who was dressed in a purple qipao, got out of the vehicle in high heels. The Eight Vajras followed close behind.

Before Zhou Yingxue reached the entrance of the residence, her voice drifted over. "Master!"

With that, all onlookers could confirm that the person living in this house was indeed the future commander of the Northwest.

In that instant, Ren Xiaosu's reputation as a lazy bum changed. Everyone started discussing and saying, "What a low profile the future commander has kept..."

When Zhou Yingxue heard the noisy chatter around her, her eyebrows twitched. She ordered Wang Yuchi and the others, "Go tell them not to stop watching. Is this something they should be standing around to watch?"

As soon as the maidservant opened her mouth, the fearsome mob boss aura of hers could be felt.

As she walked to Ren Xiaosu's residence, the soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade did not stop her as they knew who she was.

But before she could knock on the door, she heard Ren Xiaosu's voice come from inside. "Stay outside and reflect upon yourself!"

The maidservant's expression darkened. She stood outside the door in anger and muttered under her breath, "I came to see you in the middle of the night, yet you're making me stand out here as punishment?! Did I set up this black market for myself? It was all for you, Master! Seriously?!"

As she complained, the maidservant looked at Wang Yuexi and Hu Xiaobai before saying amiably, "You two are his neighbors, right? When did he move here?"

"About a month ago," Wang Yuexi answered.

Zhou Yingxue looked at Wang Yuexi. "Eh, why do you look so familiar?"

"I'm Wang Yuexi from the Policy Research Office," Wang Yuexi introduced himself.

"Oh, I remember now. When the black market opened for business, you also sent a flower basket. When you have time, come visit the black market." Zhou Yingxue said with a smile, "Hey, you two! Come over and tell me what he's been up to recently."

The sudden commotion completely disrupted the peace in the old military neighborhood. News of the future commander secretly living in Stronghold 144 quickly spread to every corner of the stronghold within ten minutes.

Their future commander was finally back!

Chapter 1020 - Internal Meeting

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin's house was fully packed with people.

The Great Hoodwinker, Zhang Xiaoman, Wang Yun, P5092, Wang Fugui, Jiang Wu, and the rest had all gathered around Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu sat calmly on the couch. "So tell me, how did y'all find me?"

Zhang Xiaoman chuckled, "We were planning to sniff out all the spies hiding in Stronghold 144 with the same method that we used to catch Luo Zongren. But who could have thought that we would end up catching Future Commander instead!"

Ren Xiaosu was left speechless.

Next to him, the Great Hoodwinker kicked Zhang Xiaoman's butt and chided, "Watch what you're saying! What do you mean by we've caught Future Commander!?"

Zhang Xiaoman was immediately enraged. But considering that he could not win against the Great Hoodwinker, he held in his anger.

Only then did Ren Xiaosu realize Wang Yun had located him through the surveillance footage.

It couldn't be helped then. Staying hidden under the nose of someone like Wang Yun was virtually impossible.

The Great Hoodwinker laughed and said, "Future Commander, why didn't you tell us that you were already back in the Northwest?"

"I wanted to rest for a while. After all, I'm really tired from all the fighting and killing we did in the Central Plains," Ren Xiaosu answered. "However, this rare moment of peace was shattered by all y'all."

"Don't put it like that." The Great Hoodwinker chuckled and said, "Future Commander, if you had informed us in advance, we wouldn't have come and bothered you."

"Then y'all may go back for now. Remember not to reveal my identity to the neighbors," Ren Xiaosu said.

"It's already too late." Zhang Xiaoman said shamelessly, "I was afraid that you wouldn't want to return to Stronghold 144 to take charge, so I explicitly ordered the soldiers to tell your neighbors that this is the future commander's residence."

Ren Xiaosu's eyebrows twitched. He really wanted to kick Zhang Xiaoman in the face.

In the end, it was still P5092 who stepped forward to calm things. "Actually, Future Commander, all the other strongholds are no longer run by the military. However, Stronghold 144 is still being managed by the 6th Combat Brigade. This shows that Commander Zhang also hopes you can govern this stronghold."

In normal times, there was a clear distinction between the military and the administration.

But due to special circumstances, the Fortress 178 troops had taken management of the various strongholds in the Northwest. Now that all the new overseer positions were filled, it was time for the military to step back and return to their original duties.

The administration and the military were two systems that complemented each other—always having overlapping objectives but never running parallel in the way they operated. This was the difference between civilian and military officials.

However, Stronghold 144 was different. The 6th Combat Brigade still retained all the authority over the stronghold. Zhang Jinglin's intention was clear. He wanted to hand Stronghold 144 to Ren Xiaosu to gauge his capability.

Although Commander Zhang's current thoughts were not explicitly expressed, the Great Hoodwinker and Zhang Xiaoman, along with the rest, understood his intention with just a hint.

P5092 said, "Future Commander, Stronghold 144's trade scene has stabilized as President Wang Fugui has handled everything very well. The Chamber of Commerce is also in good order, so everyone can rest easy. Ms. Zhou Yingxue is also maintaining order in the mafia. We're all of the opinion that she's more than well-suited to manage the black market. Currently, the remaining issues are the food crisis and the possible outbreak of war. I feel we don't have much time to waste. Would you like to make a trip to Fortress 178 and meet Commander Zhang to see what his plans are?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I won't go there for the time being."

If he went there, that would be as good as officially accepting Zhang Jinglin's arrangements. After that, he would truly become the future commander of the Northwest Army and would have to shoulder the responsibilities of the entire Northwest.

But Ren Xiaosu was really not prepared for it. It was not that he was refusing to oblige.

He just wanted to see what he could achieve at Stronghold 144 first before deciding on his next step.

"Let's handle things one at a time." Ren Xiaosu shouted to Zhou Yingxue, who was standing outside, "Get in here."

Zhou Yingxue wiped away her plaintive look. The moment she came in, she greeted Yang Xiaojin first before walking over slowly to Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Didn't I ask whether you've been lording over others in my name? How did you answer me?"

Zhou Yingxue said in a meek voice, "I didn't make any trouble at all. Master, think about it. If I didn't set up the black market, someone else would've done it. It's better to keep the black market under our control than to have it in the hands of others, right?"

"Did you use any unfair practices to monopolize the market?"

"No, absolutely not. I just collect the transaction fees. I'd never do something unfair against consumers."

"Did you resort to violence?"

"No, everyone is quite obedient. Master, if you don't believe it, you can ask Wang Yuchi and the others. They're the most honest...."

Ren Xiaosu looked at the Great Hoodwinker. "What is Mr. Zhang's opinion of the black market?"

"It's just as Ms. Zhou Yingxue said. Commander Zhang also felt that it was better to have it under our control. You cannot expect everyone to be squeaky clean, so the black market will always exist," the Great Hoodwinker said.

"Alright then." Ren Xiaosu heaved a sigh of relief. "Zhou Yingxue, you must speak and act prudently while you oversee the black market. Don't go thinking that you can do whatever you like just because you're strong."

"Master, don't worry. Don't you know me well enough? I know what I'm doing!" Zhou Yingxue was relieved. She knew that once this matter blew over, the black market would not have to be disbanded in the future.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Fugui again. "What about over at the Chamber of Commerce? Did you encounter any difficulties that need to be solved?"

Wang Fugui chuckled and said, "It's not really a problem per se. Xiaosu, I just wanted you to talk with Ms. Zhou to see if she can allow the Eight Vajras to stop hanging around the black market. Although the trade route to the Central Plains is quite safe, there's still some occasional risk-takers who rob the traveling merchants. So we need some people to protect us along the way."

"OK, there's no need to discuss this further." Ren Xiaosu said to Wang Yuchi, "The eight of you will stick to the trade convoys from now on. The black market isn't a place you should be hanging around at your age, so stop going there. Follow your Uncle Fugui and venture outside more so you can broaden your horizons. Once the trade route to the grasslands is ready, y'all can visit it."

Zhou Yingxue's expression sank. Ren Xiaosu said to her, "Your black market is right next to the stronghold. If there's really any trouble, you can just call Zhang Xiaoman. Don't tie Wang Yuchi and the others down at that place anymore. Besides, who dares to provoke you anyways?"

With this promise from Ren Xiaosu, Zhou Yingxue beamed with joy. "That's great. I just needed to hear that from you, Master. After all, my superpower isn't suited for frequent use in battle."

Following that, Ren Xiaosu asked P5092, "How do you think we should adjust our military forces?"

"The recruitment for the new year will have to start on time." P5092 thought for a while and said, "Since Stronghold 144 is the closest to the Central Plains, this place will be the first to bear the brunt of the war if it breaks out. Therefore, a brigade is definitely not enough manpower. We'll need a division.. I need to expand the reconnaissance company into a battalion and deploy them to the borders so we can know in advance what the Wang Consortium is planning."