

Chapter 1021 - Contract Responsibility System

"Military expansion is not a trivial matter." Ren Xiaosu explained to P5092, "It still needs to go through a formal approval process by Commander Zhang."

However, the Great Hoodwinker said from nearby, "Commander Zhang has said that you'll be in charge of things in Stronghold 144 and its territories. He won't interfere with your decisions. Even if you submit documents for approval, they'll be rejected and sent right back. Right now, you basically have the power to act as you please."

"Does Stronghold 144 have the budget for military expansion?" Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhang Xiaoman.

"Of course. After the trade routes opened, although the tax rates were very low, Stronghold 144 has become the richest stronghold in the Northwest," Zhang Xiaoman replied. "In terms of our local regional finances, we have more money than we can spend."

"More than we can spend or do you just not know what to spend it on? Otherwise, the food shortage issue should've been resolved already. I've walked around the market recently and noticed that the food prices are increasing almost daily. This is a very bad sign. P5092, you can just take charge of the military expansion plans. The rest of us still have to resolve the major problem of the food shortage first," Ren Xiaosu said calmly.

Feeling wronged, Zhang Xiaoman complained, "It's not that we didn't try, but we faced way too many difficulties. If the Wang Consortium were willing to export food to us, we wouldn't have so many problems. I've already sent people to the Qing Consortium to see if they can help us in any way."

"Even if there's difficulties, we still have to handle them." Ren Xiaosu said, "Be it the Qing Consortium or the Wang Consortium, they're all outsiders. Food is everyone's lifeline, and that's true for the Northwest as well. How can we rely on outsiders for something like that? Zhou Yingxue, I'm assigning you to grow potatoes starting tomorrow. We have to resolve the food shortage first so that no one will panic."

Zhou Yingxue's expression immediately turned bitter. She knew she would definitely be asked to grow potatoes if the food shortage needed to be resolved.

If Zhou Yingxue were the one who planted the Potato Shooter, not only would the potatoes be bigger, but the Potato Shooter could also produce up to a 100 potatoes per day. With this crop, it could at least assure that the people in the Northwest would not have to starve to death.

"However, we can't just rely on potatoes to resolve the food shortage. We can't possibly make everyone eat potatoes all the time." Ren Xiaosu said, "Tell me, what're the difficulties you've encountered regarding the food crisis?"

Zhang Xiaoman said, "We took over the Zong Consortium's strongholds not long ago. But we realized that we have to start from scratch just to survey the new land."

"What's so difficult about drawing a map?" Ren Xiaosu frowned. "There's so many skilled people within the troops who can do that. Send your 6th Combat Brigade to survey the terrain. We have to get this done quickly. Wang Yun, you'll lead the team for this purpose. I want to see results within half a month."

"Alright, Future Commander," Wang Yun said with a nod.

"What other difficulties were there?" Ren Xiaosu asked again.

Zhang Xiaoman said, "We also have issues with the irrigation infrastructure and the terrain. As the soil erosion here is quite severe, a lot of places are unsuitable for farming. Of course, there's also some good plots of land. But it'll be quite difficult to construct irrigation canals through them since it'll require too much manpower and resources."

"When will Ji Zi'ang get here?" Ren Xiaosu said, "Don't post him to the inspection board for now. Have him lead a team to improve the irrigation works first. Great Hoodwinker, did you encounter any other earth-type supernatural beings when you were in the Central Plains? Poach them for our Prosperous Northwest."

"No, there aren't any left in the Central Plains, but there's still one here in the Northwest." The Great Hoodwinker said, "It's just that he's unwilling to join the Northwest Army, so we can't force him."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "When did you become easy to talk to?"

"Ahem, it's not that I'm easy to talk to but this is our Northwest's policy. We don't force others to join us," the Great Hoodwinker said.

The moment he said that, Wang Yun and the others looked at the Great Hoodwinker in silence. They thought to themselves, 'That's what you've been doing all this while in the Central Plains, so why would you deny it now that you've returned to the Northwest?'

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while and said, "Can we get the people of Stronghold 144 to participate in the land recultivation efforts as well?"

"No one here has any enthusiasm for that." Zhang Xiaoman said, "It's not just our Northwest that has this problem; all the consortiums face the same issue. Although we can hire refugees and stronghold residents for farming, they actually aren't very enthusiastic about it. In fact, this is the main cause of the food crisis. Now that the trade routes have opened, everyone is running their own business. But farming is different. As they don't own the land, the crops they grow don't belong to them either. So they're only drawing a salary. That's why so many refugees went to the uninhabited land in the valley to cultivate the land by themselves. If we want to encourage them, we must enact land reform first. However, we can't sell the land and let the people privatize it either. If that happens, it can also become a potential problem if people start buying and selling their property privately and not use it for farming."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and suddenly asked, "Have y'all ever heard of the contract responsibility system¹? This solution is somewhat suitable for the problem we're facing in our vision of the Prosperous Northwest."

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Actually, Ren Xiaosu also did not know anything about managing a stronghold, and Zhang Xiaoman and the others were suddenly forced to start learning as well. As such, they could only take things one step at a time and learn on the job.

After agreeing on the meeting time tomorrow, Ren Xiaosu walked them to the door.

Very quickly, all the vehicles that had suddenly rushed here to see Ren Xiaosu drove off, and the old military neighborhood on Anning East Road returned to its usual calm.

But after the convoy of vehicles left, all the residents in the old military neighborhood came out of their houses and looked curiously at Ren Xiaosu. They wanted to see just what the legendary future commander looked like.

Hu Xiaobai and Wang Yuexi stood at the entrance of their house and hesitated about whether to go up to talk to Ren Xiaosu. However, Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "Mr. Wang, Mrs. Hu, is there anything I can help you with?"

Hu Xiaobai said in embarrassment, "Erm... Future Commander, I'm sorry. I've misunderstood you recently..."

"It's alright." Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "After all, I've really been a little lazy these days."

"How could that be?" Hu Xiaobai quickly corrected him, "Future Commander, you were just traveling incognito to get the lay of the land and find out what the people's concerns are. I understand, I totally understand!"

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. As expected, the way everyone looked at you would depend on your status.

Honestly, he had really come here to lead a peaceful life and do nothing at all. But in the end, everyone misunderstood that he was here to find out about the people's concerns.

Then Ren Xiaosu said to Wang Yuexi, "We'll be holding a meeting regarding the food crisis tomorrow. You should represent the Policy Research Office and attend it."

Wang Yuexi was stunned. Then he hurriedly nodded in excitement. "OK, OK! No problem!"

After that, Ren Xiaosu returned to his house. Hu Xiaobai wondered, "What did Future Commander mean by that? Is he going to place you in an important role?"

Wang Yuexi thought to himself that maybe the future commander was very satisfied with the comprehensive services he had set up in the administrative center?

But he still had to restrain himself. "I doubt I'm good enough to be placed in an important role, so don't go around talking to others yet. Who knows how that might sound by the time it reaches the future commander's ears?"

Back in the house, Ren Xiaosu smiled at Yang Xiaojin and said, "Sorry, it looks like we can't continue living this quiet life anymore."

News of the future commander living in seclusion on Anning East Road had already spread throughout Stronghold 144.

Their neighbors, as well as the stall owners at the market, were all extremely excited. They went about telling all their relatives and friends about the story of the future commander's incognito travels with great enthusiasm.

In the early morning, Yang Xiaojin passed by Anning East Road carrying her basket. Although it was almost summer, Stronghold 144 was seemingly brought back to early spring due to a sudden drop in temperature. A thin fog had filled the air, and the ground was a little wet.

But today was different from usual. As Yang Xiaojin walked down the street, she noticed the passersby could not help but look at her.

She knew very well why this was so. People were even whispering on the sidewalk as they tried to explain her status to the unaware.

Yang Xiaojin smiled. Whenever other people mentioned her, the most commonly used words they used to describe her were "Future Commander" and "Future Commander's wife."

In the past, she was a sniper who evoked fear in people and an independent lone wolf. Now that she had a prefix added to her name, she found it rather interesting.

Of course, both Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin knew very well that they were still individuals.

However, Yang Xiaojin's smile soon disappeared.

As a supernatural being, she was destined to have a better sense of hearing than normal people. Although it was not that much better, it was still enough for her to hear the discussion five meters away.

A passerby muttered, "All of you are looking at her. Why? Who is she?"

The passerby was a little puzzled. Although the girl in the ballcap had an elegant air about her, one could only see her nose and chin when they walked past her from the opposite direction. So everyone was probably not attracted by her beauty, right? It should be because her status was a little special.

A passerby in the know whispered, "Don't you know who she is? She's the legendary Queen Mother of the West..."¹

Yang Xiaojin's expression darkened. What kind of weird nickname was that? If she found out which culprit gave her that nickname, she would probably gun down that person with her black sniper rifle.

She did not expect that she would have to bear the burden of this unwanted nickname at her young age.

The passerby in the know was still saying with gusto, "It's a little tacky to address her as Future Commander's wife, but Future Commander will succeed Commander Zhang to become the ruler of the Northwest sooner or later. So there's nothing wrong with calling her Queen Mother of the West. Besides, you've also read the superhuman rankings publication. The combat power of our Queen Mother of the West is very high as well."

Yang Xiaojin took a deep breath and headed straight to the market. She decided not to continue listening to the rest of the conversation.

There were a variety of nicknames in the Northwest Army, such as Qin Shihuang, Cleanser of the Altars, and so on. And today, Queen Mother of the West was added to that list as well.

When Yang Xiaojin arrived at the market, all the stall owners who used to greet her enthusiastically remained silent. It was not that everyone was afraid of Yang Xiaojin or hated her, but they suddenly did not know how to treat her with her new status.

Moreover, talk had been going around recently that Ren Xiaosu was living off his woman. Thinking about it now, they even found it a little embarrassing.

It wasn't until Yang Xiaojin started shopping for groceries as usual that everyone eventually breathed a sigh of relief. Ms. Xiaojin was still the same old her.

While shopping for groceries, a few stall owners insisted on giving them away for free. But Yang Xiaojin managed to get them to accept payment after much persuasion.

However, Yang Xiaojin also made it very clear to the stall owners that they would probably be staying here for some time. If they did not accept payment from her for their groceries, she would probably not come and buy from them anymore in the future. At that time, Ren Xiaosu would have to starve.

These words tickled the stall owners, but they did not dare to laugh and could only accept the payment.

When she left the market after she was done grocery shopping, she was so exhausted her forehead was covered with sweat.

Honestly, not even the normal battles she took part in were this tiring.

When she returned home, Yang Xiaojin surprisingly complained for the first time. She said as she placed the keys on the shoe cabinet by the door, "I didn't expect you to have such a good reputation in the Northwest. Everyone was offering to give their groceries to me for free. You obviously haven't been in the Northwest for long, so why are they so supportive of you?"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, "Perhaps I was the hero who liberated them from the Zong Consortium."

Yang Xiaojin clicked her tongue in disapproval. "If they didn't know we're together, there would probably be a long line of matchmakers outside offering their services to you."

Early in the morning, Wang Fugui, Zhang Xiaoman, Wang Yun, and the rest showed up at Ren Xiaosu's residence. However, Wang Yuexi suddenly got very nervous at the thought of having to attend a meeting with so many important people.

Ren Xiaosu said to everyone in the living room, "The agenda for today's meeting is mainly to discuss whether the contract responsibility system is suitable for the Northwest."

"About that... Future Commander, can you explain to us what exactly this contract responsibility system is about?" Wang Fugui said.

Of the people present, everyone possessed a certain level of knowledge with the exception of Zhang Xiaoman. Even Wang Fugui also used to like reading books and newspapers a lot.

However, a subject like the contract responsibility system was relatively unfamiliar to them.

After the gradual rise of the consortiums, some books related to this topic naturally got banned. Some consortiums directly destroyed the publications while others stored them and did not allow the public to access them.

Ren Xiaosu had come across this term in a novel before. The books on this subject matter had probably already been destroyed. But this novel must have slipped through the cracks due to the novel's theme. Otherwise, he would not have come across this term ever.

Wang Yun carefully cycled through his memories. "I've read all the books in the Wang Consortium's library. There were seven books that mentioned the contract responsibility system. Its core objective is to improve enthusiasm for agricultural production and have farmers cultivate the land willingly rather than being forced to do so."

Especially in this era where farming was still considered as working for the consortiums, such a system would prove very tempting for the people.

Wang Yuexi listened to all of this quietly. He knew exactly how steely one would need to be the first person to implement the contract responsibility system.

Initially, he thought Ren Xiaosu would start by importing food to resolve the current food shortage or solve it through other means. But he didn't expect Ren Xiaosu to want to solve the core of the issue as soon as he spoke.

Land reform was a subject everyone would treat with caution if they encountered it.

Ren Xiaosu calmly explained, "The problem we're facing is that the people in the Northwest have too much freedom. Everyone can start a business, work in factories, or choose whether to farm or not. But compared to other ways of making a living, farming is obviously not attractive enough to them. The reason why the Northwest is facing a food shortage is partly due to natural disasters, but we can't ignore the man-made factors either. Y'all can see that there's still a lot of unclaimed wasteland in the Northwest. As for why they have remained as wasteland, that deserves deeper consideration on our part."

Wang Yuexi said softly, "Everyone present should know exactly what the land reform measures represent, right? Should we discuss it with Commander Zhang first?"

This land reform would fundamentally topple some of the consortiums' existing practices.

However, Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Since Mr. Zhang said that he would not interfere with Stronghold 144's matters, we can just introduce the reforms first before getting his approval. We can just treat Stronghold 144 as a pilot project. As for whether to introduce the reforms to the Fortress 178 territories, he can decide that for himself."

Chapter 1023 - Never Stopped

To control people in these wastelands, the consortiums were used to keeping all the production resources firmly in their hands. Water, land, and everything that the people relied on for survival were all controlled.

When Zhang Jinglin was at Stronghold 113, he had profoundly said to Ren Xiaosu, "This is a world that has been meticulously designed by the consortiums."

Previously, even Zhang Jinglin did not dare to break this status quo. Fortress 178 could not even take in any refugees because if they broke this rule, everyone would start attacking them.

For example, Luoyang City had wanted to completely open its gates to everyone and sought to end any differentiation between refugees and stronghold residents. However, they were warned by the Kong Consortium, the Wang Consortium, and the Zhou Consortium as soon as they introduced those changes.

In the end, documents like "visas" were created, and there was still a huge gulf in the treatment of refugees and stronghold residents.

But now, Ren Xiaosu not only wanted to implement land reforms, but he also wanted to completely topple the walls separating the stronghold residents and refugees in the Northwest.

Actually, Stronghold 144 had already done so. After all, it was impossible not to let people into the city if you wanted to promote trade.

Ren Xiaosu said, "I've read a lot of books, but what we've planned is just textbook theory for now. So I need everyone to work together as a group. I'm just sharing my thoughts right now. As the largest trade hub in the Northwest, it should be more open here in Stronghold 144 than other places. So our pace of reforms should be faster than theirs. Don't be afraid of making any mistakes. If there's any, I'll take responsibility."

The Great Hoodwinker looked at Ren Xiaosu quietly. Regarding Zhang Jinglin's uncaring attitude towards Stronghold 144, he was most aware of it.

He knew very well that Commander Zhang was doing this because he wanted to see how Ren Xiaosu would lead the people of this city to create a new world.

Perhaps even Ren Xiaosu himself did not realize that while he was only trying to solve the problem of the food shortage, what he was actually doing was planning a roadmap.

Wang Yun thought for a while and then said, "But actually, we still have to discuss the pros and cons of the contract responsibility system. Everyone should know that when this system is implemented, there'll definitely be a lot of people who are willing to own their 'own' land even if the lease will only last for a few decades. But in terms of agricultural efficiency, it will not be as beneficial as large-scale mechanized production."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and replied, "I think now's the right time to reclaim the wasteland. The land in the Northwest that needs to be reclaimed will need manpower to do so. We can divide the development process into stages. It's still too early to introduce large-scale mechanized production at this stage, and we don't have the conditions for that either. We have to improve the enthusiasm of the people first to cultivate the wasteland into farmland."

"I agree," Wang Yun said with a nod.

"In this process of 'privatization,' we still have to pay attention to the large families swallowing up the smaller land parcels. So it's best to add certain restrictions to the awarding process of the contracts." Wang Yuexi thought for a moment and said, "Moreover, I feel that besides contracting out the plots, we can also contract out the building of brick kilns and other factories as well. There'll be all sorts of things that can be contracted out. But the prerequisite is that our economic lifeline must always remain in the hands of Fortress 178. This is the foundation that cannot be shaken."

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. "Wang Yuexi has hit the nail on the head. Currently, our Northwest's productivity is still several notches below that of the Central Plains. But if we take everyone's enthusiasm into account and make use of it, the Northwest might be able to advance by leaps and bounds. However, all y'all have to be careful. Once the brick kilns are privately owned, there'll likely be extreme cases of exploitation in the industry as well. So the supporting labor laws will have to keep up to prevent that from happening."

At the side, Yang Xiaojin just sat there quietly. She leaned her chin on her hand and looked at Ren Xiaosu's profile.

In the past, Ren Xiaosu would always be reading books whenever he had free time, even in the wilderness.

Some people felt that studying was useless, but Yang Xiaojin could see the charm of books through Ren Xiaosu at this moment. The young man who used to be a refugee had never stopped increasing his own knowledge. And now, his hard work was starting to bear fruit.

If she were to ask Wang Yuexi now, "Do you believe that Ren Xiaosu used to be an average refugee who couldn't even afford to attend school?"

Wang Yuexi would probably not believe it.

If Ren Xiaosu had not persevered in his book reading and understanding of the world, he could never have become the true master of the Northwest even if he were extremely powerful in combat. Zhang Jinglin would also not have placed his hopes on a boor who only knew how to solve problems with force.

Previously, no one could understand why Zhang Jinglin chose Ren Xiaosu as his successor. Only he himself knew he had seen unlimited potential in this young man.

When this young man was still a refugee, he was willing to squat on the walls to listen in on his classes. That attitude of knowledge seeking even made Zhang Jinglin feel ashamed of himself.

Ren Xiaosu had never stopped on his path of enriching himself.

In the eyes of others, Qing Zhen was someone born with extreme intelligence, and a person like him deserved to shine brightly in this era.

But in Yang Xiaojin's eyes, Ren Xiaosu, a pragmatic young man who firmly believed that diligence made up for the lack of talent, was even more precious.

Ren Xiaosu instructed Wang Yuexi, "Everyone in the stronghold's administrative center will have to start getting busy. Your responsibility will be to keep up with the publicity work so that our people will take in the ideologies."

Wang Yuexi nodded and wrote it down in his notebook. "But there's another problem. We need seeds to reclaim the wasteland. The seed bank in the Northwest does not have enough seeds to support such a large-scale program."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "We can now see the importance of having friends. The seeds that we need will be delivered to us by the Qing Consortium in a few days."

Wang Yuexi was stunned. He had long heard that the future commander was on good terms with the Qing Consortium, but he did not expect it to be true.

Ren Xiaosu continued instructing Wang Yuexi, "The labor acts and the contract responsibility system will need to be drawn up as quickly as possible by y'all. We need to communicate with Fortress 178's bank as well to create small loan programs to support the residents' willingness to sign the contracts. They'll need money to buy seeds and raw materials after they've signed the contracts to farm and build factories. We have to consider all aspects of this."

At this moment, Wang Fugui chuckled and said, "Our Northwest Chamber of Commerce can do that since we're well-funded. Why don't we set up our own bank?"

However, Ren Xiaosu shook his head firmly. "We can't have Yunsu get involved in such matters. Y'all can take some contracts on your own, but we must not get involved in matters that involve the economic lifeline of the Northwest. It concerns the entire plan of the Prosperous Northwest, so the economy can't be held hostage by the merchants. Perhaps the Northwest Chamber of Commerce won't cause any trouble while I'm still around, but you and I will leave this world someday. I can't let a new consortium be born in my hands."

Rich merchants could be allowed to exist in these lands of the Northwest, and they could even become the richest people in the world. But they must not gain the ability to shake the foundations of the Northwest, and that was Ren Xiaosu's principle and bottom line regarding this matter.

Wang Yuexi stared deeply into Ren Xiaosu.. He knew that Yunsu was actually Ren Xiaosu's private business, so to be able to restrain the temptation at a time like this was enough to make Wang Yuexi look up to him.

Chapter 1024 - Poaching

Importing food would only resolve whatever urgent situation was at hand.

But what Ren Xiaosu was doing now was seeking a more stable and prosperous future for the Northwest.

As the director of the Policy Research Office, Wang Yuexi knew well the difference between the two.

Ren Xiaosu said to Wang Yun, "Of course, it's not like everyone can take on as many contracts as they like, or choose whichever plot of land that they want. We have to play a macro role in this. So drawing the borders of land is of utmost importance. Not only do we have to draw a map, but we also have to know which are the fertile and barren plots."

"Future Commander, don't worry. I'll definitely complete the mission within half a month," Wang Yun said.

Ren Xiaosu nodded and said to the Great Hoodwinker, "Since we want everyone to venture out into the wilderness to reclaim the wastelands, we have to ensure that it'll be safe. Deploy Xun Yeyu and have Wang Yuchi and the others bring him over and activate his radar power while they clear the entire wilderness of any danger."

"In the Northwest's territory, I don't want there to be any banditry or wild animals attacking people. Xun Yeyu and the rest are to sniff out all the bandits hiding in the valleys and the hills," Ren Xiaosu said.

The Great Hoodwinker had a feeling that the future commander was getting serious this time. He was even planning to use Xun Yeyu, the mobile human radar, to clear out the bandits. After this, there would really be no more bandits left in the Northwest.

With Xun Yeyu around, it would be impossible for anyone to avoid their encirclement this time no matter where they hid. The bandits and robbers in the Northwest were really going to be exterminated.

"Of course, we don't have to kill all the bandits either. If they turn over a new leaf after we capture them, they can still join the Prosperous Northwest's efforts." Ren Xiaosu had set the tone for this affair. This was the beginning of the Prosperous Northwest, and manpower was the foundation of everything.

Under such circumstances, Ren Xiaosu was willing to be lenient to whoever was willing to join the Prosperous Northwest, as long as they had not committed any grave crimes.

The meeting lasted for eight hours before it finally came to an end. During this time, Yang Xiaojin even made lunch for everyone, leaving them feeling very honored.

Wang Fugui stayed until evening before leaving. However, he did not go home and instead took the car to Stronghold 143 next door to pay a visit to someone.

At around 9 PM, Wang Fugui headed straight for 179 Guangxing Street after arriving at Stronghold 143. He knocked on the door, and a surprised middle-aged man on the inside answered.

The middle-aged man looked at Wang Fugui in confusion. "Who are you looking for?"

Wang Fugui said with a smile, "Pardon me, are you Mr. Jiang Lin?"

"Yes, that's me." Jiang Lin said in surprise, "Is something the matter? If you're from the Northwest Army, please go back. I just want to lead a simple life, not join the military."

Wang Fugui shook his head. "I'm not from the Northwest Army. Let me introduce myself. My name is Wang Fugui, and I was very fortunate that everyone supported my bid to be the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce."

Jiang Lin was stunned. He had heard of Wang Fugui's name before. By now, who did not know about Yunsu Trading Company and Wang Fugui? The Northwest Chamber of Commerce's influence on the Northwest was much greater than Ren Xiaosu could imagine.

After all, most of the things the Northwest Chamber of Commerce imported and exported were very closely linked to necessities. For example, kitchenware imported from the Central Plains, lipstick, and many other novelty products were all sold through the Northwest Chamber of Commerce.

Jiang Lin was the earth-type supernatural being the Great Hoodwinker had mentioned. However, he did not want to join the military and was even very determined against it. Therefore, he remained a company employee until now.

Before Wang Fugui came here, he had done his research and knew that Jiang Lin did not have any animosity for the Northwest Army. It was just that he cherished his life more and did not want to get involved in any dangerous activities.

In the past, he was picked out from the crowd by Xun Yeyu to do the Zong Consortium's bidding. During that time, Jiang Lin had killed many people, and that was not in line with what he wanted. As such, he often had nightmares about it.

But while such talents could not be used by the Northwest Army, the Northwest Chamber of Commerce could really do with their help.

Moreover, Wang Fugui heard that Jiang Lin was probably one of the earliest supernatural beings to awaken their power. So in other words, it was very likely that Jiang Lin was an extremely strong supernatural being.

Jiang Lin invited Wang Fugui into the house. Wang Fugui got straight to the point and said, "To be honest, I'm only here because of your superpower, Mr. Jiang. However, I don't need you to do anything dangerous for me. On top of that, I can assure you that you'll be paid handsomely."

Jiang Lin was stunned. "What does President Wang want me to do? Won't you be needing me to fight and kill? Let me say this in advance: I'm really not interested in fighting and killing, nor am I willing to be a bodyguard for the rich and powerful."

"There won't be any fighting or killing." Wang Fugui waved it off with a smile. "All I want is for you to help the Northwest prosper, Mr. Jiang. Now that the Prosperous Northwest is right before us, even though our Yunsu cannot participate in the macroeconomic development of the region, we can still take contract work. In the eyes of others, Mr. Jiang is a supernatural being and a weapon. But in our Yunsu's eyes, Mr. Jiang should be the first chief engineer of our company!"

"I've never studied engineering before...." Jiang Lin was a little dumbfounded. This was the first time he had heard someone wanting to utilize his superpower like that. An earth-type supernatural being getting into engineering? That seemed a little interesting.

Wang Fugui said with a smile, "You don't have to know about engineering. We'll provide the drawings, and we also have professionals to guide you, Mr. Jiang, on how to do it. All you need to do is apply your power to help with the development of the Northwest. Altering the terrain and surface topography is what you're best at. Even digging a foundation in about a second would help our Yunsu make back the remuneration that we're paying you."

Only those who had worked in civil engineering before would understand how useful an earth-type supernatural being could be in construction.

As Stronghold 144 was about to start building its irrigation infrastructure projects, it would not be difficult to provide for the livelihood of a supernatural being like Jiang Lin as long as Yunsu could undertake a project.

When Wang Fugui saw that Jiang Lin's interest was piqued, he asked with a smile, "May I know what your annual salary is now, Mr. Jiang?"

Jiang Lin hesitated and said, "80,000 yuan."

Wang Fugui gave a wave of his hand. "I'll pay you an annual salary of 800,000 yuan and throw in a car and a villa in Stronghold 144 as benefits. In addition, there'll be year-end bonuses and dividends. How does that sound to you? As you know, your power is a weapon in the eyes of others, but it can only be put to good use by our Yunsu Company. You're a supernatural being, yet you're only working at a mediocre job. Don't you feel like that's really hard on you?"

The words impressed deeply upon Jiang Lin's soul. As a supernatural being, he should have nothing to worry about. But just because he was tired of fighting and killing, he could only work an ordinary job. He felt wronged.

But now, his chance had arrived.

Seeing that he was about to succeed, Wang Fugui immediately added, "You should know Yunsu's background as well. It's the Future Commander's private company, so by following him here in the Northwest, you won't have to worry anymore about your future."

Since even Zhou Yingxue knew she could make use of Ren Xiaosu's influence, how could a businessman like Wang Fugui not? Although Wang Fugui might look like a simple and honest person, he had been doing business for decades. How could a truly honest person possibly gain a foothold in the stronghold's town?

Although he had principles, he still had to earn whatever money he could!

Since this person would not join the Northwest Army, the Northwest Chamber of Commerce could not be blamed for trying to poach him. Furthermore, this was to support the future commander's plan to make the Northwest prosper. With such a talented man joining the building of the infrastructure, their progress would go faster.

To quickly convince Jiang Lin to join them, Wang Fugui did not even bother to have dinner yet!

Wang Fugui said with a smile, "What do you think, Mr. Jiang? You won't find another company in the entire Northwest offering such generous compensation."

Jiang Lin had already made his decision.

Chapter 1025 - A Mysterious Meeting

A lot of people knew that after the reappearance of the future commander at Stronghold 144 in the Northwest, a secret meeting was held in a small courtyard house on Anning East Road with him as the core figure of the group.

Although everyone knew about this meeting, not many people were qualified to attend it.

Someone said that anyone who appeared at this meeting was a trusted aide of the future commander.

All of Stronghold 144's reforms started taking shape during this meeting.

At the dining tables of the middle-aged men who enjoyed discussing current affairs and politics, this meeting became even more mysterious than it really was. The small house where the future commander lived also gained a much more legendary status through their discussions.

They said that only the true big shots of the Northwest could enter that residence now, and most people should not even think about going inside.

The revolutionary decrees that were going to be issued from there would determine the fate of the Northwest.

Sometimes, when a pedestrian passed by Anning East Road, they would subconsciously peer into the residences' yards in the old military neighborhood. Their companions would then ask, "What are you looking at?"

The person peeking into the future commander's residence would reply, "Do you see that brightly lit house? That's where the future commander lives."

The companion asking the question would curiously ask, "It's so late. Why are the lights still on?"

The person explaining would say, "What do you think? There's a lot of people working in that house right now. They're working for the future of the Northwest."

Although it sounded quite awe-inspiring, it was actually just Zhang Xiaoman and the others reporting about their work at the end of the day and refusing to leave until they had scrounged enough food off of Ren Xiaosu.

All of a sudden, a new upstart became known throughout the stronghold: Wang Yuexi.

The more Ren Xiaosu worked with Wang Yuexi, the more he realized his middle-aged neighbor was more than met the eye. According to Mrs. Hu, he used to idle at home for many years and was just as lazy as Ren Xiaosu back in those days.

Later, when the Zong Consortium was wiped out by the Northwest, Wang Yuexi applied for a civil official job with the Northwest and was placed in charge of the Policy Research Office at Stronghold 144.

Although it sounded like the research office did not have any real authority, it still wielded great power. Otherwise, Wang Yuexi could not have arranged a job for Ren Xiaosu so easily.

Ren Xiaosu carefully supervised him. Wang Yuexi was very clear-headed and organized in his work. He had just instructed them to draw up the new labor act and supporting publicity work, and by the next day, Wang Yuexi led the people from the Policy Research Office to work through the night before submitting a very satisfactory plan to Ren Xiaosu.

Some people said Wang Yuexi was lucky that he happened to live next door to the future commander. However, Ren Xiaosu knew full well this was a result of Wang Yuexi's skills. If Wang Yuexi were a useless person, there would be no need for Ren Xiaosu to choose to work with him.

The starting point of their cooperation began with the administrative center. While it might not look too outstanding from a political point of view since the administrative center did not make much of an impact on their financial income, but from the words "make things convenient for the residents" that Wang Yuexi had uttered, it was enough to show the ambition that he had. Furthermore, being able to integrate all the departments and making the staff get out of their comfort zones to serve the residents willingly, this in itself was enough to reflect his capability.

At this moment, no matter how the rest of the world speculated about what went on within this house and the people going in and out of it, there was one thing that everyone was right about. The people in this house were indeed fighting for the future of Stronghold 144.

Wang Yun had not returned to the stronghold for seven days. Based on the order he received, he would have to finish drawing the map demarcations of the vicinity of Stronghold 144 within half a month, which was not much time at all.

The 1st Infantry Regiment of the 6th Combat Brigade had been working alongside Wang Yun all this while. For the past seven days, they had traveled to almost every hill and valley in the vicinity of Stronghold 144.

Everyone was very tired, but after the Battle of Mt. Zuoyun, there was a marked change in their willpower as compared to others. When Wang Yun asked if they were tired, everyone would laugh and say this was nothing compared to the time on Mt. Zuoyun.

This was a sense of honor the unit had. Even if P5092 had kicked off the plans for a military expansion, the veterans would continue instilling this sense of honor to the newbies who enlisted.

Only when a unit had a sense of honor would they feel the esprit de corps.

For the past seven days, Wang Yun and his men remained out in the wilderness without returning to the military base at the stronghold.

They brought along a large number of surveying equipment to measure every inch of terrain.

However, Wang Yun had a huge advantage in being in charge of the mapping mission. As long as he used the surveying equipment to confirm the data, he could immediately draw on the map without any errors in the details.

However, some of the officers were puzzled. The regimental infantry commander asked Wang Yun curiously, "Sir, I'm a little puzzled. Logically speaking, we don't have much time to complete our mission. But you're not only demarcating the wastelands, you're even measuring the altitude of the mountain ranges and other details. Why do so? Didn't you say that our mission was to identify which areas are suitable for farming? Why are you doing the extra work?"

Everyone knew there was no way to grow crops in the mountains.

However, Wang Yun insisted on detailing all of the mountain ranges and the course it ran. He even marked out their elevation contours on the map. If he only wanted to identify where crops could be grown and where the land was fertile or barren, there was no need to include those details.

However, Wang Yun explained with a smile, "This is called going a step further while you're at work. Although we're only thinking about which places are suitable for planting crops right now, you all have also heard from P5092 that we might have to fight a war with the Wang Consortium someday. At that time, he'll need a very detailed military map. There's still many mistakes in the map the 6th Combat

Brigade drew previously. I'm not saying you all can't plot a proper map, but it's just that normal people really can't draw them with enough detail. The other map's good enough for the average commander and would serve its purpose."

"But P5092 is different. He can make use of every detail on the battlefield to the extreme. In that case, of course I'll have to provide him with the conditions to do so." Wang Yun said with a laugh, "When we bring this map back, he'll definitely be very surprised."

"Alright, we'll do as you say, sir," the commander of the 1st Infantry Regiment said.

Wang Yun, P5092, and the others had not been given any appointments in the Northwest yet. This was as good as saying that they held no official posts.

If Wang Yun were to command the other troops, his words would definitely not be as effective.

But it was different for the 6th Combat Brigade. They had fought the Battle of Mt. Zuoyun together, so everyone knew exactly what they were capable of. All of the soldiers knew Wang Yun and P5092 would get promoted sooner or later and trusted them, so they treated them as their superiors.

On the contrary, Zhang Xiaoman had more spare time. He basically just followed Ren Xiaosu around to handle some miscellaneous errands.

Zhang Xiaoman also knew what his role entailed. He only sought to serve everyone well.

Wang Yun smiled and said to everyone, "Let's finish demarcating the map today. We'll work hard for another seven days after that and then return triumphantly. At that time, we can all rest well!"

The soldiers responded in unison, "Yes, sir! Let's get to work!"

Chapter 1026 - Highly Enthusiastic

To Wang Yun and the others, they were no longer just risking their lives for money and power. Therefore, both he and P5092 never sought Ren Xiaosu for any recognition either.

Without an official appointment or salary, the two of them were just fighting for the vision of the Prosperous Northwest.

Of course, they also knew the Northwest would not just leave them hanging like this. Commander Zhang of Fortress 178 was probably just waiting to see what this future commander could achieve with his band of supporters.

By the time Stronghold 144's reforms started bearing fruit, success would naturally follow.

Currently, Wang Yun and the rest were scattered across various locations and working on their own missions. Although no one was supervising them, they carried out their tasks with extreme efficiency.

Of course, it was not like their operating locations did not overlap with each other. For example, when Wang Yun was carrying out the mapping mission yesterday, he even saw Wang Yuchi and company hunting down bandits in the wilderness with the fair-skinned chubster, Xun Yeyu.

At that time, Wang Yun's group was verifying the collected data with specialized equipment when they saw a pack of people running past them in the wilderness. Wang Yuchi and company only managed a quick greeting to Wang Yun before continuing their pursuit.

Wang Yun did not interfere, and both parties calmly went about their own missions as normal.

The Northwest's territory was vast, so some bandits were able to remain hidden, and that made it difficult to find them.

The bandits were also caught in a very awkward situation. Currently, the Northwest's security measures were very structured, so coming out to rob people could easily lead to their deaths. However, they were unwilling to work an honest job to support their families.

These people were used to profiting off other people's toil, so they would definitely find it difficult to be convinced by the vision of the Prosperous Northwest.

Therefore, Ren Xiaosu could only make use of Xun Yeyu's power to round them all up. The bandits would either have to join the Prosperous Northwest or die. In any case, these were the only two choices they were given.

While Wang Yun and the others were busy carrying out their missions, Wang Fugui's Yunsu Trading Company shifted its focus.

The business scene in the Northwest had gradually matured, so Wang Fugui did not have to personally keep an eye on the company's operations most of the time. Before Ren Xiaosu's return, Wang Fugui waited every day for his subordinates to deliver the financial statements before tweaking some of the company's general directions.

But now, some of the upper management in Yunsu could not even find Wang Fugui anymore. The people from the Northwest Chamber of Commerce who wanted to get hold of Wang Fugui to help them resolve their issues were also met with a standard answer, that President Wang had made a trip outside of the stronghold. If they wanted to find him, they would have to head to a place 70 kilometers west of the stronghold where a new construction site had been set up.

All of Yunsu's documents had to be sent 70 kilometers to that construction site for signing as President Wang was stationed there.

Initially, the merchants of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce thought they would just wait for President Wang to return before discussing with him the problems they were facing. However, Wang Fugui suddenly returned to the stronghold that night and invited the various trading companies in the Northwest to a dinner party.

The members of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce were considered famous businessmen in the Northwest. Under normal circumstances, they would usually choose to dine at very high-class places in the stronghold.

But this time, Wang Fugui held the dinner party at a small roadhouse.

The CEOs were a little puzzled. "President Wang, what's going on? Why are we eating at a place like this? Did you encounter some difficulties? Don't worry, we're here for you."

Wang Fugui sighed and said, "To be honest, I have indeed encountered some difficulties."

Everyone looked at one another. Yunsu was now the leading enterprise of the Northwest, so what difficulties could it possibly have? Didn't the company still have the backing of the future commander?

Wang Fugui said, "Y'all should have heard about it too, right? After the future commander returned to the Northwest, he's sought to implement some reforms to solve the current food shortage problem."

Everyone listened carefully.

Wang Fugui sighed and said, "But it's not that easy to solve the problem. Building the irrigation infrastructure for that is a big project. All of you are also leaders of the industry, so y'all know exactly how much money is required for a project like that. But money is not the most difficult thing. What's difficult is sourcing the equipment to conduct the works...."

"As you all know, there's very little excavation equipment, cranes, and the like in the Northwest to begin with. It's really hard to find them now that we want to gather all the resources to build the irrigation works. This matter is causing extreme anxiety to our future commander. Look, my boss is so angry, so how can a shopkeeper like me still be in the mood to eat?" Wang Fugui said, "So let's just make do and have dinner here. After we're done eating, I still have to go and help the future commander source the equipment."

The CEOs of the Northwest's businesses looked at one another and thought to themselves, 'How is this a dinner party? Wang Fugui, you sly old fox! You're obviously here to seek the support of everyone on behalf of the future commander!'

One of them asked, "The Northwest Army's construction engineering capabilities are also very impressive, so why don't you get the Northwest Army to come and build the infrastructure?"

Wang Fugui's eyes drooped as he drank his tea and said, "I'm afraid that it'll be difficult for Future Commander to convince the masses if he mobilizes the Northwest's troops so soon after returning. Besides, didn't I just say that the Northwest Army also has insufficient engineering equipment?"

A businessman sighed in his mind, but he could only go along with Wang Fugui's cue and ask, "I wonder if we can be of any help?"

Wang Fugui hesitated and said, "That won't be good. All of you are so busy, so how can I trouble everyone over this small thing?"

"Why would that trouble us?" The businessman smiled enthusiastically and said, "It's our duty to contribute to the development of the Northwest's infrastructure!"

While he said it rather diplomatically, everyone was cursing in their minds. It seemed like Wang Fugui was also very particular about the party tonight. The businessmen he had invited today all had a common trait, and it was that they were all the owners of large construction companies.

In other words, basically all of them had the engineering equipment the future commander needed.

If they still did not understand why they were invited here today, that would simply be unacceptable.

A businessman said, feeling the pinch, "I wonder how we can aid the future commander?"

Only then did Wang Fugui break into a smile. "Look, the priority is truly to improve our irrigation infrastructure. Otherwise, if we really end up facing a food shortage, we won't even have anything to eat. Why don't all of you temporarily suspend the real estate projects and focus our efforts on resolving the issue of building our irrigation infrastructure? What do y'all think? Of course, the future commander will not treat everyone unfairly either. Since y'all are here to undertake the construction efforts, he definitely won't allow y'all to lose any money."

Everyone understood what Wang Fugui meant. If he said they would not lose any money, it meant they had to participate in the development of the Prosperous Northwest by quoting at cost price. Even if they did not have to lose money, they could forget about earning any.

The lack of water sources in the Northwest and the instability of the river basin were objectively present. In the vicinity of Stronghold 144, there was only a Yellow River tributary 70 kilometers away that had enough water to irrigate the farmlands. Therefore, Ren Xiaosu was currently trying to solve the major problem of how to use this river to reclaim the wasteland areas of Stronghold 144.

If they did not solve this problem, reclaiming the wasteland would just be a wasted effort.

As Wang Fugui spoke, he had his assistant bring over a dozen copies of documents.. Then he said with a smile, "I see that everyone is very enthusiastic about participating in the development of the Northwest. Why don't we sign this letter of intent first before dining?"

Chapter 1027 - Putting On An Act In Front Of Everyone

Those who were willing to sign the letter of intent were friends, and friends were welcome to stay for dinner.

But it did not matter even if they were unwilling. The Northwest would not persecute anyone, but it would probably be impossible for those who did not sign the letter to continue to do business in the Northwest.

Wang Fugui's attitude was very clear. He was helping Ren Xiaosu resolve a pressing matter at hand, so only friends who helped the future commander could continue eating from the same plate in the future.

Wang Fugui was different from other businessmen. He placed more importance on Ren Xiaosu's future than his own path to fortune. Every decision he made was done with Ren Xiaosu in mind.

His boss, Ren Xiaosu, had said that Yunsu could not take advantage of this situation to gain control of the economic lifeline of the Northwest, nor would he allow any other lifelines to be taken advantage of.

Meanwhile, Wang Fugui planned to do one better. Not only would he not make any money from the development of the Prosperous Northwest, but he was even willing to pay money to support the cause.

In the future, the Northwest would belong to Ren Xiaosu, so how could the goals of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce compare? Wang Fugui knew clearly what was at stake here.

In this world, it was not only matters that revolved around money that could be considered a business!

In the past year, Wang Fugui had worked hard to make Yunsu stronger. He even became the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce so he could help Ren Xiaosu during moments like this.

As he had hoped, the members of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce were in a tight spot. No one dared to withdraw from this project by themselves.

One by one, the big bosses of the Northwest signed the letter of intent on the spot. Wang Fugui's assistant even prepared a red ink pad so everyone could leave their fingerprint on it.

One of the businessmen sighed and said, "President Wang, the Northwest will surely prosper with your support of the future commander."

Wang Fugui placed his hands inside his sleeves and said with a smile, "CEO Li, you're too kind. With only me helping the future commander, the Northwest will not prosper. But with all of your support, things will be different."

When everyone heard that, they had mixed feelings. They knew Wang Fugui was determined to tie everyone here to the future commander's plans.

After everyone signed the letter of intent, Wang Fugui called for the waiter in the restaurant to take away the appetizers scattered across the table and change them to the main dishes.

Wang Fugui got up and picked up a lamb chop for everyone with the shared chopsticks. "Everyone, you won't be able to make much money from this project. I'll have a good engineering accountant set the construction costs for our future commander. After all, this is money that we'll be spending from Stronghold 144's budget, so we can't afford to make any miscalculations. Otherwise, it wouldn't be good if the public thinks that our future commander is abusing his position to profit off the project. Moreover, I believe that all of you are also honest people, so you will definitely not skimp on materials required for the engineering works."

With that, everyone gave up on trying to find any loopholes to exploit.

But after Wang Fugui distributed the lamb chops to everyone's plates, he changed the subject and said, "However, our Yunsu can give y'all what Stronghold 144's budget can't. From now on, the goods that our Yunsu import from the Qing Consortium will be sold to you at prices 10% lower than usual. You can consider this as my gratitude for your passionate support."

When he said that, all the CEOs were overjoyed. Their businesses were spread across more than 20 strongholds in the Northwest, but Yunsu was the only company that had access to the Qing Consortium's goods.

With this promise from Wang Fugui, they would be assured of great profits. Based on this, if the irrigation project did not incur any losses, everyone would even end up making money.

Therefore, Yunsu was really trying to help the future commander by lowering its own margins!

A slightly younger businessman was grinning from ear to ear. "President Wang, why didn't you say so earlier!"

Wang Fugui smiled but did not answer the question. Instead, he raised his glass and toasted, "To Future Commander, and to the Northwest!"

Only the shrewd old foxes knew that Wang Fugui did not mention in advance he would reimburse them and forced them to accede to his requests was so that he could establish his authority first. He would only reward them after everyone had given in.

Wang Fugui wanted everyone in the Northwest Chamber of Commerce to understand that he could choose not to give them this perk, but since he did, everyone here would be expected to remember the future commander's benevolence.

For a moment, some people lamented that they had thought the matter of the Northwest's leadership might remain unchanged for many more decades to come since Commander Zhang was still in his prime. As such, the future commander might not necessarily become the commander in the future.

But from the look of things, the future commander had many talents by his side who were led by Wang Fugui, so it wasn't likely there would be any more variables regarding the question of succession.

On that night, the party ended and everyone left in satisfaction. There was no unhappiness among the businessmen, and it was as though being forced to sign the letter of intent had never happened at all.

The next day, all of the businessmen who attended the banquet reported to the administrative center to bid for the contracts.

Wang Yuexi was a little dumbfounded as he stood in the administrative office. "I haven't even gotten the irrigation blueprints out yet, so what are you all doing here?"

The businessmen said, "It's fine, we can wait. We also have professional civil engineers on our side, and a few of them have expertise in large-scale engineering projects, so please use them however you like."

Wang Yuexi was taken aback yet again. "Our engineering budget is very low. You all won't make any money from this."

The businessmen replied, "It's fine. What's the big deal about not making money if it's for the vision of the Prosperous Northwest? How about this? We'll transport all the engineering equipment over first so that when all the plans are out, we can immediately start building the Prosperous Northwest!"

In just one night, all of the construction projects within Stronghold 144 came to a halt. There was only one project left to be carried out in the huge territory of the Northwest now: irrigation works.

When Wang Fugui ran to Ren Xiaosu's courtyard house, Ren Xiaosu asked with a smile, "I heard that you held a meeting with the Northwest Chamber of Commerce? Uncle Fugui, you've thought ahead for me again."

Wang Fugui chuckled and said, "It's my duty to share some of the burden with you, Future Commander."

"Uncle Fugui, you can just call me Xiaosu," Ren Xiaosu corrected.

However, Wang Fugui shook his head. "No, we can't break etiquette."

The progress of Stronghold 144's reforms was picking up much faster than they had imagined. Although they could not mitigate the food shortage in time for the coming year by recultivating the wasteland, this was something that would benefit them for hundreds of years to come. Everyone was aware of that.

Over at Fortress 178, Wang Fengyuan walked towards Zhang Jinglin's office with a smile while holding a thick stack of documents in his hand.

At this moment, several high-ranking commanders were giving their work reports in the office. After Wang Fengyuan entered, he sat down off to the side and remained silent.

When Zhang Jinglin saw that he had come in, he unexpectedly interrupted the work report and asked Wang Fengyuan, "How are things?"

Wang Fengyuan said with a smile, "It progressed much faster than expected, and they're doing rather solid work at Stronghold 144. With so many people working together, it looks like it's going to be very successful, especially the irrigation project. Old Qi was quite troubled by that previously and did not know how to handle it. But now that it's being handled by the future commander, it doesn't seem like it'll be a problem at all. Yunsu stepped up to it and handled everything."

A high-ranking commander in the office wondered, "Yunsu? Isn't Yunsu a company? Why is Yunsu stepping in to handle this matter?"

Wang Fengyuan explained, "Because Yunsu's boss, Wang Fugui, is the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce. So he's quite influential in the business world. Reportedly, he gathered all the businessmen to participate in the construction of the Northwest. That's how the problem of insufficient engineering equipment was resolved."

That high-ranking commander muttered, "But based on what I know, that Yunsu is the future commander's private company, right? If he participates in such a huge project, there had better not be any problems with the intermediary procedures. A lot of people could get into trouble over this project."

His words sneakily hinted that Ren Xiaosu was trying to profit off the irrigation work contracts. The other high-ranking commanders in the office did not say anything and just looked at Zhang Jinglin.

Moreover, everyone was thinking that this commander, Yu Chuyao, who doubted Ren Xiaosu was a trusted aide of Commander Zhang. In that case, why would he suddenly oppose the commander and question Ren Xiaosu's purpose?

Could there be some disgruntlement?

"Then let's investigate it." Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "Fengyuan, after you finish investigating, make known the results. If there's any discrepancies, they'll be severely punished."

"Understood." Wang Fengyuan nodded and said, "I'll get someone to follow up on this matter."

After everyone left, a lot of people started paying attention to this matter. Everyone wanted to see if the future commander of the Northwest would make any mistakes in handling the financial aspects of the project.

Actually, some people had already discussed this possibility in private a few days ago, but no one dared to mention it to Commander Zhang. But now that someone was finding fault with the future commander, everyone could watch the proceedings from the sidelines.

But seven days later, Zhang Jinglin suddenly called for a meeting with all of the high-ranking commanders of the Northwest. The agenda was Wang Fengyuan's investigative report.

The report showed that Ren Xiaosu's private company had not only not profited off the reforms introduced at Stronghold 144, but it also made many concessions for the project. Yunsu was basically coughing up money to help Ren Xiaosu with the reforms.

This report was written by Wang Fengyuan, and the contents of the investigation were so detailed that it convinced everyone.

Someone held the report and said with a laugh, "Future Commander is really selfless and so admirable. This Wang Fugui is also talented. I consider it a great achievement to convince the Northwest Chamber of Commerce to contribute to the construction of the Northwest."

At this moment, everyone looked at Yu Chuyao, the person who first cast doubt on Yunsu's motives. However, they realized that Yu Chuyao was smiling without saying anything. He did not look like he had been slapped in the face by the results of this investigation.

As such, some wily old foxes came to an immediate realization. Commander Zhang might have also heard there were people privately discussing the building of the irrigation infrastructure. Therefore, he might as well let Yu Chuyao lay it all out on the table and clear things up for everyone. It could also be considered as justifying Ren Xiaosu's character so everyone would not have to worry that he would try to profit from the reforms.

Some of the high-ranking commanders had wry smiles on their faces.. In order to protect the successor, the commander had really put in a lot of effort. He even dragged in Yu Chaoyu to put on an act in front of everyone for this very reason!

A commotion suddenly broke out in Stronghold 144, because a batch of potatoes had suddenly been hauled into the stronghold. The potatoes in the truck were so large they resembled small watermelons.

If the person transporting them in did not personally admit they were potatoes, the stronghold residents would probably not believe it.

At this moment, Zhou Yingxue was seated in the lead transport truck in high spirits as she led the convoy towards the stronghold's marketplace. This was the mission Ren Xiaosu had assigned her. He wanted her to use these potatoes to resolve the pressing matter of the food shortage in Stronghold 144.

Although Zhou Yingxue was usually so carefree that she did not care about anyone, she still took everything Ren Xiaosu said to heart.

Now that the Potato Shooters had seen a great harvest, she would, of course, want to bring in the first batch of potatoes quickly to claim her contribution.

Wang Yuexi was having a small meeting in his office at the Policy Research Office when his subordinate came to report to him, "Director Wang, that person from the black market is bringing in a large batch of potatoes into the city. She said they'll be given out to the stronghold residents for free. The potatoes are extremely large. I wonder where she got them from."

Everyone in the office was stunned. "How big is big exactly?"

"They're like watermelons," the subordinate said and gestured. "This is great. The prices of food in the stronghold should stabilize now."

This was indeed good news for the Northwest where food was becoming scarce.

But Wang Yuexi did not think so when he heard that. He jumped to his feet. "Where's the convoy now? Quickly, stop them!"

Everyone in the office was taken aback. "Director Wang, what's the matter?"

Wang Yuexi put on his jacket and rushed outside. "There's no time to explain. Stop the convoy first."

"But it won't be easy to stop that person from the black market. You know her style..."

"Even if it won't be easy, we still have to stop them." Wang Yuexi said, "I'm running there right now."

When Wang Yuexi arrived, Zhou Yingxue was sitting in the truck with a sullen expression. Meanwhile, two Public Order Division patrol cars were parked in front of the truck convoy and blocking their way.

When Zhou Yingxue saw Wang Yuexi coming over, she sneered, "Well done, you must think my master really regards you highly. You even dare to stop our convoy now? Why don't we go over to my master's right away and we'll lay it all out for him? Let's see who he thinks has more authority here! You had better get out of my way!"

Although Zhou Yingxue was extremely obedient in Ren Xiaosu's presence, how could a woman who started a black market outside the stronghold be that docile? When Zhou Yingxue first arrived here, some people coveted her black market business, and her as well.

But now, all of those people had disappeared into thin air. Who knew where they had been dumped to become fertilizer for new ground?

Wang Yuexi said in seriousness, "This has nothing to do with who the future commander values. I have my own reasons for stopping your convoy. Even if we have to go to the future commander's place to sort this out, I'm not afraid."

With that, Wang Yuexi first had the Public Order Division officers disperse the onlookers before walking over to have a look at the potatoes the trucks were hauling.

Zhou Yingxue raised her eyebrows. "I'm doing this for the good of the stronghold. Don't you know that my master is worried about the food shortage?"

"I understand you're doing this with good intentions, but it could still lead to more harm than good." Wang Yuexi was actually a somewhat proud academic. It was precisely because of his pride that he did not work for a long time back then and was disliked everywhere he went.

But when Zhou Yingxue heard him say that, she immediately turned unhappy. "Tell me, why would my good intentions lead to more harm than good? If you don't give me a valid reason, I'm gonna have to invite you to the black market for some tea today."

Wang Yuexi said, "C'mon, let's head over to the future commander's place to discuss this matter."

"It's fine, I'm here." When Ren Xiaosu heard that Wang Yuexi had stopped Zhou Yingxue's convoy, he ran over immediately. He asked, "What's going on?"

Zhou Yingxue was acting all high and mighty just a moment ago. But when Ren Xiaosu appeared, she immediately put on a wronged look. "Master, didn't you tell me to plant the potatoes? But when I brought the crops over, he insisted that I'm doing more harm than good. Does he think the potatoes are poisonous or something? By the way, Master, I have another piece of good news. Not only can I plant potatoes now, but I've also collected a number of seeds of other crops. Look, the last truck is carrying the winter melon I planted just the day before! But despite all the hard work I did to help Master with the issues our Northwest is facing, someone is accusing me instead..."

Ever since Ren Xiaosu said they were going to make the Northwest prosperous, Zhou Yingxue did not sit idle. For the first time ever, she led her subordinates from the black market to reclaim the wastelands. Then she even offered a high bounty in the black market for people to search for mutated crops, including wheat, sorghum, winter melons, tomatoes, and so on.

Zhou Yingxue's power to absorb strange seeds had to be used on plants that had already mutated as it did not have any effect on ordinary plants.

This was the first time that such a simple bounty had appeared in the black market. In the past, the payouts were always for missions such as assassinations, selling intel, causing "accidental" deaths, and smuggling goods. But now, the mission pinned right at the top of the black market's mission board looked extremely out of place.

This was the first time the guys in the black market realized they had such a close relationship with food. Moreover, the reward was also quite high. It was so high the killers who swore to only complete the high-end missions had gone out into the wilderness to search for mutated crops.

The slogan at the entrance of the black market had changed. In the past, it was "Enter not those who fear death."

But that had now changed to "Tomorrow, care for the crops and vegetables. / Tomorrow, face the sea, flowers blooming in the spring breeze."¹

When these words were recited in the Northwestern accent, there was an exceptional sense of sentimentalism.

As a matter of fact, Zhou Yingxue really was not inferior to Wang Fugui and the others when it came to resolving the pressing issues Ren Xiaosu was facing. She was really trying her best.

Now that someone was claiming she was doing more harm than good, Zhou Yingxue could not bear this injustice!

Ren Xiaosu glanced at her. "Speak properly and don't pretend to be insulted. No one can bully you anyways, and I've never seen you like this before either. Don't be corrupted by all that bad behavior out there. Wang Yuexi, tell me what happened."

"It's like this, Future Commander." Wang Yuexi explained, "You've mentioned the potatoes before, but as I don't understand much about superhumans, I didn't know the potatoes could be grown so quickly. Before I could make a detailed plan, the potatoes were already brought in. Of course, it's a good thing that we have these potatoes. I would like to thank Ms. Zhou for her efforts first of all, but we definitely can't introduce them into the market for free."

In Wang Yuexi's opinion, even though this batch of potatoes could keep the price of food suppressed in the short term, it would be a blow to the entire market if their appearance caused some of the stall owners to lose their livelihood and lead to their stock of vegetables and fruits going bad.

Of course, no one would only eat potatoes. They would still buy cabbages if they had to, but it would definitely be a lower amount than usual.

Wang Yuexi continued, "I heard from Ms. Zhou just now that she can plant other crops as well, but I don't think it's suitable to do so on a large scale."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Why?"

"Future Commander, let me ask you a question." Wang Yuexi said, "If everyone does not need to work anymore to get an unlimited amount of resources for their daily lives, will they be leading an enriching or aimless life?"

The poem's title describes an ideal location for a home; overlooking the sea, and warm enough that flowers bloom in spring.

Chapter 1029 - Sticking To One's Principles

"Enriching or aimless?" Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, "We're facing a food shortage crisis, so there's no time to think about all that."

Wang Yuexi said, "That was why I stopped Ms. Zhou. It's not because I want to throw away the potatoes, but because I hope Future Commander will give the order to sell them at parity prices to stabilize the market and not give them out to the stronghold residents for free. Not everyone is that ambitious. When they realize they can survive without putting in any hard work, many people will become utterly complacent."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "If it were me, I would go and do something more meaningful if I didn't have to worry about having enough to eat and wear."

"Future Commander, that's you, but there will always be a portion of people in society who are prone to laziness." Wang Yuexi said in seriousness, "Why are there able beggars in the stronghold? In this era of hardship, why do some young people still laze around at home while their parents work to support them? There aren't many people who are truly motivated and have a sense of self-control. The people who play mahjong all night long will only leave the table if they still need to work to survive. If they can continue sitting at the mahjong table without doing anything else, they might as well be useless. Of course there's nothing wrong with always playing, but what if it's playing for a month or two, or what about a year or two?"

Wang Yuexi continued, "Perhaps I can joke that as long as you don't need me to work, I can carry on playing as happily as I like. But is that really the case? It's not! Future Commander, I just hope these potatoes can be sold at a stable parity price. I'm not trying to devalue Ms. Zhou's efforts. Besides, it's only right to set a threshold when providing relief in times of crisis."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Mhm, we'll do as you say then."

There was no need to discuss whether Wang Yuexi's thinking was correct or not, nor the long-term and short-term considerations. For Wang Yuexi to step forward and block Zhou Yingxue, the black market's mafia boss and the future commander's trusted aide, it showed that he was a person with principles and courage.

Moreover, the other party was not extreme with his ideology either. He had only requested to sell the potatoes at parity price, so Ren Xiaosu had no reason to reject him.

He also agreed with what Wang Yuexi had said about setting a threshold when offering relief. He had read a book that said that a long time ago, there were cases of sand being added into sacks of rice used to relieve disaster victims. Was this done on purpose to annoy the victims? No. The truly starving victims would not care if there was sand in the rice. Instead, it would avert those who were not truly hungry from taking advantage of the victims if they saw there was sand mixed in.

Recently, Ren Xiaosu also found out about an interesting anecdote regarding Wang Yuexi.

Currently, there were a lot of immigrants in Stronghold 144, including some refugees and poor people from the Central Plains. As a result, a lot of them did not have the money to buy or rent a place, so they ended up sleeping on the streets.

Then the Policy Research Office led by Wang Yuexi drafted a relief program to build some cheap houses to rent out to these immigrants.

But when Wang Yuexi was carrying out this project, he specifically requested that there be no dedicated bathrooms in the rental houses. It had to be a shared bathroom serving more than a dozen households, and even the toilet had to be the squat type.

At the beginning, many people in the stronghold criticized Wang Yuexi, saying he was a really terrible person and that what he did was totally inhumane.

Later on, everyone realized that those who criticized Wang Yuexi were all people who wanted to abuse the rental housing program. Although they did not necessarily need the cheap houses, they wanted to move in and take advantage of the stronghold's financial support.

At a time like this, the benefits of having a shared bathroom and not a dedicated one would emerge. That was because it was good enough for those who had been forced to sleep in the streets to have a place to stay, so why would they care whether the bathroom was shared or dedicated?

To be honest, Wang Yuexi really had his own way of governance.

Wang Yuexi continued to tell Ren Xiaosu, "By the way, I still have another matter that I'd like your help with, Future Commander. I hope you won't ask Ms. Zhou to plant too many potatoes and winter melons. On top of that, this needs to be kept a secret."

"Why?" Ren Xiaosu asked with a smile.

"Ms. Zhou's power is our trump card." Wang Yuexi explained, "These potatoes can ensure that no one in the Northwest dies of starvation. But if we plant them on a large scale and make everyone think that farming isn't required in the Northwest anymore, it'll probably lead to a disaster. During the next few

decades when Ms. Zhou is around, nothing bad should happen. But what if she's no longer around one day?"

Zhou Yingxue muttered, "Who are you cursing? What do you mean by when I'm no longer around?"

She was exceptionally meek in front of Ren Xiaosu and did not even dare to raise her voice when rebuking Wang Yuexi. However, Zhou Yingxue was still the current boss of the Northwest black market, so even with Ren Xiaosu reining her in, Wang Yuexi knew very well how fearsome she could be.

However, Wang Yuexi did not back down. Instead, he continued asking, "Future Commander, to put it bluntly, if we really rely on Ms. Zhou to provide us with food, what if she defects to the Wang Consortium one day? This is only a hypothetical, but who can guarantee the future? At that time, all the lives in the Northwest will be entirely tied to Ms. Zhou. Is that what you want to see, Future Commander?"

Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "Are you worried that Zhou Yingxue will betray the Northwest?"

Zhou Yingxue said from next to them, "How could I possibly betray my master?!"

"Future Commander, you should understand what I mean." Wang Yuexi continued insisting, "When you told Wang Fugui that Yunsu must not interfere with the economic lifeline of the Northwest, you were also worried Yunsu would become a new consortium when you were no longer around, isn't that so? Future Commander, that day will definitely come. You, me, and Ms. Zhou will all depart from this place. So since we're making the vision of the Prosperous Northwest happen, we should seek the most suitable system of survival and regulations for it, not find it a savior."

In fact, it was highly unlikely that Zhou Yingxue would betray Ren Xiaosu. However, everyone's fate was inevitable. When Zhou Yingxue passed away one day, the Potato Shooters would definitely not allow anyone to get near them.

The Potato Shooter had become a submissive crop in the hands of Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue. But if an outsider were to approach it without permission, it would still uphold its dignity. At that time, there would probably not be a lot of people in the world who could obtain the potatoes from a large farm of Potato Shooters.

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "That makes sense. We'll do as you say then. Zhou Yingxue, don't make things difficult for him. We must follow the stronghold's regulations and hand over the potatoes that were brought in."

Wang Yuexi finally heaved a sigh of relief. To be honest, he was really quite worried Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue would fly into a rage when he hypothesized that Zhou Yingxue could betray the Northwest.

But he felt that his suggestion, and the way he chose his words, were not wrong.

"Thank you, Future Commander, for understanding my concerns," Wang Yuexi said.

Ren Xiaosu patted him on the shoulder. "Why are you thanking me? I should be the one thanking you instead.. With someone like Director Wang in the Northwest, we will thrive."

Chapter 1030 - Luo Lan Wants To Get Stronger

"By the way, Future Commander," Wang Yuexi said, "the first step of clearing the silt for the irrigation works is almost complete. A preliminary canal has also been dug. However, we've yet to make any progress on our plan to procure the crop seeds."

Wang Yuexi and the others had planned the irrigation works with a three-step approach. The first step would be to clear the silt and dig up the sand to clear the old rivers that had dried up or diverted in the past. Then they would only proceed after a new river basin was formed in the vicinity of Stronghold 144.

At that point, they could start reclaiming the land. Although it would still be very difficult for them to fetch water for farming, they could at least start working.

The second step was to build a reservoir and sluices to drain the river. Now was the time to complete all the irrigation infrastructure in case another flood suddenly arrived during the coming year and ruined all their efforts.

The third step was to finalize the layout of the irrigation canals so they would be more effective and allow the people to farm more efficiently.

With the full cooperation of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce, the first step was completed very quickly. But if there were no seeds, it would be impossible to continue.

Ren Xiaosu was thinking of a solution when Zhang Xiaoman suddenly ran over and said, "Future Commander, a Qing Consortium merchant caravan has arrived from the South. They said that they wanted to see you. Their leader calls himself Xu Man!"

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback for a moment. Then he led everyone out of the stronghold. Xu Man was an old acquaintance of his and could be considered Qing Zhen and Luo Lan's trusted aide.

When they arrived outside the stronghold, everyone saw a long convoy of trucks parked in the empty space outside the city. Xu Man was waiting there.

"Why didn't you enter the stronghold?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

Xu Man smiled and said, "I have other matters I have to attend to, so I'm gonna leave after I see you, Future Commander."

Honestly, Xu Man also felt a little emotional. When he first met Ren Xiaosu, Ren Xiaosu was just a normal refugee. But now, he had become the future commander of the Northwest.

Ren Xiaosu said to Xu Man with a smile, "It feels like you're always very busy. Every time I see you, you have to leave in a hurry."

"There's nothing I can do about that. There's things that need to be seen to." Xu Man said, "Mr. Qing Zhen asked me to deliver the seeds here. They're all loaded inside the trucks behind me. On top of that, I've also brought a sales agreement that covers a year of low-cost food supplies. Although the Wang Consortium is unwilling to sell food to the Northwest, our Qing Consortium is."

"Only for a year?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Yes. Mr. Qing Zhen said that if you all can survive this year, you won't have to buy any more food from the Qing Consortium in the future," Xu Man said.

Ren Xiaosu felt a little emotional. Perhaps saving Luo Lan from the Experimentals back then was his wisest decision.

"But Luo Lan previously mentioned that he wanted to come and visit the Northwest. Why isn't he here this time?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Xu Man's expression turned strange. "Boss Luo is currently trying to lose weight."

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To be precise, Luo Lan was not trying to lose weight. Instead, he had a very specific goal of training his body and willpower. He hoped to use this training to quickly raise the level of his superpower and mental strength.

This was hellish training that would last for half a year, and Zhou Qi was appointed as his instructor.

At this moment, Zhou Qi was lying on a recliner in a valley in the Southwest and eating some freshly ripened peaches with a hint of smugness. He was wearing a pair of sunglasses that covered half his face and a checkered shirt with a pair of loose-fitting shorts. He resembled a rich man from before The Cataclysm taking a vacation at the beach.

Next to Zhou Qi was a pool where a sparkling waterfall cascaded down from a hundred-meter cliff.

Meanwhile, Luo Lan was shirtless and doing a horse stance under the waterfall.

Zhou Qi took a bite of the peach and said leisurely as he chewed, "I've been through the same training as well. Don't worry, it'll definitely work. But you have to persevere. If you want to raise the level of your superpower, you'll have to train until you're exhausted each time. Otherwise, it won't be effective."

Luo Lan could not hear what Zhou Qi was saying at all under the waterfall. He only knew that the bastard was probably gloating at his suffering.

In the past, Zhou Qi would have to be paid for anything he was asked to do. But this time, Zhou Qi did not even ask for a single cent for being his trainer. In fact, he even enjoyed it.

Some military tents had also been set up not far away from the shore. Some soldiers on the inside were busily preparing dinner for Zhou Qi. In fact, they were extremely well-equipped for this expedition into the mountains.

When the water falling from the cliff hit Luo Lan, he bitterly kept his eyes closed while trying to bear the crushing weight. Honestly, he was very determined. When he performed the horse stance at the bottom of the waterfall for the first time, the duration he lasted went beyond Zhou Qi's expectations.

Initially, Zhou Qi thought the lazy fatty would go back on his word and slack off. After all, the man was never one to sit down if he could lie down.

Before Zhou Qi came into the mountains, he had said to Luo Lan, "I wonder what's gotten into you. You're actually insisting on putting yourself through training? It would already be quite good if you could last for three days based on the intensity of this training."

But to Zhou Qi's surprise, Luo Lan had already persisted for half a month.

Moreover, Luo Lan even managed to endure the waterfall for an hour during his first training session. Now that half a month had passed, the man could endure the waterfall for six hours.

Every day, Luo Lan would exhaust himself until he nearly vomited blood. This made Zhou Qi, his instructor, extremely bored. He was deriving absolutely no sense of pleasure from torturing him.

In Zhou Qi's words, "I didn't accept any money to be your trainer because I wanted to tell you off when you were slacking. If you can bear it so well, I'll have to start charging you..."

But Luo Lan did not care about that. Sometimes, after soaking in the pool for too long, he would realize he had not reached his limits yet after he got ashore, so he would even carry a full combat load and start running long distance.

At this moment, Zhou Qi shouted towards the waterfall, "It's already been six hours. Come on out. Your body won't be able to take it if you stay any longer."

As he spoke, the waterfall was parted by Zhou Qi's water-manipulation power. It was as though someone had lifted a roller shutter.

Luo Lan wiped his face and walked ashore with some water still dripping down his face. He said to a soldier, "Bring me a full combat load. I haven't reached my limits yet. I have to train for a bit longer."

Zhou Qi was taken aback. "Fatty, what's wrong with you? Why have you suddenly become so motivated? Did someone provoke you? You don't usually have to take part in battles, so why are you working so hard?"

"As if you'd understand." Luo Lan wiped his body down with a towel and said, "I can only keep training myself to strengthen my willpower. Only then can my comrades in the Martyr's Palace get summoned out more often. Think about it, if my mental strength is enough for them to remain outside for 24 hours a day, they won't have to endure the darkness inside the Martyr's Palace anymore."

Zhou Qi was stunned. "It's just that? Weren't you trying to become stronger to unify the Alliance of Strongholds or something?"

"What's the point of unifying the Alliance of Strongholds?" Luo Lan said disdainfully, "I'm only doing it for my own objective, is there a problem?"

"No problem.." For once, Zhou Qi did not continue ridiculing Luo Lan any further.