

First Order 1041

Chapter 1041 - Gossiping

There were many types of antibiotics, such as penicillin, tetracycline, and erythromycin. With the conditions in Xiuzhuzhou, it was impossible to make them.

Or to be precise, they could be produced but not purified.

Using penicillin as an example, there was a large amount of harmful substances in the mold culture. Using it without purification was no different from suicide.

Moreover, the output of mold culture that did not go through industrial selection was devastatingly low.

However, it was different for allicin. Garlic cloves yield about 2.5 milligrams of allicin per gram of raw weight, and the harmful substances were much fewer as well, so the extraction of allicin could be done in Xiuzhuzhou.

Hu Shuo was a professional spy who was also extremely well-versed in physics and chemistry. One could figure that out from the lessons he taught to the children of Luoyang City's orphanage.

Therefore, Hu Shuo felt that extracting allicin was a more reliable option after giving it some thought.

Although the compound was mainly used for agriculture in the Central Plains and was considered a relatively basic antibiotic, it had strong antibacterial and anti-inflammatory effects. It could suppress or

kill many types of bacterial, viral, and fungal infections, among other things. This was a benefit that could not be ignored.

It was also one of the few antibiotics that worked on fungal infections.

After all, in a place like Xiuzhuzhou where anesthetics were used as a first-line treatment against illnesses, there was no better option than allicin.

Li Shentan asked over the phone for instructions on how to extract the allicin before hanging up.

He said to Lian Yi, "You heard it too. This is a very well-founded treatment method. If you want your people to survive, get them to work with me to extract the allicin. After your people recover, we can discuss the matter of me becoming chief consort."

Lian Yi thought carefully for a moment and suddenly said, "We can extract the allicin while planning for you to become my consort. There doesn't seem to be any conflict between the two events. I'll sleep with you at night while you extract the allicin during the day. There's no interference at all."

Li Shentan was shocked. "You make so much sense that I can't contradict you!"

For some reason, Li Shentan felt a little helpless when facing Lian Yi.

In the past, it was always him giving others a headache because he never did things logically. But now, it was his turn to get a headache over someone else's behavior.

Thinking of this... Li Shentan actually found it quite interesting!

However, he could not just submit to her like that. How could the dignified Demon Whisperer serve as some superstitious tool to drive away the illness plaguing the village?!

Li Shentan said in seriousness, "Let's cure the sick first!"

Lian Yi hesitated for a moment before saying, "Alright then."

The woman's tone still sounded a little indignant. But because she really wanted her tribespeople to get better soon, she temporarily shelved her plans.

The process of extracting allicin was relatively simple. Lian Yi ordered the tribespeople to work with Li Shentan to collect all the garlic cloves from the village households before collecting wine from them as well.

In normal times, very few people in Xiuzhuzhou's Lian tribe were required to do menial work. Basically, all the laborious jobs were left to the copper and silver corpses to complete. So the people in the village's households just distilled wine every day before heading out for the bonfire party at night to search for their ah'zhus and ah'xias.

To be honest, this kind of life was really quite comfortable. It was no wonder Lian Yi and her tribespeople did not want the rest of the world to find out about their utopia.

With the wine and garlic cloves collected, the basic items for extracting allicin were fulfilled.

Li Shentan told the people of the Lian tribe, "Hey... sort the garlic cloves that were collected from the households first. Remember, we don't want any rotten ones and those infested by pests!"

The Lian tribe's villagers looked at one another and wondered why the chief's ah'zhu was suddenly ordering them to work.

The social standing of men in this village was extremely low, so nobody listened to Li Shentan. Instead, they turned their attention to Lian Yi.

Lian Yi thought for a moment and said, "He's going to become my consort, and I'll be using the Scarlet Gu on him in a few days. Y'all can rest easy and follow his plans."

When everyone heard that even the Scarlet Gu would soon be used, they cast aside any worries they had. 'Alright, this man is dependable.'

The status of men who were implanted with the Scarlet Gu was definitely different from that of normal men. In an instant, everyone squatted down and started peeling the garlic cloves. They carried out their tasks really diligently!

However, Li Shentan was a little upset. As the dignified Demon Whisperer, he actually had to use his status as the "chief consort" to make these people peel the garlic without doubts!

What the hell?! He was clearly doing this to save the Lian tribe's villagers!

Li Shentan looked at Lian Yi angrily. "You have to understand! I'm only doing this to save your people. It's not my duty!"

Lian Yi corrected him seriously, "Our people."

"... Wow!"

When it came to having a mental illness, Li Shentan finally admitted he might not be the most deranged person anymore. He had encountered someone even more unpredictable than him.

The men of the Lian tribe did not work. So it was a group of young women and middle-aged women squatting in front of Li Shentan who were diligently peeling the garlic while the men watched.

While the women were peeling the garlic, their mouths did not stay idle. They muttered, "The ah'zhu that Chief found is so fair-skinned and pretty, but his hair is all white. I wonder if he's not healthy."

"That's a possibility. Should we dissuade Chief? She should not consider a man whose body is weak..."

When Li Shentan heard that, he thought to himself, 'Can you all keep your voices down? Hmm? Do you all think the Demon Whisperer does not care about his reputation?!'

Furthermore, his white hair had turned white from stress due to the excessive sorrow he experienced when he was young. How did that have anything to do with his health?

And that auntie, why did you secretly take a few bites of the garlic while peeling them? Don't you find it biting?!

Li Shentan felt he was always getting irate ever since he came to Xiuzhuzhou. He was constantly getting angry at every little thing!

Next to him, Lian Yi asked, "What's next after peeling the garlic?"

Li Shentan said helplessly, "Mash them into a paste first, then have the tribespeople use a large cauldron to cook it over a weak flame until it dries. After that, grind the paste into powder."

With that, Lian Yi prepared the cauldron with her tribespeople. Soon after, a small fire was lit under it.

After they poured the garlic paste into the cauldron, Li Shentan instructed, "It'll take eight hours to fully dry the garlic paste. Remember, the fire can't be too strong, so you have to flip the garlic paste over every hour."

"Alright." Lian Yi squatted down next to the cauldron and stared at the flame.

The group of women did not have anything else to do, so they also squatted down next to the large cauldron and started chatting softly. It was a fine spectacle.

The chatter of discussions came from them. "Then does that mean that Chief's ah'zhu can start refining corpses after he's implanted with the Scarlet Gu? We have another gold corpse in the village. Not just anyone is qualified to use it, and I wonder if the elder will recognize this outsider as well."

"I guess it should work. I heard from Ah Hua that Chief's ah'zhu is quite powerful. He was even able to subdue her."

When Li Shentan heard this, he thought to himself, 'There's still some smart people around. Your tribal chief is not my equal!'

However, someone immediately retorted, "Chief did not have her gold corpse with her at that time. Otherwise, that gigolo would definitely not have defeated her."

When Li Shentan heard that, he wanted to flip the cauldron over on them.

Chapter 1042 - Laid-back

Li Shentan decided not to listen to the women gossiping anymore. Instead, he sat a ways away and rested his chin on his hands while waiting eagerly for the garlic paste in the cauldron to dry.

Initially, he thought he would not have to do any work himself. But by the evening, the situation had changed.

Due to the drying of the garlic paste, the bonfire party tonight was canceled.

When the women saw it had turned dark, they started bidding farewell to Lian Yi one by one. "Chief, I have to go home and wait for my ah'zhu to jump in through the window..."

"Chief, I just saw my ah'zhu entering through the window. He's waiting for me right now."

After a while, all of the women left to go back to have their happy time with their ah'zhus. Only Lian Yi, Li Shentan, and Little Liren were left.

When Little Liren saw that something was amiss, she excused herself by saying she wanted to go back to her room to sleep.

When only Lian Yi and Li Shentan were left sitting next to the cauldron, Li Shentan could sense a green glow coming from her eyes, a terrifying wolf gazing at him.

Lian Yi's large eyes were blinking and staring intently at Li Shentan. She looked like she was about to carry Li Shentan into the house.

"Ahem, I'll go and flip the garlic paste in the cauldron." Li Shentan got up and ran over to the large cauldron. He picked up the shovel and started stirring the paste inside.

He kept wondering what was with this situation. He had been kind enough to help treat the villagers' illnesses, but the entire group of women who were working ended up heading off to have fun, leaving him, a legendary superhuman, to flip the garlic paste in the cauldron!

Lian Yi's voice came from behind him. "Are you that afraid of me? Do you know how many people in this village want to be my ah'zhu? But I don't fancy them."

Li Shentan did not even dare to turn around and answer her. All he wanted to do was flip the garlic paste.

However, he heard Lian Yi say, "The Scarlet Gu is very difficult to refine. The worm's body is as thin as a silver needle, so it's very difficult to find them. After finding one, I have to refine it for 49 days before I can successfully refine it into a gu worm. During the 49 days of refinement, I have to take care of it every hour and feed it blood. In other words, I haven't had a good sleep for the past 49 days, all so that I could use it to find a lover.

"When I was young, my mother told me that if I met someone I like, I should open the window and let them in. If I didn't like them, I should just keep looking for someone else. But I don't think that's the proper way. It doesn't suit my style. I should continue liking the person I fancy, not keep cycling through them.

"But Mother said that I was too naive. All men are fickle, no exception. The sincerity that I've put in will definitely be let down. Later, when I grew up, I realized that some of my older sisters' lovers became other people's lovers after just a few days. It was just as Mother had said. All men really are fickle.

"So I made up my mind to find the Scarlet Gu and use it to search for someone who'll be loyal to me."

Li Shentan listened quietly to the words and suddenly felt that Lian Yi was actually quite cute. At the very least, she was cuter than most of the people he had met before.

Hypnotism was about making others surrender their subconsciousness. When Li Shentan first mastered this power bestowed by Heaven, he enjoyed hypnotizing the psychiatric hospital's guards and making them reveal their darkest thoughts.

Such experiences really broadened Li Shentan's horizons. The dark thoughts he heard were all the darkest things that festered within the guards' minds.

Later, he became a little disappointed in human nature and stopped playing those little games.

In Li Shentan's opinion, the human heart was the most fragile thing in the world. It was precisely because he had seen too much darkness that he found it a little piercing when he saw the ray of light that Chen Wudi was. Li Shentan was touched by his warmth.

So it turned out there were still people in the world who remained true to themselves and were always a bright light for others.

Li Shentan had promised Ren Xiaosu that he would be a good person not only because he wanted to be friends with Ren Xiaosu but also because he really wanted Chen Wudi to come back.

Right now, Li Shentan felt that Lian Yi's longing for love was very pure.

Li Shentan suddenly said, "I'm not afraid of you, nor do I hate you. It's just that I still have some unfinished business to attend to, so I can't stay here."

"Where are you going?" Lian Yi asked.

"The Prosperous Northwest," Li Shentan said with a smile as he turned around.

The flame in the fireplace was burning in the house not far away. When the light shone out through the door and illuminated Li Shentan's body, his mid-length white hair swayed in the breeze. When he turned around and smiled at Lian Yi, she could not help but say, "You look really handsome. Even without your strange black outfit, you still look really handsome."

Sensing that it was a good opportunity, Li Shentan said with a smile, "Why don't you come with me to the—"

Lian Yi interrupted him and said in a serious tone, "But to prevent you from leaving, I have to find an opportunity to implant the Scarlet Gu in you sooner rather than later."

Li Shentan's expression immediately crumbled. "You're ruining the moment!"

"When you become my ah'zhu, the entire village will be yours. After you learn how to refine corpses, there's still a gold corpse in the village waiting for you to take control of it," Lian Yi figured. "At that time, all of Xiuzhuzhou will also belong to you. In any case, outsiders won't dare to come here due to the noxious night air."

"Forget it, I'll just continue flipping the garlic paste." Li Shentan sighed. 'I only wanted us to join the Prosperous Northwest, but I didn't expect that you only want...'

After the garlic paste was dried, Lian Yi, who had been waiting, fell asleep on the ground. She was very quiet.

Lian Yi was a little different compared to the daytime. Awake, Lian Yi was full of vigor and exuded a unique energy. But asleep, Lian Yi was as quiet and obedient as a rabbit.

Li Shentan stared at her for a while before glancing away. He started scraping off the dried garlic paste in the cauldron and transferring it onto the millstone to grind it into powder with the roller.

He gave it some thought before eventually taking off his jacket and putting it over Lian Yi so she would not catch a cold.

When dawn broke, the village women came out to work again in high spirits. Li Shentan and Lian Yi acted as though nothing had happened and instructed everyone on how to distill the homebrew wine multiple times.

The alcohol content of the homebrew wines in the village was very low, with none of them undergoing a second distillation. Therefore, they did not meet the requirements for soaking the garlic powder.

According to Hu Shuo's instructions, they had to turn the homebrew wine into a strong liquor first before pouring the garlic powder in and soaking it in a low concentration allicin solution.

During the distillation process, Li Shentan watched numbly as the older women could not help sneaking a few sips of the wine. Sip by sip, they ended up having too much to drink. And then, they dragged their ah'zhus back to their houses in broad daylight.

Li Shentan thought to himself, 'What the hell is going on? The people in this village are way too laid-back!'

But to be honest, it was not really their fault. The aroma of the wine that wafted out during the distillation process was so enticing they wanted to have a taste of it.

However, the women in the village had never drunk such strong liquor before, so they got dizzy after a few sips.

It was not only those women. Even Lian Yi could not resist the temptation of the liquor. After a few sips, she went into her house and fell asleep.

Before entering the house, she even reminded Li Shentan not to run away and that the gold corpse elder was standing guard at the entrance of the village. If he tried to run away, the old man would beat him up.

When Li Shentan heard this, he nearly dropped the wine jug in his hand onto the ground.

What the hell!

Chapter 1043 - Secret Legacies

The villagers of the Lian tribe sobered up. When they walked out of their houses and saw Li Shentan, they all cast him a respectful look.

Li Shentan thought that his hard work might have moved them.

These people had gone off to enjoy themselves after drinking, so it was very tiring for him to be left alone to distill the liquor.

Moreover, he was doing this to save the people of the Lian tribe, so this earth-shattering kindness would definitely have moved them.

Li Shentan was overjoyed. After he gained some prestige here in the Lian tribe, he might really be able to bring everyone to join the Prosperous Northwest!

Truly, being a sincerely good person would earn people's respect!

But before Li Shentan could feel happy about it, he heard the women say softly, "The ah'zhu who Chief found is amazing. He can brew such a strong wine. You don't even know, but after my ah'zhu drank it, he..."

"Yeah, the wine is wonderful!"

Li Shentan stiffened. So it turned out these people were looking at him with respect because he had taught them how to brew strong liquor, not because he was trying to treat their sick.

Why did it feel like there were not many normal people in the Lian tribe?

Among the Lian tribe, he even felt he had become normal himself.

He ordered the sober women to mix the dried garlic powder into the liquor. This way, they would get a low concentration allicin solution.

A woman asked him, "Can this really be used to treat illnesses?"

Li Shentan said, "Yes, the allicin in this wine has many strong biocidal effects, such as anti-inflammation, blood pressure and cholesterol lowering, etc. All we need to do next is to place the solution through—"

Wait!

Before Li Shentan could finish speaking, he saw a woman scoop up a bowl of wine from the vat and run away. He asked in surprise, "What are you doing?"

The woman said, "I have an illness to treat!" The woman slipped off into the distance.

Lian Yi walked out of her house and said, "Her brother has been bedridden at home since he fell sick, so she probably can't wait to cure him."

Li Shentan said, "But we still need to further extract the allicin from the wine."

"The allicin can't be used to treat illnesses while mixed with the wine?" Lian Yi asked.

Li Shentan thought for a moment and said, "It can. Not only can it be used to treat illnesses, but it can also break down blood clots."

"Then everything's fine!" Lian Yi said firmly, "It so happens that this wine is delicious. It can be drunk and used to treat illnesses. That's perfect!"

"Hehe, do whatever you like." Li Shentan smiled woodenly before rushing off to that woman's house.

When he arrived, the woman had already poured the bowl of wine into her brother's mouth.

She had not used a small bowl but a large one that was the size of a person's face. Li Shentan estimated that the wine the woman had just scooped out was probably at least half a liter.

Her younger brother who had been bedridden for many days fell into a coma after drinking the medicine. The woman got a little panicky. "Chief, what's going on? My brother was still conscious before taking the medicine. Why did he suddenly fall unconscious after taking it? Could there be something wrong with the medicine?"

Lian Yi turned her gaze to Li Shentan and asked, "What's going on?"

Li Shentan thought for a moment before answering, "I'm just taking a shot in the dark, but he might've had too much to drink."

As he was not particularly sure that allicin that had not been extracted from wine was fit for human consumption, he went to a secluded spot and called Hu Shuo. "Hello, Grandpa?"

Hu Shuo asked excitedly, "Has the baby been born?"

"What the hell?" Li Shentan was getting anxious. Why did it feel like he was the only normal person left in the world?

"Hahahaha, it was just a slip of the tongue," Hu Shuo explained. "That should take at least ten months. Where's my common sense gone? What? Is something the matter? Has the allicin been extracted?"

"What I wanted to ask is: Will anything happen if the allicin is taken together with wine?" Li Shentan asked. "I remember that antibiotics can't be consumed with alcohol."

"You're referring to cephalosporins, right?" Hu Shuo said. "Indeed, that medicine can't be consumed with alcohol, and it can easily lead to someone going into shock and/or fainting. It's a class of antibiotics that's obtained by culturing the acremonium fungus mold to extract cephalosporin C, which is the lead compound that gets synthesized into the antibiotic through partial side chain modification."

"And what about allicin?" Li Shentan asked.

"Allicin's fine. When I'm drinking and having cucumber salad, there's also garlic paste in the salad dressing. So don't worry. It won't kill anyone," Hu Shuo replied.

Li Shentan heaved a sigh of relief. It was fine as long as no one would die from taking the medicine. As for whether the allicin's dosage in the wine was enough to treat the illnesses, that was basically not within the consideration of the Lian tribe's people.

"By the way, Grandpa," Li Shentan said, "I realized the Lian tribe already had a complete supernatural system before The Cataclysm. They even had dealings with the founder of the Riders back then, which surprised me a lot."

"It's nothing, really. There was already something legendary about a big shot like Ren He, the founder of the Riders." Hu Shuo said, "I've also studied the Riders' heritage. It seems they can unlock their genetic code by completing a series of extreme challenges, such as free soloing or skydiving. But they don't have the conditions to do so anymore. The creatures in the sea have become too ferocious, so they can't surf. Birds have also become very territorial and frequently attack other flying creatures or objects in the sky. So they can't go skydiving either. You can say that this legacy has reached its end."

"Are there any other similar secret legacies in this world?" Li Shentan asked. He had always been very interested in these things, and if he had the chance, he would also like to have a look at what exactly corpse and gu poison refinement in the Lian tribe was about.

This time, Hu Shuo said without hesitation, "There were still one or two such legacies in the Alliance of Strongholds. But the people from those two bloodlines haven't appeared in a long time, so they might've died out during The Cataclysm."

"What about outside the Alliance of Strongholds?" Li Shentan asked.

"They exist too." Hu Shuo said firmly, "They're the enemy that Fortress 178 has always been defending against."

"What kind of enemy is that?" Li Shentan asked.

"They're a group of mysterious people who call themselves the Magi. Although they are very few in number, they rule the world outside of the Northwest. It seems they control an entire system of alchemy and magic. However, their rule is relatively lax, unlike the Alliance of Strongholds, which is more authoritarian," Hu Shuo answered.

Li Shentan hung up. When he found out about this, he really wanted to see for himself what the so-called Magi was capable of.

Three days later, most of the Lian tribe members who had fallen sick miraculously recovered. Other than being drunk every day, they suffered no side effects.

From this moment on, the way the Lian tribe's people looked at Li Shentan truly changed. When they met him outside, they would voluntarily greet him respectfully, which made Li Shentan very happy.

Right now, the only thing that worried him was that Lian Yi would probably attempt to implant the Scarlet Gu in him again.

Chapter 1044 - The Prosperous Northwest 2.0

While Li Shentan was trying his best to figure out a way to enfold the Lian tribe into the Prosperous Northwest, hundreds of red banners suddenly started appearing in Stronghold 144 in the Northwest.

"Hand over enough to the stronghold, and the rest is yours to keep!"

"An entire family can be well-fed as a result of one person's farming!"

Such conspicuous banners appeared on the streets and in the alleys of the stronghold, the town outside the stronghold no exception.

Not only were banners flown everywhere, but Wang Yuexi also organized several hundred employees from the administrative center to go out onto the streets to set up small tables at dozens of locations across the stronghold where human traffic was greater. The tables were all stacked with promotional pamphlets.

With such a big to-do, it attracted the attention of countless residents and refugees. They came to have a look and asked how they could tender a plot of land for farming.

The staff answered all their questions fluently and in detail to address their doubts.

Before this, Wang Yuexi had put the administrative center's employees through a dozen days of training and requested they serve the residents with the sincerest attitude possible. Furthermore, no situations could arise where they might stumble over the people's queries.

In truth, everyone was more enthusiastic than Ren Xiaosu and company had expected.

However, the problem was that the stronghold residents were used to living comfortably in the city. Who would be willing to abandon their homes and go out to work a farm?

Although everyone was very enthusiastic in their inquiries, they just waved it off with a smile when they were told that they should farm. These people were purely busybodies who delayed the progress of the push into farming.

Although some refugees also expressed interest, their numbers were far from being enough to reclaim all the wastelands in the Northwest.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu understood why the Wang Consortium would suddenly plot against the Kong Consortium and the Zhou Consortium to entice their refugees into joining them. It turned out that population was very important to the development of a power.

The contract responsibility policy was extremely attractive to the refugees. In the first week of the announcement, almost half of the refugees signed up for contracts to farm land. However, these people were still not enough to reclaim the wastelands.

Moreover, Wang Fugui came to complain to Ren Xiaosu for the first time. As the president of the Northwest Chamber of Commerce, it was only natural that he would speak out on behalf of the entire business sector.

Wang Fugui sat in Ren Xiaosu's yard and said, "Future Commander, first off, I understand that issues regarding farming in the Northwest is a red line no one should cross. After all, this is a matter that concerns the economic lifeline of the Northwest. But now that a large number of refugees have taken up agriculture, basic jobs such as loading and unloading of goods, packing, transportation logistics, etc., that our Northwest Chamber of Commerce depends on to operate have all started showing signs of manpower shortage. If this matter weren't serious, I would definitely not have come to you to discuss it. It's just that the lack of manpower has seriously affected the normal functioning of trade operations. Some of the workers know we lack manpower now, so they raised their asking rates by three times on the spot.... Of course, there's nothing wrong with that, but I hope Future Commander can think of a solution."

Ren Xiaosu fell into deep thought. Managing a stronghold was definitely not a matter that could easily be solved by getting into brawls like he did in the past. Previously, he just had to kill his enemies and that was it. It was a very simple solution.

But now all of his decisions would affect the big picture.

Commerce was also a very important industry in the Northwest now. Without the Northwest Chamber of Commerce, Stronghold 144 would not be as prosperous as it was, and neither would Stronghold 144 have such a large monetary surplus.

Therefore, the population problem would definitely have to be resolved.

Wang Yuexi's considerations were for the long term. When Ren Xiaosu first proposed the contract responsibility system, Wang Yuexi mentioned the population problem and suggested that the stronghold roll out childbirth subsidies to the residents and reduce the cost of children's education.

Ren Xiaosu agreed to Wang Yuexi's suggestions and had him implement the relevant policies as quickly as possible. But the problem was that no matter how hard they encouraged everyone to have children, they could not immediately give birth to a full-sized 18-year-old to do manual labor.

It could only be said that this policy was really for the long term and would not solve the current issues they were facing.

However, Ren Xiaosu was not one to avoid problems. He did not discuss what countermeasures to take with Wang Fugui, Wang Yuexi, and the others. Instead, he directly approached the Great Hoodwinker to talk about the supporting plans for the Prosperous Northwest.

If he went to look for Wang Yuexi and Wang Fugui, that would be to come up with a proper set of countermeasures and policies. But if he went to look for the Great Hoodwinker, it would be obvious that he wanted some unorthodox solutions.

When the Great Hoodwinker arrived at Ren Xiaosu's courtyard house, he said politely with a smile, "Future Commander, what's the matter?"

Ren Xiaosu got straight to the point and asked, "Where can we find tens of thousands of people who'll join the Prosperous Northwest?"

The Great Hoodwinker was taken aback. "That many?"

The Great Hoodwinker thought to himself that he had only tricked a handful of people to the Prosperous Northwest. But the future commander was entirely different the moment he made his move. He was immediately talking about wanting to trick tens of thousands of people.

From the look of things, the Prosperous Northwest's outlook was going to get upgraded. It was about to enter the 2.0 era!

But the problem was, where could they get so many people from?

When Ren Xiaosu saw the Great Hoodwinker looking troubled, he suddenly said, "You've been getting intel on the Central Plains recently, right? How's the Zhou Consortium doing?"

The Great Hoodwinker said, "The Pyro Company has already abandoned their last stronghold and fled to the lands bordering the steppe in the North. The Kong Consortium only has one stronghold left by the coast, but it looks like it'll be taken over by the Wang Consortium in less than a fortnight. A large number of escapees have fled to the South, but the Zhou Consortium is also in chaos at this moment. Many of the factories have started going on strike, and the escapees and refugees don't really have anything to eat. It's a really tragic situation."

Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, "Was this all because I killed the head of the Zhou Consortium? This is all my fault...."

"Uh, although that's the direct cause, Future Commander, you shouldn't blame yourself for it." The Great Hoodwinker said, "After all, the Zhou Consortium's management is somewhat of a mess right now. So many people don't have enough to eat, yet they're still caught up in their civil strife without caring for the common folk, so it has to do with that too."

The Great Hoodwinker felt that since Ren Xiaosu had killed the head of the Zhou Consortium, there was no need for him to blame himself. Besides, the Zhou Consortium only had themselves to blame for what happened.

Honestly, the Great Hoodwinker believed Ren Xiaosu was becoming kinder after taking over management of Stronghold 144 recently. He was a little worried Ren Xiaosu's character would swing to the other extreme.

After all, the loyal could not dabble in business; the merciful could not control the military. A truly benevolent person might not be able to lead the Northwest to survive the chaotic world.

When the Great Hoodwinker thought of this, he wanted to persuade his future commander not to get too soft and to be willing to do anything to their enemies.

However, Ren Xiaosu said with a look of pity, "That won't do. It's a fact that I have some responsibility for those escapees and refugees who're suffering from displacement and starvation. Look, I killed their leader and made them descend to such a pathetic state. In that case, as compensation, isn't it only right that I bring them to the Northwest and take care of them?"

The Great Hoodwinker was stunned. "Future Commander, your shamelessness is really in line with the core ideals of the Prosperous Northwest."

"Then it's decided." Ren Xiaosu said, "The problem now is how to bring them to the Northwest!"

Honestly speaking, Ren Xiaosu felt a little uncomfortable discussing the policies of the Prosperous Northwest with Wang Yuexi and the others.

It was not that he did not want the Northwest to prosper, nor was it that he did not understand what Wang Yuexi and the others were talking about. On the contrary, he knew quite a bit.

But for some reason, he felt that it was a little difficult to execute his plans with decent people such as Wang Yuexi. He always felt that carrying out those plans in a proper and orderly way was not in line with his character.

Now that he was conspiring with the Great Hoodwinker, he found that it matched his energy much better. This was what the Prosperous Northwest's plan should be like!

"First of all, we have to bring those people back here." Ren Xiaosu said, "As you know, they're all starving in the Central Plains. It's still not that bad right now since there's still bark they can chew on. But there's hundreds of thousands of escapees and refugees there. Who knows, there could already be more than a million of them. Even if there's bark and roots for them to survive on, it's not enough to keep so many people alive. When I think about how they're about to starve to death because of me, I get really sad!"

The Great Hoodwinker hurriedly said, "Future Commander is benevolent. I didn't expect Future Commander to not only be skilled in literature and combat but also put the world's concerns before your own. I've thought about it carefully. We definitely cannot let those people starve to death like this!"

The two of them exchanged a look and grinned at each other.

"Moreover," the Great Hoodwinker changed the subject, "it's not only the escapees and refugees of the Zhou Consortium who can join the Prosperous Northwest!"

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. "Who else is there?"

"Future Commander, have you forgotten what I said? Some of the Pyro Company's remnant troops have just fled north to the border of the steppe, and their commander has been executed by the Wang

Consortium. They're without a leader." The Great Hoodwinker said, "Those troops are very prideful and refuse to yield to anyone. No matter whose territory they end up in, whoever takes them in will have a headache on their hands. But in our Northwest, we have just the person who can convince the Pyro Company's members...."

The Great Hoodwinker was referring to P5092!

As a matter of fact, during the battle at the northern front line of the Great Wall, P5092 gained the respect and admiration of most of the frontline commanders and soldiers. It was just that the Pyro Company was so stubborn they insisted on holding them accountable for the loss.

In the end, for the sake of the overall situation, P5092 took all the blame and left by himself. This was not only an honorable act but also a great favor to the commanders of the various Pyro Company divisions.

If it were anyone else who was dispatched to bring the Pyro Company's remnants under control, those troops would likely maintain their pride and refuse to accept any form of subjugation even though they were already a defeated force. But if it were P5092 who went, it would be a completely different situation!

Ren Xiaosu facepalmed. "That's right! There's still so many Pyro Company soldiers who're starving in the North. If P5092 finds out about this, he'll probably feel sorry for them too. Those soldiers have bled for the Central Plains, and I was even a little moved when they said that they were fighting to ensure that humanity in the Central Plains could survive. Who could bear to let them starve? I'll have someone summon P5092 right away."

After that, Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker looked at each other and grinned again.

When P5092 arrived, Ren Xiaosu bluntly ordered, "It's like this: I need you to make a trip to the north of the Central Plains to gather your old troops and comrades for the Prosperous Northwest."

The Great Hoodwinker added on about the current situation of those Pyro Company soldiers.

Sure enough, P5092 revealed a look of worry after hearing that. Ren Xiaosu knew full well that even though the man had remained calm, he still cared quite a bit for his old comrades.

However, P5092 wondered, "But according to the Great Hoodwinker, there's still over 10,000 Pyro Company soldiers remaining. How are they going to cross the Wang Consortium's territory to come to the Northwest?"

"You don't have to worry about that." Ren Xiaosu said, "I have a handwritten letter here. Follow our Northwest's trade convoy to the steppe and hand the letter to the khan of the steppe when you get there. He'll arrange for cows and horses to transport the soldiers. You won't have to travel through the Central Plains. You can just take a detour back to the Northwest via the steppe instead!"

The Great Hoodwinker's eyes lit up. It was good that the future commander had friends all over the world. If the average person wanted to lead more than 10,000 soldiers on a detour through the Northern Plains, they would not only have to worry about their rations, they would also have to worry about getting attacked by the nomads of the Northern Plains. But this was different. The young lord of the Northern Plains was the future commander's younger brother. Not only would no one attack them this time, but they would also even have cows and horses to transport them.

When P5092 heard this, he gave a slight and serious bow to Ren Xiaosu. "Thank you, Future Commander, for remembering the comrades who fought alongside us on the Great Wall."

Ren Xiaosu smiled kindly and said, "Their act of protecting the Central Plains moved me deeply, so how could I forget? Hurry up and go!"

After P5092 left, the Great Hoodwinker figured, "With that, the expansion of Stronghold 144's military will be solved. We've already conscripted about 3,000 soldiers from the stronghold. When the Pyro Company's remnants arrive, the size of our army here will instantly reach 20,000. Moreover, the Pyro Company's troops are extremely combat effective. Their physical fitness is even higher than that of our elite troops. If they become part of Future Commander's faction, no one in the Northwest will be able to compete with you."

Ren Xiaosu politely waved it off. "Ahem, keep a low profile."

While they were discussing the "Prosperous Northwest 2.0" plan, no one else heard it. At the beginning, Yang Xiaojin was listening in on the conversation. But when she saw their behavior, she rolled her eyes and went out to shop for groceries.

The entire Northwest had expanded to a strength of 130,000 soldiers. Meanwhile, the 20,000-strong army that Ren Xiaosu's group was about to form would obviously become the strongest force in the whole of the Northwest.

As for the military budget, the tariffs collected in Stronghold 144 was enough to cover it. As for the food, they would just need to have Zhou Yingxue grow more potatoes, as well as purchase another batch of supplies from the Qing Consortium. As long as they could last through the year, they could definitely keep up with the demand by the next year after reclaiming the wastelands.

As for the armaments, the Great Hoodwinker said there was also no need to worry about that. As long as they formed an army, the fortress commander would equip them. Although the Northwest lacked food, they did not lack military equipment.

Previously, the progress of the industrial and agricultural structures in the Northwest had become a little unbalanced in order to survive the chaotic times. But now this imbalance was about to tilt back to normal.

Right now, they needed to think about how to bring the escapees and refugees over at the Zhou Consortium back to the Northwest.

"I'm afraid that the Zhou Consortium and the Wang Consortium will not sit back and watch us take their people away just like that." The Great Hoodwinker said, "We know the importance of population, and Wang Shengzhi knows that as well. To transport people from the Zhou Consortium to the Northwest, we'll have to pass through the Wang Consortium. Alternatively, we could travel through the mountainous regions. But the escapees definitely can't endure the hardships. Besides, how're we gonna convince them to come with us?"

A lot of people tended to forget how good Wang Shengzhi was at strategizing because of the artificial intelligence's existence. He had played the Zhou Consortium like a fiddle during the early years, and the strategy he employed at Stronghold 61 had also angered the Kong Consortium and the Zhou Consortium.

How could such a great tactician behind the scenes possibly sit back and watch the Northwest poach people from the Zhou Consortium? After all, Wang Shengzhi already regarded the Zhou Consortium's resources as the Wang Consortium's own.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Don't worry, I'll personally make the trip to the Central Plains!"

Chapter 1046 - Abduction

Ren Xiaosu had no intention of fighting anyone on this trip to the Central Plains, so he was not going to bring too many people with him.

Moreover, the Central Plains was now the territory of the Wang Consortium and the Zhou Consortium. For the Northwest to carry out the Prosperous Northwest's plan there, it would be better to keep a low profile.

However, the Great Hoodwinker was still worried and insisted on following him there.

In the words of the Great Hoodwinker, he was in charge of the entire Northwest's field operations. With him around, the future commander could obtain any intel immediately.

Actually, everyone slowly realized that while the future commander's relationship with Wang Fugui ran deeper, it was the Great Hoodwinker who was Ren Xiaosu's second-in-command when it came to the political affairs of the Northwest.

On one hand, the Great Hoodwinker was indeed very capable. For example, Wang Yun and Ji Zi'ang, who had joined the Prosperous Northwest, were also recruited by him. He also carried out his intelligence gathering duties in a very dependable and orderly manner.

On the other hand, this Great Hoodwinker was way too good at sucking up to others. Furthermore, he was old, yet he was totally shameless when it came to flattering the future commander. He was way too good at cozying up to the powerful!

Before leaving, Ren Xiaosu had a short meeting with Wang Yuexi. Wang Yuexi asked Ren Xiaosu why he was going to the Central Plains at a time when the Northwest needed someone to take charge of the overall situation.

Ren Xiaosu replied he was going there to solve the population problem.

Wang Yuexi was stunned by the answer. In his opinion, the population problem could only be solved with time. Starting by encouraging the people to have children this year, there would naturally be a population increase in 15 to 18 years.

As for other ways to attract talent, it was not that they did not dare to think about it, but that it was truly impossible to achieve. The Wang Consortium stood firm between the Central Plains and the Northwest, so the Northwest would not have any such opportunity.

But when Wang Yuexi saw how relaxed Ren Xiaosu looked, he realized he apparently already had a plan.

...

At this moment, a large number of escapees and refugees had congregated outside the various strongholds of the Zhou Consortium. Their numbers easily exceeded everyone's imagination.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker had also somewhat misunderstood the Zhou Consortium. In their opinion, it had to be the Zhou Consortium's inaction and internal strife that caused the escapees and refugees to starve.

But in fact, it was not that the Zhou Consortium did not want to intervene but that they really could not!

The Kong Consortium and the Pyro Company had a total of more than 40 strongholds in the North. Currently, they were almost half empty after everyone fled to the South. Some of the escapees had died along the way, but most still managed to reach the Zhou Consortium's territory safely.

Their numbers were definitely not something the Zhou Consortium could sustain.

Before this, the Wang Consortium had reestablished Stronghold 61 to take in the refugees, causing many of the Zhou Consortium's factories to stop operating and their farmlands to turn into wastelands. As such, the Zhou Consortium was now at a stage where they were unable to accept any more refugees. This made them care even less about whether the people lived or died.

Sometimes, the Zhou Consortium's people wondered if the Wang Consortium had already thought of this outcome when they announced that Stronghold 61 was accepting refugees from the other strongholds.

This was not to deify Wang Shengzhi's strategic foresight, but everyone had dealt with him for over a decade now. In the past, Wang Shengzhi had used seven years to plan a silkworm breeding industry to lure a large number of refugees into the mountains to breed silkworms, and that left the consortiums around the Wang Consortium extremely disgusted.

During that period, he also deployed food policies, business policies, and countless others policies to attract the inflow of refugees.

On the surface, it looked like the Wang Consortium, the Kong Consortium, and the Zhou Consortium were the three most powerful forces in the Central Plains. However, the Wang Consortium was actually the richest and most powerful organization in the Central Plains. Otherwise, they could not have supported Wang Shengzhi's policy of conscripting everyone into military service.

This was a completely different strategy from Qing Zhen's. Qing Zhen was better at preparing for rainy days in military affairs, while Wang Shengzhi was best at laying plans that concerned livelihoods, industry, agriculture, and commerce.

Although their personalities were completely different, they were undoubtedly the most troublesome opponents one could have.

Ren Xiaosu looked quietly at the refugees who had gathered outside of the Zhou Consortium's Stronghold 69. He had rushed over here excitedly to abduct some people back to the Northwest. But when he saw what they were going through, he could not bear to do it anymore.

The refugees had set up their shacks outside the stronghold to shelter themselves from the elements. Every day, they would only receive a bowl of porridge from the Zhou Consortium. The porridge was so thin they could not see any rice grains.

The trees surrounding the stronghold had all been stripped bare, and the bark was gone, leaving only the sight of white tree trunks behind. The leaves were also gone, and it was as though spring had never arrived. They looked like they were still stuck in the withering winter.

Some of the refugees were lying in their shacks with numb expressions on their faces. Their children next to them were crying and complaining that they were hungry, but the adults were helpless. Everything that could be eaten in the vicinity had already been eaten up, and some of them had even died of poisoning after consuming the wrong stuff.

This sight was hell on earth.

Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, "The Prosperous Northwest is their only way out of this misery!"

The Great Hoodwinker nodded solemnly.

"Actually, Wang Shengzhi could have stopped all of this from happening." The Great Hoodwinker said, "According to the intel that I received, he could have implemented a quick pacification policy so that the escapees would not have to flee to the South. But the fact was that he did not do so. Instead, he sat back and watched the escapees come to the South and destroy all of the Zhou Consortium's material foundations. The Zhou Consortium can't support so many people, and the civilians will soon turn into rioters. At that time, the Zhou Consortium's troops will have to spend a lot of resources just to protect their factories and farmland. In this way, by the time the Wang Consortium is ready to annex the South, the Zhou Consortium will already be riddled with weaknesses."

However, the Great Hoodwinker changed his opinion and said with a sigh, "We're not in a position to blame Wang Shengzhi either. The struggle between the consortiums is always a battle to the death. If it were the Northwest facing the Zong Consortium, we would also resort to any means to win."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu said, "Rather than blaming Wang Shengzhi, why don't we quickly take everyone to the Prosperous Northwest? The steam locomotive has a total of 1,196 seats, but if everyone is standing, it shouldn't be a problem to hold up to 5,000 people. Based on the speed of the steam locomotive, we'll only need 23 hours to reach the Northwest."

The steam locomotive! This was the reason why Ren Xiaosu wanted to personally make a trip to the Central Plains.

If it were anyone else, it would be impossible to take so many refugees away from under the Wang Consortium's noses. After all, they were still part of the Wang Consortium's plans.

But Ren Xiaosu was different. He had the most efficient transportation tool in the era of the wastelands.

When the Great Hoodwinker previously brought up the difficulties of abducting all these people, Ren Xiaosu had already decided on this plan. After all, if even Wang Congyang could provide a delivery service, it was only natural that Ren Xiaosu could also run a transportation business.

"But how should we convince these people and make them trust us?" the Great Hoodwinker said disconsolately. "I'm afraid they won't be willing to go with us that easily, right?"

Ren Xiaosu gave an eerie smile. "They're starving, so they'll definitely go with us as long as they're given something to eat."

Then Ren Xiaosu took out a potato as big as a soccer ball from his storage space.. "We were supposed to arrive here yesterday, but I deliberately delayed our departure for a day so that Zhou Yingxue could prepare enough potatoes for me. With these in hand, are you still afraid that these starving people won't follow us?"

Chapter 1047 - The Prosperous Northwest In Progress

"Future Commander, I heard from Commander Zhang that you used to live in town and led a very tough life?" the Great Hoodwinker asked as he watched the refugees outside the stronghold.

They did not directly distribute the potatoes to them and instead walked among the tens of thousands of them to observe their state of hunger.

The refugees were emaciated skeletons. This meant their bodies had consumed all the glycogen in their bodies, and even their fat had almost been depleted.

The stench in some of the makeshift shacks was overwhelming. No one knew when the people inside had died, and some people were even holding their stomachs in unbearable pain. It could be that they had either eaten something raw that damaged their stomachs, or their stomachs were already perforated.

Ren Xiaosu answered, "When I was living in Stronghold 113's town, my life truly was very tough, but it wasn't bad to this extent. Because I'd always lived in that environment, I learned from others how to find food so that I wouldn't starve to death. Meanwhile, some of these refugees were stronghold residents who've just encountered a huge disaster and don't have any wilderness survival skills, so they might die before they can adapt to the environment."

The Great Hoodwinker chuckled and said, "The commander said that you suffered a lot during that time. He even said that he saw with his own eyes that you gave your younger brother the cornbread that you earned from mining and went outside your shack afterwards to secretly chew on tree roots so that your younger brother wouldn't see it."

When Ren Xiaosu heard this, he started reminiscing. At that time, he probably had not learned how to hunt yet and could only work in the coal mines with the adults. But as he was young and weak, the cornbread he earned from working was only enough to feed one person.

However, he replied with a smile, "Speaking of which, it was really tough then. But when I recall those memories, it somehow feels like one of the happiest times I've experienced in the past decade."

"Future Commander, do you know why Commander Zhang chose you to be his successor?" the Great Hoodwinker asked with a smile.

"Why?" Actually, this was something even Ren Xiaosu did not understand.

"Because he saw a lot of invaluable qualities in you that most people don't have." The Great Hoodwinker did not go into detail, but it seemed the reason was connected to the period he lived in town.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu saw a child hiding in a shack who was staring at him and the Great Hoodwinker. He suddenly crouched down at the entrance of the shack and looked at the child through the gap in the curtain door.

It was as though Ren Xiaosu was seeing the young Yan Liuyuan again. At that time, Little Liuyuan was still not lord of the steppe.

Ren Xiaosu took out a few milk candies from his storage space and spread them out on his palm. The child was so timid he did not reach out to take them.

"Go ahead," Ren Xiaosu said.

The child in the shack quickly grabbed the milk candies from Ren Xiaosu's hand but did not eat them. Instead, he hid them in his shirt pocket as though he wanted to share them with others later.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the other shacks around him and said to the child, "If you don't eat them now, someone will come and steal them from you immediately after I leave. Perhaps you've already gained the courage to want to protect your things, but you don't have the ability to do that yet. So go on, eat them."

After the child heard Ren Xiaosu's words, he seemed to fall into deep thought. Then he peeled eight milk candies and stuffed them all into his mouth at once.

Ren Xiaosu laughed. "Smart kid."

Many of the refugees were looking at the Great Hoodwinker and him. They wanted to surround them and beg for something to eat, but they just cowered and did not go forward.

Ren Xiaosu did not distribute the potatoes to these people. Instead, he started a campfire and threw a few potatoes in to roast.

He and the Great Hoodwinker sat calmly at the campfire as more and more refugees gathered around them, gulping as they watched the campfire.

Twenty minutes later, Ren Xiaosu took out the potatoes from the campfire with his black saber. He did not hide his identity as a superhuman. This made the refugees feel fear and reverence.

"I can see that y'all're very hungry. Share these potatoes," Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

The refugees immediately bounded forward.

Although the potatoes were extremely hot, the refugees were unwilling to let go even when they got burned.

There were probably several hundred refugees who had surrounded over, but there were only six to seven potatoes to go around, so it was not enough to share at all.

When the first refugee broke open a potato, the aroma immediately spread through the entire crowd, and everyone went into a frenzy as they struggled to get some for themselves.

Very quickly, all the potatoes had been grabbed. Many of the refugees' faces were bruised and swollen from fighting for a piece. They looked at Ren Xiaosu and seemingly asked him without speaking, "Do you have any more?"

Ren Xiaosu looked at them in silence. He still had a lot of potatoes. For the sake of tricking people back to the Northwest, he had even filled half his storage space with potatoes.

But Ren Xiaosu threw his hands up and said, "That's all I have."

Everyone looked disappointed, but no one dared to question him. Suddenly, a man pushed through the crowd and walked out. He was even holding a pistol and pointing it at Ren Xiaosu. "You must have some more food on you. Hand it over. Not even a superhuman can stop bullets."

If this were any other time, normal people would not dare to threaten superhumans like this even if they owned a gun. But this man had gotten way too desperate from hunger.

When the man saw that Ren Xiaosu did not budge, he raised his voice and said, "Didn't you hear what I said?! Empty your pockets and let me see what else is in them! Is there any hardtack or chocolate? Candy's fine too. I saw you giving that child some milk candy just now!"

But just as he finished speaking, the Great Hoodwinker, who was next to Ren Xiaosu, suddenly leaped up like a cheetah. The man could only see a blur as the pistol in his hand got snatched away by the Great Hoodwinker.

The Great Hoodwinker spun the pistol in his hand and sat back down next to the campfire. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the gun in his hand stripped apart, and its parts scattered onto the ground.

Ren Xiaosu glanced at it and saw there were no bullets in the pistol. It had probably already run out of ammo while the man was escaping here, and he was only carrying it around for show to scare others.

Nearby, someone muttered, "So he was already out of bullets. Let's see if he dares to steal from others in the future!"

"Damn, I'd had enough of him the past few days. Since he doesn't have a gun anymore..."

When the man saw the surrounding refugees mean mugging him, he turned around and ran out of the crowd. He did not dare to stay around any longer.

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Are there any more bad people like him around here? I can help y'all take revenge."

The Northwest definitely lacked population and a labor force, but Ren Xiaosu did not have a good impression of those in a refugee group who bullied the weak and feared the strong. Such people were not fit to join the Prosperous Northwest, so he might as well clear them out now.

A refugee replied, "No, he's the only one around here."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "That's good then."

One of the refugees whispered, "Do you have any more potatoes? My child has been starving for three days, so please let him have a bite. You're clearly a good person. If it weren't for my child, I wouldn't ask you. Please..."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head ruthlessly. "I really didn't bring any food with me, but I know where to find some.. If y'all want to eat and survive, you should come with me."

Chapter 1048 - Diplomacy Before Violence

Ren Xiaosu still had a lot of potatoes in his possession, but he did not let the refugees have them. It was not that he did not have any compassion but that he could only lead them to the Prosperous Northwest if they remained hungry.

When was a person most irrational? Was it when they were experiencing complete starvation? No.

Rather, it was when a person was completely starving and realized they were about to have something to eat.

Ren Xiaosu felt from the bottom of his heart that the Zhou Consortium did not care whether these people lived or died. The Wang Consortium also treated them as a weapon, and the Qing Consortium could not take them away either. Therefore, the only way for the refugees to survive was to head to the Prosperous Northwest.

He would not let these people starve to death. Once the steam locomotive arrived in the Northwest with them, Ren Xiaosu would immediately distribute potatoes for everyone to eat.

At that time, not only would he have saved their lives, but he would also earn a lot of gratitude tokens.

His gratitude tokens had already broken past the 8,000 mark, and he was only a step away from unlocking the third weapon. Ren Xiaosu felt that with his life-saving efforts this time, he could earn one gratitude token per refugee rescued at the minimum.

Meanwhile, there were several hundred thousand refugees in the vicinity of the Zhou Consortium, so he should at least be able to lead a 100,000 of them to the Prosperous Northwest, right?

With a 100,000 gratitude tokens, he might even be able to unlock the fourth weapon!

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu started looking at the refugees with a burning gaze.

However, when the refugees heard they needed to follow Ren Xiaosu, they started hesitating. After all, this chaotic world was fraught with danger. Any normal person would instinctively consider if there were a plot behind Ren Xiaosu giving them the potatoes and offering to bring them elsewhere.

"Where do you want to take us? Is it far?" a young man asked hesitantly.

Ren Xiaosu grinned. "It's not far; it's at most a day's journey."

Everyone figured that if they could get there within a day, it should at most be 70 to 80 kilometers away, right? After all, they could not walk fast in their current condition.

But what they did not know was that when Ren Xiaosu said they could get there within a day, he meant they would be traveling in the steam locomotive. The Zhou Consortium was more than 2,000 kilometers away from Stronghold 144 in a straight line, so even traveling by steam locomotive would take them 23 hours to get there.

To be honest, it would be unrealistic to expect they could return to the Central Plains by themselves after they were brought to the Northwest. It could even be said there was absolutely no turning back.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu said, "There's thousands of you here. Even if you want to leave midway, you can just return anytime. How can we stop everyone with just the two of us?"

Now he needed to coax these people onto the steam locomotive. When the steam locomotive started moving at a speed of 120 kilometers per hour, Ren Xiaosu did not believe anyone would have the courage to jump off the train.

If they really had the courage, they would not have stayed here and starved themselves to this state.

The refugees looked at one another. They were still very worried that Ren Xiaosu was a human trafficker who would kidnap them to sell to bandits.

Everyone was making wild guesses about his identity. In short, they felt that Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker's motives were not honest.

They were only refugees, not fools, so they wouldn't really follow someone to another place just for a few potatoes. Who knew if any food would actually be at the place where Ren Xiaosu was going to take them?

A young woman holding a little girl's hand said, "You chased away the bully for us just now. I believe you, so I'll go with you!"

Ren Xiaosu smiled and nodded. Then he took out two more milk candies from his pocket and placed them into the little girl's hands. He said to all the refugees around him, "Remember, although I'll be taking y'all away from here this time, if there's any others among you who're up to no good, please let me know in advance so that I can get rid of them. Our utopia doesn't welcome evil people, so let's avoid any bad apples."

Actually, this was a type of psychological hint. If Ren Xiaosu directly placed himself on the side opposing the villainous, most people would subconsciously think of him as good. They might even label him a "knight" or something like that.

Immediately, many people stepped forward. "We'll go with you, but you have to keep your promise and give us food when we get there."

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Don't worry, you'll definitely get your fill when y'all get there. If I don't keep my promise, all y'all can beat me up together."

Before this, he discussed Zhou Yingxue's potato cultivation and the market economy with Wang Yuexi. Everyone felt it was not suitable to push for Zhou Yingxue's potato cultivation to be done on a large scale as it would affect the normal market mechanisms of the Northwest.

However, the potatoes could be used for emergencies. For example, in a situation like this, it was definitely the best option to feed this many people with potatoes so they would join the Prosperous Northwest.

As long as they could survive this year, the Northwest would only get more and more prosperous starting from the next.

In just half an hour, almost half the refugees decided to go with Ren Xiaosu. However, Ren Xiaosu still felt it was not enough. His goal was to take away 80% of the refugees.

But the commotion over here was so massive that even the Zhou Consortium's garrison troops were alerted at this point.

The Great Hoodwinker had been watching the surroundings all this while. When the garrison troops at the city gate started moving towards them, he whispered to Ren Xiaosu, "The Zhou Consortium's people are coming over. What should we do? Kill them?"

With their strength, it would not be a problem for them to deal with the 100-odd garrison troops.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Diplomacy before violence, please."

The Zhou Consortium's garrison troops were already approaching them with loaded weapons. They looked at the crowd of refugees that had gathered and shouted, "Disperse! All of you, disperse! Don't cause any trouble here!"

The refugees immediately dispersed and returned to their makeshift shacks. They wanted to see how Ren Xiaosu would handle the situation. If the two of them could not even deal with the Zhou Consortium's people, talk of taking them away would just be pointless.

However, the refugees realized Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker had remained seated at the campfire, motionless. It was as though they were not afraid of the soldiers at all.

When the 100-odd garrison troops realized Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker were the instigators of this gathering, they immediately surrounded them. An officer stepped forward and said coldly, "Are you refugees or spies? What's your purpose in gathering here?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I'm not a spy, nor am I a refugee. I'm just a normal person from the Northwest. As for why I'm here, I'm afraid that you aren't qualified to talk to me at your level. Have Zhou Shiji or Zhou Shoushi come out here."

The garrison officer was so angry he laughed. "Are you kidding?! Those two old bastards are dead!"

Ren Xiaosu remained silent for a moment before metallic armor suddenly covered his right arm. Then he asked, "Do you know how they died?"

Chapter 1049 - Be Back In Two Days

How did Zhou Shiji die? Could the Zhou Consortium's soldiers possibly not know? Everyone in the Alliance of Strongholds knew how he had died, and it was at the hands of none other than the owner of the armor.

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Looks like y'all know who I am."

Abducting the refugees would surely cause a huge uproar. Moreover, Ren Xiaosu still had to make many more trips back here, so he felt he would have to reach some sort of consensus with the new head of the Zhou Consortium.

If he could not reach a consensus with him, he would beat a consensus out of him.

It was not that Ren Xiaosu wanted to be this attention-seeking on purpose, but he knew the current situation. What did these refugees mean to the Zhou Consortium? In normal times, they were a population that provided the labor force. But now they were a ticking time bomb that was a potential security risk.

So while the Wang Consortium did not want to see the refugees join the Prosperous Northwest, the Zhou Consortium hoped enough of them would leave.

Under such circumstances, the appearance of Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker was basically helping the Zhou Consortium solve their issues!

On the surface, the Zhou Consortium would definitely not admit Ren Xiaosu was helping them. But privately, they had to be heaving a sigh of relief. Therefore, they would definitely not stand in Ren Xiaosu's way.

As for the feud between the future commander of the Northwest and the Zhou Consortium, it had blown over.

After Zhou Shiji was assassinated by Ren Xiaosu, the Zhou Consortium's spokesperson often proclaimed they would retaliate against such behavior by the Northwest. But as time passed, the Zhou Consortium still did not take any action, because the Zhou Consortium was headed by someone who used to be constantly oppressed by Zhou Shiji.

When the garrison officer mentioned Zhou Shiji and Zhou Shoushi, he addressed them as "old bastards" without any respect at all.

Superiors always set an example for their subordinates to follow. Whatever stance the higher-ups had, the subordinates would display the corresponding attitude.

Would they want the new head of the Zhou Consortium to avenge Zhou Shiji and take it up with the Northwest? No way!

Moreover, the most critical problem was Ren Xiaosu's ability to take the head of an enemy general who was protected by 10,000 soldiers. He was really that terrifying. The new head of the Zhou Consortium was willing to offend anyone but Ren Xiaosu.

Otherwise, some lucky bastard would take over for him before he had even warmed the seat as the head of the Zhou Consortium yet.

At this moment, the garrison troops at the campfire looked at Ren Xiaosu's armor. Although they did not recognize Ren Xiaosu, the armor was highly distinguishable. As such, everyone cocked their weapons and retreated a dozen steps back, but no one dared open fire.

Ren Xiaosu said, "I'm here to help the Zhou Consortium this time. Aren't y'all annoyed over handling these refugees? I'll bring some of them back to the Northwest so that they won't starve to death and you don't have to be tied down by these security risks anymore. Wouldn't that be a win-win scenario? I think you definitely can't make the decision, so you'd better report back to your superior."

That garrison officer was looking uncertain as he signaled to a soldier beside him to hurry back and inform their superiors about this.

Soon after, Zhou Qingyang, the new head of the Zhou Consortium, received a call and learned that Ren Xiaosu wanted to take some refugees away. His subordinates were asking him how to handle this.

After pondering it for a long time, he replied, "Convey our thanks to the Northwest for extending a helping hand to our Zhou Consortium during this time of crisis."

This man was also a coward. Otherwise, he would not have been oppressed by Zhou Shiji for so many years. It could be said that no one was really capable enough to take charge of the Zhou Consortium after Zhou Shiji's death.

After Zhou Qingyang hung up, the secretary in the official residence thought for a moment before saying, "Sir, although the refugees are a burden to us now, population is the foundation once we start rebuilding the Zhou Consortium. If we just let them take the refugees away like this, aren't we being too easily pushed around? We're importing grains from the South, so not all of these refugees will have to die from starvation."

Zhou Qingyang's expression darkened. "Do I need you to teach me?"

Even if Zhou Qingyang were stupid, he could still understand his secretary's point. But it was Ren Xiaosu they were facing. Surely they did not want to anger and provoke him into slaughtering his way here again when it had only been a short while since Zhou Shiji's mourning period had passed, right?

So what could he do? He was also very much in despair!

Based on their strength, the Zhou Consortium did not actually have any reason to be afraid of superhumans. However, Ren Xiaosu's antics at Stronghold 73 had really induced fear into them.

Moreover, Ren Xiaosu was not a lone wolf. The destructive power of the 12 Riders was extremely shocking as well.

Zhou Qingyang softened his tone and said, "Our current enemy is the Wang Consortium, so we shouldn't offend another strong opponent like the Northwest. You have to understand that no matter how important the population is, we still have to survive this calamity first. Just let that Ren Xiaosu take the refugees away. They're only two people, so how many can they take with them?"

The secretary thought about it and felt it made sense. After all, how many refugees could they take away with only the two of them?

Thinking of this, the secretary felt more at ease. But Zhou Qingyang continued, "Besides, won't they have to pass through the Wang Consortium with the refugees? How could the Wang Consortium agree to let them pass through so freely? Wang Shengzhi will definitely think of a way to intercept them. That way, won't the Wang Consortium and the Northwest become enemies?"

The secretary started smiling. "So you've already thought everything out, Boss. I was much too shortsighted."

When Zhou Qingyang saw his secretary turning humble, he immediately felt much better.

At this moment, the phone in the official residence rang again. Zhou Qingyang picked it right up and answered, "How'd things go?"

"Sir, Ren Xiaosu has left with the refugees," the person on the line said.

"Mhm, how many people did he take with him?" Zhou Qingyang smiled and asked, "Dozens? Hundreds?"

"6,000! Boss, they took 6,000 people away!"

Zhou Qingyang was confused.

Zhou Qingyang was shocked on the spot. Were they fucking professional human traffickers or what? How did they manage to take so many refugees at once?

"How did they leave?" Zhou Qingyang asked.

"Ren Xiaosu shouted 'Wang Congyang, summon the train,' and a steam locomotive appeared out of thin air." The person on the line said, "The steam locomotive didn't travel towards the Wang Consortium but headed straight into the wilderness."

"The refugees left with him just like that?" Zhou Qingyang asked with a gulp.

The person on the line said, "After the refugees found out he was the future commander of the Northwest, all of them wanted to leave with him. If not for the fact that the train was full, I'm afraid he would've taken all of them away."

If everyone there were taken away, it would be close to a 100,000 people.

News of the Northwest's future commander avenging Jiang Xu had spread everywhere. A lot of people admired Ren Xiaosu's character from the bottom of their hearts, so the refugees no longer had any doubts about him.

Previously, they were worried they would get abducted. But now they were worried they would not be able to get on the train fast enough.

Zhou Qingyang kneaded his brow and said, "We have hundreds of thousands of refugees here. Taking 6,000 people with him wouldn't make a dent in the numbers. It's only 6,000, so it's nothing to worry about."

The secretary nodded at the side. 6,000 people was indeed no big deal to the big picture, and it might even help relieve the Zhou Consortium's burden a little.

Then Zhou Qingyang asked, "Did he say anything else before leaving?"

"Yes," the person on the line said, "he said he would be back again in two days...."

Chapter 1050 - Kind And Benevolent

Although it would take 23 hours for Ren Xiaosu's steam locomotive to travel from the Zhou Consortium to the Northwest, he had to make many rest stops along the way. Therefore, the actual journey would take about a day and a half.

After all, no one could get any rest as there were no sleeper cars attached to the steam locomotive. Everyone just stood and squeezed together in the carriages. They could not even make their way to the toilets to relieve themselves. As such, he had to set up camp and let everyone take a break for a few hours.

However, no one complained about the cramped space within the carriages or the fatigue they experienced during the journey. They were all harboring hopes of leading a stable life once they got to the Northwest.

At that time, they would have food to eat and work to do. They also would not have to worry about getting dragged into the war for the time being.

Everyone knew there would be a war between the Wang Consortium and the Zhou Consortium in the near term, so it was definitely a blessing to be able to leave that place quickly.

Besides, the Northwest and the Southwest were relatively stable for the time being. The refugees also heard that the headquarters of the Hope Media had been moved to the Northwest.

Before leaving, Ren Xiaosu promised them they would be given food when they arrived in the Northwest. No one was worried he would go back on his word either. Perhaps Ren Xiaosu himself did not expect he would have such a good reputation in the Central Plains.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu had also thought about piling on more refugees on the outside of the train so he could transport more of them at once. But he was really worried those people would get blown away by the strong winds as the steam locomotive traveled at a speed of 120 kilometers per hour.

After a day and a half, the steam locomotive arrived outside of Stronghold 144 in the Northwest. Wang Yuexi had already organized the stronghold's staff to process the household registration for the new residents, with many banners flying in the open area.

"Welcome to the Northwest, fellow Northwesterners!"

"Tender for farmland: What you reap is yours to keep."

"Welcome to our big family in the Northwest!"

The stronghold employees waited outside of the steam locomotive and greeted every refugee who disembarked with a smile, "Welcome to the Northwest. We'll be family from now on."

The aroma of roasted and fried sweet potatoes was lingering in town. All of the refugees could not help swallowing their saliva.

Although every one of the steam locomotive's carriages had doors, Ren Xiaosu did not open all of them. Instead, he had the refugees line up and disembark from the first carriage. Then he just waited outside that door and shook hands with everyone in a friendly manner.

Ren Xiaosu smiled amiably as he shook hands with everyone. "All y'all're safe now. Hurry up and get registered. Once you're done, we'll be one family, and all y'all will have potatoes to eat!"

The refugees were deeply moved and thought the future commander of the Northwest was just as upright, kind, benevolent, excellent, and affable as the rumors had said.

"Thank you, Future Commander!"

"Thank you so much, Future Commander!"

"Future Commander, I love you!"

Serious, Ren Xiaosu corrected, "Don't love me, just thank me."

The refugees lined up one by one to disembark from the train. Just the process of disembarking the train lasted for several hours, but Ren Xiaosu still shook hands with everyone nonstop. The sight was simply too touching.

Off to the side, Wang Yuexi sighed emotionally and said, "Sure enough, Future Commander is kind. These refugees must be a little terrified after arriving in the Northwest. Future Commander is helping alleviate their fears, and he can only achieve that by greeting them with the utmost enthusiasm! Future Commander has to shake hands with more than 6,000 people. If it were y'all, would you have this patience? Only Future Commander can do that!"

Wang Yuexi said to the stronghold employees in a solemn tone, "Everyone, you must learn from Future Commander's selflessness. What do you think Future Commander gets out of comforting these refugees? Money? No! He's doing this for the sake of the Northwest. He's truly concerned for the refugees! Although we're stronghold officials, we must keep in mind our mission to serve the Northwest. We have to understand that we're service providers, not some privileged class! Let's all learn from Future Commander!"

These words left the stronghold staff in tears as they expressed their desire to learn from their future commander. The Great Hoodwinker was standing next to Ren Xiaosu and heard him muttering, "5,891...5,892..."

The Great Hoodwinker wondered, "Future Commander, what are you mumbling about?"

"Oh," Ren Xiaosu casually explained, "I'm doing a headcount."

To be precise, he was taking note of the number of gratitude tokens received.

Why did Ren Xiaosu insist on shaking hands with everyone? For the gratitude tokens.

This time, they had brought a total of 6,012 refugees back from the Zhou Consortium. Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu gained a total of 7,131 gratitude tokens from them. In fact, each person had contributed more than one gratitude token to him on average.

Many people thought the greatest benefit of this refugee migration was the development of the population in the Northwest. But to Ren Xiaosu, he had gained a number of gratitude tokens he did not even dare to think about in the past!

The palace's third weapon could finally be unlocked!

Ren Xiaosu went to look for Wang Yuexi, who was busy, and said, "Have you done a detailed calculation of the number of people required for the Northwest's reclamation efforts?"

Wang Yuexi answered without hesitation, "70,000. Although over 6,000 people have arrived this time, it's still quite a shortfall with regard to our plan. Of course, I also know the number is a little high. If you think that's too many, 20,000 people will do...."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Only 70,000? That little? What if I abducted more refugees than that?"

Wang Yuexi was also stunned by Ren Xiaosu's words. In his opinion, it was already hard for the future commander to abduct 6,000 people. To ask the future commander to abduct tens of thousands of people more might prove a little difficult.

But he realized his thoughts were completely misaligned with the future commander's. The future commander was hoping for an answer of like hundreds of thousands of people.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "What'll happen if more than 70,000 people join the Prosperous Northwest plan?"

Wang Yuexi seriously pondered it and then said, "Future Commander, it's not necessarily always better to have a larger population. If there's too many immigrants, it could lead to a lot of potential problems. Here's a comprehensive assessment I've made. First off, the basic infrastructure can't keep up with the increased population. If we don't manage to handle the large amount of sewage and garbage produced, it'll lead to the contamination of our local groundwater. A secondary problem will be security. We'll need to allocate a lot of manpower to ensure order, and that'll also place a burden on the stronghold. Besides, there's some other problems like the education curriculum and so on, all of which are very complicated to handle. The current Northwest is not ready to take in so many people."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Alright then..."

When Wang Yuexi realized that Ren Xiaosu still felt a little unsatisfied, he suddenly said, "But I'm only talking about what Stronghold 144 can bear. If Future Commander can persuade Commander Zhang to implement our policies in the other strongholds, the shortfall of people will still be very significant!"

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. "You're always so dependable!"

Ren Xiaosu waved to the Great Hoodwinker. "Come on, let's head to the Central Plains again. We're gonna make at least 10 trips before anything else!"

Next to him, Wang Yuexi said, "Future Commander, do you want to take a break first? There's no hurry...."

"No." Ren Xiaosu said righteously, "You don't know how miserable the refugees in the Central Plains are. If we go a day later, a lot of people might have already died from starvation. How can I watch them starve to death!?"

Nearby, the refugees and the stronghold staff teared up again. Everyone munched on their potatoes and shouted, "Future Commander is kind and benevolent!"