

First Order 1051

## Chapter 1051 - The Third Weapon Gets Unlocked!

The steam locomotive rumbled away from the Northwest and made its way through the wilderness towards the Central Plains again.

The Great Hoodwinker said out of concern on the train, "Future Commander, why don't you rest for a bit? You didn't rest well when we set up camp yesterday. The urgency of the Prosperous Northwest plan isn't dependent on this moment."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said, "I'm not sleepy yet. How about this? You go and sleep first, and I'll wake you up six hours later to take over from me."

"Sure, Future Commander. Tell me when you're tired then." The Great Hoodwinker was indeed sleepy. From the time they went to the Central Plains to abduct the refugees for the Prosperous Northwest until now, the two of them hadn't slept in over 20 hours. Although superhumans did not get tired easily like normal people, the Great Hoodwinker was still advanced in age.

Ren Xiaosu was actually rather sleepy as well, but he could not wait to see exactly what the palace's third weapon was!

When the Great Hoodwinker went to the carriage to sleep, Ren Xiaosu immediately said to his mind palace, "I have 15,000 gratitude tokens now. That's enough to unlock the third weapon, right?"

"Yes, do you want to unlock the third weapon for 10,000 gratitude tokens?" the voice from the palace asked.

"Unlock it!"

Ren Xiaosu waited quietly, but there was still no sign of the weapon being unlocked this time.

The interior of the palace resembled a circular library filled with display cabinets. A small, delicate cabinet lit up, but there was nothing in it.

Ren Xiaosu was a little puzzled. "Where is it?"

The palace did not answer.

Suddenly, the palace started shaking. Ren Xiaosu intuitively stretched out his right hand with his palm facing up. A scorching ball of energy that caused no physical harm started gathering in his hand.

A huge vortex started forming in the sky above the steam locomotive.

As the steam locomotive was moving at a high speed, the huge vortex above also moved rapidly along with it.

Fortunately, there was no one around in the wilderness. Otherwise, someone would definitely have been shocked if they saw this strange phenomenon.

A violet eye suddenly appeared within the gray vortex.

Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at his outstretched right hand. Meanwhile, the Great Hoodwinker in the next carriage over was alarmed. He hurriedly opened the door and ran to the front of the train. "Future Commander, it feels like something odd is happening! An eye has appeared right above us. Have the Heavens come to subdue me because I've revealed too many secrets?"

"Revealed too many secrets?" Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry as he ridiculed, "What secrets have you revealed? You've clearly just cheated too many people!"

But at this moment, the tremendous ball of energy in Ren Xiaosu's hand suddenly started solidifying into a black stone.

The black stone was only about the size of a fist, and it felt a little warm in his hand. But the strangest thing was that as the vortex in the sky started fading away, the violet eye within it began appearing on the black stone instead.

Curious Ren Xiaosu asked in his mind, "What is this!?"

But the voice from the palace replied, "Unauthorized to answer."

At this moment, the Great Hoodwinker came over to Ren Xiaosu's side and looked at him in surprise for a while. Then his gaze landed on Ren Xiaosu's hand. "Future Commander, did that strange phenomenon in the sky have anything to do with you?"

Ren Xiaosu did not hide it from him and nodded. However, he did not explain where the black stone had come from, so the Great Hoodwinker did not probe any further either.

Ren Xiaosu looked silently within the palace. This time, the palace did not indicate there was a next weapon to unlock. In other words, this was the last weapon the palace would give to him!

Thus, he had a problem. He was about to earn tens of thousands of gratitude tokens, but what could he do with the tokens other than exchange them for more Explosive Poker cards and Seeds?

Inside the palace, he saw a new, transparent window slot in the vending machine. There were light gray stones in it, and every stone was in the same exact shape with an eye sigil on it.

Product name: Proficiency Stone.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. What the heck was this? What was wrong with the palace? Why did it always give him something he could not make sense of?

But for some reason, he suddenly felt the purchasable Proficiency Stones and the third weapon in his hand might turn out to be very important.

Although the palace might mess around with him at times, it had never done anything redundant since it came into existence!

Ren Xiaosu used a gratitude token in exchange for a proficiency stone. It was as soft as limestone in his hand, and he crushed it by just tightening his grip. But more importantly, there was no reaction after that.

The voice from his mind palace suddenly said, "You do not have any corresponding skills whose proficiency can be increased. The Proficiency Stone was destroyed."

Ren Xiaosu muttered to himself, "What the hell is this? Don't I have a lot of superpowers? Why did it say that I do not have any corresponding skills? What's the use of this Proficiency Stone?! Ptui, you unscrupulous merchant!"

The voice from the palace answered, "Unauthorized to answer."

But next to him, the Great Hoodwinker suddenly said, "Future Commander, the black stone you're holding looks a little familiar."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned as he looked at the Great Hoodwinker. "You recognize it?"

"I can't be sure." The Great Hoodwinker said softly, "You also know that our Fortress 178 had fought with enemies from beyond the Northwest before. Although all the previous battles ended in our victory, Fortress 178 also paid an extremely painful price. The last war happened about 17 years ago when I was just a company commander. When the enemy was defeated, only 20% of my entire company was left. This sigil of an eye looks similar to the one I saw back then."

"You mean that something like this appeared in that war?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"That's right. When we were cleaning up the battlefield, we saw a few broken pieces, which we pieced back together to form this eye sigil." The Great Hoodwinker recalled, "But those stones all looked very worn. They were not as exquisite as the one you're holding, and their eye sigils were faded as well. At that time, the fortress commander even ordered us to continue searching for those stones. In the end, we only found some broken pieces but not any complete ones. So we didn't know what uses they had."

"Were they all broken?" Ren Xiaosu muttered, "Who's the enemy from beyond the Northwest and why did they come here?"

"They're also humans, but they're a little different from us." The Great Hoodwinker said, "I heard that in the early days of The Cataclysm, roughly around 200 years ago, they started coming to our territory to kidnap our people. A large number of our compatriots were kidnapped to a place beyond the Northwest. It was estimated that several hundred thousand to even a million were taken away. Fortress 178 was built specifically to defend against them. At that time, human civilization in the Central Plains had not yet been restored. They also seemed to have a secret legacy before The Cataclysm. As such, the martyrs fought very hard against them, resulting in a lot of casualties for us."

Ren Xiaosu started thinking.. A million people were abducted during the early days of The Cataclysm? At that time, the total population of the entire Alliance of Strongholds probably only numbered a few million, not the tens of millions it currently had.

## Chapter 1052 - Domination

Ren Xiaosu analyzed the information revealed by the Great Hoodwinker. He suddenly asked, "You said that they already had a secret legacy in place before The Cataclysm? What sort of legacy was that?"

"I think it's a magus order, some kind of a sorcerer organization. Their methods in war were very peculiar." The Great Hoodwinker said, "At that time, a black mist enveloped the battlefield that I was fighting on and blocked everyone's line of sight of the enemy's position. Our comrades on the other battlefields also said that they encountered some strange enemies, and some of them even encountered strange creatures too."

"Are there many of said sorcerers?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"That's where we were fortunate." The Great Hoodwinker said, "Although they employed strange fighting methods, their numbers weren't that great. Over the years, we also attempted to send our people there to check on the situation. What surprised us was that the areas our agents were posted to were full of other similar yellow people with black hair. This was because in the past two hundred years, they had kidnapped so many of our people back to their lands. Moreover, they assimilated into our culture. Perhaps this is the reason why there hasn't been a war between the two sides in over a decade now."

Ren Xiaosu admitted the Great Hoodwinker's deduction made some sense. He had read a lot of books about the Pre-Cataclysm times, and he had to admit the Central Plains culture was one that easily assimilated other cultures.

"What's the political structure over there like?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously, "Why did they kidnap so many people from our side?"

"I happen to know that. Intel says that kings are a thing over there, so it should be a monarchy." The Great Hoodwinker said, "However, those mysterious magi rank above the kings. Kings are just normal people who keep order in society on their behalf while a minority of those magi are the true rulers of that world. They don't have to work or put in any effort and can stand at the top of the pyramid just like that, absorbing all of what their society produces."

This was a system where it felt like the magi had declared themselves gods and controlled the world order as the ruling class.

The Great Hoodwinker continued, "But Future Commander, as you know, we only started sending our agents to infiltrate their territory after Commander Zhang returned to the Northwest. As such, we're unable to find that much information on them, and it's not easy for intel to be relayed back either. We aren't usually able to track those magi because they can't be located. Our agents have already been

stationed there for some time, yet they still haven't had any contact with a real sorcerer. Over there, everyone calls those who are magi the Omniscient, and they all belong to a unified organization."

"At first, they took advantage of the fact that the Central Plains had not recovered from the Cataclysm to steal our people. Perhaps they did so to build up their hierarchical society. Only with a large number of laborers were they able to build their basic infrastructure and send a steady stream of resources to the top." The Great Hoodwinker said, "I heard that in the early years, people with black hair and yellow skin were the lowest caste of society. They could only do the most tiring jobs and were not paid for it. Later, this situation changed due to one of their compatriots becoming a magus."

Ren Xiaosu frowned. "Since we have compatriots among the sorcerers, why did they still attack us 17 years ago? Shouldn't they have stopped all of that from happening?"

The Great Hoodwinker shook his head with a smile. "Future Commander, rumor has it that the yellow and black-haired magus has already been dead for over 40 years. During his time as a magus, Fortress 178 really did not get attacked."

"Alright then." Ren Xiaosu nodded. He looked carefully at the black stone in his hand but could not figure out how his third unlocked weapon was related to a mysterious organization outside the borders of the Alliance of Strongholds. Should he try to catch a magus and copy their power?

After all, the black stone had appeared in such a grand manner. No matter how one looked at it, it did not look like a standard item. But holding it did not have any effects, which really made Ren Xiaosu very curious.

Ren Xiaosu somehow felt the secret of the black stone could probably be unlocked by searching for answers from a sorcerer.

The steam locomotive arrived at the Zhou Consortium's stronghold a dozen hours later. This time, Ren Xiaosu did not waste any time and took the refugees away without hiding his identity.

There was no need to use potatoes to trick the refugees into following him anymore. His status as the future commander of the Northwest was the strongest lure!

When the Zhou Consortium received news that Ren Xiaosu was back again, they felt extremely troubled.

However, they still watched from afar as Ren Xiaosu called for the refugees to board the train. The Zhou Consortium did not dare to step forward to stop him. Now that the Riders were lying low somewhere, who knew if they would reappear and attack them again?

When Zhou Qingyang found out Ren Xiaosu had really returned, the coward obediently stayed in his official residence with thousands of garrison troops stationed around him. It was as though he were afraid Ren Xiaosu would try to assassinate him this time.

The Zhou Consortium's officials were all very aggrieved. There were only the two of them, yet they could still openly abduct the refugees like that. How arrogant!

However, there was really nothing they could do, nor did they dare to.

As a matter of fact, Ren Xiaosu's outstanding achievement of assassinating three Zhou Consortium officials in a single day had really struck fear in these cowardly Zhou Consortium officials.

Some of the Zhou Consortium's officers were filled with righteous indignation as they suggested that Ren Xiaosu be surrounded and killed here. In the end, the other officials found some random excuses to place these officers under house arrest.

It was as though the Zhou Consortium's officials had turned into Ren Xiaosu's supporters overnight.

When Ren Xiaosu called for the refugees to board the train, he even felt a little emotional. In this chaotic world, a group of good-for-nothings really should not be allowed to take charge of things. Otherwise, they could get sliced apart and divided among the other organizations in these highly contested wastelands at any moment.

The Zhou Consortium was probably going to be gone soon.



Ren Xiaosu believed the current Zhou Consortium was no match for the Wang Consortium. When the Wang Consortium's troops arrived, some of the Zhou Consortium's troops might even surrender immediately and lead them in.

A lot of refugees had gathered around the steam locomotive. Ren Xiaosu waved to the Zhou Consortium's garrison troops not far away and shouted, "Don't just stand there! Can't you see that it's a little chaotic here? Come over and maintain order! Have the refugees line up in front of each car door and usher them in one by one only after I say to get on. Otherwise, it'll be too disorganized!"

The soldiers of the garrison troops were aggrieved. Why did they have to help maintain order when the enemy was trying to abduct their people?

Why did they have to stand so close to the commotion? Wouldn't everything have been OK if they had only stood farther away? This was too humiliating!

When Ren Xiaosu saw them not moving for a long time, he took out his black saber and shouted, "What are y'all still standing there for?"

The garrison troops' commanding officer hurriedly said, "Coming, we'll be right there."

After that, the soldiers formed a human wall at the carriage doors and organized the refugees into boarding the train one by one.

Nearby, the Great Hoodwinker sighed emotionally. It was so fun to work together with the future commander. In the past, it would take him several months to "abduct" someone for the Prosperous Northwest. But now, Ren Xiaosu had managed to convince close to 10,000 people to join them in just a single day.

Compared to the efficiency of the Prosperous Northwest plan of the past, this fully deserved to be called the brand-new Prosperous Northwest 2.0!

In conclusion, it could only be summed up in a word: domination!

## Chapter 1053 - A Strange Crowd

Ren Xiaosu and the Great Hoodwinker tirelessly made their way back and forth between the Northwest and the Central Plains to abduct the refugees, truly enjoying it as they did so.

All of the Zhou Consortium's officials seemed to have suddenly lost their sight and hearing. They could not see or hear whatever that was going on and just hid in the stronghold without making any fuss about the abduction. They did not care, and they did not ask.

When a reporter found out about this, he even went to interview the Zhou Consortium officials. However, they refused to meet him.

Moreover, some of the Zhou Consortium's officials had also mysteriously disappeared.

At first, everyone thought that one of the officials might have fallen sick, so he did not come to work. But after two days, they felt that something was off. They could not get through to the official's home line either, so some people started wondering if something had happened.

When his subordinates went to pay him a visit, they realized their superior's house was already empty. The entire place was a mess, and all the gold, silver, and other valuables were gone as well.

Did someone break into the house and rob their superior? They should quickly report this to the Public Order Division!

As this official's rank was not low, the Public Order Division placed high priority on his case. They immediately sent out a lot of officers to search for clues and check the surveillance cameras around the official's house in recent days.

In the end, they were shocked by what they saw. The surveillance footage showed the official had packed up his belongings and left with his wife.

The couple left the stronghold with their luggage and faked their visas before disappearing into the crowd of refugees outside the stronghold.

He had escaped!

At this moment, everyone who was searching for his whereabouts understood that the man must have followed the Northwest's future commander to the Northwest!

Recently, a wave of anxiety had been affecting the Zhou Consortium's people. Everyone knew the Wang Consortium would start a war against the Zhou Consortium soon.

Initially, when Zhou Shiji was around, everyone could still work together to prepare for the war. But now that the cowardly Zhou Qingyang had taken over, everyone knew he was not at all capable of stopping the Wang Consortium.

When the Wang Consortium annexed the Zhou Consortium, the Zhou Consortium's officials would definitely be the first to get dealt with. At that time, the entire south of the Central Plains would face a major reshuffle.

Instead of enduring humiliation when it happened, wouldn't it be better to lead a rich man's life in the Northwest while one still had their possessions?

The Zhou Consortium officials had many ways to amass wealth while holding office. The gold bars they had saved were definitely enough for them to enjoy their later years in the Northwest.

Before Ren Xiaosu came here, some people had already wanted to run away, but they just did not know where to go.

The north of the Central Plains had already become the Wang Consortium's territory, so those seeking to escape could only go to the Qing Consortium. However, they would have to travel 500 kilometers through the wilderness to get there, and a lot of people were worried about danger along the way.

But now, the appearance of the steam locomotive from the Prosperous Northwest had given them hope and a way out!

Hope Media had already started reporting on the events of Ren Xiaosu helping the refugees escape. The entire Alliance of Strongholds could see the happy smiles on the faces of the refugees when they arrived in the Northwest, as well as pictures of them shaking hands with their future commander.

Included in the report were photos of welcome banners, photos of Wang Yuexi and Stronghold 144's staff registering the new residents and dining with settled refugees during breaks, and interviews conducted with the refugees.

This assured everyone they would not lose their freedom if they went to the Northwest. Moreover, they would be treated as Northwesterners.

Faced with the flames of war in the Central Plains, Hope Media's newspapers suddenly made everyone feel that any place outside of the Northwest would soon be in deep trouble. Only by getting to the Northwest would they lead a peaceful life.

If there was a first official that tried to escape, there would be a second one.

News of the Zhou Consortium's official fleeing to the Northwest was secretly spreading within the Zhou Consortium's ranks. A lot of people were starting to think, 'That future commander of the Northwest didn't seem to care about the identities of the refugees when he took them away to the Northwest. Besides, there wasn't even time to check their IDs since the train had to carry several thousand people.'

So, as long as they pretended to be refugees and got onto the train, they could lead a carefree life in the Northwest in slightly over 20 hours!

Thinking of this, the Zhou Consortium officials started disappearing in the course of the fortnight. Almost all of them brought along their families and disguised themselves as refugees.

Some of the officials who had satellite phones given by the Zhou Consortium even took it with them before leaving. When the Zhou Consortium discovered they had left, they immediately contacted them. However, they were greeted by the fleeing Zhou Consortium officials dishing out insults to Zhou Qingyang for being a fool. They even said it would be waiting for death if they did not leave the Zhou Consortium.

From this, it could be seen that they were really determined to leave.

Of course, not all of the officials brought their wives with them. There were even some people who abandoned their wives and left with their mistresses. In the past, such people were always conducting their affairs secretly in the stronghold. They were unable to get a divorce from their wives no matter how much they wanted it.

But now, they finally found a way to get rid of their wives. It was like they had eloped several thousand kilometers away with this separation from them.

Quite a few people did this. As a result, many women in the stronghold often woke up from slumber and started cursing at their husbands who had run away overnight.

Such was life.

When something like this happened, Zhou Qingyang would definitely be the one with the biggest headache. Seeing that the Wang Consortium's main forces had already started heading south, the officials working for him had all started fleeing one by one. The Zhou Consortium was already riddled with holes, so how could they possibly stop the Wang Consortium?

Zhou Qingyang thought for a moment and ordered his secretary, "We can't let Ren Xiaosu continue doing this. Find a way to stop him!"

It was not that he had suddenly become bold, but rather, if he did not stop the refugees from being taken away, the Zhou Consortium would really be done for!

Ren Xiaosu had been leading a very fulfilling life these days. Although there was no fourth weapon to unlock, he felt the gratitude tokens and Proficiency Stones would come in very handy. Therefore, he was trying his best to earn as many gratitude tokens as he could.

It was just like earning money. Who wouldn't mind having more?

By the sixth trip, his number of gratitude tokens exceeded 40,000.

At this moment, if anyone were to provoke Ren Xiaosu and force him into a corner, he might really resort to trading 40,000 gratitude tokens for the Explosive Poker cards just to get a pair of Jokers to blow them up!

But on the seventh trip back to the Northwest, Ren Xiaosu discovered some strange people... people he did not receive any gratitude tokens from!

Normal refugees tended to suffer from starvation and would revere Ren Xiaosu's character. After arriving in the Northwest, Ren Xiaosu would definitely receive gratitude tokens upon shaking hands with them. Some of them gave him one token, while others gave him three. There was really no one who did not sincerely thank him.

But by the seventh trip, Ren Xiaosu realized that even though some of the refugees looked like they were sincerely grateful, his gratitude tokens did not increase after shaking hands with them. Moreover, those people all had rosy cheeks and did not look like they were refugees who had been starving for over half a month.

Ren Xiaosu sneered in his head. Previously, the Great Hoodwinker was worried weird people would be hidden among this group of refugees. There could be Zhou Consortium officials or spies among them, and these people would then go on to become the bad apples of the Northwest.

But Ren Xiaosu said there was nothing to worry about since he could identify such people.

At that time, the Great Hoodwinker was a little puzzled. With so many refugees, how could they possibly get identified?

In the end, the Great Hoodwinker saw Ren Xiaosu pick out more than 60 people from the group of refugees within three hours and separate them from the real ones.

#### Chapter 1054 - Future Commander, I Also Want To Join The Prosperous Northwest

A total of 67 passengers were isolated from the refugees. Ren Xiaosu did not worry about them and just continued to shake hands with the rest with all his might and congratulate them on settling into a new home and life.

Wang Yuexi and the others were also standing nearby, lamenting from the bottom of their hearts that the future commander was way too patient. A few days ago, they thought the future commander had shaken the hands of every refugee because he was very enthusiastic at the beginning. They felt he would probably not continue doing so by the time the next few groups arrived.

After all, it would be really tiring to shake hands with tens of thousands of people.

In the end, they underestimated Ren Xiaosu's patience and felt very ashamed of their own thoughts.

After Ren Xiaosu handed over all the refugees to Wang Yuexi, he slowly walked towards those 67 people. "Tell me, who are all y'all?"

One of the Zhou Consortium officials said softly, "We're just normal refugees. Future Commander, why're you asking something like that?"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. "Look at who's standing around y'all. I ordered the Northwest's armed soldiers to watch over all y'all. Do you think I'd treat refugees with an attitude like that?"

But even though Ren Xiaosu said that, the Zhou Consortium officials still refused to tell the truth. "Future Commander, you've misunderstood. We're really just normal refugees."

"Since you're so tight-lipped, I guess y'all must be spies." Realization dawned upon Ren Xiaosu. Then he said to the Northwest soldiers next to him, "Take them to the military base's prison and interrogate them properly. Tell Zhang Xiaoman that I'll be heading to the Central Plains to recruit more refugees later. I hope he won't torture these people to death before I return."

When these cowards from the Zhou Consortium heard this, they nearly peed their pants. "Future Commander! Future Commander! We'll talk! I'm the deputy director of the Zhou Consortium's Ministry of Commerce. I really couldn't stay in the Zhou Consortium any longer, so I decided to flee to the Northwest. I heard there's a plan to make the Northwest prosperous. I think I can contribute...."

Ren Xiaosu pondered it for a moment. Actually, he could not keep these people here no matter what they said. It was not that the Northwest was prejudiced against those from other places, rather, Ren Xiaosu was worried spies were actually among them.

It did not really matter to him that the Zhou Consortium officials had fled here, but it would be very troublesome if any spies managed to infiltrate the Northwest.

Those people must have brought along some jewelry. If it were Ren Xiaosu, he would definitely care about such things. But the Northwest did not lack these. Compared to the wealth of the entire Northwest, the valuables that a dozen or so Zhou Consortium officials had brought were not even worth a mention.

But if spies were hidden among them, it could prove extremely disastrous in the future.

Kill them all? Ren Xiaosu was not that cruel.

He said to the 67 people, "Wait here for now."



After that, he went off to the side and whispered to the Great Hoodwinker.

The Zhou Consortium's officials muttered among themselves, "Will he send us back to the Zhou Consortium? I insulted Zhou Qingyang over the phone...."

One of them shook his head and said, "That's impossible. We're already here, and we even have lots of money on us, so how could he possibly make us go back? He's just hinting that we should pay up a little. Afterwards, let's each contribute a little to bribe this so-called Future Commander of the Northwest. I don't believe he won't be tempted."

"You're absolutely right." Another Zhou Consortium official said, "Is there anyone in the world who doesn't love money?"

These Zhou Consortium officials were also very open-minded. Furthermore, they had survived in the Zhou Consortium's bureaucracy for many years, so they were well versed in the unwritten rules. As such, they were prepared to cough up some money.

After Ren Xiaosu finished discussing things with the Great Hoodwinker, he returned. "I'm sorry, but y'all aren't welcome here in the Northwest."

A Zhou Consortium official was dumbfounded. "We have money."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I can't allow it even if you have money."

One of the Zhou Consortium officials said anxiously, "What gives you the right to decide our fate just like that? I want to see Zhang Jinglin! We want to receive corresponding political treatment and apply for political asylum! You're not the ruler of the Northwest yet, so you don't have the authority to decide our fates!"

Two hours later, the steam locomotive drove back to the Central Plains. A Zhou Consortium official sat in the carriage with his face all bruised and swollen. He made a call on his satellite phone and said helplessly, "Hello, Boss? I was just joking with you previously. Hahahaha, I'll apologize to you right away when I get back..."

When the steam locomotive arrived at the Central Plains, many of the Zhou Consortium's people actually came out of the stronghold this time to welcome it and pick up the Zhou Consortium officials who had escaped.

Before leaving, the Zhou Consortium's intelligence officer who came to greet them said politely to Ren Xiaosu, "Sorry for the trouble!"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "By the way, these people also brought some of their belongings with them. As you know, it's quite expensive for the steam locomotive to make the trip here...."

The corners of the Zhou Consortium's intelligence officer's eyes twitched. This was clearly a superpower, so what was expensive about it? However, he understood what Ren Xiaosu meant. Before coming out here, Zhou Qingyang had specifically instructed him not to get into conflict with the man.

As such, the Zhou Consortium's intelligence officer clenched his teeth and said, "We'll hand over their belongings to you as the escort fee, so please accept it."

"Smart!" Ren Xiaosu beamed and said, "Alright, deploy more of your people to maintain order while the refugees line up to board the train."

The Zhou Consortium's intelligence officer was left in tears of humiliation. He suddenly felt like it was them making reparations to Ren Xiaosu, and that really felt aggravating.

He just could not understand. Since you needed someone to maintain order around the refugees, couldn't you have brought your own soldiers from the Northwest?!

However, he could not say that out loud.

The Zhou Consortium's intelligence officer smiled and said, "Alright, I'll see to it immediately..."

However, before coming out, Zhou Qingyang had given him other tasks. The intelligence officer said to Ren Xiaosu, "Future Commander, it's like this. Although the refugees used to put a great burden on the Zhou Consortium's resources, we've also imported a lot of grain from the South to feed them. The grain has been delivered here, but the refugees have almost all been taken away by you already. Won't the grain all go to waste like that? Y'know, we spent a lot of manpower and materiel to gather and transport the grain. Do you think you can..."

Ren Xiaosu was touched. "Hurry up and load the grain onto the train then. It won't be a waste if we bring it to the Northwest to feed the refugees!"

The intelligence officer was confused. Was that what I meant? Didn't I say all that because I wanted you to leave some refugees for our Zhou Consortium?

When Ren Xiaosu saw that the intelligence officer did not say anything, he drew his black saber. "Did I misunderstand?"

"Hahahahahaha," the intelligence officer laughed. "I'll load up the grain right away!"

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Mhm, you can use hemp ropes to secure the bags of grain onto the train's roof. That way, it won't take up the refugees' space on the train."

"That really makes sense," the intelligence officer said through clenched teeth. Now that the refugees had been taken and their provisions were also given away, he reckoned that his future with the Zhou Consortium would probably be over as well.. The intelligence officer looked at Ren Xiaosu and said in seriousness, "Future Commander, I also want to join the Prosperous Northwest."

In the month after the Prosperous Northwest plan was upgraded to 2.0, Ren Xiaosu led the Great Hoodwinker on 15 trips to the Central Plains. On average, they made one trip every two days to abduct almost 90,000 refugees from the Zhou Consortium to join the Prosperous Northwest.

During this one month, the name of the Prosperous Northwest Express had shaken up the entire Alliance of Strongholds. Even Wang Congyang's name, the person said to be operating the Prosperous Northwest Express, became famous.

What made Ren Xiaosu curious was where Wang Congyang had gone. He did not even come out to clarify he was not the one operating the steam locomotive, and this made Ren Xiaosu even more fearless when using the steam locomotive power.

The Prosperous Northwest 2.0 plan was still ongoing. Wang Yuexi expressed that the number of residents in Stronghold 144 had reached its limit. If more refugees came, it would cause a negative effect.

The Great Hoodwinker immediately went to Fortress 178 to report this matter to Zhang Jinglin. The good news was that Stronghold 145 was also starting to introduce an expanded pilot project for the contract responsibility system to complement the Prosperous Northwest 2.0 plan.

Actually, the Great Hoodwinker already knew from the beginning. The expansion of Stronghold 144 was in full swing now, and it proved the future commander, Ren Xiaosu, was capable of overseeing such a large reform. The fortress commander had always been doing his best to support Ren Xiaosu as his successor, so he would definitely be very willing to give him the green light to introduce his reforms.

But just as Ren Xiaosu was about to continue abducting more refugees to the Prosperous Northwest, something unexpected happened.

The steam locomotive slowly came to a stop in the wilderness. Ren Xiaosu looked at the Wang Consortium troops standing in front of the train in silence.

Not many soldiers were in the group, and it looked like they were only the size of a regiment. Since the other party had appeared here, Wang Shengzhi must have figured out Ren Xiaosu's travel pattern through Zero and ordered his men to stop them here.

Ren Xiaosu waited quietly in the train as someone familiar-looking from the Wang Consortium troops stepped forward and slowly approached the steam locomotive.

"Future Commander, long time no see," Wang Run greeted with a smile.

Wang Run could be considered an old acquaintance of Ren Xiaosu's. When he went to the Kong Consortium with the Trinity Institute to carry out the decapitation strike mission, it was Wang Run who was responsible for providing Ren Xiaosu with intel.

Later, on Mt. Zuoyun, it was Wang Run who led his men to transport the first batch of weapons and equipment to them, and they even fought alongside each other for half a month there.

As the saying went, slap not a smiling face. Ren Xiaosu dispelled the steam locomotive and went up to Wang Run with the Great Hoodwinker. "Is the Wang Consortium going to attack the Zhou Consortium? Y'all're getting impatient, huh?"

"It's not that we're impatient, but that we can't miss the opportunity." Wang Run explained with a smile, "The Zhou Consortium's at its weakest right now, and our Wang Consortium soldiers are also at the peak of our morale. If we don't make a move at this time, it'll only make things more troublesome later on."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. He had no intention of participating in the war with the Central Plains. Anything that had nothing to do with the Prosperous Northwest was not his particular concern.

Honestly, if he were to view things from the interests of the Northwest alone, he would rather see both the Wang Consortium and the Zhou Consortium suffer heavy losses. That way, the Northwest would have more time to complete their own development.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "What're y'all doing here?"

"To block your path, of course, Future Commander." Wang Run said frankly, "On one hand, our Wang Consortium's main forces have already arrived at the Zhou Consortium's border. If Future Commander were to appear within the Zhou Consortium's territory at this time, you could accidentally injure our troops. On the other hand, the homes of those Central Plains refugees are in the Central Plains. They

only chose to go to the Northwest as they had no other choice. Our Wang Consortium will definitely take care of them after the war is over. Therefore, Future Commander, you don't have to worry too much about their safety. Just let them remain in their hometown."

In fact, Wang Run was far too courteous. The other party was even treating Ren Xiaosu with such respect even though he was leading an entire regiment of troops. This was truly diplomacy before violence.

Actually, no matter what had happened between Ren Xiaosu and the Wang Consortium, and whether they had really stood by and done nothing during Jiang Xu's death, Wang Shengzhi was still Ren Xiaosu's savior.

Although he had already repaid the Wang Consortium's debts by helping them, it was better not to make a move if they could avoid fighting each other.

Meanwhile, Wang Shengzhi also had the same attitude towards Ren Xiaosu. It was as though he did not want to see his former friend become his foe.

Ren Xiaosu sized up the soldiers behind Wang Run. "You brought an entire regiment here just to tell me that?"

Wang Run explained, "I brought along a combat brigade, but I only showed up here with a regiment because I was afraid you would misunderstand."

"Understood." Ren Xiaosu nodded. He knew that if Wang Run could not convince him, they would be ready to intercept him. Moreover, the other party knew his strength. The rest of the brigade that did not appear here had to be equipped with weapons specially designed to deal with him.

No matter how powerful he was now, he should not underestimate the technology of human civilization.

Ren Xiaosu smiled. "Alright then, I'll head back now. I wish y'all the best."

Wang Run took the initiative to shake hands with Ren Xiaosu. "Thank you, Future Commander. Drop by for a visit in the Wang Consortium when you have time."

Ren Xiaosu shook hands with him. "We can still talk if you want to visit the Northwest as our guest, but forget it if you're inviting me to the Wang Consortium. We Northwesterners are all very hospitable. Come and have some fun when you have time."

"Definitely." After that, Wang Run turned around and walked back to his soldiers. Ren Xiaosu conjured up the steam locomotive and returned to the Northwest.

Along the way, the Great Hoodwinker sighed and said, "The Wang Consortium's pace of war is even faster than we expected. I feel that with the current state of the Zhou Consortium, the outcome will probably be decided in two to three months. This will be winner takes all. The Central Plains will soon fly the banner of the Wang Consortium."

"P5092 will be back soon as well." Ren Xiaosu said, "A while ago, someone from the Northwest Chamber of Commerce brought news that he's kidnap—led the Pyro Company's remnant troops across the Shenmu River in the grasslands and will be arriving in the Northwest soon. After he returns, we have to get him to complete the deployment of our troops along the Wang Consortium's border as soon as possible. I feel that the Wang Consortium will not stop here. Wang Shengzhi's target is the entire Alliance of Strongholds."

"Future Commander." The Great Hoodwinker suddenly said, "It's also time for you to make a trip to Fortress 178."

Ren Xiaosu fell silent. Ever since he came to the Northwest, he did not go to Fortress 178 to see Zhang Jinglin because he did not want to get into the details of becoming the Northwest's future commander.

But even if he did not want to admit that he was the future commander now, it would be futile. To everyone, Ren Xiaosu was the future owner of the Northwest. There was no doubt about it.

If Ren Xiaosu were to continue refusing, it would only make him unreasonable.

He asked the Great Hoodwinker, "What else do we need to do after we get to Fortress 178 other than meeting Mr. Zhang?"

The Great Hoodwinker smiled. He knew that this was as good as Ren Xiaosu accepting the role, so he explained, "First of all, Commander Zhang will bring you to the copper bell to pay your respects to the pioneers of Fortress 178. After that, you'll visit all of the outposts outside Fortress 178 on foot and express sympathy to those soldiers who've endured a decade of hard living guarding their positions."

"And after that?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"After that?" The Great Hoodwinker said with a smile, "From the moment you return from the outposts, you'll become the future of the Northwest."

## Chapter 1056 - The Future Commander Enters The City

The Wang Consortium's sudden war on the Zhou Consortium shocked the entire Alliance of Strongholds.

The 1st Field Division of the Wang Consortium's military corps crossed Luoyang City at lightning speed and arrived at the Zhou Consortium's northern defensive line. Although the Zhou Consortium was already prepared for this, their defenses were currently lax, and even their military discipline was slipshod. As a result, they were forced to retreat in defeat within the first week of the war.

The Zhou Consortium, led by Zhou Qingyang, started leaving Stronghold 73 and migrated southwards to the Zhou Consortium's political center.



This cowardly attitude demoralized the Zhou Consortium's soldiers. Many people said the glory days of the Zhou Consortium had already passed, with Zhou Shiji and Zhou Shoushi's era over.

Amid the commotion, no one noticed an off-road vehicle was driving from Stronghold 144 towards the even more solitary Fortress 178.

Now that the Northwest had opened up the trade routes, it had become bustling and prosperous.

The dozen or so strongholds that originally belonged to the Zong Consortium in the Northwest looked like a huge array with Stronghold 144 as its center, and building and development works were being carried out nonstop day and night.

There was only Fortress 178 standing farther in the Northwest, a mottled but magnificent presence.

Currently, the merchants did not really like going to Fortress 178. Because there were more of the Northwest Army's troops there, the margins of doing business in Fortress 178 were always far lower than in the other strongholds.

Moreover, the other strongholds in the Northwest were only about a 100 to 200 kilometers apart from each other. But if they wanted to go to Fortress 178, they could only set off from Stronghold 141, which was nearest to it and travel through nearly 400 kilometers of deserted land to get there.

There was no place to top up for gas or get food along the way. Everything was just very desolate.

As there were very few vehicles traveling in between the two strongholds, the dust storms caused by the nearby soil erosion often covered the roads with a layer of yellow sand.

Ren Xiaosu drove the off-road vehicle alone as it sped along the highway. A huge dust cloud was kicked up under the wheels, and it looked just like a comet shooting across the sky with a tail of exhaust.

He had set off from Stronghold 144 in the morning. By the time he arrived at Fortress 178, it was already evening.

Ren Xiaosu had been here before, but when he saw the towering fortress again, he was still awed.

This was a fortress completely different from the other strongholds. Everything here was built for the sake of war. There were firing points densely spaced apart on the walls, and even cannon embrasures were laid out in honeycomb patterns in them.

From the outside, this fortress gave off an extremely oppressive sense of intimidation. Upon entering it, one would see the complex structure of the fortress walls.

Different paths led to different parts of the fortress walls. There were wide railways for transporting artillery, and "bridle paths" for soldiers to pass through.

Ren Xiaosu could even imagine how intense it would get on the fortress walls when war broke out again.

Xu Xianchu was already waiting outside the gate of Fortress 178. When he saw Ren Xiaosu, he got out of the vehicle and gave him a warm hug. "Long time no see. Come on, the commander is waiting for you."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "Long time no see, Old Xu."

Xu Xianchu suddenly felt that when Ren Xiaosu called him "Old Xu," he said it in such an extremely familiar and endearing manner. It was as though they had never parted ways before. This made Xu Xianchu feel that Ren Xiaosu absolutely treated him as a friend!

As the two of them walked into the fortress, Ren Xiaosu wanted to take the car when Xu Xianchu stopped him with a smile. "The commander has specifically instructed that you have to walk from here."

Ren Xiaosu was surprised. "I thought I'd only need to go on foot when I visit the outposts? Why has it started already? Is there such a rule?"

"Oh, it's not a rule." Xu Xianchu said with a smile, "It's just that Commander Zhang wants everyone in the fortress to see what their future commander looks like so there won't be any awkwardness in the future."

Ren Xiaosu was slightly taken aback. At this moment, he realized that people were starting to rush over from both sides of the road. They were not doing this for anything other than to get a glimpse of their future commander.

Everyone had a kind smile on their face. The buildings by the roadside were filled with the fortress residents watching as well.

Xu Xianchu explained with a smile, "The people of Fortress 178 take pride in getting enlisted in the military to protect their homeland. If any family members get selected to join the Northwest Army, it's a glorious achievement for the whole family. They even have to treat their neighbors to a meal. Everyone loves and respects those of us serving in the military, so it's only natural that they're curious about what our future commander looks like."

Ren Xiaosu could not help but laugh. "That sounds a little exaggerated."

Xu Xianchu had a look at a group of young ladies who had gathered nearby. Then he said with a laugh, "If everyone didn't know you and Ms. Xiaojin are so close, there'd be a lot of matchmakers stopping you on the road. Speaking of which, it's really quite nostalgic. When we left Stronghold 113 together back then, you were still a refugee while I was a down-and-out private army officer. But times have changed. You're the future commander of our Northwest!"

At this moment, an elder on the sidewalk said with a smile, "Comrade Little Xu, you don't have to belittle yourself. You are our Northwest's King of Cauldrons! I heard that your usage of the black cauldron has become rather godly. You can even blot out the sky!"

Xu Xianchu said reservedly, "You flatter me, sir!"

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

He did not even know Xu Xianchu had gained the nickname "King of Cauldrons."

And what the hell was this black cauldron that blotted out the sky? Just how big had Xu Xianchu's black cauldron become?!

"About that..." Ren Xiaosu asked nonchalantly, "How big is that black cauldron of yours?"

Xu Xianchu said with a laugh, "Blotting out the sky was just an exaggeration. It's only a few dozen meters in diameter."

"That's already very big!" Ren Xiaosu sighed.

At this moment, a few veterans were standing on the sidewalk in their military uniforms. Their hair had already grayed, and their bodies were hunched over. However, the military medals on their chests were still glistening brightly.

To everyone, the arrival of the future commander in the city was just like a ceremony. From today onwards, the authority over the Northwest would gradually start shifting. It would only end when Zhang Jinglin finally handed all of his authority over to Ren Xiaosu.

When one of the veterans saw Ren Xiaosu walking down the long boulevard, he muttered, "I heard that this future commander is extremely good at combat. I wonder if he'll empathize with the recruits like how the old commander and Commander Zhang did."

Another veteran joked, "Does a matter like this need a frail old man like you to worry over it? Just who do you think you are?!"

These veterans were very old. When Zhang Jinglin became the fortress commander, they had already retired from the military. When Zhang Jinglin walked into the city as the future commander, they had also stood on the streets and watched him from afar.

The "old commander" they were referring to was not Zhang Jinglin, but Zhang Jinglin's predecessor.

Someone nearby said with a smile, "In the previous war with the Zong Consortium, the Razor Sharp Company achieved successive military achievements under his leadership. However, not a single person died in the process. So he'll definitely protect this place just like the old fortress commanders did. Everyone, please don't worry."

The veterans turned around and were surprised to see that Zhang Jinglin had gotten next to them at some point. Ren Xiaosu also noticed Zhang Jinglin's presence, so he greeted him with a smile, "Mr. Zhang."

Zhang Jinglin walked out of the crowd and said, "Are you ready? Once you've made this decision, you're not allowed to turn back."

## Chapter 1057 - Can't Afford To Lose

Although the streets were bustling with people, they consciously parted ways for Ren Xiaosu and Zhang Jinglin to walk towards Fortress 178's Memorial Bell Square.

Everyone knew about this tradition. The first thing the future commander did upon entering the city was to pay tribute to the pioneers who died in battle for Fortress 178.

Zhang Jinglin looked at the residents on both sides of the street as he walked. He suddenly asked Ren Xiaosu, "So do you know what Fortress 178 is fighting for now?"

"More or less." Ren Xiaosu smiled. "But I still haven't figured out how to protect them and be a good leader for the Northwest yet."

Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "I was the same as you at the beginning. When the old commander told me to take over Fortress 178, my mind was in a daze. I was only a medic, so how did I end up becoming the commander of the Northwest Army?"

"What happened after that?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

"Later, he locked me up in solitary and told me that I was the commander and that I was the only one who could lead everyone to survival. If I didn't agree to it, he would lock me up forever," Zhang Jinglin recalled. "He even gave me guidance and said he was also not prepared when the previous commander got him to take over. In the end, he was strung up and beaten until he agreed to it."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Why were the commanders of Fortress 178 all made to take their roles in such a torturous manner?

When Zhang Jinglin saw that Ren Xiaosu was shocked, he continued with a smile, "Speaking of which, it's quite strange. None of the commanders of Fortress 178 were willing to take their roles at the beginning. It was always the old commander behaving like a thug and forcing the next commander to submit to their pick. So in a way, I can be considered the gentlest commander when it comes to picking the next commander. What do you think? Are you touched?"

"Mr. Zhang, you haven't changed at all." Ren Xiaosu sighed emotionally.

Back at the school in town, Zhang Jinglin would plant vegetables in the yard and even smoke cigarettes. Although he was a decent person, he did not give off an oppressive aura when interacting with others.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "But why did they all have to choose someone unwilling to be the commander? There should be a lot of capable people out there."

"The old commander once told me that I must choose someone who doesn't care for the position of commander. Because the commander of Fortress 178 does not need ambition or desire for power," Zhang Jinglin explained.

"Why's that?" Ren Xiaosu was surprised.

"Because Fortress 178's duty is to protect. Its commander definitely must not have any intention of expanding the territory." Zhang Jinglin said in seriousness, "The reason for our existence is these people around us. If this war chariot starts moving for the sake of its own desires one day, Fortress 178 will be on its road to demise. Of course, choosing the fortress commanders this way might not necessarily be right either, but it's always been done like this in the past. If I make the wrong choice, it won't be my fault either. It was the old commander who made me do it this way."

"Wait a minute, why did you suddenly shift the blame?!" Ren Xiaosu was stunned.

"But even so, you still have to work hard." Zhang Jinglin instructed in seriousness, "Of course, you're doing great now. I've been paying close attention to everything happening at Stronghold 144. Initially, I was worried you couldn't manage a stronghold since you're still too young. But the results you've shown made me realize I was overthinking things."

Zhang Jinglin continued, "Using the contract responsibility system to stimulate everyone's enthusiasm for reclaiming the wastelands is the most suitable solution for the entire Northwest. I have to admit you're much better than when I first took over."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Mr. Zhang, what was it like when you took over Fortress 178?"

"At that time, I only had Fortress 178 to manage, but I was so busy with it. Someone might say they wanted to raise the level of combat readiness today and expand the number of troops. But tomorrow, someone else would say there wasn't enough food. In any case, just handling these political matters alone was already like fighting a war." Zhang Jinglin sighed and said, "At that time, the Zong Consortium was still secretly causing trouble for Fortress 178. A lot of problems also arose within Fortress 178, but fortunately, they were all resolved. Otherwise, I really couldn't face the old commander when I die. However, after experiencing all this, I've concluded that no one's born to be a commander. They'll naturally improve once they get put in that position, and the pressure will make them grow."

Although Zhang Jinglin made it sound very simple, Ren Xiaosu knew it would definitely be very difficult when the time came for him to take over.

Zhang Jinglin continued, "You already have your supporters. Many of them are very talented in politics, and you also have a genius military commander in P5092, so that makes me less worried for you. What I'm more interested in is your Prosperous Northwest 2.0 plan. Have you started thinking about the 3.0 plan?"

1.0 was about recruiting highly skilled people, such as Wang Yun, P5092, Ji Zi'ang, and others.

2.0 was to cast a wide net and abduct a large number of refugees to support the development of the Northwest. They would start reclaiming the wastelands and boost their technical talents.

The progression of the 2.0 plan was still rather surprising this time. That was because not all of the refugees were uneducated people. A large group were former technicians, engineers, university professors, and other highly skilled professionals from the Pyro Company and the Kong Consortium. Some of these people even held patents in their names, and this was a very strong supplement to the technological advances of the Northwest.

For example, a scientist among these refugees was one of the program directors who had researched and developed micro pacemakers, and another was a project leader who led the development of single-use endoscopes.

Although these talents were not of much help to the war efforts, a growing force should not always be thinking of war exclusively. The most important thing was to go for an all-around development.

Only those who were truly concerned about the development of their establishments would understand how important such people were.

Truly, Zhou Qingyang was a fool. He only felt the refugees were a burden, but he never thought there would also be a wealth of talent hidden among them.

That was why Zhang Jinglin praised the Prosperous Northwest 2.0 plan. The "abduction" of the refugees this time had really given the Northwest a huge surprise.

As for 3.0...

Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said with a wry smile, "I don't have any ideas for the 3.0 plan yet."

"It's fine, there's no hurry." Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "We still have a long way to go."

The two of them had already walked up to the memorial bell. A huge copper bell hung in the square where 11 tall stone tablets were scattered. They stood for the 11 wars Fortress 178 had participated in.



Behind the two of them was a dense crowd of Fortress 178 residents. Everyone was watching Zhang Jinglin and Ren Xiaosu's backs in the square quietly.

Zhang Jinglin said, "Under this monument are the names of the pioneers who died in the previous wars. The casualties total 279,281. Although the 11 wars left Fortress 178 riddled and down and out, we still emerged victorious every time. Xiaosu, as the current commander, I actually have nothing much to teach you. But there's one thing you must remember. Although victory and defeat are common in war, Fortress 178 must never, ever lose. Look at those people behind watching you with anticipation. You should understand that Fortress 178 can't afford to lose."

Behind them were millions to tens of millions of Northwesterners. They really could not afford to lose.

Everyone said a person had to be brave enough to accept defeat, and that failure was not a big deal. What was more important was whether you had the courage to get up and fight again.

But it was different for the Northwest.. They had to use their courage, determination, wisdom, and even their lives to ensure that the final victory of every war was theirs to claim.

Chapter 1058 - How Shameless!

Fortress 178's memorial bell also bore the responsibility of reporting the time. In an era where watches were not widely available, the sound of the bell represented the people's sense of time.

While Ren Xiaosu and Zhang Jinglin were talking, a platoon of the garrison troops arrived at the square. They saluted Ren Xiaosu and Zhang Jinglin before walking over to the copper bell and striking it seventeen times.

It was 1700 hours. Everyone used this signal to check their own clocks.

The loud and melodious sound of the bell reverberated outwards. Ren Xiaosu stood amid the ringing and felt the evening sun's rays shine down on him.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu realized there was something particular about the direction the 11 gray stone tablets were facing. Their fronts faced the east, while their backs faced the west. Be it sunrise or sunset, the sun's rays would always shine down over them.

Under the afterglow of the sunset, the smooth gray stone tablets seemed to be plated with a layer of golden radiance. It was exceptionally brilliant.

But when the ringing faded away, Ren Xiaosu suddenly heard someone say, "Is that kid the next fortress commander? He looks a little inexperienced. I wonder if he's dependable."

"I think he's not too bad." Another voice answered, "A few days ago, a couple was chatting in the square, and I overheard them talking about this kid. Apparently, he's extremely good in combat."

"Good in combat? I can fight really well too!"

"And what are you? He's a supernatural being, OK? We didn't even have supernatural beings during our time!"

"They already existed back then. At that time, the Riders were quite ferocious. Have y'all forgotten? I think there were more than 30 Riders back then. I heard there's only 12 of them left now?"

"Then can you compare to a Rider? We were just normal folks. Even if we were still alive, we couldn't defeat this kid."

"As a fortress commander, what good is it even if he can fight really well? A commander has to rely on his wisdom!"

"Hey, junior, why do you always like talking back to me? I'm more than 40 years older than you, so be polite and don't keep arguing with your elders!"

"Oh, come off it! We've already been buried in the ground. What's with all that talk about who's more senior than who? Down here, we compare our military achievements. I've blasted a sorcerer to death in one shot before, but have you done anything like that?"

Ren Xiaosu listened quietly for a while before looking around in surprise to see who was speaking.

But after searching for a long time, he realized the residents of Fortress 178 behind him had maintained their silence throughout. They were observing a moment of silence for the martyrs, so nobody made any noise.

Zhang Jinglin asked, "What're you looking at? Let's go to the copper bell and have a look. You should have also heard about it. The bodies of our pioneers who sacrificed themselves on the battlefield are buried outside Fortress 178. But we'll bring back one of their teeth and bury it under the copper bell together to commemorate them. Of course, it also implies their spirits will continue to protect this land with their passion and bravery."

When Ren Xiaosu heard the word "spirits," his expression turned strange.

He heard a faint voice say, "Alright, enough chatting. That kid Zhang Jinglin is bringing another kid over. Let's talk after they're done paying their respects and leave."

"What're you afraid of? It's not like they can hear us anyway."

The voices were very noisy due to the cross talk. Ren Xiaosu had to listen very hard before he could discern what they were saying.

The closer Ren Xiaosu got to the copper bell, the stranger his expression became.

However, he did not say anything and just bowed deeply before leaving with Zhang Jinglin.

Before leaving, someone under the copper bell said, "Eh, why do I feel like that kid can hear what we're saying?"

"Bullshit, how can he possibly hear us when we're separated by the spiritual plane?"

"But when the fourth eldest Li was cracking his lame jokes just now, I saw the corners of that boy's mouth twitching!"

"Don't think too deeply into it. That kid's nerve endings are probably damaged or something. That's why his mouth was twitching!"

After Ren Xiaosu left with Zhang Jinglin, he suddenly asked, "Mr. Zhang, when are we setting off to the outposts?"

"At 0600 hours. We'll start walking for 41 kilometers to get to the first outpost." Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "Our journey this time will be very long, but it will be very meaningful."

"Mhm, alright." Ren Xiaosu turned around and looked at the copper bell behind him before following Zhang Jinglin to his temporary accommodation.

After 10 PM, the bell would not be struck anymore to signal the time until 6 AM the next morning. This was so it would not disturb everyone's rest.

At 2 AM, Ren Xiaosu quietly climbed out of the guest house's window and headed towards the copper bell stealthily.

When his figure arrived at the square, those faint voices rang out again. "Eh, look, why is that kid sneaking back? What does he want?"

"Has he come back to pay his respects to us again? Did our heroic deeds move him?"

"Stop being such a narcissist. I think he has some other motive!"

"Wait, do y'all remember what I said this afternoon? I think he might be able to hear us!"

In that instant, all of the commotion the martyred spirits were creating immediately stopped. Everyone watched quietly as Ren Xiaosu walked over step by step, hoping to see what he would do.

Ren Xiaosu walked up to the copper bell and said with a laugh, "I can indeed hear y'all talking."

At almost the same moment, the voices under the copper bell suddenly started stirring again. "See, I told you so!"

"Fuck!"

"Can this kid really hear us? How bizarre!"

"Is this kid a human or a ghost?"

"Ahem, everyone, be serious. He can hear us!"

In that instant, all of the voices disappeared again.

Finally, a deep voice asked, "How is it that you can hear us?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and explained, "It's probably because I have a power that allows me to communicate with martyred spirits. But I'm also very surprised that your spirits have remained here all this time."

"Actually, our spirits should have dissipated. But for some reason, as more and more people came to pay their respects to us, the faith that had gathered here grew and our consciousnesses gradually awakened. At first, everyone thought it was very boring to remain here. But later, we started thinking it was quite interesting. We were all very satisfied to see Fortress 178's days getting better and better."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. So it was the spontaneous act of Fortress 178's residents paying their respects that kept these martyred spirits around?

This could even happen?!

Ren Xiaosu suddenly said, "Then are y'all interested in 'coming back to life'? My power is called the Martyr's Palace. After you accept my summons, you can exist in the form of energy and make physical contact with other people. You can also continue to protect Fortress 178 this way."

However, that deep voice rejected Ren Xiaosu. "You want so many of us to listen to the commands of a young child like you? Are you kidding? How old are you? Do you know how old we are?"

Ren Xiaosu asked, "How old is the oldest one among you?"

"191!" The deep voice said, "I joined the military in the early days of the stronghold. You want me to take orders from a child like you? Dream on! How old are you?"

Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow and said, "I'm over 200 years old, any problem?"

The martyred spirits were confused.

'Doesn't matter whether I'm telling the truth or not, just know that I'm older than you!'

"Ptui! Brat, you're way too fucking shameless!"

"Ptui, ptui, ptui!"

"Ptui, ptui, ptui, ptui, ptui!"

"Get lost!"

"Kid, you're way too shameless!"

The deep voice interrupted the others again and said to Ren Xiaosu, "Kid, take a hike already. Stop trying to take advantage of us!"

#### Chapter 1059 - How Mean!

With over 200,000 martyred soldiers laid to rest under the copper bell at the memorial square, probably no one could have expected such a situation.

The stronghold residents who came to pay their respects to the martyred soldiers could not have expected the dead to actually be able to hear what they were saying.

But Ren Xiaosu did not care about that now. He only thought that if he could convince all these martyred spirits to enter his Martyr's Palace, he could probably do anything he wanted across the entire Alliance of Strongholds.

Even the Wang Consortium, which had launched an all-out war and recalled their veterans, only had about 200,000 troops now.

However, just as Luo Lan had mentioned before, the contract between the user and those who resided in the Martyr's Palace was an equal one. Even if you summoned the other party, there was nothing you could do if they did not accept your summon.

Amid the commotion, a martyred spirit suddenly said, "What's with that kid Zhang Jinglin? He actually chose such a dishonest boy to be the next commander?"

When Ren Xiaosu heard this, he said unhappily, "Who're you calling dishonest? How can you speak to your elder like that?"

When the martyred spirits heard Ren Xiaosu say that, they nearly vomited on the spot. "You even believe your own lies now? Can you be any more shameless than that?"

The martyred spirits' form of address for Zhang Jinglin had always been "that kid," so who could tolerate it now that someone was suddenly trying to pass off as their elder?

"Kid, I can tell at a glance that you're extremely devious!"

"That's right, this kid is full of tricks. He even tricked us into telling our age to him first!"

Ren Xiaosu said with a dark expression, "Are y'all serious? I heard everything you were saying among yourselves earlier. Tell me, how are y'all more serious than me? The one who said that there was a pretty young lady on the street, come forward! You're already resting in the ground, yet you're still checking out young women all day long. Perverts! Out with it! Have y'all also peeped on someone taking a shower?!"

The martyred spirits flew into a rage. "We only looked at her when she passed by. Do you think we're that dirty? Would we do something like that?! Besides, we can't leave this square at all!"

"Who knows if that's true?" Ren Xiaosu curled his lips.

Ren Xiaosu did not want to keep bickering with these martyred spirits. Instead, he said patiently, "Who can you protect by staying here? If the enemy really attacks, y'all can only watch the fight from the sidelines. If those fucking sorcerers become much stronger and Fortress 178 gets razed to the ground, no one will come and commemorate you anymore, and y'all will vanish forever, understand?"



The martyred spirits gradually fell silent. Ren Xiaosu continued, "Look, back then, all y'all used to fight that group of sorcerers from beyond the Northwest. If y'all settle down in my Martyr's Palace instead, I'll lead y'all in eliminating them. Isn't that much more satisfying?"

However, the martyred spirits did not buy it. "We've already had our fair share of battles, so stop trying to bullshit us. Once we go into your Martyr's Palace, we'll be under your control. Even if it were the old fortress commanders saying that to us, we wouldn't agree, much less you, a candidate to be fortress commander!"

When Ren Xiaosu realized he could not convince the martyred spirits, he gave up.

Seeing that these over 200,000 martyred spirits were unwilling to join him, Ren Xiaosu's heart ached a little.

However, he could not force them either. Ren Xiaosu said, "Alright, gentlemen, rest up. I'll be leaving then!"

"Wait." The deep voice from before said, "Kid, come back here."

Ren Xiaosu turned around and wondered, "Anything else the matter?!"

"Um... tell us in detail what's been happening in the Northwest recently," the deep voice said.

The martyred spirits had been cooped up under the copper bell for too long. Although the 200,000-odd of them could chat among themselves to relieve their boredom, they were getting tired of talking to each other after nearly 200 years.

Moreover, they could not get out from under the copper bell. Some of the people who came to pay their respects would talk about the latest happenings in the Northwest, but the problem was that no one would tell them about the events in detail.

Sometimes, when a major event occurred in the Northwest, such as the destruction of the Zong Consortium, which had always annoyed them, people would even come over with the day's newspaper to show them how powerful Fortress 178's Northwest Army was.

During such times, all of the 200,000-odd martyred spirits would squeeze together to read the newspaper. But before they could finish reading, the people who came to pay their respects would start burning the papers.

In the minds of those who came to pay their respects, the dead would get their hands on the newspapers if they burned them. Therefore, burning the newspapers was done out of goodwill for the dead.

But the martyred spirits were very angry. Once the newspapers were burnt, they could not read them anymore.

They felt especially peeved when they were halfway through reading the newspaper and it got burnt by the people who came to pay respects to them. It was simply too maddening.

Whenever this happened, everyone would start quarreling for as long as a month over what might have been written in the latter half of the newspaper.

To prevent such incidents from happening all the time, everyone purposely split the workload. One group would read the first half of the first page, while another group would read the second half. After that, yet another group would read the second page, then the third page, and so on.

Only by doing so could they piece together all the contents of a newspaper.

Although the process sounded very interesting, they often made mistakes when piecing together the newspaper's content. Once there were any errors, they would start blaming each other and argue endlessly.

If they could buy their own newspapers, they would definitely not want to go through such a tiring process!

And the problem was that it wasn't every day that people came to burn newspapers for them to "read." Such events would only occur once every couple weeks.

Therefore, the martyred spirits were particularly curious to know about what was happening in the rest of the world.

"Kid, tell us about what happened in the Northwest recently," the deep voice said again.

Ren Xiaosu grunted an affirmation and smirked.

He turned around and sat down at the copper bell. "There's still four or five hours until dawn. I'll tell y'all all about it."

When the martyred spirits saw this, they immediately perked up. It had to be known that they had not interacted with "outsiders" in a long time. Now that someone who could talk to them had appeared, it was equivalent to them suddenly gaining an additional channel to communicate with the outside world!

Ren Xiaosu said, "If we're talking about changes in the Northwest, we'll have to start with the Zong Consortium. One day, Wang Shengzhi, the current head of the Wang Consortium, personally came to the Northwest to pay a visit to Mr. Zhang Jinglin in hopes of reopening the trade route. However, the Zong Consortium tried to mess with the plans by allowing bandits in the valley to cut off Fortress 178's path and isolate them from the rest of the world. It's been 16 years since the last war happened in the Northwest. Mr. Zhang is worried that the foreign enemies beyond the Northwest have grown stronger. If Fortress 178 does not seek further development, they might not be able to stop them anymore. So he made up his mind and decided to eradicate the Zong Consortium, that cancerous tumor of the Northwest...."

"We already know about that. So what happened afterwards?" the deep voice asked.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Then I'll tell y'all about the chaos going on in the Central Plains. When I first got to the Central Plains, they were suddenly invaded by barbarians from the Far North, and Stronghold 176 crumbled like a house of cards under their attacks."

The martyred spirits said in unison, "Yes, yes! Tell us about that! Previously, a kid came to offer us newspapers and burnt it too fucking quickly. He burned the newspapers before we could even get to read the contents, so we don't know the details of that incident."

"Details?" Ren Xiaosu smiled. "If y'all want to hear the details, please join me for the next session. Alright, it's getting late. I'll be heading back to sleep."

Then Ren Xiaosu left.

The angry roars of the martyred spirits could be heard coming from behind him. "You fucking asshole! And I was wondering why you were suddenly kind enough to share stories with us. So you were deliberately trying to pique our curiosity and leave us hanging!"

"How fucking mean! How did such an asshole suddenly become a choice for the commander of the Northwest Army?!"

## Chapter 1060 - I Underestimated His Terribleness

There was a commotion in the square, but other than Ren Xiaosu, no one could hear it.

After a long time, the deep voice suddenly said, "Although that kid is a little mean, I find him quite interesting. After all, there's no use being humble in this chaotic world. Instead, it's only by being meaner that he can lead the survival of Fortress 178."

As the martyred spirits slowly calmed down, one of them suddenly said, "Fortress Commander Li, do you think that kid is qualified to be the commander?"

The deep-voiced Commander Li replied, "I think he's not too bad. Back when my old commander reprimanded me, he always said I was too honest. If I had used clemency and morality when dealing with the enemy, I would have led all of our Fortress 178's soldiers to their deaths. At first, I didn't understand why he said that. But later, I realized that he was right. Because our enemies won't talk about such morals with you."

"Alright, since Commander Li says so, there must be a reason for it," the martyred spirits said.

"However," Commander Li suddenly changed the subject and said, "I'm a little worried about the next kid who'll take over from that kid. Although it's still too early to talk about this now, based on the tradition passed down by our Fortress 178 commanders, we must find someone who isn't willing to be the commander. Then the sitting commander will force the future commander to accept the role. From this tradition, and with his asshole-ness, his successor will definitely be miserable...."

"Commander Li, you still have a mind to care about that?" The martyred spirits said, "We're only fucking concerned about when that kid will finish telling us the rest of the stories!"

The next morning, Ren Xiaosu woke up feeling refreshed. He packed his belongings and got ready to follow Zhang Jinglin to the outposts on foot.

However, Xu Xianchu came to inform Ren Xiaosu that their agenda for the day had been canceled at the last minute. As Commander Zhang had other, more important matters to attend to, the plan to visit the outposts would have to be delayed for a few days.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Oh, it's fine. I'll just walk around the stronghold for the next few days then."

He thought to himself that it must be something very important if Zhang Jinglin had to revise his schedule. Moreover, Xu Xianchu did not tell him the specifics, so it showed it was highly confidential.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Can I ask what matter held him up?"

"I don't know either." Xu Xianchu said with a laugh, "Don't look at me like that. I really don't know. To ensure absolute secrecy of the matter, Commander Zhang doesn't even use any communications equipment or satellite phones to communicate with his colleagues who are carrying out this mission."

Ren Xiaosu wondered what was going on. After all, Xu Xianchu was usually responsible for protecting Zhang Jinglin. If someone this close to him did not even know what was going on, wouldn't the matter be the toppest of top secret?

What could it be?

However, Ren Xiaosu was not a busybody. He would find out sooner or later if it was something he should know about.

Moreover, it suited his plans as well that Zhang Jinglin had something to attend to at the last minute.

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself, 'Didn't I just get to know a group of friends? I should take this opportunity to improve my relationship with them!'

After Xu Xianchu left, Ren Xiaosu became the person with the most free time in Fortress 178. He put on his cap and headed out. He had done so in case too many people recognized him. Ever since he walked down the long boulevard yesterday, probably a third of the people in Fortress 178 knew what he looked like now.

Ren Xiaosu headed straight for the memorial square. When he got there, he was surprised to see a young man standing under the copper bell with a newspaper in hand.

When he got closer, he heard the clamoring voices of the martyred spirits. "Group One, read the first half of the first page. Group Two, read the second half of the first page. Groups Three and Four, you're on standby. Everyone, you must complete your mission before the target finishes burning the newspaper!"

"Got it!"

"Got it!"

"I'll definitely complete the mission!"

"Send me for the first battle! I'll definitely get it done!"

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. Why did reading a newspaper suddenly sound like they were fighting a battle? He seriously suspected the 200,000-odd martyred spirits had fully organized themselves for this. They might even have formed an organized army.

If that were the case, as long as he could summon the martyred spirits into the Martyr's Palace, they would instantly become a fully operational combat force.

Moreover, some of the martyred spirits had already been together for nearly 200 years, with the shortest being 16 years. Such tacit understanding among a group was probably not something any other military unit could match.

But a martyred spirit suddenly said, "Wait! Look, that asshole has actually returned!"

The deep-voiced Commander Li ordered, "Ignore him! Let's finish reading the newspaper first!"

At this moment, the young man holding the newspaper looked at the copper bell and said, "Sirs, a new round of conscription has started. I've passed my physical, so we'll be comrades soon. Do y'all know that the Northwest is flourishing? This is the prosperous era that y'all wished for. I'll also protect this fortress with my life like y'all did."

The reason the people of Fortress 178 burned newspapers to the martyred spirits was because everyone hoped these pioneers would also learn about it in the underworld whenever something good happened in the Northwest.

A brazier was placed in the memorial square to be used for burning newspapers, and it was even cleaned regularly. This could also be considered a tradition of Fortress 178.

At this moment, the martyred spirits said with a smile, "This child has potential. He might even become a company commander in the future."

"I think he can become a brigade commander!"

"He might even become the fortress commander. Hurry up and replace that asshole!"

"Wait a minute, that mean kid is walking over!"

"What does he want?"

Ren Xiaosu took out a torch from somewhere and said to the young man, "Let me help you with that."

The young man recognized Ren Xiaosu. "F-Future Commander?"

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "I've just arrived at Fortress 178 and haven't been able to do anything for our pioneers yet, so let me help you burn this newspaper. May I?"

The young man looked at the future commander's sincere expression and said emotionally, "Sure."

With that, Ren Xiaosu took the newspaper from the young man.

The young man had only brought a box of matches with him. With the speed at which he could burn the newspaper with the matches, the martyred spirits could still have memorized all the newspaper's contents. After all, all of them had already gone through so much training.

But it would be completely different if it was a torch.

When the martyred spirits saw the torch in Ren Xiaosu's hand, they were shocked. "Kid, stop right there!"



"Fuck!"

"I've underestimated how horrible he can be..."

When the martyred spirits saw the rapidly blazing flames, they despaired.

After the young man left, Ren Xiaosu suddenly laughed. "Alright, you don't have to start criticizing me that quickly. I was just kidding with y'all. I bought today's Hope Media newspaper so that y'all can take your time and read it slowly."

Ren Xiaosu took out a newspaper from his storage space and placed it neatly on the ground.. Then he sat down next to the newspaper to protect it from getting blown away by the wind.