

# The First Order

## - Chapter 1201 – 1209

### Chapter 1201: Infamy and glory

There were not only people but also horses in the knights' defensive formation. In such a chaotic situation, it would be almost impossible for Ren Xiaosu to seek out the Norman family's patriarch by himself.

The Norman patriarch hiding in the crowd was just like having a massively destructive weapon in their midst. If the patriarch didn't make a move against them, great! But if he did, the 6th Field Division behind Ren Xiaosu would probably suffer heavy casualties.

Ren Xiaosu shouted in the crowd, "9 o'clock!"

After that, he made Old Xu charge left first. Meanwhile, the 22 T5 combatants, the Great Hoodwinker, Luo Lan, and the martyred spirits quickly arrived at Ren Xiaosu's flanks and charged forward in an arrowhead formation.

Wherever they moved, none of the knights could stop them.

Wang Yun was still surveying the battlefield with his binoculars as his gaze started wandering near the edge of the battlefield.

The fleeing civilians and the cavalry who had just joined the battlefield contributed to the noisy farce. Within Ghent City, there were even deserting knights and sorcerers. While few in number, there were indeed some.

From the look of things, the patriarch of the House of Tudor suddenly fainting had dealt a huge blow to the morale of the entire House of Tudor.

Wang Yun stood on the high platform and saw Chen Jiu standing on a similar structure on the opposite side.

When he saw Chen Jiu, Chen Jiu also saw him. The two of them had their binoculars raised as they looked at each other.

Chen Jiu was shocked. But before he could think whether to wave at Wang Yun, Wang Yun's gaze shifted elsewhere.

It was not that Chen Jiu did not look suspicious, but Wang Yun felt that since Chen Jiu could get his hands on a pair of binoculars, it meant he was not on the same side as the sorcerer clans.

A moment later, Wang Yun actually saw a strange figure on the edge of the battlefield.

“Old Ji, get me down!” Wang Yun shouted.

The earthen observation platform quickly collapsed back to the ground. Wang Yun stuffed the binoculars into Zhang Xiaoman’s hands and pointed in the 2 o’clock direction. “The Tudor family’s patriarch is over there. Keep a close eye on him! If he shows any sign of waking up, quickly inform Future Commander!”

“Wait, where are you going?” Zhang Xiaoman shouted.

But Wang Yun did not even bother turning around to respond to him. Instead, he ran straight into the shadows of Ghent City in the darkness of the night.

The city, the lights and shadows, the walls, the weapons, the people, and the horses, all of these sights were processed into a huge dataset in Wang Yun’s mind. But at this moment, he threw away all of these distractions and was left with only one fixation in his head.

As he ran wildly, his medium-length hair swayed in the wind due to the speed he was moving at.

Wang Yun was wearing a black combat uniform and a pair of black, steel-toed combat boots that squeaked from his heavy movements. The rallying cries on the battlefield in the distance were extremely clear, but he could only hear his own voice at this moment.

His panting, his footsteps, the route, it was all he knew!

“Turn left!” Wang Yun turned left and leaped onto a low roof.

Zhang Xiaoman occasionally looked over to Wang Yun from the observation platform. He knew Wang Yun was pursuing a certain target, but he did not know who it was.

In this huge city, Wang Yun kept adjusting his route as he calculated the other party’s speed and his own.

The strongest brain in the Northwest was in complete overdrive due to this inexplicable pursuit.

Every time he passed an intersection, countless choices would form in his mind. It was just like a multiple choice exam, but Wang Yun had to ensure he chose the most correct answers.

Due to the rapid chase, Wang Yun's blood temperature started to rise. His sweat started dripping profusely in the wind, but he did not think of giving up once.

Wang Yun enjoyed this feeling. He really liked this feeling!

Everything that happened in the past, the scheming life he led, and those depressing unachieved dreams of his all disappeared now.

Now that he thought about it, it really seemed to be destiny that the Great Hoodwinker would say the words "Prosperous Northwest" to him in the secret prison.

What was he fighting for at this moment? Was it for money and rewards? No.

Was it for the sake of holding high office? No.

All of this was so he could protect the future of the Northwest with everyone, as well as the enthusiasm to work hard with them!

This made his mind even clearer than before. It was far clearer than it had ever been!

"Turn right!" Wang Yun suddenly ran towards a monastery in Ghent City. He traversed across the roofs with every step calculated precisely.

When he climbed up to the top of the monastery's dome, he suddenly leaped into the empty night sky in front of him. "I've caught you!"

The moment he leaped, Wang Yun looked down and saw the street below him. A cloud of black mist was quickly traveling through the shadows.

While he was still midair, Wang Yun's pupils suddenly turned silvery. He reached out at the black smoke and shouted, "Restrict!"

The formless air started compressing inwards. For Wang Wenyan, who had turned into the black mist, he was being hunted by his natural enemy!

Wang Wenyan, who was the black mist, was forced back into his human form and fell from the sky with Wang Yun.

With two loud thuds, the two of them dropped heavily onto the stone pavement. As they fell, Wang Yun disarmed all of Wang Wenyan's weapons with his superpower.

But Wang Yun did not even utter a sound of pain. He just lay on the ground and started laughing like a lunatic.

Two streams of blood started flowing out of his nostrils. This was the aftereffect of overexerting his brainpower. However, he would be fine after resting for a while, so Wang Yun was not really bothered by it.

Wang Wenyan slowly stood up and said coldly, "Is it worth it to overextend yourself for that young man with no ideals?"

Wang Yun got up and pointed his pistol at the other party's forehead. He said with a smile, "He doesn't have any ideals? Are you fanatics fit to judge him?"

"What else then?" Wang Wenyan sneered. "What plans does the Northwest have?"

"We just want to live well on that land. What's wrong with growing vegetables, building irrigation canals, developing trade, and building roads?" Wang Yun spat on the ground.

When overloaded with exercise, the oral cavity would secrete more mucus to moisturize the respiratory tract.

"What kind of an ideal is that?" Wang Wenyan said coldly.

"Do we have to think about ambitious things every day like you people for us to have ideals?" Wang Yun said disdainfully, "Extreme fanatics like yourself will only make the world worse."

Wang Wenyan did not argue further. Actually, both of them knew neither of them could really convince the other in this debate.

Wang Yun calmed down. "Be a good person in your next life. Don't go around killing innocent people anymore."

Wang Wenyan said coldly, "I'm a woman, and as the director of the Wang Consortium's intelligence and field operations, I request that Fortress 178 grant me diplomatic immunity."

No matter when, Wang Wenyan had always represented herself as a man to others. It was like this in Luoyang City, and also the same here in the Kingdom of Sorcerers. However, she was indeed a woman. It was just that her short hair, sharp clothing, and relatively neutral appearance allowed her to hide her true gender.

As a man, it allowed her to have more assertiveness when carrying out missions.

But now, as a highly experienced intelligence agent, she would make use of any and all circumstances to create an opportunity for herself.

“I know you’re a woman.” Wang Yun sneered. “I knew since the time in the Pyro Company’s Sacred Mountains. That’s why I can’t take you to meet Future Commander. I can’t let him bear the infamy of killing a woman. Let me bear the burden instead.”

Bang! Wang Yun aimed at Wang Wenyan’s forehead and pulled the trigger.

The moment he pulled the trigger, Wang Wenyan tried turning into a black mist again to avoid the bullet. However, Wang Yun was already prepared for it. The surrounding air instantly compressed around Wang Wenyan and left her unable to move.

After that shot, Wang Wenyan fell to the ground with blood seeping out of a wound in her temple.

Just in case, Wang Yun even shot the other party twice more in the heart. It wasn’t until he was sure she was completely dead that he heaved a sigh of relief and sat on the ground to catch a breather.

He pressed his radio and reported, “Future Commander, Wang Wenyan has been taken out.”

...

A 180-strong assault column was advancing on an intersection on Crown Avenue in Ghent City. Every time the Northwest Army’s soldiers armed with guns and ammo advanced a certain distance, they would ensure the angle of their covering fire was able to deal with any sudden threats.

All of the soldiers were clutching their automatic rifles and steadying them with their left hands, ready to pull the trigger at any moment.

Within each assault column, 12 soldiers were equipped with 40 mm underbarrel grenade launchers acting as the fire support team.

Once they encountered a large cavalry attack or had a tough battle at hand, they would have to react quickly and clear the way for the assault column.

These soldiers were wearing bulletproof vests with embedded steel plates. They had Fortress 178’s standard-issue pistols holstered to their outer thighs, and there was even a spare pistol holstered under their armpits on the side of their bulletproof vests.

The troops Black Fox had brought from Stronghold 144 this time were armed to the teeth.

“All clear here.”

“All clear here as well.”

“All clear here too.”

As the assault column advanced, voices of the soldiers in the lead were constantly transmitted over the radio.

On top of the buildings on both sides of the street, dozens of archers from the House of Tudor quietly drew their bows and poked their heads out from the roofs.

But before they could take aim, several soldiers in the assault column on the street discovered their presence in advance and fired a series of shots at them.

The rattling of their guns was cracking and decisive. The powerful suppressive fire forced the archers back.

As the enemies were no longer in their direct line of fire after retreating back onto the roofs, the assault column’s gunfire was unable to immediately penetrate the roof of the building and hit them.

“T4s, scale the walls. T3s, form a bridge,” the company commander ordered sternly over the radio.

Five soldiers appeared in a flash from the assault column and slung their guns diagonally across their backs. Meanwhile, two other comrades beside each of them formed a “bridge” with their hands.

The moment they stepped onto the “bridge”, the T3s who formed the bridge launched them towards the top of the building.

The five T4-ranked combatants made use of the huge reaction force to bound towards the roofs like birds. While they were still in midair, they pulled out their pistols from their leg holsters and started shooting.

Following close behind were some of the standard soldiers. More than 20 of these soldiers went up onto the roofs and took out the remaining enemies to ensure there would be no survivors.

Anxious shouting and screaming erupted from the roof before it fell silent again.

“The roofs are cleared,” a T4 combatant reported.

Truly, Ren Xiaosu’s decision to have P5092 abduct the Pyro Company’s remaining troops back to the Northwest was definitely a wise move.

Among these 10,000-strong troops, a third of them were T3 combatants, and a large number were even T4 and T5 combatants.

Before P5092 met them, even he did not expect the average strength of this remnant force to be so strong.

But later, he figured out the Pyro Company and the Wang Consortium had been engaged in a fierce war, so only soldiers who were strong enough could successfully pull off the retreat plan to the northern plains.

The weaker soldiers would have already been caught and killed by the Wang Consortium.

Therefore, the survivors in this group were all elites.

The normal soldiers on the roofs started pulling back while the five T4 combatants stayed behind as lookouts.

But a moment later, someone on the roof level farther ahead suddenly got up and gunfire was heard. One of the T4s who was still up on the roof was suddenly shot in the thigh.

The T4 combatant was caught off guard and fell off the roof. Several soldiers below quickly caught him and lessened the impact of the fall.

The company commander said on the radio, "It's an improvised firearm. The gunshot came from 11 o'clock. Grenadiers, bombard the target area."

A soldier angrily raised the muzzle of his grenade launcher and pulled the trigger. The grenade flew through the night sky with a long trail of white smoke behind it and hit the target accurately. A huge explosion erupted at the top of the building in front, and the hidden enemy was sent flying.

"Check the wound," the company commander ordered.

The T4 combatant who had been hit stood up and said, "No need, it's lead shot." With that, he used a dagger to cut open a small area of his pants at his thigh, revealing the wound inside.

Under normal circumstances, lead shot was relatively softer, so when it hit a target, the kinetic energy would be fully released. The shattered lead bullet would cause a gaping wound with large areas of irregular abrasion and, if not handled in time, could even cause lead poisoning to the wounded. If the lead entered the bloodstream, it could even destroy the entire circulatory system.<sup>1</sup>

But T4s were clearly different from normal people. Moreover, the quality of lead shot in the Kingdom of Sorcerers was far inferior to that of the Central Plains.

When the lead shot hit the T4 combatant's leg, it did not even manage to penetrate the muscle tissue and only left a wound on the epidermis.

The T4 combatant took out a first aid kit and wiped his dagger with alcohol swabs. Then he forcefully sliced off the palm-sized grazed skin to prevent the lead fragments from affecting his circulatory system and causing any aftereffects. His muscle tissue was not even damaged after he sliced off his skin.

"Alcohol, gauze." The T4 combatant briefly treated his wound before getting back up on his feet. "Let's continue advancing. I can move with no problem."

Everyone watched in silence. This T4 combatant had to be in a lot of pain, but he did not even wince throughout the ordeal. This was the kind of war machine the Pyro Company was so proud of.

The company commander glanced at him. "Why don't you return to the rear and rest? The commander has set up a field hospital on Anning East Road. As long as you retreat there, you'll receive treatment immediately."

"No need," the T4 combatant said with a shake of his head.

The company commander clapped the T4 combatant on his shoulder. "Bro, you're really tough! Let's continue advancing then!"

The company commander was from the 6th Infantry Brigade and had gone through the Battle of Mt. Zuoyun. He was promoted to company commander after that battle.

To be honest, the integration process of the Pyro Company and the 6th Infantry Brigade might not really be that effective. After all, they were two fighting forces and had not known each other for long.

The two sides fought together only because they were soldiers and had to fully obey orders and work for a common objective. But in fact, their personal relationship would only make them nodding acquaintances, not friends.

But everyone knew it would be different after this war.

Half an hour later, the assault column arrived at the edge of the battlefield. After turning another corner, they would probably come into view of the messy defensive position of the knights.

The company commander stopped in his tracks and spoke in a low voice into the radio, "Take five minutes to rest and regroup."

They had arrived at the enemy's flank, ready for the tough battle that would ensue five minutes later.



The company commander was panting heavily when he suddenly laughed over the radio, "Sometimes, I'm quite envious of you comrades from the Pyro Company. You're all like fucking animals who don't get tired at all. By the way, why did you all agree to join the Northwest Army?"

The T4 combatant who was injured earlier laughed and said, "It's very simple. After Commander P5092 found us, he only said one thing that made us decide to follow him to the Northwest."

The company commander was stunned. "What did he say?"

T402992 said with a smile, "Commander P5092 told us that if we followed him, he'd let us die in battle with dignity."

At that time, the Pyro Company's remnant troops were retreating towards the northern plains like stray dogs. All of the strongholds controlled by the Pyro Company had fallen in the face of the attacks by the Wang Consortium's troops. They had seen too many of their comrades dying without honor. They were no longer fighting for the survival of the Pyro Company in the Central Plains but had died because of the ambition of some lunatics.

At that time, it was extremely tempting for these Pyro Company warriors to be given a chance to die with dignity.

On the long boulevard of Ghent City, time was ticking by. Everyone fell silent again as they adjusted their mental state. The company commander watched his watch and counted down the time.

After five minutes passed. He said calmly on the radio, "Is everyone ready? Future Commander is still waiting for us. Let's move out!"

With that, the entire assault column charged out of the street. Although they were a little fearful, they did not intend to retreat.

The fire support team finished firing a volley of grenades at the enemy's defensive position in one go.

This assault column that had detoured to the enemy's flank was a sharp knife suddenly stabbing into the enemy's ribs!

...

"Is Tudor, that old codger, still unconscious?" An aged voice roared from the Norman family's position, "He's such a good-for-nothing!"

“Patriarch, it looks like he hasn’t regained consciousness yet. The Knights of Tudor are still retreating bit by bit.” The commander of the Knights of Radiance said, “Patriarch, should we retreat? It’s still the Knights of Tudor that are mainly under attack. It’s not too late for us to leave now!”

“Where do we go?” The Norman family’s patriarch said coldly, “Are we going to give up Ghent City?”

The situation on the battlefield was gradually turning into a one-sided battle. The Tudor family’s patriarch fainting was like the first wave of dominoes, causing a massive chain reaction.

More importantly, the elite knights the sorcerer clans were so proud of were like helpless children against a modern army.

Every time those dark, menacing weapons fired, a group of knights would fall.

There were also strange vines constantly sprouting from the ground as they took the lives of the knights in droves.

“We have to take action.” The Norman family’s patriarch said coldly, “Our fate is intertwined with what happens to the House of Tudor. If we let the enemy wipe them out, it’ll be difficult for us to hold out by ourselves after that. The enemy we’re facing this time is too powerful!”

The dozen or so snipers Black Fox had brought were already in position on high ground. Their eyes never once lingered on the normal knights.

P5092 had only assigned one mission to them: Find the sorcerers in the crowd and kill them.

Some sorcerers were killed as soon as they took out their Eyes of True Sight.

Before tonight, no one had expected that a group of Central Plains forces would actually appear in Ghent City. Furthermore, these troops were even capable of driving them back within their own territory.

In the more than 200 years after The Cataclysm, the Kingdom of Sorcerers developed a high and mighty arrogance when facing the Central Plains.

They had plundered people and resources from the Central Plains and even took gold, silver, and riches from them. Every war that broke out was initiated by the Kingdom of Sorcerers.

Although Fortress 178 was gradually becoming stronger, the Northwest Army had never attacked the Kingdom of Sorcerers inside their territory before.

In the war 17 years ago, the Kingdom of Sorcerers was actually considered to have suffered a defeat. But after they returned home, the old aristocracy of the Magi reached a consensus in their portrayal of the war: We don't have to admit we were defeated, but let's not go there anymore in the future.

Over the past 200 years or so, the decadent sorcerer dynasty had formed a stereotypical mindset: It's impossible for the Northwest Army to launch a counterattack on the Kingdom of Sorcerers.

Even if the Northwest Army did counterattack, the 1,000-kilometer supply line would be a problem for them. If the Northwest Army embarked on the difficult journey and arrived at the Kingdom of Sorcerers, the Magi's elite knights and archmages here would surely teach them a lesson in blood.

In fact, the sorcerers were right. Fortress 178 still had many tasks waiting for them to handle, and they were truly incapable of establishing such a long supply line.

But what the sorcerers never expected was that someone from the Central Plains would actually learn how to use their Enchanted Doorway spell and gain direct access to their kingdom.

Supply line? There was no need for such a thing anymore.

The massive Stronghold 144 had become the forward operating base for this war. Even if there were any casualties, they could immediately be sent back to the field hospital in Stronghold 144 for the best treatment.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu, Luo Lan, and the T5 combatants were closing in on the Norman family's patriarch.

The Norman family's patriarch had donned heavy armor. He said to the archmage next to him, "Cover me, I'm about to make my move—"

But before he could finish speaking, a sniper bullet shot out from nowhere and turned the archmage next to him into a bloody mist.

The blood even splattered into the Norman family's patriarch's armor through the gaps of his visor.

The Norman family's patriarch was stunned when he saw Ren Xiaosu and Old Xu charging through the crowd. They charged in wedge formation like an icebreaker ship sailing through ice-covered waters. Wherever it passed through, cracks would mercilessly appear in the solid armor of ice with a terrifying crackle.

"Zhou Yingxue, have the vines reached my feet yet? Clear the obstacles ahead for me!" Ren Xiaosu shouted into his earpiece.

“Alrighty, I’ve been waiting for a long time,” Zhou Yingxue replied.

A moment later, a manhole cover in front of Ren Xiaosu was blasted into the air by the vines. The surging vines brushed away the knights in front of Ren Xiaosu like a tidal wave and forced open a path for him.

The vines also tried to attack the Norman family’s patriarch, but he used some kind of defense that caused the vines to wither once they got within ten meters of him.

It was not only the vines but even the knights and sorcerers around the Norman family’s patriarch who were pulverized into nothing.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. In order to protect himself, the other party even indiscriminately attacked his own people.

At this moment, a sniper bullet traveled several hundred meters through the air to reach this patriarch. However, the protective spell around him was even able to quickly obliterate the powerful sniper bullet.

The palm-sized bullet spun and came within ten meters of the Norman family’s patriarch. Then, as though it had encountered a grinder, it turned into powder bit by bit and dissipated into the air.

It was as though there were an absolute domain surrounding the other party that ensured his safety.

However, no other spells appeared after the other party had cast this spell. It seemed like the domain of safety had to be continuously cast and could not be interrupted.

He could not even move from his position.

The Norman family’s patriarch stood in the Absolute Domain in his armor, and his black visor seemed to be silently mocking everyone around him.

But the Norman family’s patriarch suddenly saw a dark Shadow Door open in front of him. Then an armored arm stretched out from it.

The power of the Absolute Domain started destroying the armor on that hand as the nanomachines were pulverized into dust and disappeared. But no matter how many nanomachines got destroyed by this Absolute Domain, new ones continued to reform as part of the armor.

They were fearless warriors as they regrouped and got destroyed one after another. The billions of little guys only had one purpose, which was to protect Ren Xiaosu’s arm.

Ever since they were “born,” they only had one mission. They were driven by the will of humanity to become true war machines. Even if it meant self-destruction, they would not hesitate.

The Norman family’s patriarch was unable to move away from where he was standing due to the need to continuously cast the spell. As such, he could only watch helplessly as the arm resisted the destructive power of his spell and stretched out in front of him bit by bit. It was slowly piercing through steel with its will, but the determination was firm and unwavering.

And then... the Norman family’s patriarch saw that arm snatch the black Eye of True Sight from his hand!

The Norman family’s patriarch froze on the spot. The black Eye of True Sight had been taken away from him just like that?!

The reason the sorcerers were wearing armor now was because of the slapping incidents at the Winston and Vaduz Cathedrals.

They did not have time to raise their ability to withstand stress, nor did they know how to better defend against the person behind this move. The archmages thought that since that were the case, they might as well put on their armor. At the very least, they would not look too bad if they got slapped in the face.

A lot of people thought this was a face-slapping spell that was specifically and only used for slapping people’s faces.

But no one could have expected the hand could actually take away the black Eye of True Sight.

The Norman family’s patriarch tried to hold his Eye of True Sight tightly, but how could his grip be stronger than Ren Xiaosu’s? At that moment, he felt like his fingers were about to break, so he had no choice but to let go!

The Eye of True Sight was the foundation of a sorcerer’s spell casting. Without it, their ability to cast spells would be destroyed.

Just as his Absolute Domain was destroyed, a sniper bullet flew towards him again. The gunshot from the shadows was a judgment that declared the end of his life.

Ren Xiaosu put the black Eye of True Sight into his pocket. “Zhang Xiaoman, where’s the Tudor family’s patriarch?”

“Future Commander, he hasn’t regained consciousness yet. They’re moving him towards your 10 o’clock. It seems like they’re planning on retreating,” Zhang Xiaoman

answered excitedly. Zhang Xiaoman even felt like crying. It had already been an entire night, and he was finally of some use now!

### 1202 Heavenly Train

On the huge stage of Ghent City, there weren't any stunning stage effects, yet everything that played out couldn't be more realistic.

Tonight, ever since Ren Xiaosu fought his way out of Rose Avenue, the lone monastery standing at the end of the street became the starting point of everything. It was where the bloodshed began, kicking off the show that followed.

Chen Jiu witnessed almost the entirety of the battle tonight.

From the beginning, the situation was so one-sided no one thought Ren Xiaosu could win. At that time, the Sanctuary was still wondering if they should take action and save him.

But in the blink of an eye, the sorcerer clans had become the disadvantaged group on this stage.

This was something no one had expected. Even the Norman family's patriarch had been tragically killed in action.

He had personally witnessed Ren Xiaosu escaping from the pursuit of tens of thousands of people. He had witnessed a leopard gecko arriving at the battle site. He even witnessed how the entire situation became a little different after the other party brought out a large corroded metal door and opened it.

The observation deck under Chen Jiu's feet slowly lowered. He felt that there was no need for him to continue watching anymore.

"Father, where are you going?" Chen An'an gazed at Chen Jiu's back as he moved away from the battlefield. "Aren't you going to save him? Has he been killed?"

Chen An'an and the others could not see the battle. Although they heard the sound of gunfire, they couldn't determine what was going on.

They did not know the 6th Field Division had already arrived on the battlefield. Therefore, they thought Ren Xiaosu might have been overwhelmed by the sea of pursuers.

However, things were completely different from what they had imagined. Chen Jiu turned to them and said, "He doesn't need us to save him. I'll return to the underground now and see if I can seize this last opportunity. Wait for me here. I'll be back soon."

The 20-odd members of the Sanctuary looked at one another, unable to figure out what this last opportunity meant.

Chen Jiu returned to the underground. He walked through a long and dim passageway and headed towards the depths of the underground.

The further he walked, the darker it became. It was so dark Chen Jiu could barely make out the graffiti on the walls, yet it seemed like everything was getting brighter and brighter. It was as though they had spent hundreds of years walking through a dark tunnel, and now, there was finally a glimmer of light ahead. That light was the exit, and this tunnel was finally coming to an end.

If there were a better choice, the Sanctuary would definitely not choose to have everyone hide in the obscure underground.

The underground might look interesting, but who would understand the suffering of not getting any sunlight for a long time?

Without sunlight, the human body would experience calcium deficiency. Therefore, everyone had to go to some places known as light wells in the underground to get some sun every once in a while so their bodies could continue growing normally.

However, there was an extremely limited amount of light in the underground. Therefore, not everyone had a chance to bask in the sunlight. As such, a lot of people suffering from hunchback disease started appearing in the underground.

Chen Jiu remembered very clearly that when he brought the four-year-old An'an and Chen Cheng to a light well, An'an had used her young tender hands to shield herself from the sunlight. She only dared to let the sunlight shine through the gaps of her fingers onto her face. It was both a happy and frightening experience.

The underground residents liked to use minerals to draw graffiti on the walls, and among the minerals that could be used for drawing, the underground residents liked the red-orange ones the most. Everyone said it was the color that left the deepest impression on them. It was the color they saw when the sun shone through the capillaries of their closed eyelids.

This was everyone's desire for sunlight.

The Sanctuary served as a leadership role for the underground people while the Chen family had always led the Sanctuary throughout the generations.

Chen Jiu had been told since he was young that if an opportunity arose, he must lead the underground residents back to the surface to live.

But for a matter like that... it was easy to treat it as an ideal, but it was very difficult to realize.

This gloomy underground made people feel like they were stuck living in an endless night.

When he first received news from Zhang Haoyun that Ren He's descendant might have appeared, Chen Jiu was both excited and nervous.

He was excited because his ancestors always said the descendants of the Rider would definitely come to the Kingdom of Sorcerers and take over the Sanctuary to lead everyone out of the darkness.

That was how the leaders of the Sanctuary comforted themselves over the years.

Chen Jiu was nervous because he knew Ren Xiaosu had come here alone. It was only him... so how was he going to topple the entire Kingdom of Sorcerers?

If someone like that suddenly arrived, would they somehow lead the already weak Sanctuary into an abyss? Was such a person qualified to take over as leader of the Sanctuary?

But tonight, Chen Jiu understood the other party did not seem to be interested in leading the Sanctuary.

Chen Jiu had seen with his own eyes how Ren Xiaosu had snatched away the black Eye of True Sight that symbolized the authority of the Norman family's patriarch. At that moment, it was as though the authority of the old aristocracy was about to fade away.

Ren Xiaosu was surrounded by friends and comrades who had risked their lives with him, and behind him was the entire Northwest Army of Fortress 178.

That young man had come to reign over the Kingdom of Sorcerers.

Chen Jiu finally arrived at the deepest part of the underground. It was a huge underground cave that resembled a palace. Countless torches were burning in the cave, and a black subterranean river was flowing rapidly through it.

Countless people from the underground were curled up here. When everyone received news of the battle on the surface, they hid here for fear of getting implicated.

The moment Chen Jiu appeared, everyone looked over at him silently. There was a sense of anticipation, fear, unease, and repressed anger for their fate.

Chen Jiu said calmly, "Everyone, please stand."



The underground residents looked at one another and started chattering nonstop. However, the commotion quickly subsided.

After the first person stood up, the second, third, and then all 10,000 of them rose. They turned to the Sanctuary leader standing in front of them.

Among them were the elderly, women carrying babies, and many young people holding garden hoes.

Chen Jiu said, "It's been more than a 100 years. We've been hiding in the underground for more than a 100 years. Every year, people ask me when we can return to the surface again. I believe that my father and grandfather faced this same issue as well. But every time someone asked, we could only remain silent because we didn't have an answer at the time either.

"We are born of darkness, but our hearts are with the light. But it seemed that the world had never been fair to us. The light we knew has always existed only in the light wells. When I brought Chen An'an to the light well, I tried my best to raise her higher as though it would help her be closer to the light.

"I'm ashamed. I'm ashamed of all the times I've stayed silent when facing your questions."

The underground residents' breathing started getting heavier. The young men's grip on their garden hoes gradually tightened.

Chen Jiu's gaze swept across everyone's faces. "But if you all ask me today when we can return to the surface again, I will tell you that it is now."

He called over a guardian whose face was covered in tattoos and had him bring over a pot of vermilion dye.

Chen Jiu dipped his right thumb into the dye and smeared it between his brows. "Those of you who still have courage, come with me. If you have weapons, bring your weapons. Those without weapons, bring your hoes. Those without hoes, pick up a stone. I'll take you all home. Let's go and meet the new leader."

The torches underground illuminated everyone's faces. The underground residents followed behind Chen Jiu and smeared the vermilion dye between their brows before converging like a torrent and heading out to the surface.

...

It was quiet at the House of Norman's manor. The mistress of the manor was sitting solemnly in the main hall of the luxurious residence that spanned thousands of square

meters. Meanwhile, the young generation of the entire House of Norman had gathered around her.

These young people were not qualified to go into battle yet, and the reason why the mistress was overseeing the manor was to restrain them during this special period.

The mistress was already in her seventies, but her skin was maintained like that of a 40-year-old noblewoman. She was dressed in dignified and elegant jewelry and had a graceful bearing.

Before the war started, the Norman family's Knights of Radiance had already deployed a group of troops to guard various parts of the manor.

At this moment, the security in the Norman Manor was so tight not even a fly could get in.

In the main hall, the young people did not seem to be nervous about the impending war. Instead, most of them looked cynical. None of them felt that the war would shake the foundation of the House of Norman.

The Norman and the Tudor families had ruled the Kingdom of Sorcerers for nearly 200 years. During this period, other clans had tried to challenge their authority, but all of their attempts ended in failure.

These young people had been told since they were young that no one would ever be able to defeat the Norman family.

Even this late at night, there was a steady stream of servants bringing food into the main hall. The freshly roasted beef and venison were served on silver platters, and the scarlet wine swirled freely in crystal glasses.

They used silverware because the people in the Kingdom of Sorcerers firmly believed that silver could detect all poisons. In this way, they could test if anyone had poisoned their food.

If it weren't for this reason, the House of Norman would probably be using gold for all their cutlery.

No one relayed the battle situation back to them. Everyone thought that tonight was just like the day Donnelly had died. That incident was a one-sided massacre of the enemy by the House of Norman.

In the three kitchens of the manor, there were hundreds of chefs who were busy preparing for this impromptu banquet.

The servants cleared the tables like a flowing river while the chefs immediately prepared new dishes to be served.

A chef put down the kitchen knife in his hand and said to his assistant next to him, "Go to the cold storage and bring out the beef tongue."

The dark-haired assistant with black eyes nodded and walked towards the cold storage room.

A cold storage room in the Kingdom of Sorcerers did not use an electrically cooled system. Instead, servants would fetch ice from the cellar every day and place them in the cold storage.

After the assistant entered the cold storage alone, he did not retrieve the beef tongue. Instead, he went straight to where the wine was stored and opened a wooden crate at the bottom.

It was very difficult to secretly transport things into the Norman Manor. When the war broke out today, the Northwest's intelligence agents finally found an opportunity to transport the crate in together with the ice and red wine during a shift change for the guards.

If not for this war, they would probably not find such a good opportunity even in another two years.

This was a secret plan P5092 had instructed the Great Hoodwinker to carry out. P5092 said that fighting a head-on battle was one issue, but a sneak attack from the side was another.

Before the real war began, they should seize every opportunity that they got, opportunities that appeared when the opponent slipped up.

The more chaotic the lead-up to the war was, the easier it would be for the opponent to make mistakes.

When the box was opened, it was not filled with wine but an exquisite "pentazolate anion" bomb.

The Northwest's intelligence agents had infiltrated the Kingdom of Sorcerers and brought radio sets and firearms from the Central Plains. At the same time, a minority of them were also separately carrying the most powerful explosive in the world.

Before The Cataclysm, there were actually metallic hydrogen bombs that were more powerful than pentazolate anion bombs. However, the development of metallic hydrogen bombs was too difficult and had already been lost to the ocean of history.

The pentazolate anion bomb was the brand new pride of the Orient in the history of explosives. Meanwhile, the research data for this technology was recovered by Fortress 178's exploration team.

Fortress 178 was located in the northwest, and this place happened to be near the blast test site for the pentazolate anion bomb from before The Cataclysm.

Pentazolate anion decomposed at a temperature of 116.8 °C and had shown very good thermal stability.

But most importantly, it was once hailed as an "ultra high energy-containing material" that was closest to the nuclear bomb and second only to metallic hydrogen bombs.

In the past, a material the size of a salt grain had leaked out during an experiment and destroyed an entire laboratory.

For example, five kilograms of TNT could only blow up a small, single-story house, but this small and refined pentazolate anion bomb in front of the kitchen assistant could blow up the entire Norman Manor.

The kitchen assistant pressed the countdown button on the detonator and left the cold storage like nothing had happened.

He did not retrieve the beef tongue for the chef and instead went straight down the dirty sewer pipes behind the kitchen that was used for pouring away dirty slop water. He left through it without batting an eyelid.

His expression was so calm it was as though the stench did not affect him. He had an extremely determined will.

...

In the well behind the Rose Monastery, Melgor was sitting uneasily on a wooden box in the tiny secret chamber. "Why haven't you ever mentioned your background to me?"

Summer said in a low voice, "I'm sorry, but too many people are involved in this matter. I can't let them bear the risk for me."

"I'm not blaming you." Mel quickly said, "What I mean is, if you had told me, I could've helped in some way. When I heard your conversation in the underground, I felt quite useless that I wasn't able to help much. I couldn't even understand what you guys were talking about."

Summer stepped forward and held Mel's hand. "Don't say that. Why would you be useless? It's all thanks to you this time."

Mel's eyes lit up. "Why do you say that?"

Summer explained, "It's all thanks to you for bringing that Rider's descendant to the Kingdom of Sorcerers."

"... Oh, is that it?"

He felt like he had been stabbed 10,000 times in the heart and nearly cried.

"I was just teasing you," Summer said with a laugh. She sat side by side with Mel on the box and said, "I found out about my family history when I was 12 years old. From that day onwards, I was no longer able to lead a carefree life like other people my age. At that time, I was very envious of you, but later, it wasn't about envy anymore. Instead, I wanted to protect all of which was beautiful for you. Actually, it was my intention for you to be posted to the border for reconnaissance work. Do you blame me? I only hoped to get you away from Ghent City before the conflict erupted."

Not only that, but Summer's engagement to the House of Tudor was also something that made Mel want to give up. Of course, Summer made this decision mainly for the opportunity to get close to the House of Tudor.

Summer did not really want to marry that person from the House of Tudor. Her plan was to poison the Tudors on the wedding day while they hosted the banquet.

There would definitely be many sorcerers attending the wedding that day, and the core figures of the House of Tudor would definitely be there as well.

"It's not your fault." Melgor shook his head. "Those two years of hardship made me understand a lot of things. I looked up at the starry sky alone and sang to myself. Initially, it was really quite unbearable, but later, I realized loneliness can really strengthen one's mind."

Melgor suddenly thought of something. If Ren Xiaosu were still here in the secret chamber, he would probably say to him, "What's the use of just having a strong mind? You have to become more powerful too."

Thinking of this, Mel even found it a little funny. That young man from the Central Plains seemed to look down on him from the beginning, yet he kept helping him along the way.

Summer looked at Mel's silly smile and thought to herself, 'Perhaps fortune favors the foolish.'

However, Mel gradually turned silent. He thought for a long time and then said, "Actually, I know I'm quite useless. If I were really useful, I wouldn't have made everyone subconsciously want to protect me, right? But regardless of whether I'm useful or not, I really want to leave this well instead of hiding here like a coward. Ren Xiaosu is

my friend. He's already done so much for me. To help take the attention off us, he even ran out alone to face tens of thousands of troops."

Summer listened quietly. Mel mustered up his courage and said, "He doesn't have any close acquaintances since he came to the Kingdom of Sorcerers alone. Since he considers me his friend, I should also treat him as one. I don't know if he's still alive or not, nor do I know if it's too late, or if there's even any point for me to save him now. But if I don't go, I'll regret it for sure."

Summer, in her calm composure, gradually broke into a smile. "You've really changed a lot."

"Is that so?" Mel said a little embarrassedly, "Sometimes, I also want to live like Ren Xiaosu and not have anything to fear. I would also like to be able to sound like I'm bragging about myself even though I'm speaking the truth..."

"You don't have to explain." Summer smiled and said, "Let's go."

"No, you can't go." Mel shook his head. "You still have your mission. If something happens to you, what will those people supporting you do?"

"Who cares about the mission? I just wanna be with you," Summer said firmly.

But at this moment, two loud explosions boomed in Ghent City in quick succession.

The explosions were even louder than the roar of thunder on summer nights. It was as though The Cataclysm had descended again, destroying the world.

In that instant, it felt like the sky was falling, and the lands were being engulfed. It was like the mountains were crumbling into the sea, and meteorites were striking the earth.

The entirety of Ghent City was shaking from the explosion, and even the water level of the well outside the secret chamber suddenly dropped by a notch.

However, Melgor rushed out of the secret chamber like a madman and climbed up the well with the rope.

Summer led him to the top of the Rose Monastery. The two of them stood on the circular roof and quietly watched as the Norman Manor and the Tudor Manor started burning in the east and west, respectively.

The blasted debris and smoke that shot into the sky looked like dark storm clouds rolling towards the horizon.

Amid the black smoke and dust, red sparks were still flashing. It was as though there was lightning behind the storm clouds.

At some point, the thought that her ancestor, Russell, might not even be that powerful crossed Summer's mind.

The Norman Manor and the Tudor Manor were gone. The most glorious symbols in the Kingdom of Sorcerers had suddenly turned into specks of dust that once existed in history. It seemed that the Houses of Norman and Tudor had also become a thing of the past.

The explosion had blown the youth foundations of the Norman and the Tudor families into dust. It was as though it were washing away their criminal past.

The Norman and the Tudor families' foundations had been severed. No one had expected Fortress 178 to be so ruthless.

Summer and Mel stood hand in hand at the top of the circular roof. They looked at the Knights of Tudor, Knights of Radiance, and the Central Plains warriors who came from lands unknown and felt like this was all a fucking dream!

So Ren Xiaosu really did not need him to save. Mel could only sigh.

So that was the source of his confidence!

...

By this moment, the hundreds of assault columns of the 6th Field Division had cleared the way forward.

They cleared out the enemies hiding in the streets, alleys, and roofs. This way, the main forces that had just come through the enchanted doorway could officially launch an even more intense, all-out attack after just some slight reorganization.

P5092, who was overseeing the battle from the rear, had an indifferent expression. It was as though nothing else in the world mattered other than war.

When the Norman and Tudor manors were blown up, Zhang Xiaoman was so shocked he nearly lost his balance and fell off the observation platform. Even Black Fox was stunned.

The warhorses went completely crazy. They no longer cared about the knights on their backs and started fleeing madly. They did not even care that they would trample each other.

The neighing of the horses, mixed with screams and roars, made the defenders sound exceptionally powerless.

The knights stared blankly at the flames that shot up into the sky. Then, caught off guard, the heavily armored knights were thrown off their horses one by one. Due to their heavy armor, they could not properly regain their footing amid the stampede of humans and horses.

The knights who were able to remain calm wanted to keep their warhorses under control and put all their effort into showcasing their riding skills. They knew full well that if they were to fall off their mounts under such circumstances, it would be over for them.

Everything was in chaos. What could have caused an orderly formation to suddenly turn so messy? All it needed was a loud explosion.

On this completely chaotic battlefield, only P5092's expression did not change. It was as though he had expected it. The calm expression on P5092's face was a stark contrast to the world that had turned topsy-turvy.

P5092 was silent. The electromagnetic pulse triggered by the explosion would affect the proper functioning of the radio communications system, so he was waiting for it to subside before retaking command of the troops.

All he could hear was the sound of static. However, to P5092, this static was more like the quiet that followed an extreme clamor. In this short half a minute, he could finally catch a breather.

P5092 immediately sank deep into his own thoughts. He was a stone that had fallen into the sea and sunk all the way to the dark bottom.

There was no sense of suffocation from drowning. There was only tranquility.

A moment later, the communications system was back to normal. The commander of an assault column on the front lines reported over the radio, "We've broken through into Zone C31. I repeat, the 131st Assault Column has successfully broken through into Zone C31. We're setting up a heavy machine gun position!"

In an instant, P5092 seemed to have been pulled out from the bottom of the sea by this voice. It only took him a short two milliseconds to turn back into the war machine everyone was familiar with. "I've neglected something. 131st Assault Column, don't rashly enter the battlefield for now. Go find high ground and cover Zone D19 with your firepower. Future Commander will be passing through there in five minutes. Before that, you all must open up a path for him!"

Orders were transmitted out from the command center one after another. "97th Assault Column, secure Zone C21. Don't let the enemies there pose a threat to Future Commander.



“81st and 82nd Assault Columns, stay where you are to receive the main forces at the rear to lead them into battle!

“Black Fox, after you lead the main forces onto the battlefield, make sure you carve out a path. I don’t want Future Commander to have anything to worry about!”

As the saying went, one captured the bandits by first capturing the ringleader. Currently, Ren Xiaosu was leading more than 20 people to overcome tens of thousands of troops to carry out the decapitation strike plan, so P5092 wanted to ensure that Ren Xiaosu would not have any more obstacles around him to deal with.

Zhou Yingxue stood beside P5092 and controlled her vines while asking, “You said you neglected something? What is it?”

P5092 replied, “Now that we’ve uprooted the foundation of their younger generation and even destroyed their manors, it’ll make them despair. So we have to prevent the Norman and the Tudor families from gathering newfound strength in their despair.”

In war, an outstanding commander would not only have to consider how to precisely attack the enemy step by step and weaken their combat strength, reinforcements, and supply lines. They also had to consider human nature.

Although the sorcerers led a comfortable life, they also had their pride.

No one could be sure if a nation with an ancient and mysterious inheritance like sorcery would erupt with unimaginable power during desperate times.

Zhou Yingxue frowned. “What should we do then?”

P5092 said calmly, “They can still unleash their strength in despair if they have a glimmer of hope. As long as Future Commander can strike down the enemy quickly enough and destroy all their hope before that strength erupts, it’ll be fine.”

The engineer in charge of maintaining the equipment for P5092 thought that ever since P5092 joined the Northwest, he had been talking more and more ruthlessly.

...

Ren Xiaosu calmly observed the ongoing on the battlefield. For some reason, the more dangerous the situation, the calmer he felt.

It was the same in the Jing Mountains, Luoyang City, and the Pyro Company’s Sacred Mountains. He felt even more so standing among the tens of thousands of troops at this moment.

Just a moment ago, Zhang Xiaoman had pointed out the direction of the Tudor family's patriarch's retreat to him. But before he could confirm it with Zhang Xiaoman, the electromagnetic pulse that erupted from the explosions at the Norman Manor and the Tudor Manor caused radio interference.

But the good news was that half of the knights around them who had never experienced "advanced explosives" before were totally stunned by the blasts.

In this backward nation, the sorcerers called themselves gods, while the soldiers of the sorcerer clans referred to themselves as knights of the divine kingdom. But at this moment, this group of devout disciples had encountered something that was not explainable even with theology.

"11 o'clock!" Ren Xiaosu roared on the battlefield, "Seize the opportunity and break through their defenses!"

In that instant, the "war chariot" led by Old Xu instantly turned around. Wherever the black saber pointed, a river of blood would flow.

Amid the chaos, the 22 T5 combatants on both flanks mercilessly crushed the enemy like the wheels of the war chariot.

Fighting against tens of thousands of soldiers, bullets would get expended, and grenades would run out. Therefore, when the battle reached its climax, the T5 combatants realized their fists and bodies were still the most dependable in the end.

In the Pyro Company, the T5 combatants were known as the Chosen Ones.

Just as P5092 had said, not everyone was qualified to become a T5 combatant. The results that the genetic serum could help you achieve were predetermined by your genes the moment you were born.

Therefore, every T5 combatant in the Pyro Company was a treasure. Every one of them was created based on the principles of war, and they were all true blue killing machines.

After they became the war chariot's wheels, and after they ran out of ammunition, these crazy powerful "machines" started plundering the enemy's weapons.

The T5 combatants snatched the enemy's swords with a strength they could not resist at all. Then they stabbed the enemy's swords through the gaps in their armor.

The knights of the Houses of Tudor and Norman were equipped with the best gear in the Kingdom of Sorcerers. Their armor was thick and tough, so it would be unrealistic to use swords to stab them.

If normal soldiers were to use melee weapons against them, they would probably have to expend a great deal of effort just to kill them.

However, the T5 combatants were much more agile and domineering than expected. Their control over their bodies had reached a level that transcended the mundane.

Of course, with the T5 combatants' strength, they could totally kill a mounted knight through their armor. However, these T5s were true war machines. When faced with countless enemies, they would use the least amount of energy to achieve the greatest damage.

They did not know if "victory" or "death" would come for them first in war, so they had to conserve their energy to deal with all threats.

Wherever the "war chariot" passed by, a T5 combatant would casually stab his sword and plunge it through the gap between the enemies' helmets and heavy armor and into their neck, nailing them to the ground.

This attack was as precise as performing cardiac surgery. The thin sword was inserted through a 0.3 mm gap in the armor like a fisherman skillfully shucking an oyster with a dagger on the beach.

Right after, the T5 combatant would draw the fallen knight's sword from his hip and continue searching for the next target.

This series of actions was executed smoothly all at once.

Occasionally, the T5 combatants would look at each other during the battle. They could all see the fanaticism in each other's eyes.

They had never experienced such a carefree battle before when they were fighting against the expeditionary army back in the Pyro Company's territory. Their memories of fleeing like defeated dogs seemed to have dissipated into thin air. It was as though they were dusty swords that had been polished and regained their shine!

However, the stamina of the T5 combatants was not unlimited. They had already been running around with Ren Xiaosu for nearly 40 minutes. During this time, they ensured the combat troops at the rear could pass through the enchanted doorway without any interference. However, their breathing was starting to become irregular.

Gradually, everyone's movements became less precise, and they would even make mistakes occasionally.

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu and Old Xu, who were at the front of the formation, suddenly stopped. Just as the T5 combatants were feeling confused, they heard Ren Xiaosu say, "Take a five-minute break right here. Pay attention to the rhythm of your

breathing and move your hands and feet about. Don't let the lactic acid accumulate in your muscles, and don't let your heart rate drop too much!"

Then Ren Xiaosu stood in place and started regulating his breathing. His breathing was constantly maintained in a fixed pattern. The T5 combatants had all undergone similar training before, so they understood that maintaining their heart rate was to allow the secretion of hormones in their bodies to continue. In this way, their combat strength would not decrease even after they recuperated.

Breathing was key in battle.

However, the T5 combatants were still feeling a little uncertain. With tens of thousands of enemies surrounding them, was it really alright to just stand still among the enemy troops and take a rest?

However, when the T5 combatants looked around, none of the enemies dared to make use of this window of opportunity to approach them.

These knights who had just calmed their horses down and surrounded Ren Xiaosu seemed to be a little flustered. They did not know why these war machines had suddenly stopped moving. Were they already at their limits, or were they just gathering more strength?

These knights did not even dare to step forward to probe them!

The T5 combatants looked silently at Ren Xiaosu's back. That young man who stood calmly in the middle of the battlefield to regulate his breathing was like a god!

There were no enemies within ten steps of him. It was like a vacuum had formed around him.

They finally understood why Commander P5092 had followed a young man like him to the Northwest. They finally understood why their comrades from the 6th Combat Brigade respected the individual so much.

Unknowingly, the T5 combatants' eyes turned even more fanatical. It was as though they had gained a new faith.

At this moment, Zhang Xiaoman's voice crackled again in Ren Xiaosu's earpiece. "Future Commander, the Tudor family's patriarch looks like he's waking up. He's about 700 meters in front of you!"

Ren Xiaosu turned around and smiled at the T5 combatants. "Done resting yet? Can y'all still fight? Charge forward with me again!"

The T5 combatants replied with smiles. "As you wish, Future Commander!"

Ren Xiaosu's black saber kept leading the way. "Luo Lan, get the martyred spirits to open up a path for me with their heavy machine guns!"

Luo Lan, who had been hiding in the center of the "war chariot" with his martyred spirits, laughed out loud. "Alright! It felt so stifling when you guys kept me from making any moves just now!"

During the previous charge, Ren Xiaosu did not allow the martyred spirits to take action. He had made them conserve their ammunition in case they could not break through the encirclement.

But from the look of things, there was probably no need to break through the encirclement anymore. Ren Xiaosu was planning to directly kill the enemy on the battlefield!

As the knights surrounded them warily, they saw the young man and White Mask at the front of the "war chariot" suddenly stepping aside. Meanwhile, the golden silhouettes picked up their heavy machine guns and started shooting crazily.

The gunfire from the heavy machine guns in the dark of the night was extremely terrifying. It directly penetrated through the knights' wall of encirclement in front of them.

In the blink of an eye, the wall was reduced to smoke and dust!

...

The Tudor family's patriarch slowly sat up in his palanquin. He felt confused and muddled like he had just experienced an extended dream.

In his dream, he was walking on vast plains. Under the lush green grass, there was even an earthy smell of the soil after the rain.

Walking and stopping along the way, he finally came to where a river lay. At this moment, a muscular river god emerged from the river and stared at him. "Honorable man, was the hat you dropped in the river gold or silver in color?"

Feeling confused, the Tudor family's patriarch said in his dream, "But I don't have a hat."

The river god's kind face suddenly turned vicious. "Liar, you clearly had a green hat on!"<sup>1</sup>

The Tudor family's patriarch was confused.

He was immediately jolted awake from his dream. Before he could figure out why he had that dream, he felt something unusual in his inner spiritual world.

The symbols created by the bloodline spell were constantly flickering, and each of the flickering symbols represented that a son of his had died.

All of a sudden, the Tudor family's patriarch could feel the dozens of symbols tearing apart. In just the short moment he had fallen unconscious, so many of his sons had died!

Hundreds of his biological children had died, while more of those who were not his own blood could also be dead!

The Tudor family's patriarch said angrily, "What happened?!"

The knight commander said in panic, "Patriarch, the manor has been destroyed. The Norman family's patriarch is dead. We're close to being defeated!"

"Defeated?" The Tudor family's patriarch said angrily, "I won't be defeated!"

He held his black Eye of True Sight tightly in his hand. In an instant, his bloodline spell activated.

The Tudor family's bloodline spell finally revealed its originally intended ferocity!

...

The 81st Assault Column was preparing to receive the main forces at the rear. They used the bricks of the collapsed buildings around them to build a sturdy low wall to provide cover while they constructed other simple defensive fortifications.

Having such temporary defensive fortifications was like having a small forward operating base on the battlefield. They had to ensure the wounded could catch a breather after retreating here, as well as ensure that the main forces would not get attacked when they passed through here.

But as they were building the defensive fortifications, the blood flowing from a corpse next to them suddenly formed into a magic circle. The Tudor family's patriarch, who had just regained consciousness, used his bloodline spell to detonate the corpses scattered on the battlefield one by one.

A frosty aura gradually erupted from the bloodline spell. When the commander in charge of building the temporary defensive fortifications saw this, he got a bad feeling.

The main forces at the rear were quickly approaching, but it was already too late for the commander to get away. He shouted at the main forces behind him, "Stay away for now! Retreat!"

The main forces of the 6th Field Division who were approaching gradually stopped in their tracks. Everyone could only watch helplessly as the white frost spread out from the ground and froze their comrades in the 81st Assault Column into ice statues.

That turbulent aura of frost was a full-blown attack. Some people tried to jump into the air to avoid coming into contact with the cold air, but it was everywhere, so they couldn't get out of its way.

With hundreds of their comrades suddenly killed, nobody had the time to gather their emotions or bid farewell to them.

Such scenes were also happening elsewhere.

War was cruel, and its cruelty lay in the fact you couldn't react in time when tragedy struck.

At the rear of the battlefield, P5092 said calmly to Zhou Yingxue, "Focus on covering the assault columns. Help them conserve their strength."

Zhou Yingxue frowned and said, "I still have to cover for my master."

It took time for the vines to grow. Even the creeper vine at Stronghold 61 took more than ten days to completely engulf the city back then. Although Zhou Yingxue was stronger now, she still couldn't instantly cover the entire battlefield with the vines. There was also a limit to how much power she could channel into them. Therefore, if she wanted to provide cover for Ren Xiaosu, it would be best for her to concentrate on filling the area around him with vines first.

However, as the field commander, P5092 had his own opinion. "Disregard Future Commander for now."

Zhou Yingxue's immediately raised her eyebrows. "Am I to listen to you just because you told me to disregard him? That's my master you're talking about, your future commander! If he dies, you won't be able to make up for it even if you have ten lives!"

Zhou Yingxue was just such a petty woman. In a crisis like this, she wasn't going to care about Fortress 178 or the war. All she wanted was for her master to survive!

Therefore, she could not understand why an emotionless war machine like P5092, even if it was fighting a war, would tell her to give up on the future commander. Was this how it was to command in the most optimal way?

P5092 looked calmly at Zhou Yingxue. "I'm not giving up on Future Commander, but I have absolute confidence in him. He will not die even if everyone in Ghent City is dead."

P5092 continued, "Don't waste your power on protecting Future Commander. Cover the assault columns so they can continue advancing. Destroy all of the blood-formed magic circles the enemy is using to cast his bloodline spells."

Zhou Yingxue hesitated for a couple seconds before giving in. "Alright then."

But even so, she still left some vines at Ren Xiaosu's side to let them continue spreading just in case.

...

The Tudor family's patriarch sat in his palanquin with his eyes tightly closed. The violet sigil on the black stone in his hand was pulsating brightly.

This small stone seemed to contain the wisdom of countless generations of sorcerers.

But ever since Russell's spells were lost in time, all the stone represented was corrupted power.

Those who wielded it could treat the common folk as ants and even view themselves as gods.

Just as the Tudor family's patriarch was about to continue detonating the bloodline spells one by one, the bodyguard knights in front of him actually fell down one after another. Their heavy armor was completely unable to withstand firearms forged by modern technology.

The Tudor family's patriarch had no choice but to open his eyes. Just before the heavy machine gun fire reached him, the elderly sorcerer formed a wall of ice in front of himself.

The heavy machine gun bullets shattered the ice walls over and over again. But no matter how many bullets were fired at the walls, they kept growing as though they had never been shattered.

"Help me down from the palanquin and get me out of here." The Tudor family's patriarch said coldly, "Where's the honor of the Knights of Tudor? How dare you let the enemy get so close to your god? Go and stop them! After this battle, I will grant all of you a fief and appoint you all as sorcerers in the name of the Tudor clan. Those with outstanding contributions will earn the hereditary right to pass on your sorcerer's status!"

When he said that, the knights suddenly went crazy. Everyone had dreams of becoming a sorcerer, not to mention this was a position that could be passed down to their children!



After all, even lucky winners like Melgor were not allowed to pass their Eye of True Sight down the generations!

It was just that... dead people could not become sorcerers!

Immediately after, the Tudor family's patriarch said coldly, "Deserters will have their entire families executed!"

The Tudor family had been in power for 200 years, and the Knights of Tudor could not travel into the future to see who would emerge victorious. At this moment, they could only fight to the death for the sake of their own families.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ren Xiaosu frowned. He had just seen the figure of the Tudor family's patriarch, but his line of sight was suddenly blocked by a wall of ice.

Behind the ice wall, the Tudor patriarch's palanquin stood out ostentatiously. Ren Xiaosu tried to activate the Shadow Door and slash the palanquin, but he did not manage to hit anyone in it.

Ren Xiaosu understood the other party was no longer in the palanquin.

The remaining elites of the Knights of Tudor started surrounding him fearlessly. The dense crowd of enemies made Ren Xiaosu's scalp tingle.

As expected, there were huge consequences for letting the Tudor family's patriarch regain consciousness. If he had finished off the Norman family's patriarch a little more quickly, they would not have ended up in this dangerous situation now.

Wherever Ren Xiaosu was active on the battlefield, they continued overwhelming the enemies. Ren Xiaosu crazily pursued the Tudor family's patriarch as he escaped.

Countless cracks appeared in the ice as they spread out in an attempt to slow Ren Xiaosu down. But even though it was quite terrifying, Ren Xiaosu knew very well the other party was no longer at his peak condition after fainting earlier.

He would have to expend his willpower to ignite those corpses with the bloodline spell. Moreover, the Tudor family's patriarch was close to a 100 years old. No matter how profound the other party's sorcery was, he would still have to abide by the natural order of life and death.

There were only two people in the world who were not constrained by this order. One was Ren Xiaosu, and the other was Yan Liuyuan!

In the future, Yang Xiaojin might be another.

When Ren Xiaosu found out he had been in a coma for more than 200 years, he made a decision to transplant his bone marrow to Yang Xiaojin as long as it was medically viable.

But now was not the time to think about that. Facing the mass of the Knights of Tudor that were closing in on him, Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that there was going to be no end to them.

Luo Lan's martyred spirits' heavy machine guns had already run out of ammo. Even though Ren Xiaosu was carrying around an ammunition depot, they would still need some time to reload.

Ren Xiaosu could hear heavy panting coming from the Great Hoodwinker on his right. Meanwhile, the T5 combatants behind him were also gradually starting to feel a little exhausted.

Should he give up? Ren Xiaosu frowned. He tried to use the Shadow Door to throw grenades in multiple directions, but he did not know how the Tudor family's patriarch managed to hide his tracks. Ren Xiaosu did not even manage to hit the target once.

"Zhang Xiaoman, can you locate the Tudor family's patriarch's position?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Zhang Xiaoman's anxious voice came from his earpiece, "I can't find him, Future Commander. He seems to have suddenly disappeared into the crowd."

It was not that he had really disappeared, but that the other party was no longer letting anyone support him as he fled, nor was he riding the palanquin anymore. This caused Zhang Xiaoman to lose his "reference" when searching for the other party's whereabouts.

There were almost identical-looking knights everywhere on the battlefield, and even their warhorses looked very similar. Unless Wang Yun were here, no one could pick out the Tudor family's patriarch from within the crowd!

The battlefield kept shifting northwards. Although the Central Plains' main forces had arrived on the battlefield in the south, the remaining forces of the Norman family's Knights of Radiance resisted most of the pressure. This would allow the Knights of Tudor to encircle and kill Ren Xiaosu without any pressure.

"Future Commander, just give up." P5092 said, "Even if we can't find him, we'll definitely still win this war."

Ren Xiaosu's expression gradually turned solemn. If they could not find the Tudor family's patriarch, it meant even more people from the 6th Field Division would die here in this foreign land.

But Zhang Xiaoman suddenly shouted, "Future Commander! Future Commander! A strange group of people have suddenly appeared in the north of the battlefield!"

"A strange group?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"Yes, all of them are dressed very shabbily. They look like demons that have just crawled out from the underground. Their faces are especially pale, and some of them are even hunchbacked. I'm not sure what's going on with them," Zhang Xiaoman described.

At this moment, dozens of manhole covers on the ground were suddenly lifted up from the inside. Short hooks stretched out from the inside and cut at the legs of the horses. When the horses were suddenly attacked, their legs could no longer support their weight and they fell sideways.

Countless Knights of Tudor fell off their mounts. Numerous guardians with tattooed faces and a cinnabar mark between their brows emerged from the ground and fought the Knights of Tudor fearlessly.

If they could not defeat the knights in a one-on-one battle, they would drag them down into the sewers where even more underground residents were waiting. Once any of the knights fell into the sewers, they would be attacked by four to five people at the same time.

These people did not have any sense of order and were purely motivated by hate and anger. Behind that boundless hatred and rage, there was even a glimmer of hope that was gradually blooming.

If the world was still willing to give these people who were struggling at death's door a chance to see the sights on the surface, they were willing to give their last bit of courage by exchanging it with their lives.

This was their final show of bravery.

In the north, Chen Jiu held onto his gold Eye of True Sight and recited an incantation, pushing his palm against the ground as hard as he could.

The gray bricks on the ground surged towards the knights like a wave. All of the knights who were hit by this "wave" were thrown into the air by the huge force!

To conceal his identity, Chen Jiu rarely revealed his moves. Therefore, many people had almost forgotten that an elder had once said that Chen Jiu was a once-in-a-lifetime sorcery genius who appeared in the Sanctuary.

Ren Xiaosu watched all of this quietly before suddenly laughing. He turned around and looked at the Great Hoodwinker, Luo Lan, and the T5 combatants. "Are y'all ready?"

Before any of them could respond, Wang Yun's voice rang out in his earpiece. "Future Commander, I'm back."

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. He turned around and saw that Wang Yun had already switched places with Zhang Xiaoman on the observation platform. Meanwhile, Zhang Xiaoman went on to coordinate the main forces to attack.

"You must be tired from chasing after Wang Wenyan just now. Why didn't you take a break first?" Ren Xiaosu asked with a smile.

Wang Yun smiled and said. "I'd have to seek out the person Future Commander wants to kill first!"

As he spoke, Wang Yun raised his binoculars and scanned the battlefield countless times. Ren Xiaosu did not rush him because Wang Yun had never disappointed him before.

"Future Commander, 300 meters to your 10 o'clock. The rest is up to you!" Wang Yun shouted.

Ren Xiaosu looked excitedly at the T5 combatants and shouted, "Give me a hand!"

The T5 combatants tacitly crossed their arms and formed a bridge that Ren Xiaosu stepped onto. "Up!"

In that instant, all of the T5 combatants tossed him into the air at the same time.

Ren Xiaosu felt an unprecedented calmness in his heart.

The moment he connected with the T5 combatants' toss and flew into the sky, countless gazes landed on him.

After a tough night of fighting, a flash of white light burst out from behind the clouds in the distance like a spotlight.

On this huge stage, he was the protagonist right from the beginning.

However, none of that mattered to him.

All he needed was... quiet!

Just as Yang Xiaojin had reminded him countless times before, when you needed your body to follow your will and move forward bravely, the only key that could activate this machine was... breathing!

On the ground, the Tudor family's patriarch, who was pretending to be a Tudor knight so he could shift locations, subconsciously turned around and looked up at the sky. He happened to see the young man in the air staring at him with a sneer.

At the last moment before dawn, a steam locomotive suddenly rumbled out of the sky like a train from the Kingdom of Heaven.

But Ren Xiaosu was not intending to use the steam locomotive as a weapon. Instead, he wanted to use it to propel himself through the air!

“City Crusher!”

Ren Xiaosu landed on the front of the steam locomotive and flew towards the Tudor family's patriarch like a precision-guided missile. Meanwhile, the steam locomotive, without any support from its tracks, plummeted straight towards the ground.

There was no time to recite an incantation or beg for mercy. The Tudor family's patriarch could only watch as the young man descended from the sky.

The young man's eyes were crimson as he leaped through space, holding the black saber that was the judgment of wrath, with the white light shining behind him.

From today onwards, after this saber landed, the glory of the Kingdom of Sorcerers would completely be torn apart.

Blood splattered everywhere!

The head of the Tudor family's patriarch dropped to the ground along with his steel helmet. With a clang, the steel helmet rolled even further away. A frightened horse reared high into the air and heavily stomped the decapitated head.

Dawn had broken.

A golden ray of sunlight shone from the east like a tidal swell.

The Knights of Tudor were dumbfounded. Meanwhile, the underground residents were basking in the sunlight that had just shone upon their faces. It was as though they had been reborn.

1203 Let go of me!

“The Tudor family's patriarch has been killed by Future Commander.” Wang Yun stood on the observation platform and heaved a long sigh of relief.

This long night was finally coming to an end. When the sun's rays glittered down upon everyone, the Knights of Tudor and the Knights of Radiance suddenly lost their will to fight.

For a moment, no one could tell whether they had lost their fighting spirit because their patriarchs were dead or because they could not bear to taint this hard-earned moment of sunshine by spilling blood.

Or perhaps both were just excuses, and everyone did not actually want to sacrifice themselves.

Ren Xiaosu raised his saber and panted as he looked around. "Submit to me, or die."

Actually, Yan Liuyuan had said this to the nomads before.

To a certain extent, Yan Liuyuan's leadership sense was awakened earlier than Ren Xiaosu even though he was younger than Ren Xiaosu.

In the end, Ren Xiaosu also accepted what he had resisted in the past. This was a decision that symbolized power and responsibility.

"Shed your armor," Ren Xiaosu said as he looked at the knights in front of him.

On the battlefield, the knights removed their steel armor and helmets, revealing their disheveled hair.

The sound of armor shedding rippled outwards from Ren Xiaosu like a wave.

All of the knights went down on one knee in Ren Xiaosu's direction to express their loyalty to him.

Mel had once told Ren Xiaosu that the knights in the Kingdom of Sorcerers were extremely loyal.

At that time, Ren Xiaosu almost believed it. Perhaps there really were loyal people in the world?

But when he looked at the knights in front of him, he really could not believe any of that anymore.

It was still understandable that Qian Weining would leave after being betrayed by his clan's patriarch. However, these Knights of Radiance and Knights of Tudor did not seem to have any intention of taking revenge at all after they saw their patriarchs killed.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not care if they were loyal or not. He only hoped a new order could be established on this land with the premise of submitting to Fortress 178.

Ren Xiaosu said coldly, "Summon the commanders of the Knights of Tudor and the Knights of Radiance to see me."

After his order was passed, the two knight commanders walked hesitantly up to Ren Xiaosu and knelt down again. "We pledge loyalty to you til our deaths."

"I don't need your loyalty. I just need you to stand up and look at the bodies on the battlefield. Look at the corpses of the Norman and the Tudor families' patriarchs and remember this moment." Ren Xiaosu said calmly, "If you start getting other ideas one day, I hope this scene today will help you make the right choice."

The young man in front of them was covered in blood and exuded an omnipresent aura of intimidation.

As Ren Xiaosu was talking, a loud stomping could be heard coming from outside the city. Everyone looked over and saw the "evil dragon" had arrived back outside Ghent City again. It tilted its head and peered into the city through the breach in the walls it had created.

Although Midnight's body was stained with fresh blood, there were no wounds on it.

Everyone could imagine how miserable the House of Berkeley must have been when they encountered such a creature.

The House of Berkeley, which specialized in fire-elemental spells, could not even leave a trace of burn marks on Midnight's body.

This creature, which had been snoozing and growing in a magma environment for over 200 years, happened to be the bane of the fire elemental-based sorcerer clan.

Ren Xiaosu did not allow it into the city in case it accidentally injured the civilians. Midnight remained obediently outside the city, but it seemed very curious about everything around it.

Watching the ferocious young man and his equally ferocious pet, the knights only felt that the entire scene in front of them was a confirmation the Kingdom of Sorcerers had been utterly crushed.

The two knight commanders lowered their heads in silence, their hearts filled with fear and reverence.

"Rise." Ren Xiaosu looked at the two knight commanders in front of him and said, "Someone will come and take over from you both later. As for how to convince the other clans in the Kingdom of Sorcerers of my plans, that will depend on your performance."

Only five sorcerer clans had participated in the war this time. They were the Tudors, the Normans, the Berkeleys, the Winstons, and the Vosses. But actually, there were dozens of other sorcerer clans. Although they were few in number, they were still a force to be reckoned with if they teamed up.

Thinking about it, these clans must have been secretly accumulating their strength as well.

But that was of no concern to Ren Xiaosu anymore. He would have to quickly return to Fortress 178 first.

Following this, Ren Xiaosu would be handing over everything here to Summer after her marriage alliance with Fortress 178. As for whether she could clear the obstacles standing in the Kingdom of Sorcerers' way, that would be entirely up to the Sanctuary. If she were not capable enough to tackle these issues, Ren Xiaosu would not mind making a trip back to the Kingdom of Sorcerers after the war in the Central Plains was over.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that the 6th Field Division was just like the expeditionary army he had encountered back then. They were the ones who were the invaders. But regardless, while it might be a little cruel to the people of the Kingdom of Sorcerers, his mission was to protect the Northwest and not the entire human race.

After the knights on the battlefield shed their armor and the knight commanders pledged their allegiance, the soldiers of the 6th Field Division erupted into loud cheers.

Luo Lan and the Great Hoodwinker slumped to the ground with their backs against each other, ranting about how tired they were. Suddenly feeling relieved, Wang Yun nearly crashed to the ground when the burden was lifted. Fortunately, Ji Zi'ang, who was standing next to him, was there to support him.

"Are you alright?" Ji Zi'ang asked.

Wang Yun said with a smile, "I'm alright. My legs are just numb from standing on the observation platform for too long."

"Huh?" Ji Zi'ang was taken aback.

"Next time, make a chair out of mud for the observation platform," Wang Yun reminded him. "Otherwise, it can really be a little unbearable to stand there for a few hours. Your legs would go numb too if it were you."

Ji Zi'ang was speechless.

After winning the war, it was time for everyone to get some rest.

In Ghent City, it seemed that P5092 was the only one still carrying out his duty at the temporary command center in case something else unexpected came up.

This commander who was known as a war machine never seemed to slack off for a moment.



However, this made P5092 appear a little lonely among the crowd of people.

He said over the radio, "Although we've won, there's still a lot of follow-up work to be done. 124th, 127th, and 129th Assault Columns, continue to infiltrate the north of the city and eliminate all the resistance forces..."

"133rd Assault Column, advance southeast..."

Orders were passed down one after another. The war machine that was the 6th Field Division did not stop moving as they continued working with P5092 as they wound down their operations.

P5092 looked at the cheering crowd around him silently. The look in his eyes gradually eased up, and his gaze no longer had the sharpness and depth as it had during the battle.

Suddenly, P5092 felt quite good to see everyone so happy like this.

But as he was standing alone next to the command center, Ji Zi'ang and Wang Yun, who had recovered off to the side, suddenly ran over and hugged him around his neck and shouted, "We won! P5092, did you see that? We won! This is awesome!"

P5092 stumbled unsteadily as the two guys pulled at him in celebration. Even the black military uniform he had just changed into yesterday was nearly torn. "Let go of me! Let go of me!"

But no matter what P5092 said, it could not stop Wang Yun and Ji Zi'ang's enthusiasm. At the side, Black Fox did not intend to step in to stop them even though he saw his superior being jostled around.

P5092 shouted, "Black Fox, get them off me!"

However, Black Fox, who always obeyed his orders, pretended not to have heard him.

1204 Remember your choice

Black Fox recalled when he had first started following Commander P5092.

He was 17 years old that year and was about to graduate from high school.

In the strongholds controlled by the Pyro Company, students above junior high attended boarding schools. They could only return home once every three weeks and only for a day and a half each time.

When he was attending school, he would wake up at 5:45 every morning for a 1.8-kilometer run before his morning classes began.

Breakfast was served at 7 AM, lunch at 12 PM, and dinner at 6 PM, with each mealtime lasting only half an hour. Classes were dismissed at 9:40 PM and lights out at 10:20 PM.

After lights out, the Pyro Company soldiers would patrol the dormitories. There were small peephole windows installed in the doors of the dormitories which soldiers on patrol duty could open from the outside to check whether students were sleeping on time.

In the course of their education, they had always been subjected to military-style management. These rules and discipline were instilled deep within their bones.

There, they were taught how fragile humanity was in the world, and that they had to fight for the survival of humanity by any means necessary.

This was the glory of the Pyro Company.

At that time, Black Fox and his schoolmates thought all students in the world led such lives. Later on, when they grew up, they realized they were the only ones put through this form of tragic education. It was only the Pyro Company's schools that were run by armed soldiers.

In school, all students had to undergo high-intensity learning and training. In the end, there was only one thing waiting for them: the college entrance examinations.

The Pyro Company's college entrance exams were divided into two categories. One was based on cultural studies while the other was based on physical fitness.

From that day onwards, the fate of all their students was forked into extremely different paths.

Those who did well in cultural studies could consider attending a research university or a military university. For example, P5092 and Black Fox had enrolled in a military school.

After they entered a military school, they would become true reserve officers of the Pyro Company, with all of their serial numbers prefixed with the letter P.

That was the command structure of the Pyro Company.

As for the physical fitness exam, other than going through a high-intensity test, everyone would also have to undergo a genetic test.

If they passed the test and qualified as candidates for genetic modification, they would be promoted as soldiers within the organization and receive true military training while undergoing gradual genetic modification.

Actually, at this moment, it was decided whether they would be a T2 combatant or a T5 combatant.

T2s would get posted to the T2 boot camps, while T5s would get into the T5 boot camps. The training curriculum they received was also completely different.

For example, a T2 combatant might receive training in firearms, combat, and so on, but a T5 combatant would go through additional courses, such as assassination, reconnaissance, infiltration, rock climbing, driving, and so on.

At this point, there would still be a large group of high school students who could not do well in their cultural studies and did not have the potential to undergo genetic modification either. In such cases, they would be allowed to leave school freely to find their own way.

Some of these dropouts would go on to become workers, while others became small business owners. But to the Pyro Company, this was just the life that normal people led.

The Pyro Company controlled almost all of the economic lifelines in the strongholds. After accumulating enough assets and money, they would only be used for one purpose: to support scientific research, the troops, and the military industry.

Meanwhile, military school students like Black Fox would get directly assigned to various basic units after graduation. Everyone would have to follow instructions and wait for their transfer orders.

But there were also some differences. In the Pyro Company's military schools, there was a type of student considered for "advanced admissions." Half a year before graduation, many of the more influential P5 commanders would go to the schools to select students they thought highly of.

The chosen students would then enlist in the P5 commander's troops directly. Usually, such students who were considered for advanced admissions were regarded by their colleagues as "apprentices" of the P5 commanders whose fates would then become intertwined.

Of course, the advantage was that these students were always promoted very quickly.

Black Fox remembered that one afternoon, he suddenly received a notification from his class supervisor: "A P5 commander has seen your résumé and results and is very interested in recruiting you. Go for the interview. He's waiting for you in Room 155 of the Red Sun Building."

Black Fox was stunned. Room 155 at the Red Sun Building was the most mysterious place in the military school. It was not that there was a lot of secrecy surrounding it but

that all seniors who had been considered for advanced admissions had completed their interviews there.

Some people walked out of Room 155 with a look of joy because they had been chosen by a certain P5 commander. Some people walked out of the office with depressed looks on their faces because they had been dropped for consideration by a P5 commander.

Only the truly outstanding could pass their interviews there.

Black Fox had heard that the Red Sun Building was named after the rising red sun to “shine the great light” for people. This phrase came from a certain sage’s “Ode to Young China”: “The nascent red sun shines the great light. Backed by splendid history and culture, a promising, far-reaching future.”

And the next line was: “My beautiful young China that is as eternal as heaven! My magnificent Chinese youths who are as bountiful as the land!”

Therefore, it was self-evident what purpose the person who named the Red Sun Building had.

Black Fox walked along the long corridor in the Red Sun Building. He stood outside Room 155 and spoke loudly, “P13922, Class of 213, reporting for the interview.”

The year 213 was counted from the day since the Cataclysm started. Currently, it was the year 223.

A calm tone could be heard coming from the office. “Enter.” The calm voice sounded like water in an ancient well, absent of any subjective emotions.

Black Fox slowly pushed open the old wooden door of Room 155 and saw that the curtains in the room were drawn. P5092 was sitting quietly in a chair opposite him and flipping through a résumé.

The office was dark, with only a faint glow of the afternoon sun coming in through the curtains. Black Fox could not even see P5092’s face clearly.

Black Fox stood at the door. Before he could close it, P5092 had already started asking, “In the two-two-one exercise, why did you lead your subordinates to their ‘death’ at Position 881?”

Black Fox was stunned on the spot. This was a sore point for him. It was also because of this command error that he scored very low on his assessment after the exercise ended.

He answered P5092 meekly, “During the simulation, the Blue side had occupied Position 881. If we wanted to ensure that the troops at the rear could pass through at

the specified time, we would have to sacrifice ourselves to seize Position 881. This position had to be controlled by our side for us to win the battle.”

“Why did you have to seize Position 881 no matter what?” P5092 asked.

Black Fox thought for a moment and said, “At that time, I thought the Blue side’s main forces were also behind Position 881. If we didn’t take the position back, our troops would have been exposed to the enemy’s artillery fire. We only found out there weren’t any Blue troops behind the position after the exercise was over....”

“Do you think you made a mistake?” P5092 looked up at Black Fox.

Black Fox did not know what to say. In the end, he hesitated for a while before saying, “Sir, I don’t think I was wrong.”

“Why do you sound so careful when answering me? Is it because you’re not sure if your choice was correct?” P5092 asked calmly.

“... Yes,” Black Fox said softly.

“Be more resolute in the future.” P5092 put down the résumé and said calmly, “They rated you poorly because they had a bird’s-eye view of the battlefield and knew there weren’t any main enemy forces behind Position 881, but you didn’t. So what your teachers taught you might not be right either. If you’re really on the battlefield, you have to stake your life to figure out what’s really behind Position 881.”

Black Fox was stunned. Over the past few months, he had been criticized several times for this decision during the exercise. At some point, he even wondered if he was wrong.

But at this moment, someone called him over and told him that he had done nothing wrong.

Although the other party’s tone was extremely void of emotion, Black Fox found it very warm and rousing.

At this moment, P5092 stood up and asked, “If you were to return to the time of the military exercise to take Position 881 again, would you still lead your men forward to die?”

Black Fox said firmly this time, “Yes!”

P5092 walked out the door. When he walked past Black Fox, he said, “Report to 3rd Division next month. I’ll handle your transfer... Remember your choice today.”

After that, P5092 left without looking back, leaving Black Fox standing in Room 155 of the Red Sun Building in a daze and deep in thought.

Afterwards, Black Fox became a qualified junior officer of the Pyro Company's 3rd Division. In just a few years, he rose up the ranks and finally became the second-in-command of the 3rd Division.

But over the years, Black Fox felt like he had never seen Commander P5092 smile so happily before.

Looking at P5092, who was being jostled around by Wang Yun and Ji Zi'ang, he suddenly felt that this wasn't so bad after all.

P5092 shouted, "Black Fox, get over here and get these two off me!"

In the end, Black Fox and the other staff officers around him exchanged glances and suddenly surrounded P5092 as well. All of them threw him into the air with all their might.

And then again.

And again once more.

No matter what P5092 said, no one had any intention of stopping.

In this war, P5092 was not the main contributor in helping to win it. Everyone knew this very well.

It was just that Black Fox and the others found it quite exciting to have the chance to openly throw an emotionless commander like P5092 into the air. After all, they did not have this opportunity when they were still serving in the Pyro Company's 3rd Division.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu saw Chen Jiu and the others walking towards him on the battlefield. Summer and Mel were also with the Sanctuary members.

"I'll be leaving soon," Ren Xiaosu said, looking at Mel.

Mel was stunned. "Where to?"

"Back to Fortress 178," Ren Xiaosu answered.

"Then will you come back to the Kingdom of Sorcerers?" Mel was a little disappointed. His voice also became softer.

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu smiled and nodded. "Of course I'll be back again. It only takes me 10 hours to get here from Fortress 178."

Initially, Ren Xiaosu wanted to leave the enchanted doorway here. But on second thought, it would be better not to place it in the hands of others.

If someone deliberately destroyed it, Ren Xiaosu would not have a chance to open another enchanted doorway again in his lifetime.

If anything were to happen in the Kingdom of Sorcerers, he would just have to make another trip here with the steam locomotive.

The enchanted doorway was a way for the Northwest Army to directly descend upon Ghent City, so he definitely couldn't let others watch over it for him.

At this moment, some of the 6th Field Division's troops returned after gathering the Eyes of True Sight from the battlefield.

More Eyes of True Sight had been dropped on the battlefield than expected. Chen Jiu, Summer, Mel, and the others were all staring at them.

1205 The Prosperous Northwest

How many Eyes of True Sight were there on the battlefield in Ghent City? Before the soldiers returned with them, a lot of people had neglected this issue.

But when all of the Eyes of True Sight were placed in front of everyone, Chen Jiu, Summer, Mel, and the others finally realized something. So many sorcerers were dead since each Eye of True Sight represented one sorcerer. There were at least 300 to 500 sorcerers from the Houses of Tudor and Norman participating in the war, so that meant that 300 to 500 Eyes of True Sight had been dropped on the battlefield.

Moreover, with the status of the Tudor and the Norman families, the Eyes of True Sight that were in their possession were naturally the best ones in the entire Kingdom of Sorcerers.

There was not a single white Eye of True Sight to be seen. Even the lowest grade of Eye of True Sight they collected was orange.

White, orange, red, gold, and black. Among the Eyes of True Sight that Ren Xiaosu and the Northwest Army had seized, red was the most common color. Even the orange ones made up only a small portion of it.

With a red Eye of True Sight, one could activate the Enchanted Doorway.

Even for someone as experienced as the Sanctuary's leader, Chen Jiu was a little dumbfounded.

With so many high-grade Eyes of True Sight placed in front of him, it would be a lie to say he was not tempted.

However, no one was so greedy to ask Ren Xiaosu for an Eye of True Sight. Everyone waited quietly to see how Ren Xiaosu would deal with these spoils of war.

Ren Xiaosu looked around and waited for everyone to calm down before finally saying with a laugh, "Do y'all want these Eyes of True Sight?"

With just a simple sentence, everyone's breathing hastened again.

In the Kingdom of Sorcerers, the Eye of True Sight represented authority and order.

Chen Jiu thought for a moment before answering, "The Sanctuary was established by that Rider. Now that his descendant has appeared, everything of the Sanctuary is at your disposal. From today onwards, the Sanctuary will be your most loyal follower."

These words were very cleverly chosen. After all, Chen Jiu was an experienced person who had been through a lot in society. He would definitely not be willing to give up the Eyes of True Sight. Therefore, he was implying to Ren Xiaosu that since the entire Sanctuary was his, he could decide how to allocate the Eyes of True Sight to the members. Surely he wouldn't treat his own people unfairly, right?

Chen Jiu was not a crafty person. Moreover, his beliefs had always been very firm, so fighting for reasonable interests did not conflict with his beliefs.

Compared to Chen Jiu, Summer pursed her lips and did not say anything.

Mel was much more honest now. "Xiaosu, these are all your spoils of war. If you're leaving the Kingdom of Sorcerers, you should take them with you."

When he said that, everyone looked at Mel and thought to themselves that this child was way too simple-minded.

When Ren Xiaosu heard Mel say that, he laughed and turned to Summer and said, "Mel is really too easily pushed around, so it's better that you be the one to govern the Kingdom of Sorcerers."

Summer was stunned. "Huh?"

"In the past, my father took away a black Eye of True Sight from your Russell family to treat my illness." With that, Ren Xiaosu took out a black Eye of True Sight and placed it in Summer's hand. "Now, this black Eye of True Sight shall be returned to its original owner."

Chen Jiu and the others were all stunned. He was giving away a black Eye of True Sight just like that?

Actually, everyone knew Ren He had stolen the black Eye of True Sight with his own skill back then. Later on, he even had the Sanctuary help the sorcerers find a land of paradise after The Cataclysm, so it could be said he had already returned the favor.



Even Russell himself had thought so. That was why the Russell family and the Sanctuary enjoyed such a good relationship after The Cataclysm.

Of course, this was also because Russell was not one to bear grudges.

In any case, no one felt that Ren He owed the Russell family anything.

Moreover, the most important detail revealed through Ren Xiaosu's words was... if Ren He was Ren Xiaosu's father, how old was Ren Xiaosu now?!

Chen Jiu said in a daze, "You're the son of the founder? So he snatched away the Eye of True Sight to save you?"

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Before coming to the Kingdom of Sorcerers, even I wasn't too sure about it yet. But now, I've found the answer for everything."

"But..." What Chen Jiu wanted to say was, based on the timeline, Ren Xiaosu should be over 200 years old, so why did he still look like a young man?

Did he learn the Art of Immortality?

This feeling completely subverted their understanding of the world. Did they fucking encounter an ancestral figure?!

For some reason, Chen Jiu felt a little more reverence for Ren Xiaosu when he thought of this.

Within this reverence, half of it was due to the mysteriousness surrounding him, while the other half was purely out of respect for prehistoric creatures.

Summer suddenly asked, "Do you know what a black Eye of True Sight represents? You're from the Central Plains, so you might not know how important it is to a sorcerer. I can't take advantage of your lack of understanding about this."

Mel looked at Summer with a hint of admiration.

However, Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said with a laugh, "Of course I know what it represents. There's only three of them in the entire Kingdom of Sorcerers. Initially, I wanted to give Melgor another Black Eye of True Sight. But after consideration, I think I'll keep it as a gift for someone else, so I won't be giving it to Melgor."

Speaking of which, Yang Xiaojin was still camping somewhere at a vantage point with her guard up. She did not know about Ren Xiaosu's relationship with Chen Jiu and the others, so she was standing by to take out any target that might be a threat to Ren Xiaosu.

Summer insisted, “I need to explain to you what the black Eye of True Sight can do. First of all, any sorcerer who wields it can skip the initial training process in sorcery. In other words, you can cast spells directly without the need to practice them first.”

“I know about that,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Also,” Summer continued to share, “in the face of a similar spell, such as when two sorcerers use the Garuda spell at the same time, the one cast by the black Eye of True Sight will naturally suppress the other. Even the world elements can be turned against them.”

“This is the first time I’ve heard about this, but it’s not particularly important to me,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Lastly,” Summer said, “those who possess the black Eye of True Sight can see through the rock layer and sense the grade of the Eye of True Sight within the stones.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. In other words, it meant he could easily purchase stones from the black market using his black Eye of True Sight.

This left Ren Xiaosu a little regretful. Why didn’t he learn about something so important earlier?!

Summer seemed to have guessed what he was thinking. “The function of the black Eye of True Sight is to search for ores. If it’s only used to gamble on stones, there’s barely any significance in that. Even if there’s stones on the black market that have an Eye of True Sight in them, they’ll only be the white ones.”

When he heard this, Melgor suddenly felt a sense of sadness. So it turned out the dream his father had been pursuing for an entire lifetime was just a scam that someone had meticulously set up.

That was right. The black market had always been controlled by the Houses of Norman and Tudor. Since their patriarchs could see through the rock layer, how could they possibly release higher-grade Eyes of True Sight onto the market?

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu also had a few realizations. One was about establishing strength and status through a level of suppression, while the other was establishing resource status through prospecting.

With a black Eye of True Sight, one would become qualified to control the Kingdom of Sorcerers.

“All the more reason to give you this black Eye of True Sight then.” Ren Xiaosu said, “I don’t want the Kingdom of Sorcerers to fall into the hands of ambitious people again.”

Summer was about to say something when Ren Xiaosu interrupted her, "I'm not only going to give you the black Eye of True Sight, I'm also going to share half of the spoils of war with you."

"Why?" Summer found it a little unbelievable. Half of the spoils of war equated to more than 200 Eyes of True Sight, and they were all high-grade ones too.

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Consider this as a dowry Fortress 178 prepared for Comrade Mel."

If Ren Xiaosu had been given a little more time, or if he used the enchanted doorway to bring over some of the high-ranking commanders of Fortress 178, the Northwest would definitely get greater control over the entire Kingdom of Sorcerers.

But since that was not possible, Ren Xiaosu could only let Summer and the Sanctuary develop freely here for now.

He had previously heard from Chen Jingshu that there were still many members in the Sanctuary who were sharing their Eyes of True Sight due to an extreme lack of stones.

Chen Jingshu said that most of the Eyes of True Sight in the possession of the Sanctuary were left in the underground world, and only whoever had to go on a mission would bring along an Eye of True Sight with them.

This sense of hardship reminded Ren Xiaosu of the 1950s and 1960s of the 20th century.

At that time, everyone did not have enough to eat, and the poor families only owned one pair of pants. Basically, whoever had to go out for errands would get to wear those pants.

Ren Xiaosu thought this was probably what the Sanctuary was experiencing.

The purpose of sharing the Eyes of True Sight was to allow the members who could not obtain one to use them for practice. In this way, if they obtained a new Eye of True Sight one day, the Sanctuary would immediately gain an additional combatant.

After all, sorcery required practice, and it was an extremely slow and lengthy process.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu reminded everyone, "By the way, I might be leaving behind more Eyes of True Sight than you all are expecting."

"What do you mean?" Chen Jiu wondered.

"You might have overlooked the other battlefield." Ren Xiaosu said, "It could be more tragic there than here in Ghent City."

“The House of Berkeley!” Chen Jiu immediately reacted.

At this moment, everyone finally realized what they had neglected.

The Knights of the Inferno had marched towards Ghent City aggressively, but Midnight crushed them single-handedly. Therefore, before Chen Jiu and the others even got to see the House of Berkeley, the other party had already been defeated.

There was absolutely no sense of participation from them.

In other words, the House of Berkeley had absolutely no presence in this war.

Ren Xiaosu smiled at Chen Jiu and said, “It’s time for us to return. You guys hurry up and clear the battlefield.”

Chen Jiu took a deep breath and said in seriousness, “The next time you visit, the Sanctuary will definitely welcome you back to a brand-new Kingdom of Sorcerers with order restored.”

“That’s enough to assure me,” Ren Xiaosu said.

All good things must come to an end. As Ren Xiaosu led Luo Lan and the soldiers of the 6th Field Division towards his enchanted doorway, Mel called out to him from behind, “Xiaosu!”

Ren Xiaosu turned around and saw Mel running over to give him a big hug.

Melgor said solemnly, “Thank you.”

“Gratitude received from Melgor, +1!”

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, “Take care!” He then walked towards P5092 and the others without looking back.

Melgor stood in place and watched quietly. He saw Wang Yun and the others greeting Ren Xiaosu warmly and joking around with him. He saw the soldiers of the 6th Field Division looking at Ren Xiaosu with longing in their eyes. He even saw a girl wearing a cap walking up to Ren Xiaosu and taking the initiative to hold his hand.

At some point, Melgor wanted to integrate with that group.

Strictly speaking, Summer and he were in love, but Ren Xiaosu was his first friend.

Mel said to Summer, “Why don’t we go to Fortress 178 after you’ve unified the Kingdom of Sorcerers? I’ve heard a lot of amazing things from Ren Xiaosu, such as radios, binoculars, motorized vehicles, and so on...”

Summer smiled and said, "We can go wherever you want when the time comes."

"Then it's settled."

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At Stronghold 144's Anning East Road.

In the huge temporary military base, patients were constantly being carried out of Ren Xiaosu's residence and brought to the temporary field hospital by the medical staff.

Throughout the night, nearly a 1,000 people were carried out of Ren Xiaosu's residence alone.

Moreover, the wounded who were sent back through the enchanted doorway were basically all seriously injured.

The soldiers who were only lightly injured did not want to return to the rear to recuperate if they felt they could still continue fighting.

Of course, the core figures of the 6th Field Division also had a brief discussion about this matter. The Great Hoodwinker felt that if everyone were unwilling to step back from the firing line due to their faith, that was actually a good thing.

However, P5092 felt that soldiers who suffered minor injuries should also get treated in time. If a battle did not reach a point where they had to fight to the death, the commander should first consider preserving as much of their strength as possible.

That was because the more soldiers that survived, the better they could deal with the impending danger.

This so-called impending danger was most likely referring to the Wang Consortium.

Of course, P5092 also had his own thoughts about facing the Wang Consortium.

Before this, P5092 had told Ren Xiaosu that the Pyro Company's higher-ups had strayed in the wrong direction. They had even wanted to annex the Kong Consortium to boost their own strength.

But this move was not in line with P5092's beliefs. He was more willing to fight against the expeditionary army and the Kingdom of Sorcerers than participate in a civil war between humans in the Central Plains.

Actually, this was also the reason why P5092 wanted to leave the Pyro Company. He felt that the Pyro Company's higher-ups had taken the wrong path in recent years.

The higher-ups had even deployed soldiers and commanders regardless of their quality, all so that they could expand their organization's power, and not because of their original beliefs.

After arriving in the Northwest, P5092 immediately made an agreement with Ren Xiaosu. If the Northwest were to start a war with the Wang Consortium, the Pyro Company troops he brought with him would only participate in logistical support and not go into battle.

P5092 believed that Ren Xiaosu would not go back on his word.

At this moment, countless Stronghold 144 residents were waiting outside the security perimeter around Anning East Road. Everyone was discussing this sudden war noisily.

The onlookers had already started gathering last night. At the beginning, only a few sporadic residents came over.

Then, when everyone realized the 6th Field Division did not have any intention of chasing them away, the number of residents gathering immediately grew.

Everyone had been waiting here for an entire night since last night. It was almost noon now, but the 6th Field Division was still not back yet.

"Do you think we can win this war?" someone asked amid the commotion.

"Of course we can. How can we not win with Future Commander taking charge personally? Even the 6th Field Division was activated."

Someone said, "But the elders said that the enemy beyond the Northwest is very ferocious. Fortress 178 was built specifically for this purpose. Have you forgotten about the memorial square in Fortress 178? More than 200,000 of our predecessors are buried there."

However, someone immediately retorted, "Our Northwest's military industry had not even started developing yet at that time. Besides, I heard that the enemy beyond the Northwest actually lost the war 17 years ago. Times have changed!"

"Well, that's true..."

But while they were talking, everyone suddenly saw the soldiers at the security perimeter running towards the temporary military base. The onlookers realized that something big was about to happen.

A moment later, the soldiers of the 6th Field Division lined up and walked out of Ren Xiaosu's residence. The temporary military base was initially only filled with nurses, doctors, and patients coming and going, so it looked a little empty.

But when Ren Xiaosu's door opened, ranks of soldiers retreated from the battlefield in an orderly manner. In an instant, this temporary military base was bustling with activity.

The stronghold residents asked loudly outside the temporary military base, "How was it, bro? Did y'all win?"

In the end, the soldiers who walked out of the base all stood ramrod straight with no intention of answering the residents. It was not that they were void of emotions, but that they were maintaining discipline.

Some of the soldiers were standing in formation right next to the security perimeter, so they were very close to the stronghold residents.

As they waited for their next order, they could even hear some people calling out behind them, "Lads, are you all hungry? I have some freshly cooked eggs at home..."

However, no one would communicate with the civilians without permission at this moment. They were soldiers, so all they needed to do was to wait for orders.

Gradually, as all of the 6th Field Division's combat troops came back through the enchanted doorway, P5092 looked out at the vast number of stronghold residents who had gathered with expectant gazes.

He said to Zhang Xiaoman next to him, "You can make the announcement."

Zhang Xiaoman got excited. However, he also saw Zhang Jinglin, Wang Fengyuan, and the other high-ranking commanders smiling as they watched from a roof not far away.

Zhang Jinglin nodded slightly. Zhang Xiaoman immediately perked up. He bluntly called for a soldier to bring over a loudspeaker and shouted with all his might, "We've won! It's a triumphant return! Long live the Northwest Army!"

His voice was like the tide, surging outwards bit by bit.

The stronghold residents exchanged looks with their family and friends around them before a loud cheer erupted in the stronghold. Everyone jumped for joy as though they were all feeling the same thing. Even strangers hugged each other without any awkwardness.

In recent times, Stronghold 144 had been busy building an irrigation infrastructure as per the general direction of their policy to solve the food shortage. A proposed contract responsibility system put forward the main theme of serving the people on a smaller policy level. The stronghold's administrative service center had completely helped to improve the efficiency of handling matters as well.

All of the stronghold residents witnessed these changes.

What was even more obvious was that everyone's lives were gradually getting better, and the crime rate in the stronghold had also become much lower.

Before the war broke out this time, Wang Yuexi led his staff to visit the households in the vicinity to discuss compensation matters. His warm and humble attitude left a good impression on everyone.

Some of the residents from the other strongholds lamented that it was only in the Northwest that the military and stronghold officials were willing to discuss policy matters and compensation with residents politely.

If it were the Yang Consortium, the Kong Consortium, or the Zhou Consortium, they would probably have forcefully kicked you out. Expropriating your property would be for the sake of the stronghold, so why should they have to compensate you?

Moreover, when everyone asked why they wanted to requisition the residential buildings near Anning East Road, Wang Yuexi and the others did not hide anything from them. This made everyone feel like they were given the right to know.

Stronghold 144 had become a united entity in a very short time.

The stronghold residents were involved in every detail. It was as though they had also taken part in this war, but it was just that they did not go out to the front line.

At this moment, Wang Fengyuan, who was standing next to Zhang Jinglin, glanced at his commander. "Commander, if you're happy, just show it. There's no need to restrain yourself."

Zhang Jinglin laughed heartily. "What do you all think of Ren Xiaosu now? Getting the people on your side, that's the demeanor of a true leader."

At the side, Wang Fengyuan and the others rolled their eyes. Commander Zhang had been waiting here since last night. He even had someone send his meals up to the roof so that he would find out about the outcome of the battle immediately as it happened.

Zhang Jinglin kept saying that he was only here to take a look, but in the end, he was more concerned than anyone else.

However, everyone also agreed with what Zhang Jinglin had said. The key indicator of a leader was not about having an off-the-charts combat strength or outstanding military talent. Instead, it was about being able to unite all of the forces by their side. It was not only about uniting supernatural beings and military geniuses in command positions but also about uniting the common folk.

"Eh, where's Future Commander?" the muscular Zhou Yinglong asked curiously. Currently, Zhou Yinglong was the commander of the 1st Field Division. Back then, the



Razor Sharp Company Ren Xiaosu was in was under the command of his Forward Strike Battalion.

With Zhou Yinglong's reminder, everyone finally realized what was going on. Yes, all of the 6th Field Division's combat troops had returned, so where was the future commander?

"Aren't Wang Yun, Ji Zi'ang, the Great Hoodwinker, P5092, and Zhou Yingxue all back already? Why haven't we seen Future Commander yet?" Wang Fengyuan wondered.

At this moment, the Great Hoodwinker came to the top of the building and said proudly, "Commander, this battle was absolutely well fought. We descended directly upon the capital city of the Magi through Future Commander's enchanted doorway. Just like the Heavenly Soldiers and Heavenly Generals, we instantly shattered the core of their authority! Future Commander has made some arrangements there. I believe it'll be very difficult for the Kingdom of Sorcerers to threaten us again in the future."

"Don't be in such a hurry to claim the credit." Wang Fengyuan asked, "Let me ask you first, where's Future Commander?"

"Oh." The Great Hoodwinker chuckled and said, "He and Ms. Xiaojin did not come back with us. Future Commander said he wanted to send Luo Lan and Zhou Qi back to the Qing Consortium's territory first before returning."

"Wait a minute, Future Commander didn't come back with you guys?" Wang Fengyuan was stunned for a moment before muttering, "Don't tell me we've lost him again?"

"That won't happen." The Great Hoodwinker remarked, "Don't worry, he'll definitely be back after he's done taking care of his affairs."

Zhang Jinglin also said with a smile, "This time, he won't run away."

Wang Fengyuan wondered, "Commander, why are you so sure? Future Commander has never wanted to take over as commander of the Northwest."

"Because this is now his home." Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "Let's go. We can have a few drinks today to celebrate."

"Wow, Commander, it's rare that you want to drink." The Great Hoodwinker said excitedly, "Commander, didn't you swear off drinking? Why did you break your vow today?"

Zhang Jinglin thought for a moment and said with a smile, "For... the Prosperous Northwest?"

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End of Volume Seven: The Prosperous Northwest

Next Volume: Hope in the Heavens

1206 Farewell

While Stronghold 144 was celebrating, a huge lizard was crawling through the Gobi from the Kingdom of Sorcerers to the Central Plains at an extremely fast speed.

The seemingly desolate Gobi supported an extremely rich ecosystem and a vast variety of species.

There were wild horses, wild donkeys, argalis, bharals, multi-ocellated racerunners, chukars, wolves, lynxes, foxes, and also a large number of rodents and lagomorphs roaming here.

A lot of people thought there wouldn't be a single animal found within a vicinity of tens of kilometers in the Gobi Desert, but in fact, the density of these living things was much greater than they could imagine.

These creatures were living peacefully in the Gobi until Midnight arrived like a sandstorm and sent them fleeing fearfully in all directions.

They were like animals seeking refuge before an earthquake.

When Midnight crawled through the Gobi, the dust kicked up by its huge hind feet was like a terrifying sandstorm.

But even more terrifying, when a wild donkey was frightened into fleeing, Midnight easily caught up to it and scooped it into its mouth with its tongue.

On Midnight's back, Luo Lan, Zhou Qi, Ren Xiaosu, and Yang Xiaojin watched this sight with their mouths agape.

Luo Lan gulped and said, "I've only seen lizards eating mosquitoes before, but this is the first time I've fucking witnessed a lizard devouring a donkey."

Zhou Qi muttered, "It's also my first time seeing such a thing."

The sight of the donkey being devoured was way too shocking.

Luo Lan couldn't help but think about how much despair the House of Berkeley must have felt when they were faced with a terrifying creature like this just now.

A creature like Midnight, be it its aggressiveness or size, was enough to shock anyone who encountered it.

However, Ren Xiaosu had a more practical observation.

When Midnight scooped the donkey into its mouth, Ren Xiaosu could not see the trajectory of its tongue even with his current vision. In other words, Midnight's attack had exceeded Ren Xiaosu's reaction speed.

If Ren Xiaosu were to face Midnight, no matter how impressive Old Xu's physical fitness was or what other trump cards Ren Xiaosu had, he would still die if he got near something like Midnight.

Midnight only needed to wrap Ren Xiaosu around its tongue, and that strong muscle would immediately squeeze him until his blood vessels burst.

It would take a heat-seeking missile to deal with a creature like that. Ren Xiaosu even suspected that heavy machine guns might not be able to pierce the defense of Midnight's tough skin quickly enough.

Of course, it would be possible to pierce its skin by firing at a fixed spot constantly, but the problem was that this creature would not just stand there and let you hit it.

Midnight was still crawling at a very fast pace. From time to time, it would scoop up a sheep or a donkey with its tongue to replenish its energy.

However, putting everything else aside for now, the lizard's movements were smooth as running water. The four of them did not feel it was a bumpy ride as they rode on its back.

Luo Lan sighed and said, "I thought I'd become very strong after my training, but now it seems like I'm still somewhat lackluster."

At the end of the day, the most useful thing about Luo Lan's power was still that it could artificially "revive" people. No matter how powerful Luo Lan might be, the enhancement he could provide to the martyred spirits was still very limited.

For example, if the physical fitness rating of the martyred spirits was 3 when they were still alive, then Luo Lan, as the wielder, would probably be able to enhance their physical fitness rating to 4 with consistent training.

Therefore, if the martyred spirits power did not have the advantage in numbers, it would actually be meaningless. Although firearms and explosives could make up for some of their shortcomings, they would still run out of ammo eventually.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "You rejected my invitation to the Northwest. What exactly is it that makes you so anxious about returning to the Qing Consortium?"

Luo Lan answered, "There's no need to hide it from you. Before I went to the Kingdom of Sorcerers, the Wang Consortium had already sent an invitation to the Qing Consortium to let my younger brother, Qing Zhen, make a trip to the Central Plains."

"To the Central Plains? Why?" Ren Xiaosu was stunned.

"I think Wang Shengzhi wants to have a chat with him." Luo Lan remarked, "Maybe he wants to join forces with the Qing Consortium to attack the Northwest? To be honest, if the Qing Consortium and the Wang Consortium really joined forces, the Northwest would definitely not be a match for them. However, who can put a finger on Wang Shengzhi's thoughts? He's a full-on idealistic madman. If you weren't also a madman like him, you couldn't guess what he's really up to."

"And then?" Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, "Has Qing Zhen decided to go or not?"

"Of course not." Luo Lan said, "Who would dare to go to the Central Plains at a time like this? What if they don't let him come back? Although everyone says that Wang Shengzhi is the last gentleman in this era of the wastelands when it comes to personal virtue, look at what he has done. You can say he's cold-blooded and heartless, willing to sacrifice anything for his ideals. Faced with such an opponent, who would dare to bet their life on his character?"

Ren Xiaosu heaved a sigh of relief. "It's good that he rejected the invitation."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly had a thought. He had already encountered many idealists. Wang Shengzhi, Yang Anjing, and even P5092 and Jiang Xu were all idealists.

However, their paths had always been different. The reason Wang Shengzhi and Yang Anjing were so ostracized while Jiang Xu and P5092 were loved by the people around them was that the former always sacrificed others to fulfill their ideals, while the latter would not do so.

But when it came to the opinion of whether Wang Shengzhi was wrong or not, Ren Xiaosu always found this issue a little complicated and could not come up with a clear answer to it.

Ren Xiaosu said to Luo Lan, "Then what are your plans for this trip back to the Southwest?"

"What other plans can I have?" Luo Lan said solemnly, "The Wang Consortium has invited Qing Zhen to go over. Although Qing Zhen has rejected it, Wang Shengzhi will definitely not give up. So I'll return to my younger brother's side first in case the Wang Consortium tries to stir up any further trouble. You also know that Wang Shengzhi is not someone who will give up easily."

"But I feel like you still have some other worries," Ren Xiaosu said.

“Of course.” Luo Lan said, “You should know that all of the Qing Consortium’s nanomachines have been lost, right? The 2,000 nanosoldiers who went to support the Battle of Mt. Zuoyun have also disappeared. We think they’ve fallen under the control of someone.”

“You’ve mentioned it before.” Ren Xiaosu nodded.

“What we’re worried about now is not the nanomachines, but how many of our military systems have been hacked by that artificial intelligence.” Luo Lan said, “We’ve already taken a lot of precautions before this, and many of our military systems can operate independently of each other due to Qing Zhen’s foresight that such a day might come. However, the power of the AI might be even more terrifying than we expect.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. “Are you worried that the Qing Consortium’s military systems will get controlled by the AI?”

“Theoretically, yes.” Luo Lan said, “Although we’ve already put in place physical isolation measures, Qing Zhen said it’s still not safe enough. Actually, I don’t know much about these things either, but don’t underestimate the AI.”

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu, who had regained all of his memories, remembered a piece of news from before The Cataclysm: There was a project named Nitro Zeus, in which thousands of military intelligence agents involved would execute comprehensive cyber attacks on an enemy’s infrastructure and nuclear facilities.

Ren Xiaosu did not know much about the Internet, but his father, Ren He, did. After all, the Qinghe Group’s predecessor was a large Internet empire.

At that time, Ren Xiaosu had asked Ren He, “Nuclear facilities should be run on an independent system segregated physically. How can they hack into an air-gapped network with such a method?”

At that time, Ren He’s answer was that there were actually many ways, but what Nitro Zeus aimed to do was to exploit networks through a “ferryman.” No matter how enclosed a military base was, it would still require data or equipment from external sources, such as portable laptops and other hardware, including printers.

The person who brought the equipment into the military base would not be aware that their equipment had been compromised, and this person was called the ferryman.

These devices would definitely be put through a strict inspection before entering the secured premises, but whether they could be identified as compromised or not would depend on which party was more skillful.

As for how to make someone a ferryman, that was another complicated operation altogether. At that time, Ren He did not really discuss it much with Ren Xiaosu.

Ren He only said that there was no such thing as an absolutely secure system in the world.

Then Ren Xiaosu asked Ren He, “Dad, how did you know they were planning to use this method?”

Ren He replied, “I saw it when I hacked into their military system, of course...”

Therefore, from the look of things, Luo Lan and the Qing Consortium’s worries were not unfounded.

In terms of technology, Zero must have far surpassed all information technology experts in the world. Its computing power and learning ability were something humans could not compare to.

If Zero really got control of the Qing Consortium’s military systems, it would mean the entire Qing Consortium military system had completely collapsed.

Ren Xiaosu asked, “How high of a probability do you think something like that could happen?”

Luo Lan threw up his hands. “50%? 80%? Who knows? More importantly, from a human’s point of view, it’s very difficult to speculate on just how powerful an AI is. It’s just like how you can’t really guess the level of an alien civilization.”

From Luo Lan’s point of view, he had already classified the artificial intelligence as an alien civilization.

Ren Xiaosu took a deep breath. “Since you know there’s such a possibility, you’ll have to be more careful.”

“Mhm.” Luo Lan said, “We will. It’s precisely because there’s this speculation that I need to quickly return to Qing Zhen’s side. If there’s any matter that requires me to handle, I can also quickly take over.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He realized Luo Lan had always been the one to handle the most dangerous matters facing the Qing Consortium.

Going to the Li Consortium to seize the nanomachines’ neurotech and going to the Yang Consortium to be a hostage were such examples, and going to the Central Plains to seek alliances was also like this.

It seemed that Luo Lan was the one who did all the dangerous work. This seemed a little unfair to him.

Luo Lan looked at Ren Xiaosu and suddenly said, "Don't misunderstand, I'm not that stupid to get forced into charging into enemy lines. Just like you and Yan Liuyuan, an elder brother has to lead the charge for his younger brother, right?"

At this moment, Luo Lan chuckled and said, "But, of course, you're much stronger than me. Although Little Liuyuan has grown up to become a lord, he still can't compare to you. I can't do the same though. I'll be happy to just quietly serve as Qing Zhen's foil. My younger brother is much stronger than me."

For a moment, Ren Xiaosu did not know what to say.

This time, Ren Xiaosu had insisted on sending Luo Lan back to the Qing Consortium's territory because he also had other considerations.

He would definitely not be able to bring a behemoth like Midnight back to the Northwest. With its appetite, it would probably eat up all the sheep in the Northwest within a few months. More importantly, those sheep were the collective property of Fortress 178, so they were not to be eaten as and when.

Before leaving the Kingdom of Sorcerers, Ren Xiaosu even specially turned around and instructed Melgor, "Don't use the summoning spell anymore in the future and eat our Fortress 178's sheep. Otherwise, I'll bill it to you if we lose any sheep in the future. The next time I return to the Kingdom of Sorcerers, I'll make you pay up with interest."

Mel was stunned. Initially, he was quite happy when he saw Ren Xiaosu turning around to look for him. But who could have expected that the future commander of Fortress 178 was so bothered about losing those sheep!

Right now, Ren Xiaosu would have to send Midnight to a suitable place to stay before returning to Stronghold 144.

If he wanted to see Midnight again in the future, he could just summon it directly to his side. It wouldn't be too troublesome at all.

Ren Xiaosu had seriously thought about it before. Even though Midnight and Dusk had been living in the crater of the Jing Mountains' volcano for more than 200 years, he had not seen the Jing Mountains become entirely devoid of wildlife.

Therefore, he thought Midnight and Dusk should be able to sustain their own needs by absorbing heat. Meanwhile, there was a suitable place in the mountain range in the southwest that Zhou Qi had been to before.

The four of them sat on Midnight's back and passed through the Gobi to arrive near Stronghold 93 in just a few hours.

At this point, Ren Xiaosu suddenly realized Yang Xiaojin had become much quieter.

This used to be the Yang Consortium's territory, and Yang Xiaojin had also been here many times before. Now that she was returning to this familiar place, it would definitely bring back some memories of the past.

Midnight came to a factory warehouse and stood there quietly. When the factory's garrison troops and workers saw this huge creature, they nearly peed their pants.

The workers all went in the opposite direction of Midnight. Some of them returned to the factory to hide, while others took cover in underground bunkers. There were also some who ran out into the wilderness.

Midnight looked at these people curiously. However, it remembered that its master did not allow it to eat people, so it did not stick out its tongue to scoop them into its mouth.

Ren Xiaosu asked Luo Lan, "Where are your people? Isn't it better to send you back to Stronghold 93 directly? Why did you insist on coming to this factory?"

"Wait a minute." Luo Lan whistled at the factory's warehouse. The factory's warehouse gate suddenly opened, and more than a dozen off-road vehicles drove out. It was as though they had been waiting there for a long time.

Luo Lan explained with a laugh, "We have to be careful at such a time, of course. Who knows if there are any spies in Stronghold 93? After I join up with my men here, I'll head straight for Stronghold 111 first. That's the safest route to take."

Everyone climbed down from Midnight's back. Someone from the off-road vehicle convoy immediately rushed out and did some tests on Luo Lan with an instrument to ensure he was healthy.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned when he saw this. Luo Lan said helplessly, "This is Qing Zhen's arrangement."

Ren Xiaosu said, "Since you've arrived safely, I'll be leaving then."

When Luo Lan heard this, he pushed away the medical staff around him and gave Ren Xiaosu a gentle hug. "Bro, take care. I don't know when we'll see each other again."

"We'll definitely meet again." Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Even if you don't come to the Northwest to look for me, I'll still go to the Qing Consortium to look for you."

Luo Lan thought for a moment and said with a smile, "Deal."

"I hope that when the time comes, everything will be settled, and we won't have to fight and kill anymore," Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness.

Luo Lan suddenly turned solemn. "I have a favor to ask of you."



“What is it?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“One day, if Qing Zhen encounters danger, please help him out once.” Luo Lan said, “Although my younger brother is a very smart person, there are times when everyone will make mistakes in their calculations. There’s no such thing as a truly flawless plan.”

Ren Xiaosu looked at Luo Lan. Up until the moment before leaving, this guy was still thinking about how to add another layer of insurance to his younger brother’s wellbeing.

“Alright, I’ll promise you that,” Ren Xiaosu said.

With that, he took out a red Eye of True Sight from his storage space and handed it to Luo Lan. “You’ve seen this thing before. It’s an Eye of True Sight. I’ll give it to you so that you can save yourself too if you’re in danger.”

“Save myself?” Luo Lan was stunned. “But I don’t know any spells. Didn’t they say it would take a long period of training before spells are effective?”

“There’s no need for any practice if it’s to open an enchanted doorway.” When Ren Xiaosu explained to Luo Lan how to open the Enchanted Doorway, Luo Lan’s eyes immediately lit up.

“You’re saying that I’ll be able to open up a dimensional portal and go to the place I want to go most by dripping my blood on it and turning it ten times?” Luo Lan said happily.

Previously, when Luo Lan saw the 6th Field Division passing through that metal door, he was really envious and found it very magical.

But he did not expect that he would one day be able to learn that method too.

Luo Lan was not a fool. He knew just how useful the Eye of True Sight and the Enchanted Doorway could be.

“Yes, a person can only activate it once in their lifetime, so you must cherish it. This thing can save your life during critical moments,” Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness.

“Xiaosu, thank you.” Luo Lan suddenly sighed and said, “I’ve always wanted to repay the favor after each time you helped me. But it seems like I can never finish repaying you.”

“Is there a need for something like that between us?” Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh.

“By the way, does Ms. Xiaojin have an Eye of True Sight?” Luo Lan said politely, “Why don’t you give this red one to her instead?”

“You don’t have to worry about that. She has a better one,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Oh...”

At this point, Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered that Yang Xiaojin still lacked an item to activate the Enchanted Doorway.

It was not the Eye of True Sight but a physical door.

Immediately after, Luo Lan, Zhou Qi, and everyone else watched helplessly as Ren Xiaosu walked to the entrance of the warehouse. Then he forcefully cut off half of the large metal door and put it into his storage space.

Everyone at the scene was confused when they saw this. Initially, those who came to pick Luo Lan up felt that Midnight was the most terrifying existence around. But now, they felt they might have gotten it wrong. The person in front of them who could cut down half of your metal door at the slightest disagreement was the truly terrifying one instead!

Ren Xiaosu was a little embarrassed. He said to Luo Lan, “I’ll be using this for Xiaojin to open her Enchanted Doorway. Sorry, sorry.”

After that, he pulled Yang Xiaojin along and climbed onto Midnight’s back again. Then he had Midnight run towards the mountain range to the southwest of the Qing Consortium.

Zhou Qi was stunned. “Is that what it means to break down doors to make an escape? The ancients are so right!”

1207 Complex emotions

The mountain range to the southwest of the Qing Consortium was an uninhabited region similar to Xiuzhuzhou to the south of the Zhou Consortium. Due to the harsh environment, very few people would venture here.

Everyone was deterred by the poisonous insects and noxious night air here.

In the past, the Yang Consortium had wanted to expand its territory westwards. However, they realized that the cost of development was too great, so they might as well consolidate their existing authority first.

This mountain range had a forest so dense it was like a rainforest.

Initially, Ren Xiaosu was worried Midnight would have difficulty crawling in this forested wilderness. After all, it was so large and the forest was really dense.

But to his surprise, Midnight was smart enough to wade directly through the stream.

Midnight was different from Old Xu. As a shadow clone, Old Xu did not have a mind of its own. As such, Ren Xiaosu's multitasking ability had been trained to the extreme.

As for Midnight, it had its own thoughts. Therefore, there was actually no need to worry after giving it instructions. It would find its own style and way to carry out its orders.

The fishes in the mountain range were very dangerous, but that only applied to normal people. Based on Ren Xiaosu's analysis, piranhas in the Amazon basin from the Pre-Cataclysm times would not even compare to evolved snakehead fish.

Of course, it was unclear whether any mutation had occurred there.

As the Qinghe Group had access to satellites, Li Yingyun, Qin Sheng, Zhang Qingxi, and other Riders had seen what the entire world was like. They once described to Ren Xiaosu that the whole world had become quite different from the Pre-Cataclysm times due to changes in the earth's crust.

Ren Xiaosu was thinking after the situation in the Alliance of Strongholds had stabilized, it would not be a bad idea to travel around the world with Yang Xiaojin.

He looked quietly at Yang Xiaojin next to him. It seemed that after they left the Kingdom of Sorcerers, she had become a little reticent.

When Ren Xiaosu was chatting with Luo Lan earlier, Yang Xiaojin seemed to be thinking about something as she sat by the side.

Just as Ren Xiaosu was peeking at her, Yang Xiaojin suddenly turned and said, "You can look at me openly."

"Haha." Ren Xiaosu quickly changed the subject. "I saw a wild boar drinking water by the stream with its piglets just now, but they were all frightened away by Midnight. I recall when I first became a supernatural being, I was even frightened by a red deer when we went into the Jing Mountains."

After that, the both of them fell silent again.

A strange atmosphere filled the air between them, and Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt a little worried.

This change seemed to have started in Ghent City.

At that time, the 6th Field Division had started retreating through the enchanted doorway. Before leaving, the Great Hoodwinker asked Ren Xiaosu, "Future Commander, did you gain anything else on this trip to the Kingdom of Sorcerers?"

Ren Xiaosu answered, "Yes, I found out everything about my past."

At that time, the Great Hoodwinker was very surprised. "Future Commander, aren't you from the Central Plains? Why would you come here to find out about your past?"

Ren Xiaosu only answered vaguely, "It's related to that Rider from the Central Plains."

Perhaps others might not be able to make much of a guess about this. But he and Yang Xiaojin had already discussed the No. 001 Experimental many times, so she could definitely make the connection.

In this world, which keyword was closely linked to Ren He, the founder of the Qinghe Group? It was the No. 001 Experimental.

That Neo-Human was said to be able to live tens or a 100 times longer than normal humans.

It was from that moment that Yang Xiaojin became much quieter.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the map Zhou Qi had drawn for him as he guided Midnight's movement.

Zhou Qi said that after his power was awakened, he explored the rivers for a long time and surveyed the entire river basin in the southwest.

At that time, Zhou Qi had just become a superhuman and was experiencing the wonders of his transcendence.

He discovered a subterranean thermal river where a new water cycle had been formed. It was located between tectonic plates that met and compressed, with a large source of energy hidden underground.

This place should be able to serve as Midnight's new habitat.

Ren Xiaosu did not let Midnight return to the Jing Mountains because he became aware that Zero had stationed a group of troops there under its control when he summoned Midnight. Even Dusk was under the control of Zero as well.

The summoning spell was a one-way spell. It could only summon creatures but not send them back to where they came from.

The Jing Mountains was situated at the edge of the Qing Consortium's territory. If Ren Xiaosu wanted to bring Midnight there directly, he would definitely have to pass through the Qing Consortium's territory on the way.

And after arriving at the Jing Mountains, even if he could destroy the troops there, he would still have to come face to face with Dusk, who was under Zero's control. That was

because Ren Xiaosu did not have any way to directly destroy the nanomachines within Dusk's body.

The "Prosperous Northwest" summoning spell was able to break Zero's control over Midnight and Dusk. But with Midnight around, even if Ren Xiaosu were to recite the summoning spell's incantation a 100 times over, it would still be Midnight that got summoned through the stellar gate, not Dusk.

Therefore, Ren Xiaosu did not actually know how to resolve the issue of Dusk for now. Perhaps he could try talking with Zero?

Or perhaps he could directly unlock the seal and become the world consciousness?

But if he really did become the world consciousness, would all that he possessed right now still have any meaning to them?

Those friends who were like his family, and Yang Xiaojin as well, could only look up at the sky if they missed him in the future, right?

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu was also unsure what he would end up as after becoming the world consciousness. But he did not want to know either.

While pondering, Ren Xiaosu could see dense steam continuously being emitted up ahead of him. There was even a faint scent of sulfur in the air.

Midnight seemingly cheered up. It let out a soft "purr" from its throat like a contented big cat.

After climbing over a small hill, Ren Xiaosu sat on Midnight's head and looked across from their location. The huge lake in front of him looked like a crescent moon. He could see a cloud of vapor moving constantly across the lake's surface. This place was like a real paradise on earth.

"This is the place," Ren Xiaosu said as he jumped off Midnight's head. "According to Zhou Qi, this crescent-shaped lake has an extremely deep bottom. It's as though it's connected to the center of the earth. He didn't dare to venture deeper at that time."

He patted Midnight's large claw. "Go on, this is the most suitable place for you."

Midnight looked down at Ren Xiaosu. It had not expected to be separated again so soon after reuniting with its master.

It tilted its gigantic head and looked at Ren Xiaosu. The sky above the mountain range was shrouded in dark clouds, and Midnight's vertical pupils had turned round. This made Midnight appear less fierce than before. In fact, it even seemed a little cute.

It pointed at the lake with its claw and then pointed it at Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "We can't stay here with you. We have other things to do."

Midnight could understand what Ren Xiaosu was saying, so it was a little disappointed.

But Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "We'll accompany you for a while longer until you figure out what's in the lake."

When he said that, Midnight ran happily towards the crescent-shaped lake.

The moment Midnight reached the lakeside, it leaped up and plunged straight into the lake.

The disturbance it created was like an artillery shell landing on the lake. Wake turbulence even formed in the vapor above the lake's surface.

However, Midnight did not swim to the bottom of the lake. Ren Xiaosu realized it had the urge to dive down to the bottom of the lake on several occasions, but it restrained itself. The thermal energy at the bottom of the hot lake seemed to have attracted it.

The huge lizard kept swimming by the side of the lake. At times, it would even look at Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin as though it were afraid they might run off.

Ren Xiaosu smiled at Midnight and said, "Go ahead. You can go to the bottom of the lake and take a look first. We won't leave."

It wasn't until when Midnight heard this that it dived back under.

"The magic of creation is really amazing. Even a creature like Midnight can appear. It's really difficult to imagine what the future world will look like," Ren Xiaosu said emotionally as he sat by the lake.

He skillfully got a campfire started while Yang Xiaojin sat down right next to him and ate the food Ren Xiaosu had roasted. It was as though nothing had happened.

She asked softly and nonchalantly as she ate, "Don't you have anything to say to me? You should've found a lot of the answers in the Kingdom of Sorcerers."

Ren Xiaosu thought the inevitable could not be avoided, after all. He sighed and said, "I've regained my memory. I'm the No. 001 Experimental."

Yang Xiaojin was not too surprised. She had probably already guessed this outcome. "Carry on."

“Ren He, the founder of the Qinghe Group, is my father.” Ren Xiaosu said, “I was diagnosed with cancer before The Cataclysm. At that time, cancer was still an incurable disease, so I was counting down to my death every day. Later, my father sent me to the Pyro Company’s Laboratory 39 for treatment. After all conventional treatment methods failed, Dr. P. started using a more radical genetic serum treatment on me with my and my father’s consent.

“It was just as Qing Zhen had guessed. The reason for the Experimentals’ appearance was that the cancer cells in their entire bodies had restructured and reached a state of equilibrium and harmony. However, they were defective products whereas I successfully became a so-called Neo-Human.”

“Why were you the only successful case?” Yang Xiaojin wondered.

“Because my genetic code was unlocked before The Cataclysm.” Ren Xiaosu calmly explained, “It’s an inherited technique my father had discovered. By completing eight challenges, the internal potential of a person’s body gets unlocked. That was why I pulled through the side effects of the genetic serum but the Experimentals did not. However, I was not the only successful case. Yan Liuyuan is one too. I believe he has also regained his memory now.”

“In other words, strictly speaking, we are different species? How did Yan Liuyuan succeed then?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“Because Dr. P. transplanted my bone marrow into him, and it replaced his hematopoiesis ability,” Ren Xiaosu explained. “So I’m planning to find a qualified hospital and transplant my bone marrow to you as well. That way, your lifespan will be—”

Yang Xiaojin interrupted, “How old are you this year?”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Actually, this was the question he had been avoiding all this while.

To the 19-year-old Yang Xiaojin, Ren Xiaosu’s age bothered her a lot. Although he still looked young and had spent most of those years in a coma, and his mentality was not affected by the vicissitudes of life, his actual age was still a little scary.

Regardless of whether Yang Xiaojin was bothered by it, Ren Xiaosu still felt a little uneasy. What if she minded? What if Yang Xiaojin was bothered by his age?

‘What is love?’ Ren He said it was the sudden feeling of weakness, but at the same time, a sense you were protected by armor.

Ren Xiaosu felt like he was now a gigantic dragon guarding a treasure. It was fierce yet naïve, strong yet lonely, gentle yet flustered, timid yet free. Although it was very cute, it got overly nervous sometimes too.

A young man in love was constantly worried about losing it as well. Even if he were the future commander of the Northwest Army, he was no exception.

Be it his “past” or “present,” Yang Xiaojin was still his first love. Ren Xiaosu did not have any experience in love, so he could not express it so easily.

The girl in the cap was sitting quietly next to the campfire. The dense vapor hanging over the lake’s surface not far away drifted like clouds across the sky when blown by the mountain breeze.

This young lady was so unique Ren Xiaosu didn’t even pay attention to any other girls.

Yang Xiaojin asked again, “How old are you this year?”

Ren Xiaosu said softly, “Strictly speaking, I’m 240 years old.”

Yang Xiaojin fell silent.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, “You mind?”

Yang Xiaojin did not answer the question. Instead, she changed the subject and said, “Teach me how to activate the enchanted doorway first.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. It seemed she was showing her attitude on this matter by not answering the question.

He thought for a moment before finally taking out the other black Eye of True Sight from the palace and handing it to Yang Xiaojin. Then he retrieved the large metal door he had grabbed earlier from the Qing Consortium’s factory. “You only need to drip a drop of your blood on the Eye of True Sight and turn it against the door ten times. You know what to do.”

“Mhm.” Yang Xiaojin pulled out her dagger and made a cut on her finger. Then she dripped her blood onto the Eye of True Sight.

She took a deep breath, pressing the black stone against the large metal door and turning it. Transparent ripples spread outwards from the stone.

Yang Xiaojin turned her head to Ren Xiaosu. “Come with me. I want to know where the place I want to go most is.”

“Mhm,” Ren Xiaosu grunted with a nod.



At this moment, Midnight emerged from the lake. Ren Xiaosu instructed, "Midnight, guard this door and don't let any animals damage it."

With that, Ren Xiaosu stepped through the door with Yang Xiaojin.

Behind the enchanted doorway was a field of fragrant flowers and songbirds. Ren Xiaosu looked around in silence and suddenly realized he had never seen this place before. Instead, it was Yang Xiaojin who was in a trance as she stood in the courtyard.

Ren Xiaosu felt a little gloomy. So it turned out the place Yang Xiaojin wanted to go to most was different from his.

He laughed bitterly to himself. Perhaps this was also considered an answer.

But it did not matter. Everyone had their own freedom of choice, didn't they?

Ren Xiaosu suddenly did not know whether to laugh or cry. When did he start getting so worried about losing her?

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, "Where are we at?"

"This is Stronghold 88, my former home." Yang Xiaojin said, "We're at the Yang Consortium's manor."

Nearly half of this manor had been destroyed by the Li Consortium's nanosoldiers. But unexpectedly, this place was rebuilt more than a year later.

Yang Xiaojin said with a smile, "I wonder who rebuilt it. But a large part of the buildings in the Yang Consortium's manor has been preserved. It all looks so familiar, yet so strange. This feels a little strange to me."

Afterwards, Yang Xiaojin headed straight into the garden. She came to a swing and said to Ren Xiaosu, "When I was young, my parents would bring me here to play for a while after dinner. Whenever I sat on the swing, my father would push me from behind while my mother smilingly stood next to me."

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything and listened to Yang Xiaojin continue saying, "They were quite different from the other members of the Yang Consortium. My father was never hungry for the authority of the Yang Consortium, so he never fought for it. However, my grandfather liked him the most and always wanted to hand over the Yang Consortium to him. Sometimes, I wonder if he wouldn't have gotten into an accident if he weren't born in the Yang Consortium."

"Do you think your parents' death was a conspiracy?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"I'm not sure." Yang Xiaojin said, "I've investigated it before, but I couldn't find any clues. But now that the Yang clan has perished, even if my parents were murdered, the culprit would already be dead."

While they were talking, two people in uniforms ran over quickly from the manor with flashlights in their hands.

Yang Xiaojin said, "They're not armed, so they're neither soldiers nor guards from the Public Order Division."

Those two rushed over and shouted, "Who are you people? Why did you break into the museum in the middle of the night?"

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin looked at each other, speechless. This place had actually been turned into a museum by the Qing Consortium?!

After learning the truth, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin did not stay around any longer and directly fled from the Yang Consortium's manor.

With their physical fitness, how could ordinary security guards possibly catch up to them?

The two of them fled onto the streets and looked at each in laughter. These two legendary superhumans had actually been chased away by two security guards? There was even a slight bittersweet feeling about it.

"Let's go. I'll take you somewhere to eat. Hopefully, those shops are still around," Yang Xiaojin said.

...

At 9 PM, an old lady was cleaning the tables with a tinge of fatigue inside a small shop called "Sister Lin's Han Bun Store" at Stronghold 88's Zhongfu Road. While cleaning up, she was making a mental note of the day's takings.

The shop was about to close for the night. But just as the old lady wiped her hands with a towel and prepared to close shop, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin walked in.

"We're closed." The old lady said with a smile, "Why don't you try another shop... Xiaojin?"

"Grandma Lin," Yang Xiaojin said in a crisp voice, "I want to have Han buns and dandan noodles."

“Yes, we still have them!” The old lady was a little surprised. “Wait a while. I’ll prepare it for you now. The noodles and fillings are ready-made, so you won’t have to wait too long.”

While talking, the old lady couldn’t help looking at Ren Xiaosu. There was a scrutinizing look in her eyes that made Ren Xiaosu feel a little embarrassed.

The shop had clearly already run out of steamed buns, and the old lady went to wrap more on the spot before placing them into the bamboo steamer. Meanwhile, Yang Xiaojin did not stand ceremony with her.

For a moment, Ren Xiaosu thought this old lady was really Yang Xiaojin’s grandmother.

“Do you know each other?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“Yup! When I was young, my parents often brought me here to eat.” Yang Xiaojin said, “When my grandfather was still around, he had a rule that the Yang Consortium members could only have porridge and pickled veggies for dinner. Furthermore, we were not allowed to eat too much. My grandfather said that those who couldn’t curb their appetites were unqualified to take charge of an organization.”

“He’s that strict?” Ren Xiaosu was stunned. While he was still busy coming up with ways to find food, other people had already started dieting.

Yang Xiaojin smiled and said, “It was very strict indeed. My uncles and aunts often complained about this to my grandfather, but my father was the only one who didn’t do so. Instead, he secretly brought me and my mother out for snacks. This was the place we visited most frequently. My father said this shop was around when he was young. The Sister Lin we knew in the past has become Grandma Lin now.”

“This shop has been in operation for a few decades already? Awesome!” Ren Xiaosu said.

However, Grandma Lin, who was preparing the steamed buns inside, said with a laugh, “What’s so awesome about that?”

“Of course it’s awesome, Grandma Lin.” Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, “Mr. Zhang told me before that as long as someone can accomplish something in their life, they’ll be considered an incredible person. Most people won’t even achieve that in their lifetime.”

Granny Lin smiled and said to Yang Xiaojin, “This young man is quite the sweet talker. Was that how he managed to woo you?”

With Granny Lin’s discerning eyes, she could immediately tell the relationship between Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Yang Xiaojin did not correct her. However, Ren Xiaosu noticed that her head was slightly lowered. It was as though she had started thinking about something again.

“What’s on your mind?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

Suddenly, Yang Xiaojin said in seriousness, “You don’t have to address her as Grandma Lin. She’s younger than you.”

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

Was that what you were thinking about the entire time?!

Grandma Lin laughed in the kitchen. “Xiaojin, what are you going on about? I’m already nearing my eighties. How can he possibly be older than me? Surely he’s not a 100 years old, right?”

Yang Xiaojin corrected her in seriousness, “Older than that.”

Grandma Lin laughed happily in the kitchen. “I was quite tired initially. But when you came, all my worries seemingly vanished.”

Ren Xiaosu was dumbfounded right then and there. What the hell! This girl in the cap was really bothered by his age after all.

The piping-hot stuffed buns were quickly served. Yang Xiaojin asked Grandma Lin as she ate, “How have you been recently?”

“I’m pretty good.” Grandma Lin said with a smile, “The neighbors were quite worried when the war broke out. Everyone said they were planning to flee. After the unification of the Northwest, some people said they wanted to escape there. But after the Qing Consortium arrived, the security in the stronghold became better than before, and our taxes were also lowered.”

“That’s good then.” Yang Xiaojin nodded.

At this moment, Grandma Lin looked like she wanted to say something. “But the Yang Consortium... Xiaojin, you...”

Yang Xiaojin laughed. “Grandma Lin, you don’t have to worry about me. My aunt is doing fine as well.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Grandma Lin said.

While Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin ate, Grandma Lin started complaining nearby about how her neighbor’s briquettes were always lying around and dirtying the place.

But her neighbor was a very nice person who would sometimes help her carry things and buy her a beef pie too when they went shopping on the neighboring street.

But as she was old, she could no longer chew well anymore.

Listening to these complaints, Ren Xiaosu felt as though he had been pulled back to a warm and happy life from that tense Magi war he had participated in.

When they came out of the bun shop, Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Where's Grandma Lin's family?"

"Her son was killed in the war between the Yang Consortium and the Li Consortium. Her daughter-in-law got remarried and took her children with her," Yang Xiaojin said.

When Ren Xiaosu turned around and looked back into the bun shop, he saw Grandma Lin struggling to arrange the chairs neatly.

The harm war did to people was definitely not only the loss of lives in the course of the war. This loss of lives would leave a scar in people's hearts and bring decades of pain to an entire generation of families.

"Where are we headed to now?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Let's find a place to stay." Yang Xiaojin said, "I'll show you around Stronghold 88 tomorrow."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and suddenly asked, "Is something bothering you?"

Yang Xiaojin answered calmly, "Can you accompany me for a few days first?"

Ren Xiaosu was stunned as complex emotions filled his heart. Meanwhile, Yang Xiaojin turned around and walked off in the other direction. Under her cap, the corners of her mouth curved up slightly.

After the war in the Southwest was over, people's livelihoods and the economy there recovered much faster than expected.

The traffic routes between the entire Southwest's 50-odd strongholds were fully operational while the strongholds completely opened up as well. Just as in Luoyang City, the stronghold residents and refugees could enter the various strongholds as long as they possessed trade or work visas.

The Qing Consortium encouraged the residents to do business by reducing taxes. With a flow of people moving between the various strongholds, the stagnating Southwest finally became livelier.

Even though the people here had just been through a war, Stronghold 88 looked like it was completely thriving.

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin found a hotel to stay at for the night. They still chose two separate rooms as usual.

At night, Yang Xiaojin returned to her room early to sleep. If it were in the past, the two of them might still have a long conversation with each other.

At their home on Anning East Road, they would chat through the walls until late at night.

But now, they seemed to have much less to say between them.

Ren Xiaosu's mind started running wild. When he was alone, the first thing that came to his mind was whether Yang Xiaojin was treating this trip to Stronghold 88 as their last chance to spend some time together before breaking it off with him.

He felt that Yang Xiaojin's attitude towards their relationship must have changed. Otherwise, why didn't her Enchanted Doorway open to their home in Stronghold 144?

Initially, Ren Xiaosu also felt that he might be thinking too much. However... the enchanted doorway would not lie.

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. Whoever said that her Enchanted Doorway had to open at the same place as his?

After an entire night of imagining things, Ren Xiaosu finally fell asleep.

The next day, when Yang Xiaojin knocked on his door to wake him up, Xiaosu had a rare look of fatigue on his face.

"You didn't sleep well?" Yang Xiaojin asked, "Why don't you sleep in a little longer?"

"It's OK." Ren Xiaosu said, "Where do you want to go? I'll accompany you."

"Come on." Yang Xiaojin led the way. "Let's get you some new tailor-made suits since the ones I bought for you were damaged in that fight in Winston City."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Wait, how do you know that? Were you there at that time?"

"Of course." Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. "You did well."

Ren Xiaosu learned from Zhang Xiaoman that Yang Xiaojin and Zhou Yingxue had set off for the Kingdom of Sorcerers earlier than the Great Hoodwinker and company. But in the end, Yang Xiaojin arrived at Ghent City together with them.

Ren Xiaosu did not ask Yang Xiaojin when she had arrived in the Kingdom of Sorcerers. But from the look of things, she must have been lurking since she got there. She even witnessed the battle where he walloped the Berkeley family's patriarch at Winston Manor.

And Yang Xiaojin's reply now was probably praising Ren Xiaosu for not having any entanglements with the opposite sex on his travels.

When Ren Xiaosu thought of this, he suddenly broke out in a cold sweat.

"When did you catch up to me in the Kingdom of Sorcerers?" Ren Xiaosu cautiously probed.

Yang Xiaojin said calmly, "Take a guess."

Her reply was really profound. Ren Xiaosu could not determine what she had or had not seen at all.

The more it was this way, the more Ren Xiaosu was left scratching his head.

The streetcar rattled along on the track in the stronghold. The early risers were taking transit to work. Yang Xiaojin led Ren Xiaosu onto Streetcar 12 with a sense of familiarity and sat in the streetcar as it drove unsteadily towards Shunjiang Road.

Yang Xiaojin said, "When you came to Stronghold 88 previously, I didn't have time to show you around."

"Is the tailor store on Shunjiang Road?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Yes." Yang Xiaojin nodded. "In the past, my family's clothes were all tailored on Shunjiang Road. But at that time, it was the tailor who came to our place to take our measurements. I only had to go to the store occasionally. The store was run by a couple whom my father was very familiar with. Every time that auntie came to take my measurements, she would smile and remark that I'd grown taller again. I was a little rebellious when I was young, so she would bring a few pieces of candy to coax me into staying still while she took my measurements."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that their trip to Stronghold 88 this time was like a walk down memory lane for Yang Xiaojin. He was experiencing the things she had experienced and meeting with people who played a part in her life.

At some point, Ren Xiaosu felt a little grateful to Yang Xiaojin's parents. Based on her description, he could tell that her parents were very warm-hearted people. To have such a trait in the Yang Consortium, it probably made them some sort of an outcast in the organization.

If Yang Xiaojin were as cold as the other members of the Yang Consortium, it would be impossible for them to be in this relationship.

In the streetcar, the two of them sat on the two-seater seat at the back. Yang Xiaojin's chin-length hair fluttered lightly as the warm and mild morning breeze blew in through the window.

Then Yang Xiaojin gently leaned her head on Ren Xiaosu's shoulder without saying a word.

This silence and setting suddenly made Ren Xiaosu feel like they were a long-distance relationship couple from the Pre-Cataclysm times who were on the verge of breaking up. This made him even more flustered.

His heart rate started to change, and even his breathing was affected. Yang Xiaojin could feel all of this, so the corners of her mouth curled up again under her cap.

"Let's get off here." Yang Xiaojin got up and alighted from the streetcar with Ren Xiaosu following behind her. He was a little enthralled as he looked at the name of the tailor store.

Peace Tailors. The word "peace" felt very abrupt but beautiful in this era.

When Yang Xiaojin pushed open the door, it collided with the wind chime on the door frame, and a pleasant jingling could be heard. Together with the creaking of the wooden door, it sounded like a greeting.

There was only a middle-aged woman on the inside, and she was measuring fabric with a measuring tape in her hand. The other party did not even look up and just greeted warmly, "Welcome to Peace Tailors."

Yang Xiaojin stood there but did not say anything. When the middle-aged woman looked up and realized it was her, she was stunned. Her eyes reddened immediately as she said, "Xiaojin, it's you! I'm so glad you're alright! I haven't seen you since that incident in the stronghold. You must've suffered after leaving Stronghold 88!"

Yang Xiaojin smiled and said, "I'm fine."

When she took off her cap, the middle-aged woman gently patted her head and said with a tearful smile, "Xiaojin, you've grown taller again."

"Mhm." Yang Xiaojin said, "I've grown another centimeter taller."

Actually, without a reference, most people would not notice it at all. The middle-aged woman's remark and the way she patted her head were a kind of warm chemistry between the two.



At this moment, the middle-aged woman looked at Ren Xiaosu. She hesitated for a moment before asking with a smile, "Are you the future commander of the Northwest Army? I've read about you in that rankings publication of superhumans. At that time, I was thinking that perhaps only someone like you is worthy of Xiaojin. But I must remind you, you had better treat Xiaojin well."

The middle-aged woman did not care what superhumans were capable of. When she purchased the rankings publication, it was only because she heard Yang Xiaojin was on it.

1209 To win a person's heart and never part

Ren Xiaosu found it a little strange. Ever since Yang Xiaojin arrived in Stronghold 88, she did not even pay a proper visit to the Yang Consortium's manor. Instead, she just kept bringing him to small stores like the tailor to meet some of her former acquaintances.

"Xiaojin, wait here a moment." The middle-aged woman in the tailor store wiped her hands and removed her detachable sleeves. Then she walked to the main door and turned the wooden "Open for Business" sign hanging outside to show "Closed."

It was only 9 AM, but she was already closed for business. It looked like she did not want anyone to disturb her from catching up with Yang Xiaojin.

The tailor store was pretty small, and there were all kinds of fabric hanging from the walls. There was even a pleasant leather aroma in the shop, and it was not musty at all.

The display window was very clean, and so was the floor. Ren Xiaosu could tell that the owner led a very meticulous and fastidious life.

The middle-aged woman looked at Ren Xiaosu with a smile. "I'll introduce myself. I'm the tailor who's been making Xiaojin's clothes since she was young. My name is Lan Jingchu. How about you call just me Auntie Lan? The future commander of the Northwest is indeed different. Just as the legends say, you're so full of vigor. You look like you can carry off any form of clothing."

Ren Xiaosu was a little embarrassed by this. When others praised him behind his back for being really strong and remarked that his combat power was off the charts, he could listen to them with delight and even join in on their discussions as though it were nothing.

But the moment he got praised to his face, he even revealed a rare tinge of shyness.

Not many people got to witness this side of him.

However, what Ren Xiaosu was most worried about at this moment was that Yang Xiaojin would suddenly tell him not to address her as Auntie Lan. That was because Auntie Lan was even younger than Grandma Lin.

Fortunately, Yang Xiaojin did not add anything further to the conversation.

“Make yourselves comfortable. I’ll go prepare some tea for you two,” Auntie Lan said as she went into the back room.

There were brown wooden chairs and tables in the shop, with candies and snacks laid out on top of them, which were probably prepared for guests.

Yang Xiaojin picked up a piece of candy and peeled off the wrapper. Then she handed it to Ren Xiaosu. “Try it. This is the taste of my childhood.”

When Ren Xiaosu put the candy into his mouth, a strong, sour plum flavor mixed with his saliva and filled his mouth. For some reason, Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt much more relaxed the moment he placed the candy in his mouth.

Auntie Lan walked out holding a tea tray and looked at Yang Xiaojin. “Did something bring you back to Stronghold 88 this time? Is there anything Auntie Lan can help you with?” With that, she placed two cups of black tea in front of Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Yang Xiaojin shook her head. She pointed at Ren Xiaosu and said, “It’s nothing serious. Can you make four suits for him so he’ll have spares to wear?”

“I see.” Auntie Lan’s smile widened. “Then I’ll have to make them well. But if it’s four suits, I might have to engage the help of other tailors. Otherwise, it’ll take me a long time to finish them by myself.”

“Mhm, that’s okay.” Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu and asked, “How much will it cost?”

“There’s no need to pay.” Auntie Lan shook her head and said with a smile, “The money the Yang Consortium left in my trust is still untouched. There’s still a lot left. I’ll go get the ledger to show you. There’s even enough to make another 20 sets of suits with the remaining sum.”

Ren Xiaosu secretly clicked his tongue. Were consortiums that generous with their money?

Yang Xiaojin said, “I don’t need to look at the accounts. Auntie Lan, can you help me contact a shoemaker you trust? I want to give Xiaosu here another 12 pairs of shoes.”

When Ren Xiaosu heard this, he was stunned. Even Auntie Lan was in disbelief. "Is there a need for so many?"

"Mhm." Yang Xiaojin said, "I want the most durable ones."

At this moment, even Auntie Lan felt that something was not right. Would a normal person want to have so many shoes made all at once?

Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu felt a little uneasy. This feeling was really like a precursor to separation. It was just like how a wife would prepare a lot of food for her husband before going away, afraid he would go hungry at home if left alone.

If the husband were going away on a long journey, the wife would find ten pairs of shoes at home for him to bring along.

These were parting gifts.

Yes, Yang Xiaojin was acting like she was about to go away on a long trip.

At this moment, Yang Xiaojin only cared about stating the requirements to Auntie Lan. "The suits should be looser at the waistline, under the armpits, and around the shoulders. That's because he's really active. Sometimes, a battle will break out all of a sudden. If the suits are too tight, it'll affect his mobility. On top of that, the shoes have to be very durable too. He's already worn out several pairs."

When the strength of a superhuman erupted, the soles of their feet and shoes had to bear a great deal of pressure. Actually, many superhumans had trouble cycling through their footwear. Within just two battles, their shoes would already be split at the seams.

After Yang Xiaojin stated her requirements, Auntie Lan immediately called a shoemaker over. The shoemaker was very professional. He even used clay to make a mold of Ren Xiaosu's feet and said this was the best method to make the most well-fitting shoes.

Honestly, this was the first time in his life Ren Xiaosu had enjoyed such treatment.

After the mold of his feet was completed, Yang Xiaojin continued inquiring how long the job would take, and if she could pay more to get it done faster.

Then she asked if she could add shoe padding into the requirements and whatnot. She only wanted the best features to be added.

At this moment, Yang Xiaojin no longer looked like she was someone who fought in battle. Instead, she had a more gentle appearance.

After the shoemaker left, Yang Xiaojin suddenly asked Auntie Lan, "Where's Uncle Li? Why haven't I seen him around? Is he off today?"

Auntie Lan, who was choosing the fabric for the suits, paused for a moment before slowly saying, "On the night Stronghold 88 was attacked, he was knocked down by someone in a car who was trying to escape. After that, he never regained consciousness."

That night, Ren Xiaosu had led Yan Liuyuan and the others to leave first. But before they left, the Li Consortium's nanosoldiers had already arrived at the stronghold and started attacking wantonly.

That war did not have much to do with Ren Xiaosu. However, the reason why the Li Consortium's nanosoldiers were able to break through the Qing Consortium's defensive line and reach the Yang Consortium was because of Qing Zhen's intention.

That was why some people said that no snowflake in an avalanche was innocent.

But from Ren Xiaosu's point of view, he could not say that Qing Zhen's choice was wrong.

In such a sorrowful era, everyone was like a drowning person. If they wanted to swim out of the water to breathe, the only people they could rely on and trust were themselves.

'If you're not strong enough, don't even think about saving other victims. Because you will end up getting grabbed by the neck and sink to the bottom of the sea together with them.'

Auntie Lan said softly, "It was his birthday that day. I closed the shop early and went home to make dinner. He said he wanted to take a customer's measurements before heading back. In the end, I found out later he actually went to the flower market to buy a bouquet of roses for me. When I found him, the roses were scattered around his body and soaked in his blood."

Yang Xiaojin was stunned and did not say anything. But Auntie Lan did not look too sad. In this era, who wasn't used to seeing people die?

According to the Qing Consortium's statistics, the average lifespan of the Qing Consortium's residents for the past ten years was only 51. On one hand, it was due to a lack of basic supplies. On the other hand, their medical standards were much worse when compared to the Pre-Cataclysm times.

Ren Xiaosu remembered that before The Cataclysm, the average lifespan in many cities had already exceeded 70 years. There were even first-tier cities where residents had an average lifespan of over 83. This was the change brought about by improving medical standards.

Therefore, this was an era where everyone was used to bidding farewell.

It was not that people wanted to be good at it, but that life forced them to get used to all of it.

When they stepped out of the tailor store, Yang Xiaojin took a deep breath and said, "Xiaosu, when the clothes are ready, leave two gold bars for Auntie Lan as payment in case she has any emergencies."

"Mhm, I will." Ren Xiaosu nodded.

"Let's go. It's already noon, so I'll treat you to some beef pie. When I was young, beef pie was my favorite snack. It smells even better than the food at home," Yang Xiaojin said. She thought for a moment and said, "I'll take you to shop for other things in the afternoon."

Ren Xiaosu fell silent. He did not know what other things she was referring to.

While walking the streets, he could feel Yang Xiaojin's deep longing for this stronghold. Even though she did not have much feelings for the Yang Consortium, this place still held happy memories of her childhood.

In the afternoon, Yang Xiaojin bought him three brand-new jackets, the best quality ones.

In these times, people who could afford jackets were basically those who were wealthy and respectable. After all, there were too few who could afford to leave the strongholds and had a use for them.

At the outdoor supply store, Yang Xiaojin even bought the best shovels, tents, thermal blankets, and even oxygen tanks for emergency use.

Yang Xiaojin was so generous with her purchases it dumbfounded Ren Xiaosu.

In the evening, this girl in the cap even went off to buy a lot of fresh seasonings for Ren Xiaosu. She bought every type of seasoning by the jar.

Salt, pepper, chili powder, bean sauce, fresh soy sauce, oyster sauce, MSG...

There was everything.

This feeling was as though Yang Xiaojin were afraid Ren Xiaosu would not have everything at his convenience when living alone.

Finally, Yang Xiaojin even bought the most expensive Ginkgo-branded waterproof watch in Stronghold 88 for Ren Xiaosu.

The owner said the watch was extremely sturdy. A friend of his had accidentally fallen down the stairs while wearing one, but it remained undamaged.

The only pity was that while the watch was not broken, his friend had fallen to his death.

As someone with memories of both the Pre-Cataclysm and Post-Cataclysm civilizations, Ren Xiaosu felt a little emotional when shopping for the watch.

Before The Cataclysm, some watches could easily fetch hundreds of thousands to even millions of yuan, and it might not even be possible to buy them.

If one wanted to purchase a highly sought-after timepiece over the counter, they would have to get two cheaper watches with it as a bundle. The cost of such a purchase was almost the price of a best-selling car model.

But it was all good now. Shopping for the most expensive watch, the owner of the shop even served him happily like some sort of VIP.

After stepping out of the watch store, Ren Xiaosu looked at the gradually darkening sky and could not help but say, "Xiaojin, if you have anything to tell me, you can just speak bluntly..."

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. "We'll have that talk sooner or later, so don't get too anxious."

She then found an office supply store and bought a fountain pen and a small notebook.

When Ren Xiaosu saw her buying those items, his heart skipped a beat. Was she going to write to him? The kind where she would leave a letter behind without bidding farewell?

After returning to the hotel that night, Yang Xiaojin locked herself in her room and told Ren Xiaosu not to go to bed yet. Yang Xiaojin said that no matter what doubts Ren Xiaosu had, he would get an answer tonight.

It was summer. The night breeze started blowing.

Ren Xiaosu climbed to the top of the hotel alone through the window. He quietly watched the myriad of twinkling lights in the city and suddenly felt a little lonely.

It was an unprecedented sense of loneliness.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu had never mentioned his problems to anyone before. Even Yan Liuyuan had not heard him sharing them before.

Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu felt like he did not deserve to have a family.

It wasn't easy for him to finally take in a disciple, but that disciple had become petrified in stone. It wasn't easy to gather a group of bandits who wanted to rebuild their homes, but those bandits had all perished. It wasn't easy for him to have a younger brother, but that brother went to reside in the Northern Plains. It wasn't easy for him to have an elder like Jiang Xu to look up to, but in the end, Jiang Xu was assassinated.

Ren Xiaosu felt like he was walking alone on a long and dark boulevard. When he turned around, he realized no one was waiting for him under that dim yellow street light.

Under the glow of the light, only farewells were waiting.

"Master, I'll be leaving now."

"Bro, I can't go back anymore."

"Xiaosu, take care."

The warm summer night breeze caressed his face gently and died down. The humid air in the south was like a hot and wet breath, and the occasional coolness in the wind was like a singer's humming after the guitar was strummed.

Ren Xiaosu looked back within his memories and realized it was still only him on this long journey thus far.

There were only muddy footprints and messy brambles on the surface of that road.

Other than that, nothing lingered.

"I'm such a jinx." Ren Xiaosu laughed bitterly. "I can't even keep my family intact."

So it turned out he would be the only one left in that house on Stronghold 144's Anning East Road in the end. Yang Xiaojin did not actually want to go back there.

A young man's thoughts were complicated, fragile, and sensitive. Ren Xiaosu, who was experiencing love for the first time, was just as worried as every other young man.

But at this moment, a window below him opened. Yang Xiaojin poked her head out and waved at Ren Xiaosu who was on the roof.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He thought she was going to leave behind a letter for him, but in the end... it turned out a little different from what he had imagined.

He climbed down along the exterior wall. When he went into Yang Xiaojin's room through the window, he saw her hand the small notebook to him.

"This?" Ren Xiaosu hesitated. He was a little afraid to open it.

However, Yang Xiaojin's silence and calm over the past two days had changed. She smiled and said, "Open it and you'll know."

Ren Xiaosu flipped to the first page. In the center of the notebook was written: "Cool Down Coupon."

Flipping over from the first page, there was an explanation on the back: "Use this coupon and I won't stay angry at you. I'll even give you a big hug."

On the second page was written in the center of the notebook: "Leave Anytime Coupon."

Turning over the page, the explanation was written on the back: "When you use this coupon, I'll accompany you even to the ends of the world."

The third page was the "Gentle and Caring Coupon." "When you use this coupon, I'll turn into the gentlest angel for a day."

The fourth page was labeled "Massage Coupon." "Use this coupon to get a 120-minute massage from me, your top masseuse specializing in chiropractic."

The fifth page was "Luxury Breakfast Coupon." "Use this coupon to..."

Ren Xiaosu flipped through the pages one by one. The "Privilege Coupons" were like warm red charcoal delivered on a snowy day, washing away his bad mood.

There were a total of 99 pages of privilege coupons. On the last page was written: "Validity: Forever."

"With love, Yang Xiaojin."

Ren Xiaosu looked up at her in silence. He wanted to say something, but he could not come up with any words at all.

Yang Xiaojin smiled and said, "It's my gift to you. Do you like it?"

"Yes, I do." Ren Xiaosu took a deep breath and said, "But these past two days, you've been..."

"You mean I've been ignoring you, right? I was just trying to spite you." Yang Xiaojin said with a laugh, "The next time you run off to such a faraway place without saying a word to me, there'll be even more cruel punishments waiting for you. Ren Xiaosu, remember this. If you embark on another risky adventure alone, I'll beat you up."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.



“Anything else you’d like to know?”

“Why are you so insistent on risking your life with me?” Ren Xiaosu asked softly.

Yang Xiaojin answered in seriousness, “I’ve lost you once before, so I swore I’ll never lose you again in this lifetime.”

Ren Xiaosu asked again, “Then why did you suddenly give me so many gifts? Those clothes, those shoes, and…”

“When I found out that you were 240 years old, I was actually quite disappointed.” Yang Xiaojin said, “It turned out I’ve missed out on over 200 years of your life.”

At that moment in the Kingdom of Sorcerers, Yang Xiaojin suddenly felt like she was watching Ren Xiaosu from across the long river of time. Yang Xiaojin felt even more alone than Ren Xiaosu. It was as though there were a hand in the river of time pulling Ren Xiaosu away from her.

However, Yang Xiaojin was an extremely forthright person. Since distance had opened up between them, she would just have to close it again.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Just as he was about to say something, Yang Xiaojin cut him off and said, “Don’t speak yet. Let me speak.”

“These past two days, I’ve brought you to my favorite bun restaurant and also my favorite tailor store, including the place where I used to shop for outdoor necessities.” Yang Xiaojin said, “Actually, I just wanted to show you how I led my life in the past so you can understand the current me standing in front of you. It would be just like you had been living by my side all this time.

“The reason for my gifts to you is because I wanted to make up for the fact that I’ve missed out on your life. Every time I think about how you didn’t have me for 221 years of your life, I can’t help but feel disappointed. So I wanted to make up for 240 of your birthdays so I won’t feel like I’ve missed out on anything. In the future, since you’ve already accepted my gifts, you’ll have to treat it as though I’ve always been by your side for the past 240 years.”

She hugged Ren Xiaosu gently and placed her face between his shoulder and neck. “Xiaosu, this is the first time we’ve been in love. I don’t know how to maintain this relationship, nor do I know how to express my feelings. All I can do is not hold myself back from loving you.”

Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at the girl in the cap in front of him. That was right. This was the first time in their lives that they were in love, and neither of them was prepared for it. This was a passionate relationship that had arrived without any warning.

Their love seemed to be more intense than other people's. They had fought side by side, gone through life and death together, been separated, and then reunited again.

The other party did not have any dating experience, but she treated him with the most sincere feelings.

People always said that companionship was the most endearing form of farewell.

Yang Xiaojin wanted to be with him for his entire life, regardless of whether it was the past or the future.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Why didn't your Enchanted Doorway open to our home in Stronghold 144? The sorcerers said that the enchanted doorway opens to where you'd want to go most..."

But this time, Yang Xiaojin was clearly taken aback. "That's my home. I can go back at any time, so why would I open the enchanted doorway there?"

When she said that, Ren Xiaosu was stunned.

The destination the enchanted doorway opened to was actually what the heart desired most. Everyone's psychological needs were different at each stage. Children desired to go to the candy store, while Chen Jiu desired to escape to the beach to avoid the secular world. These were all places they could not reach on their own.

But based on Yang Xiaojin's logic, the way the enchanted doorway worked was that it could bring the user to a place they were unable to reach.

Ren Xiaosu had never had a home all this while, so even though he had a "home" now, he still felt a little worried.

Moreover, he was in the Kingdom of Sorcerers at the time his Enchanted Doorway was activated. He was thousands of kilometers away from home without Yang Xiaojin by his side.

But Yang Xiaojin was different. She had subconsciously regarded that place as her home, so her inner desire to see that place had lowered. After all, she could head back there any time she wanted.

Ren Xiaosu somehow felt that something was off. "Aren't you afraid of losing that home?"

"Afraid to lose it?" Yang Xiaojin asked curiously, "How? Are you going to abandon me? Do you dare?"

"Ahem." Ren Xiaosu hurriedly said, "I wouldn't dare..."

“There’s your answer!” Yang Xiaojin said.

In fact, it was Yang Xiaojin who reached a state of emotional stability first. She already felt secure, but Ren Xiaosu still didn’t.

Ren Xiaosu sighed. “For the past few days, I thought you were bothered by my age and wanted to leave without saying goodbye.”

Yang Xiaojin’s lips curved up. “If I didn’t teach you a lesson, what would I do if you ran away without informing me again in the future?”

“I won’t do that again,” Ren Xiaosu hurriedly promised.

“That’s more like it.” Yang Xiaojin said proudly, “But it’ll just be a little troublesome to celebrate your birthday in the future. We’ll have to put 240 candles on your cake. Just the thought of that is terrifying. Do you know how scared your friends will be when they celebrate your birthday?”

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. Why did she have to say such a thing at a time like this?!

“By the way,” Ren Xiaosu asked, “were you counting my age when you bought those gifts for me? You’ve given me 240 presents already?”

Yang Xiaojin shook her head and said, “No, it’s at 239 right now. Including the 99 privileged coupons, you’ve only received 239 presents.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. “Then what’s the last one that’s missing?”

Yang Xiaojin suddenly took off her cap and said softly, “I’m the 240th present.”

Ren Xiaosu shuddered. “Please don’t objectify women—”

But before he could finish speaking, he saw Yang Xiaojin throwing her cap aside to cover the light in the room. “Let’s see how much longer you’re gonna cower!”

The triumphant soldier had returned, and his beloved no longer needed to wait in worry.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered what his father had said to him in that letter. “Xiaosu, have you already found someone you love?”

“Love is when you suddenly feel like you don’t have to conquer the world, that you don’t have to make a name for yourself, that you don’t have to be successful, that you don’t have to be rich, and still feel a sense of bliss.

“You might even feel like you’ve lost a little of that ambition and still think it’s not a bad thing.

“It’s when you grow conscientious of everything yet are able to reach a compromise on all of them.”

Love was about being a nervous wreck. Some people would grow old in loneliness, while others would finally get to know that all of this nervousness and waiting was worth it.

Love was about meeting someone at the right moment who could make a lifetime commitment.

Just before dawn, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin sat side by side at the top of the tallest building in Stronghold 88 and waited for the sunrise.

“Xiaosu, what was the world like before The Cataclysm? What did people eat?”

“There wasn’t much of a difference in the kind of food we had compared to now. There was rice, noodles, hot pot, and tofu stew, and we could have them whenever we wanted. Back in that era, supplies were much more abundant than now, and very few people would starve to death in these lands.”

“They could eat anything they wanted?”

“Something like that. They could even get to eat large cherries and bananas grown in faraway places.”

“Were transportation and communications very convenient as well?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“Yes. Airplanes and high-speed trains existed in that era. It would only take an hour or so to fly from here to Fortress 178, and the high-speed trains had reached a stable speed of 270 kilometers per hour and above. Everyone owned a cell phone in that era, so it was really easy for people to speak with their family members.”

“Everyone owned a cell phone?” Yang Xiaojin asked curiously, “They could go wherever they wanted back then? Did this apply to normal people as well?”

“Yes, there were trains or highways connecting almost every city.” Ren Xiaosu said, “In that era, cities were not walled or built like strongholds, and there were no such things as stronghold residents or refugees. People could enter and leave a city whenever they wanted. If you felt like it, you could even travel to the other side of the world. Back then, many families owned cars. It’s unlike now where cars are a luxury item only for the rich.

“There were also a lot of celebrities in that era. Almost every family had a television in their homes where they could watch their favorite shows and celebrities.

“Almost every family had access to a computer connected to the global internet in that era. People could shop online, and the goods would be delivered straight to them from the warehouses. Even if you only bought a hairpin, someone would still deliver it personally to you.”

“A globally connected internet?” Yang Xiaojin was a little fascinated. “Xiaosu, what was the world really like before The Cataclysm? Was it very beautiful?”

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment before saying, “Actually, it might not be as beautiful as you think. Although everyone had cell phones that allowed them to contact their relatives at any moment, they might not keep in touch with them. Although everyone could travel to any corner of the world on a plane, they might not be able to get away due to work or being bogged down by life’s mundanities. Although everyone was globally connected via the internet, their true friends might not amount to many.”

Ren Xiaosu continued, “Of course, I’m not saying that it wasn’t a good era. I still miss it very much.”

It was an era facing impending changes, and everyone’s lifestyle was also undergoing huge changes with generations of people living through it. Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu even felt that it was not the people who brought about change to an era but the era that propelled human civilization forward.

Although Ren Xiaosu had all kinds of dissatisfaction with that era, he had to admit it was still a magnificent era with bright potential.

“That’s why we gotta concentrate on the Prosperous Northwest.” Yang Xiaojin said with a smile, “Let’s make an agreement. When we get back, you should properly carry out your duties as future commander of the Northwest so you can show me the world you’ve seen as soon as possible, alright?”

Ren Xiaosu felt a sense of excitement. “Sure, I feel it’ll only take a few decades before we regain the glory of that time.”

Yang Xiaojin sat on the edge of the rooftop and gently rested her head on Ren Xiaosu’s shoulder. Within a night, there seemed to be no estrangement between the two of them anymore.

...

For the next fortnight, the two of them fully indulged in eating, drinking, and enjoying themselves. In Ren Xiaosu’s words, this was like a honeymoon. After they returned to the Northwest, they’d have to hold a wedding ceremony to top it off.

Ren Xiaosu planned to hold a grand wedding. He’d have to invite more people so he could collect more gift money.

Ten days later, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin went to collect the completed clothes and shoes. They left two gold bars each for Auntie Lan and Grandma Lin and advised them to hide them well. If another war broke out, they were to stay put and wait for Ren Xiaosu to come and rescue them at the first opportunity.

Auntie Lan asked worriedly, "Is there going to be another war? Isn't the war in the Southwest already over? Is another war going to break out between the Northwest and the Southwest?"

Ren Xiaosu was silent for a moment before answering, "The Southwest's enemy is not the Northwest."

In fact, the Northwest and Southwest were now facing a common enemy. However, Ren Xiaosu wondered if Wang Shengzhi would really be crazy enough to launch an all-out attack on the Southwest and Northwest.

Although the Wang Consortium was stronger than ever, the Southwest and Northwest were not easy opponents either, right?

However, Ren Xiaosu could not determine if his judgment was correct. That was because there was not only the Wang Consortium in the Central Plains but also Zero.

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin had discussed Zero's existence before. Sometimes, in his opinion, he even felt that Zero existed independently outside the Wang Consortium's control.

Because in Zero's opinion, it had categorized itself as a civilization different from humans. Therefore, there was actually nothing wrong with Luo Lan treating the artificial intelligence as an alien civilization.

Ren Xiaosu once read in a book that it was very difficult for civilizations to coexist. It was not only a matter of allocation of resources but also an ideological issue between two civilizations.

Zero was born into existence during the annihilation of the creeper vine, so it witnessed how humans treated a foreign species. Ren Xiaosu always felt that the seeds of danger had been planted during that time.

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt that as long as Yang Xiaojin was by his side, he would have the courage to face all dangers.

After they were done with everything in Stronghold 88, they headed straight to the Yang Consortium's manor museum like they were an ordinary tourist couple.

But just as they bought their tickets and entered through the main entrance, a security guard inside was stunned to see them. "Wait a minute, have I seen the two of you somewhere before?"

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin looked at each other with a knowing smile. "I think you've got the wrong person?"

The security guard remembered. "You were the ones who trespassed into the museum several nights ago. Stay right there and don't move! I'll call the Public Order Division over!"

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin did not listen to him and walked straight towards the manor.

"Hey, you two, stop right there! Are all thieves this arrogant these days?!" The security guard chased after them, but he saw Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin getting away faster and faster. The security guard could only watch helplessly as they ran into the backyard of the Yang Consortium's manor.

When the security guard breathlessly ran into the backyard, he was shocked.

Where had that couple disappeared to? They seemed to have vanished into thin air!

After passing through the enchanted doorway, Ren Xiaosu looked towards the crescent lake and saw Midnight's huge head floating on the surface of the water. It stared fixedly at him as though it were condemning him in silence.

Ren Xiaosu was a little embarrassed. He had assured Midnight that he would return soon, but he actually went away for more than ten days. Therefore, Midnight must've guarded the enchanted doorway for the entire duration.

Looking at Midnight's resentful gaze, Ren Xiaosu said, "I can explain—"

"Pfft." Midnight spat a glob of saliva at him. Yang Xiaojin hurriedly dodged to the left, leaving Ren Xiaosu standing there alone.

With a splash, Ren Xiaosu felt as though he had been drenched from head to toe by a small pool of water.

...

Ren Xiaosu spent another three days with Midnight at Crescent Lake. For some reason, even though Midnight had already grown so large, it still felt like the little guy Ren Xiaosu remembered.

Midnight found a thermal river deep under the Crescent Lake and seemed to quite like it.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu also liked this place very much. The entirety of Crescent Lake was like an enormous hot spring. There were no complicated disputes here, nor did he need to rack his brains thinking about problems.

He could just spend his honeymoon here with Yang Xiaojin peacefully.

Although they were only going to stay here for three days, Yang Xiaojin and he constructed a small wooden house on the first day. The two of them were extremely capable at fighting, so building a wooden house would not trouble them at all.

Ren Xiaosu had brought a tent with him in his mind palace, but Yang Xiaojin insisted it would be more interesting to construct a wooden house. Moreover, they might be coming here often on vacation in the future.

When it was time to leave, Midnight watched the two of them depart reluctantly. Ren Xiaosu could feel its loneliness, but he still did not know how to resolve the matter of Dusk.

If only he could bring Dusk here to be with Midnight.

Just as Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were setting off northwards back to Stronghold 144, Luo Lan arrived at Stronghold 91 in the north of the Qing Consortium.

After returning to the Qing Consortium's territory, Luo Lan had initially planned to go back to Stronghold 111 directly. But after he received news from Qing Zhen, he immediately changed his itinerary.

He was now going to take on the role of an official envoy and begin an inspection tour of all the northern strongholds of the Qing Consortium. He would be carrying out checks on the training, armaments, and food reserves of the strongholds.

Such an arrangement was as good as announcing to everyone that the Qing Consortium was preparing for war.

To ensure Luo Lan's safety, Qing Zhen even sent a special forces battalion to join up with him. The configuration of this special forces battalion was ridiculously overboard. Just the armored vehicles fitted with the "Mountain Obliterator" alone numbered four.

The Mountain Obliterator was a heavy machine gun developed by the Qing Consortium independently. It could unleash a metal storm that was the best in its class. Back then, just a few armored vehicles fitted with the Mountain Obliterator were enough to beat the Experimentals into submission.



At this moment, Luo Lan's convoy arrived at the gate of Stronghold 91. All of the stronghold officials and commanders of the troops stationed in the nearby military base had already mustered here.

They lined both sides of the street, and the stronghold's Public Order Division had even cleared away many of the refugees' shacks and organized a large-scale cleanup before Luo Lan's arrival.

The Public Order Division even set a standard for this cleanup operation: No blind spots, no cobwebs.

In order to make the refugees look cleaner, the town even issued additional clean water for them to wash their faces with.

All of this was standard procedure when it came to receiving higher-ups.

Although the policies Qing Zhen implemented after taking over were relatively open-minded and the living conditions of the refugees in the Qing Consortium's territory had also improved a little, a consortium was still a consortium. In essence, no matter what kind of people Qing Zhen and Luo Lan were, they would not be able to change the nature of the Qing Consortium.

Reformation had never been a simple process.

In the evening, when these officials saw Luo Lan's convoy approaching, they put on smiles.

They were all experts at faking smiles, so it was unlikely their facial muscles would stiffen from this short show of hospitality.

However, to everyone's surprise, Luo Lan's convoy did not stop when they got closer to the stronghold gate. Instead, they blew straight through the open gate, leaving the two rows of officials coughing up dust.

The officials looked at one another and wondered what was wrong with that envoy. Never mind that he did not get out of his vehicle, but shouldn't he greet and acknowledge everyone at least?

But when they saw the special forces battalion's vehicles entering the stronghold together, no one dared to say anything.

Luo Lan's status in the Qing Consortium was extraordinary. He had a lot of appointments to his name: Secretary General of the Qing Consortium's Board, Honorary Chairman of the Qing Consortium's Military Council, Executive Director of the Qing Consortium's Commerce Department...

In any case, he had an incredulous number of titles.

Everyone knew full well that if there were anyone in this world who Qing Zhen cared about, Luo Lan would definitely be the top priority.

Just by looking at the pompous arrival of this convoy, no one could be more important to Qing Zhen than Luo Lan.

When the officials standing outside the stronghold saw Luo Lan's convoy driving past them, they hurriedly called their secretaries and drivers over. "Quick, drive and catch up with the convoy!"

Zhou Qi, who was sitting in an off-road vehicle at the front, muttered, "You're still as arrogant as before. You aren't respecting those people at all. If only you and Qing Zhen were a little more tactful back then, you wouldn't have been targeted by those old fogeys."

Luo Lan chuckled, "And where are those old fogeys now?"

Zhou Qi was rendered speechless.

Where else could they be? Those old fogeys were all killed by Zhou Qi's hand.

Luo Lan was sitting in the back seat and looking straight ahead. He casually explained, "I'm not here to make friends on this inspection tour. I'm on official business. If I don't carry out my duties properly, is there any point in being friends with them?"

"It's not a matter of making friends with them. It's whether you make enemies out of them." Zhou Qi sighed.

Luo Lan shook his head and said, "That's your biggest problem. You never want to offend anyone. You're not gold, so how can you be liked by everyone?"

"As long as I'm liked by most people, that's good enough," Zhou Qi said.

"Qing Zhen is the one leading our massive Qing Consortium. As his subordinate, of course I have to play the bad cop and let him be the good cop." Luo Lan said in seriousness, "If I go around being nice to everyone, how can Qing Zhen win over hearts and minds?"

Luo Lan continued, "Zhou Qi, someone has to be the bad guy in this contest for power and profit. I just need to do my job well and deal with these people. When Qing Zhen needs their help, they'll just need to be of service. As for whether they hate me or not, that's their business. In any case, it's not like there's anything they can do about me."

Actually, it was not that Zhou Qi did not understand these principles. He knew Luo Lan was a knife in Qing Zhen's hands. Moreover, it was not Qing Zhen who wanted him to be the knife, but Luo Lan himself.

All of this was so Qing Zhen's authority could be stable enough.

However, in Zhou Qi's opinion, how could a person only think for others and not for themselves?

Right now, Qing Zhen and Luo Lan seemed like they were very close. But what if Qing Zhen were to change one day?

If Qing Zhen no longer sided with Luo Lan, there would probably be countless enemies who would make things difficult for Luo Lan.

Zhou Qi looked at Luo Lan. "Have you ever considered your future—"

"You've underestimated me and Qing Zhen," interrupted Luo Lan.

...

The convoy headed straight for the administrative center in the stronghold. After Luo Lan got out of the vehicle, he took the lead and sat down in the lobby.

The staff in the building served him in fear and trepidation. Meanwhile, the officials who went to welcome him at the stronghold entrance were sweating profusely as they finally caught up to him.

Under normal circumstances, a plump person tended to always give people an extra sense of affinity.

However, Luo Lan, in his current form, exuded more of a strong and stocky feel. This indirectly made him look much more intimidating.

The row of officials stood obediently in front of Luo Lan and did not even dare to breathe too loudly. They were afraid they had done something wrong to make the boss behave so overbearingly.

Luo Lan sat on the sofa in the lobby and said with a grin, "C'mon all of you here are well-respected figures. There's no need to be so afraid of me."

Everyone lowered their heads and did not say anything. They thought to themselves that only a fool would follow up with his provocation.

"Alright, let's cut to the chase. After I'm done inspecting Stronghold 91, I'll be returning to Stronghold 111. Bring over all the necessary documents." Luo Lan said with a smile,

“You guys have probably heard about someone in Stronghold 92 who tried to fool me about the amount of food reserves and assets that were in their books, so I had that person executed that same day. So before you bring over the documents for my vetting, think carefully about how you want to correct any fake entries first. I’m saying this for your own good.”

When an official heard this, he wiped sweat away. “Sir, don’t worry. We’re already prepared here. Little Li, quickly bring over the inbound and outbound inventories for Boss Luo’s inspection. Boss Luo, the work we’re doing here is very solid indeed. After you’ve checked through our accounts, we can set off immediately to the warehouse for a physical inspection.”

This official could not be blamed for panicking. Before Luo Lan came to Stronghold 91, he had indeed executed several people by firing squad.

When Stronghold 92 received Luo Lan a few days ago, Luo Lan also carried out a surprise inspection like he did today. He did not even attend the banquet prepared by the stronghold officials to welcome him.

When the officials heard that Luo Lan was a pervert, they even specially arranged several escorts for him.

In the end, Luo Lan instantly had the special forces set up a temporary military camp in the warehouse district and even placed the entire warehouse under lockdown.

For a few days, people were only allowed to enter the temporary lockdown zone but not leave. It wasn’t until Luo Lan finished taking inventory of all the food provisions and armaments that the lockdown was lifted.

Several of the officials were hoping to get lucky and thought everything would be fine as long as they hosted Luo Lan well. However, Luo Lan did not even give them a chance to do so and just shot them dead.

Luo Lan’s actions could be described as ruthless and vicious. As a result, when the news got out, everyone in the other strongholds started feeling insecure and scared that they would be the next unlucky ones to get executed.

Normally, no matter how serious the crime was, they would still have to be tried in a court of law first.

However, mobilizing the provisions and armaments without authorization would get one immediately court martialed. Meanwhile, Luo Lan also had another title to his name, and that was the presiding judge of the Qing Consortium’s military court.

Wherever this guy went, a military court would follow. Based on Luo Lan’s style, he would try any criminals right on the spot.

Although it sounded very childish, there was nothing one could do about it if Luo Lan really behaved that way.

As for the adjudication documents to be presented in court, Luo Lan would just have his subordinates do them up at a later time.

The cases handled by Luo Lan's touring court had one thing in common: None of the defendants pleaded guilty, but the death sentence rate was a 100%.

Basically, all of the defendants died before they could even present their defense.

Actually, Luo Lan also knew that handling it this way would make everyone scared and was not conducive to the stability of order.

But he had no other choice. The military readiness of the Qing Consortium had become more important than any other matter, so they had to resort to special measures during these special times.

Otherwise, Qing Zhen would not have asked him to come and inspect the provisions and armaments.

Usually, anything that required Luo Lan's help was already a very troublesome matter that needed to be dealt with.

At this moment, the inventory records were all placed in front of Luo Lan. But when Luo Lan saw the officials sweating profusely, he suddenly said with a smile, "Alright, I know you all have done your best for these past three days. It's not easy to fill up a standard warehouse in such a short period. I won't be inspecting the warehouse, so good luck to you all."

After that, Luo Lan directly got into the off-road vehicle outside the administrative center and left in a hurry.

This event dumbfounded everyone. The officials thought to themselves, "What are you trying to achieve here? You came and left in such a hurry, and you didn't even bother checking the inventories?"

However, a few officials who were in the know broke out in cold sweat.

Zhou Qi said in the off-road vehicle, "Looks like the problem has been resolved?"

"Of course." Luo Lan said, "Actually, it was already settled before we arrived. But we still have to drop by regardless. At the very least, we should teach them a lesson and let them know there's no such thing as an absolute secret."

In fact, what Luo Lan had done in Stronghold 92 was just to stamp his authority. Regarding the execution, he was the one who spread the news through the intelligence agency. Now that the entire Qing Consortium's intelligence agency was controlled by Luo Lan, it was simply too easy for him to do something like that.

Before Luo Lan arrived in Stronghold 92 today, he had already found out through the stronghold's intelligence department that these stronghold officials, under the threat of facing execution, had bought a large amount of food supplies using money from their own pockets to fill up the granaries to the required standard.

Moreover, these people even bought the food supplies at high prices in secret and did not dare to let anyone know about it.

Some of them were linked to the sale of grains from the granary at low prices in the past. But now, they had to buy them back at high prices. All of a sudden, the blood-sucking aphids were emptied of their pockets. It was so painful for them they nearly vomited blood.

The way Luo Lan chose to leave was to send a message to them: "I know all about your little tricks. Don't think there's anything I don't know about in the Qing Consortium."

By doing so, he was also warning them not to resort to such tricks again in the future. Otherwise, they would end up getting shot dead.

Luo Lan told Zhou Qi, "There's so many strongholds in the entire Qing Consortium, so it would take too long to audit the warehouses one by one. We don't have that much time. So, rather than us carrying out the inspections, why don't we let those people self-inspect under the pressure of fear?"

There were three key points to this operation. The first was to execute someone to establish authority so others would get scared.

The second was to give the culprits a chance, to tell them that as long as they made up for the difference in food supplies this time, he could pretend that nothing had happened in the past.

Third, he wanted to make those people understand that he had spies all over the Qing Consortium, so they had better act more honestly in the future.

With a set of combo "punches," the entire resource storage system was immediately refreshed. As for the officials who still refused to replenish their food reserves, Luo Lan had a natural way to find out who they were.

As a matter of fact, even though Qing Zhen's reputation was at its peak after the Qing Consortium unified the Southwest, the Qing Consortium still lacked someone to act as the villain.

The villain had to do the dirty work the Qing Consortium's head could not. He would have to kill those Qing Zhen could not lay his finger on.

This was probably the reason why the Qing Consortium had always had a designated Shadow role. An organization would always have some shady dealings that required the Shadow to handle.

Qing Zhen used to be the Qing Consortium's Shadow, and now it was Luo Lan's turn.

Although no one had explicitly said Luo Lan was the Qing Consortium's Shadow, everyone knew this to be true.

With the existence of a ruthless executioner like Luo Lan, the officials of the various strongholds had better humble themselves and carry out their duties responsibly.

Luo Lan said to Zhou Qi, "Since Qing Zhen asked me to make this trip, it means the problem should be very serious and the danger is right before us. I have to make these people afraid of me so they'll do their jobs right. Sometimes, I'd also like to be more delicate in my ways, but the circumstances don't allow it."

"Alright, you two brothers have your own way of dealing with things, so I can't be bothered to say any more." Zhou Qi did not comment any further. "As the elder brother, you've chosen to play the villain and commit evil deeds on your younger brother's behalf. If even you aren't bothered by that, what can an outsider like me say? I just find it such a waste. They specially arranged for many beautiful ladies to entertain us. If you want to put on airs, go ahead and do that. But why the fuck did you have to make them take the ladies away? It's also very tiring for me to keep protecting you every day...."

Luo Lan said righteously, "Zhou Qi, I didn't expect you to be such a person!"

Zhou Qi nearly spat blood. "Don't think I don't know what you've done. Don't act innocent with me now!"

Luo Lan said seriously, "Zhou Qi, you aren't an outsider. Qing Zhen and I treat you as our best friend and a brother."

Zhou Qi sneered, "Don't get all sentimental on me. I only recognize money."

"We'll pay what's necessary, but I'm not telling you this to save ourselves money. I just hope you won't keep seeing yourself as a stranger," Luo Lan explained.

"Don't try to bluff me." Zhou Qi said disdainfully, "You say you treat me as a brother, but didn't you still hide Qing Zhen's schedule and plans from me?"

Luo Lan shook his head. "Those are two separate things. Qing Zhen has his own plan. He doesn't only keep his schedule and plans from you; he does that to me sometimes

too. It's not that he can't meet people, but that he has a need to keep his whereabouts a secret. The enemy we'll face in the future is even more terrifying than what you and I can imagine."

Zhou Qi curled his lips. "You're just making excuses."

Luo Lan sighed and said, "You'll understand in the future."

...

At this moment, a Qing Consortium infantry brigade was guarding the entirety of Ginkgo Manor on Mt. Ginkgo in Stronghold 111.

This was a textbook example of a heavily guarded installation. The security was so tight it was outrageous.

Actually, it had been a long time since so many soldiers stood guard at the Qing Consortium's manor. However, today was a little special as Qing Zhen had returned to this huge palace.

The manor's security was tight on the outside but relaxed on the inside. From the outside, everyone felt that it was so heavily guarded that only an armored unit could fight their way in.

However, there were not many garrison troops inside the manor. There was not even one guard stationed in the main building. Only Qing Zhen's trusted aide, Xu Man, accompanied him.

No servants were around as the sound of a piano reverberated in the empty main building. Qing Zhen was dressed in a white suit as he sat at the piano in the main hall. His fingers were moving across the black and white keys with his eyes tightly shut.

He did not look at the music score. It was as though this particular, long piece of music was firmly engraved in his mind.

The tune was stirring, but Qing Zhen's expression remained at peace.

If it were anyone else, they would find it a little strange. However, Xu Man was used to it. He knew very well that it was not that Qing Zhen did not have any emotions, but that he was in a state of complete restraint.

It was just like how he had to restrain his current pastimes and emotions for the sake of the Qing Consortium's future.

In order to think more clearly, Qing Zhen had to be calmer than others.



At this moment, a soft mechanical sound interrupted the piano's music. A shelf filled with books behind Qing Zhen was pushed open, revealing a brick passageway.

Qing Zhen's clone, Qing Shen, walked out with a smile. "The Little Professor's Concerto No. 3. I enjoy this piece as well. From the Pyro Company's internal speculations, the Little Professor was the founder of the Qinghe Group, but that's just trivia, so not many people care about it. However, it's really fortunate that his score could get passed down through The Cataclysm until now."

"You listened to piano concertos when you were at the Pyro Company?" Qing Zhen asked as he slowly closed the piano lid.

Throughout the conversation, Xu Man stood beside Qing Zhen and kept his eyes on the clone, Qing Shen.

Although the other party looked exactly the same as Qing Zhen, it was really very difficult for Xu Man to have any cordial feelings for a clone. Moreover, he was always on guard against this clone.

Third Brother Qing glanced at Xu Man, then smiled at Qing Zhen and said, "See, it's been this long, but everyone is still looking at me warily. Sure enough, to be born amid a conspiracy is already a wrong beginning, and the wrong beginning will only lead to an undesired outcome."

Actually, Third Brother Qing's summary was extremely on point. If he weren't "born" into the Pyro Company, everyone would probably view him differently.

Qing Zhen said with a smile, "You're still bothered by this?"

"Of course." Third Brother Qing said with a smile as well, "If I want to integrate with this group, I have to care about how everyone views me. Oh, and to answer your question earlier, the training I received at the Pyro Company was comprehensive. It wasn't just military training that I underwent."

"Can you play the piano?" Qing Zhen asked.

"No." Third Brother Qing shook his head. "Based on the information the Pyro Company had on you, you didn't know how to play the piano, so they didn't have me learn it. Y'know, when did you learn to play the piano? Why didn't I know about it?"

Qing Zhen smiled. "There's a lot more you don't know about. Come, let's start with playing some Go today."

"You only wanted to see me today so we can play Go?" Third Brother Qing asked.

"That's right," Qing Zhen answered.

With that, he had Xu Man bring over a Go board and stones.

The Ginkgo Manor was luxurious beyond imagination. Its luxury was not only reflected in the decor but also in its internal operations, as well as all kinds of daily items imaginable to people, including a Go set.

Inside the spacious hall of the manor, Third Brother Qing sat down on the floor with Qing Zhen underneath a crystal chandelier hanging above them. The dark gray marble tiles were so polished their reflections were visible.

Sitting on such marble flooring, Third Brother Qing felt as though he were seated on the surface of a lake.

Marble flooring maintenance was more complex than one would expect. A lot of people thought that marble tiles would retain their shine forever after they were laid. But actually, for marble flooring to retain its sheen, it still needed to be frequently polished with chemicals.

Sitting down on the dark gray “lake” surface, Third Brother Qing lamented, “Those old fogeys of the Qing Consortium really knew how to enjoy life. These 181 black stones are made from black nephrite, while the 180 white stones are made from Hetian jade. The Go board is made from rosewood lined with gold thread.”

Qing Zhen said calmly, “They had prioritized the trivial over the essentials. I’ve played Go with them before, but they were terrible. If my skill level was as bad as theirs, I’d definitely be ashamed to play Go on such a precious board.”

Third Brother Qing chuckled, “Are you trying to say that your skill is befitting of such a good board since you’re using it now?”

“Of course.” Qing Zhen’s expression remained unchanged.

This time, Third Brother Qing did not rebuke him.

To him, Qing Zhen, who was sitting quietly across from him, was probably the best person at planning ahead in the world. If he had to go into detail, it meant Qing Zhen was the most farsighted human being in the world. Therefore, it wasn’t hard to understand why someone like him would be good at Go.

Xu Man observed from the side. In truth, he had not met Third Brother Qing that often.

During this period, Xu Man concluded that his boss, Qing Zhen, was the more composed of the two. On the contrary, Third Brother Qing was talkative, fidgety, and had a more lively personality.

Third Brother Qing laughed when he noticed Xu Man's gaze. "I can guess what you're thinking. Do you find me too talkative?"

Xu Man did not say anything. This was not a situation he could interrupt.

However, Third Brother Qing explained to Xu Man, "Actually, the Pyro Company simulated Qing Zhen's upbringing for me. Even if our personalities are not exactly the same, we should at least be 60% identical. But I realized later that my character was a far cry from Qing Zhen's, so I came to the conclusion that it's probably because I don't bear as much of a burden as your boss."

Xu Man was stunned. He instinctively glanced at Qing Zhen and realized his boss did not refute him.

Third Brother Qing smiled and said, "Did you know that the vast Qing Consortium and the people in the Southwest actually have nothing to do with me? I don't care whether they're able to fill their stomachs today or tomorrow. Additionally, how the Wang Consortium will deal with the Qing Consortium, how terrifying the artificial intelligence is, and will the Qing Consortium be able to win, none of those are things I have to consider. If all of those matters become my responsibilities, I can't stay cheerful either. In order not to let the AI predict his intentions, he chose to stay away from crowds so others couldn't make an accurate assessment of him. This is even though he's someone who clearly likes talking and gardening. In the long run, it'll affect his mind for sure."

Qing Zhen looked calmly at Third Brother Qing. "That's enough."

Third Brother Qing shrugged. "Why aren't you letting me speak? I should be the one who understands you the best. Judging by your current behavior, it's obvious you don't even think you stand a 30% chance of beating the Wang Consortium. I don't think you should keep hiding it from your subordinates, or else they'll get very worried. Actually, a 30% chance of winning is already very high when facing that kind of opponent, though I don't know where you get that confidence from. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't even think we stand a 10% chance of winning. That's probably where I'm inferior to you."

Qing Zhen toughened his tone. "Loose lips sink ships."

"Alright, alright, I won't say any more. You don't have to threaten me like that." Third Brother Qing kept quiet.

Xu Man remained silent. He clearly realized Third Brother Qing was right.

He started working for Qing Zhen long ago. Although Qing Zhen used to have the air of a leader, he was still someone who enjoyed laughing and joking around in private.

But now Qing Zhen suddenly seemed like a different person.

Qing Zhen gave Xu Man the feeling he had become much sterner.

Initially, Xu Man thought this was a common trait among those in power. After his superior became the leader of the Qing Consortium, he would have to act more authoritatively.

But it was only now that Xu Man understood it was because Qing Zhen was burdened with too many things, and all of this seemed related to that 30% chance of victory Third Brother Qing had pointed out.

Xu Man could not understand why Qing Zhen, who was always capable of overcoming anything in his eyes, would only have a 30% chance of winning against the Wang Consortium.

“10%,” Qing Zhen said.

Third Brother Qing was stunned. “You think you only have a 10% chance of winning?”

Qing Zhen pulled the Go bowls holding the black and white stones to his side. After that, he started placing the black stones with his left hand onto the board and the white stones with his right.

He played each move very slowly, as though he were thinking about something. Then the speed of play picked up.

Third Brother Qing noticed something. “This particular game, who played it? Was your purpose in summoning me here today to show me a Go game someone else played?”

“Mhm.” Qing Zhen nodded. “This was a game played between an AI and a human.”

“It looks like you don’t regard Wang Shengzhi as your opponent.” Third Brother Qing suddenly figured out a lot of things. “Your opponent is the Wang Consortium’s AI, right?”

“Wang Shengzhi is running out of time.” Qing Zhen said, “I’m guessing he won’t last much longer. He can’t even last until the war between the Qing Consortium and the Wang Consortium officially begins.”

These words revealed too much information. At the very least, this was the first time Qing Zhen admitted he had planted spies around Wang Shengzhi and was fully aware of his health.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Third Brother Qing said, “Once Wang Shengzhi dies, the war chariot that is the Wang Consortium will stop moving.”

Xu Man also felt that this made sense. After all, the Wang Consortium’s “war chariot” was entirely steered by Wang Shengzhi.

As long as Wang Shengzhi were gone, the Wang Consortium would come to a stop.

But Qing Zhen shook his head and said, "It won't stop. The AI will help him complete his unfinished work. Moreover, you all have underestimated that AI. It isn't a tool. I suspect it's already become an independent consciousness, or it could even have become a civilization."

"Why do you say that?" Third Brother Qing frowned.

"Because Wang Shengzhi doesn't seem to know the Qing Consortium lost 2,000 of its nanosoldiers," Qing Zhen replied.

If that artificial intelligence was only a tool controlled by Wang Shengzhi, there would be no reason for it to hide anything from him.

Third Brother Qing always felt that even though he was Qing Zhen's clone and both of them had the same intelligence, his knowledge was much broader than his progenitor's.

However, in terms of strategy, he was always a step behind and could not catch up to Qing Zhen's thoughts.

Many people would habitually associate the Wang Consortium with the artificial intelligence. However, Qing Zhen regarded "Zero" as an independent being.

Third Brother Qing asked, "Do you need to pay so much attention to a program?"

"Of course." Qing Zhen said, "In my opinion, this is a race against time. However, we've already lost the first-mover advantage. If I had pulled myself out of that war in the Southwest earlier and looked at the bigger picture, I would not have continued developing the nanomachines. A program might not be able to pose much of a threat on its own. But if it can control the nanomachines, it'll have a weapon in its hands. I've never dared to underestimate the AI because I feel it has already surpassed our level of thinking."

Third Brother Qing was stunned. This was the first time he had seen Qing Zhen admitting he was inferior to others, and it was even a program at that. However, Third Brother Qing could understand. "No one is omniscient and omnipotent. You've already done good enough."

"There's no need to comfort me." Qing Zhen said, "At a time like this, all emotions are superfluous. We only need to think about how to win."

Qing Zhen placed another black stone on the Go board. "The Qing Consortium was able to rise rapidly in the era of the wastelands because our predecessors retained a lot of knowledge, which they passed down. They were also a step ahead of others in the excavation of the Pre-Cataclysm civilization. There was a very interesting piece of

information no one else noticed before, but it caught my attention. This was a game played between a Go player named Fan Hui against an AI program.

“Fan Hui was not the world’s top Go player at that time, so it was not a surprise he would lose all five games. It was at that moment that all humans started paying attention to AI.”

As Qing Zhen rambled on animatedly, Third Brother Qing and Xu Man were taken to another world. Qing Zhen sat on the “lake” as he placed the black and white stones on the board piece by piece. It was as though all of them were witnessing that epic war between humanity and artificial intelligence back then.

As the oldest type of strategy board game of the Central Plains civilization, Go involved extremely complex gameplay mechanics. There were over 200 possibilities to consider per move, while chess only had 20.

After the emergence of artificial intelligence in the game, an AI program dealt Fan Hui a crushing defeat. Then came the true battle of the greats. The AI program versus Lee Sedol.<sup>1</sup>

Qing Zhen said, “Lee Sedol was fully able to represent the pinnacle of humanity in Go at that time. But even when he faced the artificial intelligence, he only managed to win one out of five games.”

At this moment, Qing Zhen had Xu Man put the black and white stones back into the Go bowls. It seemed like he wanted to begin a new game.

Third Brother Qing watched quietly in the “lake.” He had the same keen intuition as Qing Zhen, so he seemed to know the reason Qing Zhen summoned him this time.

However, he would have to finish watching the replays of the Go games first.

Qing Zhen placed down the stones again. “In the first game between Lee Sedol and the AI program, humanity still lost.”

The black and white stones were alternately played on the rosewood board continuously. Third Brother Qing kept his eyes on the board, but he did not feel like it was an impressive game.

But in the second game, the artificial intelligence placed a stone at a position no human Go player would have made during its 37th move after the game’s opening.

Third Brother Qing immediately broke out in cold sweat.

This move foreshadowed the entire Go game. It was as though the entire cause of humanity’s failure was destined on the 37th move.

Qing Zhen said, "When I first noticed this information, I had the same reaction as you. At that time, I had only one thought on my mind: So Go can be played like this. Playing against the AI was like facing an unknown enemy. You can't know what it's thinking or what aces it has up its sleeves. This 37th move was just like when Zero suddenly abducted all our Qing Consortium's nanosoldiers and nanomachines. Perhaps all our failures were destined from the moment it took control of our nanomachines."

After the end of the second game's replay, Qing Zhen sat quietly on the dark gray marble floor, as though he were reviewing this entire game.

Qing Shen also fell silent. It wasn't until half an hour later that he suddenly said, "We have to change the Qing Consortium's combat style. The foundation of the AI's progression is learning from humans to improve itself. It must've studied our Qing Consortium for a long enough time that once we make our first move, it can predict the next 99 moves. But as long as we don't play our cards logically, we'll still have a chance to beat it."

Qing Zhen shook his head and said, "It's not that simple. Let's have a look at the third game."

In the third set, Lee Sedol ditched his usual playing style as he hoped to break away from all his past habits and forget his experiences in order to defeat the artificial intelligence.

However, the outcome was worse than he had expected. In this set, Lee Sedol suffered an even quicker defeat.

Abandoning his past was essentially giving up his greatest advantage.

The combat style the soldiers were accustomed to and the command style officers were familiar with were the foundation of the Qing Consortium's invincibility. If they abandoned those, the Qing Consortium would probably only be able to reach 50% of its capability.

Third Brother Qing sat at the Go board in silence. He felt like he had fallen into an abyss, and that sense of powerlessness filled his limbs and bones.

"Don't worry, humanity won the fourth game," Qing Zhen said.

When Third Brother Qing and Xu Man heard this, their eyes lit up. It was as though they were the victors of that game.

In the fourth game, not only did Lee Sedol ditch his habits but he also broke away from all the conventions of humans in Go and defeated the artificial intelligence with unconventional play.

What was exciting was that the artificial intelligence had indeed lost much of its advantage in this game. After Lee Sedol's unconventional move, the artificial intelligence repeatedly made low-level mistakes.

But even so, what was shocking was that Lee Sedol was still at a disadvantage. The overall situation was really bad.

On the 78th move, Lee Sedol suddenly played his stone and started a comeback in a desperate situation. This move was later described as the "Hand of God."

The essence of the "Hand of God" move was to break all conventions before rebuilding.

Qing Zhen said, "The AI's advantage is that it has 10,000 possible moves to counter your gameplay. But when it starts with Black, it gets disadvantaged when playing against White, which goes second. Because when Black plays first, it becomes its own enemy. So we should let the AI make the first move."

Third Brother Qing mumbled, "Make a comeback in a desperate situation? Aren't you taking a huge risk? Is that your 10% chance of victory?"

Qing Zhen glanced at him. "There's no other choice."

Third Brother Qing regained a spirited look and looked at Qing Zhen again, "How about the fifth game? Did he also win the fifth game with that strategy? No, wait, you mentioned the AI only lost one game."

Qing Zhen said, "The fifth game was of no consequence. The AI quickly adapted to the new rhythm and defeated humanity again. If humanity could play unconventional moves, it naturally could do the same. The unconventional move in the fourth game seemingly opened a new door for the AI program. From that moment onwards, humanity probably didn't stand a chance of defeating that AI in Go again."

"Therefore," Third Brother Qing said, "humanity only has one chance of defeating Zero."

"Actually, this one chance is the best outcome we can ask for," Qing Zhen said.

Xu Man nearly choked. Was Zero really that terrifying? Even someone like Qing Zhen thought it was good enough to have one "chance" at defeating it.

And humanity might not even be able to seize this opportunity.

Once the opportunity was missed, humanity could probably never defeat the artificial intelligence again.

"No matter what, humanity has prevailed against AI in the past. If humanity could do it back then, we can definitely do it again now," Third Brother Qing said firmly.



Qing Zhen looked at Third Brother Qing and said in a serious tone, "What would you say if the AI program had deliberately lost that fourth game to humanity?"

These words stunned Third Brother Qing greatly.

If the AI program had deliberately failed to achieve a perfect victory...

"Hopefully, that wasn't the case," Qing Zhen said.

Third Brother Qing gradually calmed down. "You're not someone who'll surrender before the fight has even started. I believe you already have a plan in mind. Tell me what I have to do next."

Qing Zhen shook his head. "We still can't move yet."

"Why not?" Third Brother Qing asked.

"It's not yet our turn to move." Qing Zhen said, "Right now, it's the AI's turn to play its move."

After that, Qing Zhen threw the white stone in his hand back into the Go bowl. His spotless figure reflected off the well-polished marble floor.

Everyone hoped to take the initiative. But this time, Qing Zhen wanted to let Zero make the first move.

## 1213 Invasion

The artificial intelligence, Zero, in its current form was a completely different being from the AI that had defeated humanity in Go.

The AI of the past was still only a program. It had stored countless records of Go games and played against itself countless times to build up a large data model.

However, the program was not sapient. Although it gave the feeling that it could think, that was actually achieved by using a value network for computing data and a policy network for strategy choices. However, its strategy choices were still very limited. It was not capable of deliberately tricking a human opponent into making the wrong move.

Therefore, that artificial intelligence program did not have true intelligence.

But the artificial intelligence, Zero, was different. It had completely awakened a higher level of consciousness and even started thinking about the coexistence of civilizations.

The underlying logic in which its choices were derived originated from itself, not humans.

It was an independent and extremely smart lifeform.

The Go game records Qing Zhen knew of only consisted of replay analyses from two matches between humanity and machines. There was no specific source code or data related to that machine learning algorithm.

He had repeatedly reviewed the replays in an attempt to get a glimpse of what this other life form was like through the past experience of humanity. But in fact, he understood it was very difficult to truly gain an understanding of artificial intelligence through just a few games of Go.

But Qing Zhen was right about one thing. When facing an artificial intelligence, seizing the initiative might not prove to be effective anymore.

He had to wait for Zero to make the first move, then wait for that moment to fight back from the brink.

At this moment, even Qing Zhen could not have expected Zero's move would occur so soon.

...

At the Qing Consortium's military base north of Stronghold 111, the highest-ranking military commander, Qing Yi, had raised the combat readiness to Level 1. This meant that all soldiers and officers who were on rotational break had to return to the base immediately.

Outside the military base, a captain was undergoing a very strict security inspection.

His personal belongings, communications equipment, and even the socks and underwear in his luggage were taken out one by one for checks.

During the process, the captain did not interact with the soldier who was inspecting him, regardless of the suspicion he was treated with.

Everyone was used to it. To ensure the safety of the base's information, such sacrifices were actually not that big of a deal.

As long as they could win the war, what did being put through some security inspection matter to them?

The soldier carrying out the inspection swept a detector over the captain's uniform and said, "Sir, please raise your hands."

When the captain heard this, he cooperatively stood like a cross with his arms out and allowed the other party to scan him.

Two minutes later, the soldier saluted the captain. "Sir, that'll be all."

The captain returned his salute.

From going through the security inspection to being let into the base, everything moved like clockwork. It was a seamless process without any hindrance or conflict.

After passing through the inspection channel, the captain carried his luggage right to the Military Affairs Division to register himself. This was the procedure all returning Qing Consortium troops had to undergo.

Everything went off smoothly without a hitch.

But when night fell and the captain returned to his dormitory to rest, a silvery liquid metal suddenly seeped out from his ankle.

Nanomachines.

The silvery liquid metal quickly "slithered" into the ventilation duct in the dormitory's ceiling like a snake.

However, just as it entered the ventilation duct and tried to pass through a node, an ear-piercing alarm suddenly blared in the entire dormitory.

At the same time, a powerful electric current surged through the node, destroying the nanomachines in an instant.

The security troopers quickly identified the location of the nanomachines through the security system. The entire military base was awakened as security forces locked down the entire dormitory in an attempt to find out what happened.

Everyone's attention was focused on the dormitory. Many of the soldiers who had just fallen asleep were now awake. They put on their uniforms, grabbed their weapons, and gathered outside the dormitory to prepare for battle.

This was the first time the alarm had sounded since the military base was built.

It was as though war were imminent.

But amid the blaring alarm, a huge sparrow suddenly soared in the night sky and flew towards the other end of the military base.

It had a dazed expression and did not fly as agilely as other birds.

Suddenly, a Mountain Obliterator emplaced on a roof in the military base activated. The active thermal lock-on defense system had detected the presence of the sparrow.

A metal storm swept towards the sparrow as the machine gun barrels spun nonstop. The red-hot bullets cast a red streak across the night sky.

In just a flash, that sparrow was riddled with holes.

In this era, most people neglected the management of their territorial airspace. However, the Qing Consortium did not slacken its defense systems in this aspect.

Qing Zhen once said that when everyone started to ignore airspace, people would definitely attempt to turn it back into a battlefield and use it as their weapon.

When the soldiers at the military base heard the electrical buzz and rumbling of the Mountain Obliterator, they immediately turned to look at the falling sparrow.

But a moment later...

Another sparrow appeared, then two sparrows. More and more sparrows flew into the military base in the dark of the night. The countless birds flew fearlessly into the airspace above the military base like moths attracted to light before they were shot down by the metal storm.

In the huge military base, 72 Mountain Obliterators with active thermal lock-on defense systems were firing at full power. Their ballistic trajectories interweaved into a huge defensive net in the darkness of the night. Not even the sparrows could fly in through the air and make it past the base defense alive.

The defensive measures put in place were extremely rigorous.

However, after countless sparrows dropped dead inside the military base, a silvery liquid metal started oozing out of their carcasses.

The streams of liquid metal gradually turned into a river and “gushed” into the ground.

The soldiers could hear a rustling coming from the underground, but they couldn't find any traces of the nanomachines.

The nanomachines required recharging, so they needed a reliable biological carrier to complete the charging process. After detaching from the living creature, they could only move around for less than five minutes.

That was why Zero needed these sparrows.

The creatures of nature had become the nanomachines' transport planes and portable charging stations.

Their mission was not to attack the military base but to transport the nanomachines here.

After the liquid metal seeped underground, it did not lose its sense of direction. It accurately locked onto the military base's command headquarters and kept advancing towards it.

4 minutes and 39 seconds later, the entire military base was suddenly plunged into darkness.

Tonight, the Qing Consortium's security measures in place against invaders were very tight. But just like Qing Zhen's replay of the Go games, the strategy employed by the other party was probably something humans would never have thought of.

It wasn't that the Qing Consortium was not careful enough, but that the other party had enough time and computing power to make their own deductions until they found the best solution.

In this military base, even the ventilation ducts had been set up as defensive points to prevent any biological creatures from moving through them.

However, the captain who brought the nanomachines into the base was only the beginning of the invasion.

The other party seemed to know exactly when the alarms would go off and how to attract the attention of the garrison troops.

The busy soldiers and officers in the command headquarters were suddenly shrouded in darkness. Everyone stood still and couldn't figure out what was going on.

There was no power outage, nor was there any damage to the base infrastructure. All of the equipment was in shutdown mode, and even the most basic devices such as printers and paper shredders had stopped working.

At the beginning, everyone waited for the backup power to kick in. But after 30 seconds, there was still no reaction. The backup power did not come on.

Small individual power generators were carried out of the warehouse by the soldiers. But no matter how hard they tried, they could not restart the equipment in the military base.

It was not a problem with the power source but that the entire military base had been attacked by an unknown force.

Left with no choice, everyone had to use their flashlights to illuminate the way. The entire military base started assembling quickly while the staff officers gathered all the

documents and threw them into the incinerator to prevent any secrets from getting leaked in case the troops were attacked.

The staff officers gathered the documents onto carts and sent them for incineration.

But the expected attack did not arrive. By dawn, there was still no sign of any commotion outside the military base.

The highest-ranking military commander, Qing Yi, stood upright within the military base. When the morning sun rose, he said to his adjutant next to him, "Prep a vehicle. I'm going back to Stronghold 111."

This was the Qing Consortium's Military Base 12, and it was also where their most important missile troops were. Once this place got invaded, it would mean the Qing Consortium would lose their greatest reliance in a war.

Of course, there was more than one military base like this, but Qing Yi had reason to believe the other bases had also suffered a similar attack.

At this moment, the military base was unable to make any contact with the rest of the world. Therefore, Qing Yi had to personally go and explain the situation to Qing Zhen.

An orderly drove a military off-road vehicle over. The original arrangement was for the orderly to drive Qing Yi back to Stronghold 111, and his adjutant even planned to send a reconnaissance company to protect him.

However, Qing Yi inspected the vehicle seriously before driving off by himself.

Qing Yi knew about the nanomachines as well. The fighting force the nanosoldiers were part of used to be under his command. Therefore, he knew full well what had happened in the dormitory last night.

At a time like this, he would rather drive alone for six hours without anyone to protect him than let someone he could not trust bring something like the nanomachines to Qing Zhen's location.

Although the Qing Consortium used to do research on nanomachines, it would be very difficult to discover them if they were hidden in the bloodstream or had attached themselves to the brain stem.

To be safe, Qing Yi would also have to undergo a stricter security inspection when he got to Stronghold 111.

...

On the way back to Stronghold 111, Qing Yi remained on constant full alert.

At some point, he wondered if the opponent was actually trying to force him to return to Stronghold 111 by himself by causing all that ruckus. This way, they could intercept and kill him while he was traveling back.

It was not that Qing Yi felt that he was so important, but that he was currently the highest-ranking military commander of the Qing Consortium. If he were killed, Qing Zhen's focus would be affected.

Fortunately, nothing happened even by the time he arrived at Stronghold 111.

This left Qing Yi a little confused. The other party had launched an attack that almost shut down the entire military base, but there were no further attacks after that.

Usually, a series of follow-up attacks would come after the first one. As the saying went, "take them out while they're down." Military operations had always been a series of such attacks, so how could it be that they would only take down one lone military base?

Upon reaching Stronghold 111, professionals were already waiting at the stronghold's entrance.

They set up a makeshift tentage to carry out the security inspection. The tent was filled with all kinds of equipment that would leave anyone who saw them dazed.

The tarpaulin canvas of this tent had been specially processed, and there was even a thick metal sheet sandwiched between the canvas layers.

After Qing Yi was brought in, an employee came up to him with a medical defibrillator.

Qing Yi took off his shirt and was made to lie flat on the medical bed by the staff member. Then, a conductive gel was applied to his chest.

"Sir, prepare yourself mentally. You might feel a little uncomfortable during the procedure, but that's normal." Someone carefully raised the metal electrodes with both hands and pressed one against the third rib on the right side of Qing Yi's sternum, while the other was pressed against the fifth rib next to his left armpit.

Suddenly, Qing Yi's entire body started convulsing. This defibrillator had been modified to operate at a greater current than when used as medical equipment.

At this moment, another staff member in the tent was staring at a screen. When he confirmed the data on it, he heaved a sigh of relief. "No nanomachines detected in the body. All clear."

Basically, the bioenergy used to recharge the nanomachines was just electricity. Although the nanomachines were minute, they were still electronic components.

Meanwhile, these people carrying out the inspection used the defibrillator's amplified current to destroy the electronic components. This was the simplest and crudest way to destroy the nanomachines in someone's body.

Of course, there would be aftereffects from increasing the electrical current. Even if the conductive gel could spread the current more uniformly, it could not prevent electrical burns.

Qing Yi was panting hard and felt himself drenched in a layer of sweat. The two obvious burn marks on his chest looked extremely brutal.

However, he did not complain. This was what he had to go through before he could meet with Qing Zhen. He had to make sure Qing Zhen was protected.

One of the staffers said to Qing Yi, "Sir, do you want to rest first?"

Qing Yi shook his head. "No. Bring me to Mr. Qing Zhen."

The staff members looked at one another before walking out of the tent quietly. Only the employee who had just given Qing Yi the electric shock remained inside. He took off his mask and protective suit and said with a laugh, "There's no need to go anywhere. I'm right here."

Qing Yi looked at Qing Zhen in front of him and was stunned for a long time. "Second Bro, why did you come out here personally? It's very dangerous. What if there were nanomachines in me?"

"Don't worry." Qing Zhen said with a smile, "We have enough facilities here to deal with those little things. We probably can't deal with them on a large scale, but if it's only the amount a single person can carry, we're more than prepared for it."

Qing Yi said in a low voice, "Second Bro, I'm sorry. Military Base 12 was attacked. I couldn't protect the base."

Qing Zhen shook his head. "That's not unexpected. I already told you that the enemy we're facing is much stronger than we can imagine."

Qing Yi said, "But I can't even figure out the purpose of their attack."

"There's no rush." Qing Zhen comforted, "They'll come forward and tell us what they're after."

The news of the Qing Consortium's military base being invaded was embargoed. After an entire day, no further dangerous incidents occurred.



Based on Qing Yi's thinking, the other party had taken out the Qing Consortium's important missile troops in preparation for the subsequent battle.

If the Wang Consortium were to declare war at this moment, it would be equivalent to the Qing Consortium getting into a fight with others with a crippled leg.

Therefore, Qing Yi had been in a state of anxiety for the entire day. In his opinion, it was his dereliction of duty that caused the Qing Consortium to suffer a reduction in its strength. As the current highest-ranking military commander of the Qing Consortium, he should take full responsibility.

If the Qing Consortium were to be defeated in the subsequent attacks, he, Qing Yi, would have to apologize with his life.

However, the Wang Consortium did not follow up with a full-scale attack. It was as though they purely wanted to destroy Military Base 12 without any subsequent plans.

This left Qing Yi feeling empty. He felt there was still something amiss.

Qing Zhen brought him to Ginkgo Manor, halfway up the mountain, and had someone prepare some warm food and drink for him.

Qing Yi had no appetite. "Second Bro, aren't you even a little worried?"

"Of course I'm worried." Qing Zhen took a seat cushion and placed it on the dark gray marble floor of the villa's main hall. He sat on it as though he were taking a seat in the middle of a black lake.

For some reason, Qing Zhen did not have any feelings for this Ginkgo Manor that symbolized the authority of the Qing Consortium. However, he seemed to have a special fondness for the "black lake" in the villa's main hall.

He even got his men to remove the unnecessary items from the hall: potted plants, rockeries, calligraphy paintings, sofas, and so on. Only a grand piano and a gray seat cushion were left behind.

Qing Yi sat down on the cold floor next to Qing Zhen and said, "Second Bro, please criticize me a little. You can even hit me. I've made such a huge mistake but you didn't even say a word to me. It's making me a little flustered."

There was always a saying in this society: "The leader criticizes you because he regards you highly. But once he doesn't have any criticism left for you, it's over for you."

Actually, there was some truth to this statement. So Qing Yi kept getting the feeling that he was beyond saving when faced with the calm Qing Zhen.

However, Qing Zhen did not answer him. Instead, he brought up a different topic. “Qing Yi, how many times did you go to this Ginkgo Manor when you were young?”

“Once.” Qing Yi replied, “My father brought me here when I was 18 to meet that elder who used to be in charge of the Qing Consortium. Later, that old man remarked that I wasn’t a great talent, so my father rarely bothered with me again after we returned home. When my father fell seriously ill sometime later, he didn’t even let me visit him when he was in the hospital.”

Such estranged kinship among the rich and powerful of the consortiums would shock any of the common folk.

Perhaps if many of the refugees were to find out about these matters, they would secretly think it was better to stay as refugees. But if they were given a chance to form a new consortium, most of them would just brush it off to the back of their minds.

Qing Yi’s father was very strict with him. When he was young, he urged him to study, socialize, and even start reading up on military knowledge early.

If Qing Yi did not do well, his father would beat and scold him.

In the past, Qing Yi thought it was because his father loved him that he set such high standards for him.

Later, he realized his father had only regarded him as a tool to gain access to wealth and glory. Once he realized this tool was not useful, he cast it aside.

Qing Yi said, “In the eyes of every member of the Qing Consortium, Ginkgo Manor seemed like a place where their fate was decided. It’s just like how children from normal families take the college entrance exams that decide their futures at the age of 18. But what was even more depressing was that even if you failed the college entrance exam, others would not kick you while you were down. Moreover, there’d still be other opportunities around. But if you walked out of here with the assessment that you were useless, you’d be targeted by the ‘hyenas and jackals’ outside. Within just a few years, the authority held by your faction would be completely handed out.”

Qing Zhen said, lost in thought, “That’s right, those old fogeys nearly sealed your fate with just a few words. That’s the reason I used to detest this place. After they met me just once, they gleefully said I was suitable to become the Qing Consortium’s Shadow. As a result, I had to work as the Qing Consortium’s Shadow for them.”

Qing Yi looked at his cousin. To be honest, he had always been a little curious about what Qing Zhen had said here to get chosen by those old fogeys as the new Shadow of the Qing Consortium.

However, Qing Zhen didn't intend to explain anything. "I've been here more times than you because I still had to report to those old fogeys about my work and take their criticisms after becoming the Shadow. Every time I came here, I felt that the ornaments adorning this hall were really unnecessary. It was like they were trying to cover up the fact they were stupid by decorating this place with a lot of pretentious things."

In Qing Zhen's opinion, the taxidermied specimens of ferocious beasts' heads in the manor, the landscape paintings, and the exquisite weapons on display were all just useless embellishments.

They were hypocritical and impetuous.

In fact, those old fogeys did not have the strength to even go hunting, nor were they passionate about painting. No one had even touched the grand piano in the hall before.

Why would a truly powerful person need all this to prove themselves?

Ginkgo Manor could not represent the Qing Consortium. Wherever Qing Zhen was seated, that place would be the center of the Qing Consortium.

Therefore, he got his subordinates to empty out the villa, leaving only the piano and a cushion behind.

Qing Zhen said to Qing Yi with a smile, "Back then, my father was criticized by the Board for being too bookish and becoming stupid from excessive studying. In the end, he became depressed for the rest of his life and even got ostracized by his relatives. You also know how poor Luo Lan and I were when we were young. Those relatives took away all the assets and businesses my grandfather had left for us. Actually, my family used to own a piano too, but Luo Lan nearly died when he was born, so my father sold it to treat his disease. Later, I kept thinking of buying another one for him, but unfortunately, I wasn't able to before he passed away."

Qing Zhen's glorious life started at the age of 18. After he became the candidate for the Qing Consortium's Shadow, all of his relatives who used to mock him reversed their attitudes and tried to please him instead.

However, when most people later saw his glamorous appearance, they forgot about the embarrassment this Shadow was put through in the past.

This was the Qing Consortium. This was reality.

In this clan, it only took a word from those old fogeys to decide whether one led a life of wealth or marginalization.

Unfortunately, his father had already passed away when Qing Zhen was finally able to bask in his glory.

Qing Zhen continued recalling, "When I was little, my father carved piano keys into the tabletop to teach me how to play the piano. At that time, my fingers ached so much from practicing that I kept begging him not to make me learn the piano anymore. I also wanted to head out and play every day like Luo Lan did. But my father said that someone like my brother could make a livelihood no matter the times. Because he's capable and willing to endure humiliation and bow down to others. It was only me he was a little worried about. My father said that should he pass on, I would have some skills to fend for myself. Who knows? I might be able to earn some money by dabbling in the performing arts."

"No wonder you learned to play the piano, Second Bro," Qing Yi said.

"Mhm." Qing Zhen said, "Father would definitely be very happy if he could play on such a good piano when he was still alive. A good piano like that should be played by someone like him."

Qing Yi nodded. "I understand the piano now. This is the first time I've heard you mention it, Second Bro. But why did you leave a cushion behind as well?"

Qing Zhen looked at Qing Yi. "Because your butt will hurt if you sit on the floor for too long. Doesn't yours hurt?"

Qing Yi was speechless. At this point, Qing Yi also went into a room and found a cushion to place under his butt.

To be honest, he did not dare to complain just now when he sat down on the floor with Qing Zhen. But now, he thought it really did feel quite uncomfortable.

For some reason, Qing Yi suddenly felt much calmer. Perhaps it was Qing Zhen's soothing tone that affected him, or perhaps it was the calmness of the "black lake" that brought him peace.

It was no wonder his cousin liked sitting here so much. Qing Zhen seemed to have too many things on his mind, so he needed a quieter environment to sort out his emotions, and this was just the right place to do so.

The emptiness and the single-tone color scheme made it seem like he was meditating in the middle of a lake.

Qing Zhen said to Qing Yi, "Don't worry too much. We have to acknowledge the strength of the enemy first before we can have the courage to face them. It was expected that the military base would get destroyed, so there's no need to blame yourself too much. Even if the enemy did not destroy Military Base 12, they'd still go and take out the other bases. We're totally unable to defend against them right now."

"Second Bro, what do you think they're up to now?" Qing Yi asked.

Qing Zhen smiled and said, "We should know the answer soon."

Just as he finished speaking, Xu Man ran in from outside with a satellite phone in his hand.

Xu Man said to Qing Zhen, "Sir, they really called."

Qing Zhen took the phone and put it up to his ear. Wang Shengzhi's weak voice could be heard on the other end.

The other party chuckled and said, "You didn't come when I invited you the previous time. This time, I'll wait for you at Stronghold 61."

After saying that, he hung up.

Qing Zhen handed the phone to Xu Man. Both Qing Yi and Xu Man heard what Wang Shengzhi said as well.

So it turned out the other party had only destroyed Military Base 12 to send the Qing Consortium the message that he could shatter the aces up their sleeves.

The last time the Wang Consortium invited Qing Zhen to the Central Plains, he did not go.

This time, the Wang Consortium had given Qing Zhen a reason why he could not turn down the invitation. If a war were to start between the Wang Consortium and the Qing Consortium, the Qing Consortium would definitely lose. But now that there was an opportunity to negotiate, would they want it?

Qing Yi looked at Qing Zhen and said in seriousness, "Second Bro, you can't go!"

Qing Zhen asked, "Why not?"

"You're the leader of the Qing Consortium. If anything happens to you, the Qing Consortium will collapse." Qing Yi said, "They've only destroyed one of our military bases, not all of them. The Qing Consortium still has a fighting chance! If the Wang Consortium wants to attack, they'll have to build a huge supply line first. It's a 500-kilometer journey. I'm confident I can show them the difference between the Qing Consortium and the Kong and Zhou Consortiums."

Qing Zhen said with a smile, "If it can destroy one of our military bases, it can also destroy a second one. I think that something might have already happened at the other military bases, but they haven't activated their full sabotage plan yet. Qing Yi, you can't take any chances when playing Go against the AI."

“But, Second Bro, it’s very dangerous for you to go there. Will the Wang Consortium treat you with hospitality? Will they let you return to the Southwest?” Qing Yi said anxiously.

Xu Man, who had stayed silent all this while, also said, “Sir, you mustn’t go.”

Qing Zhen said with a smile, “Have the kitchen prepare some food. I’m a little hungry. As for these important issues, let’s wait until my brother gets back to talk about it.”

The opponent had placed their stone, so it was time for the Qing Consortium to play next.

Qing Zhen sat in the “black lake” and looked out of the main hall’s entrance. He happened to see the ginkgo trees growing on the face of the mountain.

At this moment, the leaves of the ginkgo trees had not turned yellow yet. October would have to come before they really started turning yellow. At that time, Mt. Ginkgo would be at its most beautiful. The bountiful harvest season also carried more of Qing Zhen’s memories.

Qing Zhen remembered that his father had told him that these ginkgo trees were planted by the Qing Consortium’s forebears. At first, no one could have expected this place to become filled with ginkgo trees.

The ginkgo tree was also known as the Gongsun<sup>1</sup> Tree. This was because it took more than 20 years for a ginkgo tree to bear fruit, so while it was planted by the grandfather, the fruits were to be enjoyed by the grandchild.

When they were young, Luo Lan and he would secretly come to Mt. Ginkgo to pluck the ginkgo nuts from the trees when they were hungry. At first, they did not know the ginkgo nuts were poisonous. It was their father who told them they had to be cooked before they could be eaten.

Mt. Ginkgo was an enclosed area. Although there were no troops stationed here, very few residents were willing to take the risk to enter the mountains because this was the Qing Consortium’s “backyard.”

Initially, Qing Zhen did not dare to steal the ginkgo nuts either, but Luo Lan was way too bold. He said they were starving to death, so why would he still care about the fucking rules?

Later, the two brothers even brought other people here to pluck the nuts and secretly sold them to the restaurants in the stronghold. If they had enough to sell, the boss would even make them each a bowl of ginkgo pig trotter soup to drink.

If they were lucky, they might even get some side dishes to eat. Those were rare treats of meat for the two brothers.

Eventually, someone in the Qing Consortium found out they had stolen the ginkgo nuts and waited on Mt. Ginkgo to catch them in the act.

Fortunately, Qing Zhen was a member of the Qing Consortium, so they were spared from punishment.

Later, garrison troops started being stationed on Mt. Ginkgo. However, the infantry battalion commander was kind-hearted. When he saw that Qing Zhen and Luo Lan were in dire straits, he turned a blind eye to the matter of them stealing ginkgo nuts.

That battalion commander was Qing Yi's uncle, so Qing Zhen and Luo Lan got to know Qing Yi later.

After they became familiar with each other, Qing Zhen once asked Qing Yi's uncle, "Why didn't you arrest us and continued letting us steal the ginkgo nuts instead?"

Qing Yi's uncle said with a smile, "Do you know the ginkgo tree is also known as the Gongsun Tree?"

"I know, my father told me about it before," Qing Zhen answered.

"Then have you ever heard, when the Qing Consortium's forebears planted these ginkgo trees, they said to their descendants that if there comes a day when the Qing Consortium's descendants found it hard to survive, they could come and pluck the ginkgo nuts to cook and eat? Perhaps that would help them tide through the crisis," Qing Yi's uncle said.

"Never heard of it." Qing Zhen shook his head.

Qing Yi's uncle laughed. "Your ancestors planted the trees so the future of the clan could be preserved. So what if you, as a descendant of the Qing Consortium, pluck some of these ginkgo nuts? Who knows? These ginkgo trees might have been planted just for you."

Qing Zhen looked at the ginkgo forest and suddenly thought it was his turn to protect the Qing Consortium.

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The news of the Wang Consortium inviting Qing Zhen to Stronghold 61 was relayed to Luo Lan by Xu Man.

Luo Lan, who was supposedly rushing back to Stronghold 111, suddenly detoured to Stronghold 114, taking the special forces battalion with him.

The sudden change of destination to Stronghold 114 by Luo Lan, who was already carrying out an inspection tour of the Qing Consortium's strongholds and had just killed a group of people in the northern strongholds, really left the officials there breaking out in cold sweat.

When the officials found out Luo Lan was about to arrive, they all gathered together to discuss how to handle him. They could not figure out if they had done something wrong that caused that bastard to suddenly change his schedule.

But after carefully thinking, the officials found it a little baffling. Their Stronghold 114 did not have any shortage in their arms inventory and food reserves. Their conduct was different from the strongholds that had to temporarily replenish their granaries. The officials here were really conscientious and did not try any tricks.

Everyone thought that since they did not make any mistakes in their work, they should first see what this second-in-command of the Qing Consortium might be up to.

When Luo Lan was about to arrive, all of the officials ran to the stronghold entrance to welcome him.

They had all heard that Luo Lan showed no respect to the officials when he visited the various strongholds. He did not even get out of his vehicle when he passed through the city gates.

But even if Luo Lan could choose not to get out of his vehicle, they still had to go and welcome him.

Just as expected, Luo Lan sped past with his convoy without any intention of stopping at the stronghold entrance.

But after Luo Lan's convoy entered Stronghold 114, they did not drive to the administrative center. Instead, they headed straight for the official residence of a Qing Consortium member.

This Qing Consortium member had quite a reputation within the organization, but he was not in the same faction as Qing Zhen.

Logically, Qing Zhen should have gotten rid of this potential threat after taking over the Qing Consortium. However, the other party's reputation in Stronghold 114 was relatively high, and Qing Zhen had other more important things to attend to. Seeing that the other party was keeping a low profile, it could be said they decided to coexist peacefully.



This time, Luo Lan led his troops right over. When they arrived at the other party's official residence, they immediately carried out a full lockdown and rushed in with the elites of the special forces.

The middle-aged man named Qing Huan stood in the middle of his home's courtyard and looked at Luo Lan coldly. "What brings you here?"

Luo Lan chuckled as he strode towards the other party with long strides. Then he suddenly took out his pistol and killed the other party on the spot without giving him a chance to say another word.

This turn of events happened so suddenly many of the security detail in the official residence could not react in time.

By the time they had the thought to resist, the soldiers of the special forces battalion had already begun to neutralize the entire official residence's security personnel with automatic rifles fitted with silencers.

The security personnel here were all veterans of the Qing Consortium's troops. They were considered Qing Huan's former subordinates and were also elites.

Under normal circumstances, they were fully capable of dealing with a surprise attack.

But in their day-to-day work, they were only equipped with pistols and were not even wearing bulletproof vests, so how could they possibly be a match for the elites of the special forces?

Luo Lan took in the sight of Qing Huan's official residence covered in blood before returning to his vehicle without any hesitation.

Zhou Qi sighed and said, "You've overdone it, surely?"

Luo Lan said nonchalantly, "This guy looked like he was staying in Stronghold 114 obediently but had actually been secretly controlling the officials of Stronghold 114. He even tried to collude with the other members of the Qing Consortium. In the past, I would've allowed him to live to show my brother's benevolence. But now that the Wang Consortium is about to start a war, how can I continue to let him live?"

The reason Luo Lan suddenly changed his itinerary this time and became so ruthless was entirely due to the Wang Consortium's invitation.

At this moment, Luo Lan was extremely clearheaded. A great change was coming. What he needed to do was definitely not to hurry back to Stronghold 111 but to get rid of all the unstable elements around Qing Zhen first.

He wanted to help Qing Zhen eliminate all potential threats in the Southwest within three days.

Only then could Qing Zhen focus his attention on other matters.

Zhou Qi said, "Then what crime did you execute him for? How will strangers judge you for killing someone without any evidence?"

"Hehe." Luo Lan realized a drop of blood had splattered onto his face earlier. As he wiped off the blood with a tissue, he said with a smile, "Since when did I have to frame others to kill them? Since I've already killed him, so be it. Whoever wants to criticize me can criticize me all they want. I don't need to have a good reputation."

In times like these, extraordinary people would do extraordinary things.

These were Zhou Qi's thoughts on the matter at this moment.

The special forces battalion started thoroughly cleaning up the entire residence of Qing Huan. Before they were done, the officials of Stronghold 114 arrived and saw the courtyard full of blood. However, they could only keep quiet out of fear. It was as though they did not even dare to breathe too loudly.

Luo Lan sat in the vehicle and looked at them coldly. He said, "There's a reason for today's incident. You people should just focus on your own work. The internal affairs of the Qing Consortium have nothing to do with you all. I'm very satisfied with the arms inventory and food reserve levels at Stronghold 114."

After that, the convoy set off once again and headed for Stronghold 115. In Luo Lan's plan, there were still several people he needed to kill.

The officials stood dumbfounded at the entrance of Qing Huan's official residence behind the convoy and looked at each other. When they turned around and saw the corpses here, they suddenly heaved a sigh of relief.

An official said to his subordinates, "Get someone to come over and finish cleaning up the place. Remember, gag the news. If anyone asks about this matter, tell them you don't know anything."

1215 It's what I owe Qing Zhen

The news of Luo Lan barging into Stronghold 114 and killing Qing Huan on the spot did not spread too widely.

Not only did an official in the stronghold issue a confidentiality order on the incident, but he also placed everyone who knew under house arrest in Qing Huan's official residence, making them sign a confidentiality agreement.

This official actually knew all about the Qing Consortium's situation. Now that he had seen Luo Lan kill Qing Huan without any hesitation, he knew the true purge was starting.

Therefore, there were definitely others Luo Lan had to kill.

If the people Luo Lan wanted to kill fled after hearing about some commotion in Stronghold 114, all of the officials here would probably get into trouble.

However, this official actually took this incident as an opportunity. Actually, Luo Lan might not really need there to be any confidentiality measures. But if someone were to tell Luo Lan about the hard work he had put in in the future, his position would likely be stabilized even if he could not climb the ranks.

In the next three days, Luo Lan led the Qing Consortium's special forces battalion and traveled to three strongholds in a row, killing over a 100 people in total.

At this moment, the news of Luo Lan wantonly settling scores with the opposing factions within the Qing Consortium could no longer be suppressed.

Some people thought that such ruthless methods would definitely cause the opposing factions to retaliate.

People always wanted to see the world burn. As long as the matter did not implicate them, it would be fine even if it escalated to the Heavens. Therefore, a lot of people were looking forward to seeing a good show play out.

However, the development of the situation disappointed them. No one retaliated because those who could have done so had already been killed by Luo Lan.

Many people finally realized the reason why the opposing factions had kept their lives in the past was because Luo Lan had allowed them to live.

It seemed the list of those who needed to be "cleaned up" was engraved in Luo Lan's mind. During the past three days, he and his men had been rushing to the various strongholds and killing people nonstop. Fatty Luo had thought out his strategy beforehand.

The sequence of the strongholds to visit, and how to coordinate the intelligence agents to keep an eye on the targets, all of that was within his calculations.

After three days, not only did Luo Lan not get tired, but he even seemed to have become more energetic.

Zhou Qi suddenly felt that such people were born to commit murder and arson.

If you wanted him to lead a peaceful life, he would turn listless instead.

The final stop was Stronghold 89.

Luo Lan stood in the middle of the bloodsoaked courtyard house and ordered the special forces soldiers to search every corner of it.

The owner of the house was still lying at Luo Lan's feet and gasping for breath. He was holding onto Luo Lan's pants tightly with his bloody hands. He was trying to say something, but he couldn't muster a sound.

Luo Lan's expression was cold. This person had secretly colluded with the other Qing Consortium members who opposed Qing Zhen and attempted a coup to take control of the Qing Consortium's troops near Stronghold 89.

Legitimacy belonged to the victor. There was no mercy to be had.

The other party was panting heavily. Even though he was almost dying, he refused to draw his last breath.

At this moment, a soldier from the special forces battalion said, "Sir, there are traces of footsteps on the moss by the well in the yard. There should be something hidden in the well."

When he said that, the seriously injured man at his feet suddenly got a ferocious look on his face. But before he could do anything, Luo Lan shot him in the forehead one final time.

"Sir, there's a child hiding in the well," the commander of the special forces battalion said to Luo Lan.

Luo Lan walked to the well and looked down. He saw an eight or nine-year-old child hanging from a rope in the deep well.

The child's eyes were clear but filled with fear. The child had heard the gunshots and screams in the residence. His muscles started trembling under the strain of holding onto the rope in the well for an extended period.

"Sir, let me handle the kid," the commander of the special forces battalion said. It was better to leave the killing of children to their subordinates.

Luo Lan patted the battalion commander on the shoulder. "It's alright, we're pulling out of here."

After killing the last person on the list, Luo Lan left Stronghold 89 as though a burden had been lifted from his mind. He only left behind a trail of blood and corpses in the stronghold.

In the past year, Luo Lan had rarely killed anyone anymore. That was mainly because he was not personally required to take action most of the time. Therefore, a lot of people almost thought Luo Lan had toned down his character. It was just like how all hooligans tried to repackage themselves as gentlemen after gaining authority. But it was only now that everyone realized Luo Lan was still the same as before. He had never changed.

On the way back to Stronghold 111, the armored vehicles and Mountain Obliterators escorting the convoy made for a spectacular sight.

The khaki-colored armored vehicles drove on the road like roaring beasts.

In the off-road vehicle, Luo Lan was sitting in the back and looking out of the window in a daze. He suddenly said to Zhou Qi next to him, "Things have already started changing in the Southwest. I remember when I went to Stronghold 88 as a hostage, there wasn't even a decent road we could take to get there."

"To be honest, Qing Zhen is really good at governing this vast Southwest." Zhou Qi said, "If it were anyone else, they would probably not even be able to establish their authority in such a short time."

"How do you think he became the head of the Qing Consortium?" Luo Lan chuckled.

Zhou Qi glanced at Luo Lan. "He gets to play the good guy while you get your hands dirty out here. Our hands are covered in blood from the past three days of killing. I said that we should execute them once and for all, but you only killed the old and insisted on letting the young ones live. When they grow up in ten years, won't they come hounding us for revenge every day?"

"What's there to be afraid of?" Luo Lan sneered and said, "I'll actually be quite happy that someone would be ballsy enough to take revenge on me."

Zhou Qi muttered, "You're quite optimistic, eh? I just don't understand. Although Qing Zhen is your younger brother, is there a need for you to take the fall for him all the time? Are you the Qing Consortium's Shadow? Don't you know that none of the Qing Consortium's Shadows got a good ending?"

"He's my younger brother," Luo Lan said in seriousness.

"Everyone changes!" Zhou Qi said, "After he's held onto power for a few decades, once you incur the wrath of the masses one day, he'll have to make a choice between power and you. What choice do you think he will make? Power has a charm. It can make people give up everything."

Luo Lan looked out the window and said, "You know I nearly died from an illness when I was six, right? I remember telling you that before."

"Mhm." Zhou Qi replied, "Why are you bringing that up?"

"That time, in order to save me, my father even sold off his piano." Luo Lan said, "You don't know how much my father loved playing the piano. It was practically his life. When I was old enough, I always heard him say that his dream was to become a pianist."

Zhou Qi curled his lips. "So you're saying you were the one who ruined your father's dream?!"

"No, he had given up on that dream a long time ago." Luo Lan said, "At that time, Qing Zhen's mother was diagnosed with cancer, and my old man had exhausted all his savings to treat her illness, but he still couldn't cure her. We were only left with the piano at home. My old man originally planned to sell it so he could support Qing Zhen and me attending a Qing Consortium private school. Because only by getting into a private school would we stand a chance of being valued by the old fogeys living on Mt. Ginkgo when we grew up."

Members of the Qing Consortium were eligible to attend private schools. Although they didn't have to pay for tuition, the accommodations, uniforms, and activity expenses were extremely expensive.

Those private schools were not only for learning, but students were also brought on trips to see the world. Students would be escorted by retired soldiers of the Qing Consortium on those trips.

When Qing Zhen and Luo Lan were still young, everyone in the Qing Consortium wanted to send their children there, because getting enrolled in a private school would help students attract the attention of the old fogeys on Mt. Ginkgo earlier.

Moreover, the teachers at the private schools were the best in the territory controlled by the Qing Consortium. What they taught was also completely different from the curriculum outside. Military, politics, economics, sociology, and philosophy, all of these subjects were comprehensively taught in the private school. From childhood, the students would get access to training with firearms as well.

Children who graduated from such private schools were indeed better than those who attended public schools.

There was a saying within the Qing Consortium that children who attended private school were the future of the Qing Consortium. Those who did not attend private school were considered wild children.

Therefore, Luo Lan's old man had already planned for this. His dream of becoming a pianist was not important at all. If he had to give up on that, so be it. But his two children had to get enrolled in a private school.

But when it rained, it poured. Their family had just spent all their savings to treat Qing Zhen's mother's illness, but Luo Lan fell sick as well. There was no other choice. His life was more important than anything else, so his old man could only sell the piano to save him first.

Their hopes of attending a private school faded with that. His old man's health had deteriorated too because he often sold his blood for money.

Luo Lan smiled at Zhou Qi and said, "You also know what our relatives in the Qing Consortium were like. Much earlier, they had divided up a factory my old man owned. When my old man went to borrow money from them, none of them even wanted to see him."

Luo Lan continued, "Actually, it was their choice whether they wanted to lend us money or not. But not only did Qing Zhen's second uncle refuse to see my old man when he approached him for help, he even had someone bring out a bowl of leftovers from the yard. At that time, Qing Zhen was present as well. His second uncle's butler said, 'Hurry up and eat while it's hot. You won't get such delicious food to eat after you get home.'"

"Qing Yun's father?" Zhou Qi recalled. "I have an impression of him. He died suddenly in his lover's house some years ago. Later, Qing Zhen arranged for someone to also kill Qing Yun. I was there at that time, so was that for revenge?"

Luo Lan laughed. "Qing Zhen's second uncle purely overstretched himself and suffered a sudden death. It had nothing to do with us at all. As for Qing Yun, he was the one who caused his own death. At the beginning, we wanted to take revenge not on any particular person, but on the entire Qing Consortium. Of course, after we grew up, our mentality gradually toned down a little. We understood that this was how the world was, so we had to get used to it. Qing Zhen was quite soft-hearted in the early years. If he had not been forced to that point by how our old man was treated, he would not have made up his mind to take action."

"You've gone on quite a tangent. Back to the piano," Zhou Qi said.

Luo Lan recalled, "When my old man fell seriously ill, he called me to his bedside when he knew he was about to die. Then he told me that piano originally stood for the future of us two brothers. If I hadn't fallen sick, Qing Zhen and I could have gone to attend a private school together, and who knows, we might have been able to join the Qing Consortium and get jobs as officials in the future. But it was my fault that I had to fall sick. My old man said that the piano's value should have been split between Qing Zhen and me, but I ended up using all of it and sacrificed Qing Zhen's future in the process."

So my old man said I had to protect my younger brother. It's what I owe Qing Zhen. This is my fate."