

# **The First Order**

## **- Chapter 1210 – 1215**

### **That past era –**

1210 That past era

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.

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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.

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## 1211 Inspection tour of the North

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.

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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."

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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."

1212 Black makes the first move

"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."

#### 1214 Eliminating potential threats

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.”

