

Chapter 231 Captain Ren Xiaosu

Even though they despised it, everyone still felt obligated to put up the couplets since they had begged Grandpa Hu Shuo to write them, and this was especially so after he had already written them down.

Actually, couplets were only a representation of hopes for the New Year. It didn't matter what they were as long as everyone was happy.

A basic wooden house had already been built. To keep the inside of the house warm, everyone skinned the wild animals the wolves had sent over and washed them clean. They then line the outside wall of the house with the skins after drying them so the wind wouldn't get in.

After the house was completed, the duo of Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng wanted to drive back to town. They were going there to bring Wang Fugui, Yan Liuyuan, Jiang Wu, and the rest over to the outpost.

But Hu Shuo stopped them this time. "It's no longer the same outside of town. If you two go back there to bring your friends back, something could go wrong. Wait another two days before going."

Ren Xiaosu was startled. "Did something bad happen?"

"The Li Consortium lost an entire combat brigade," Hu Shuo replied.

This time, everyone else at the outpost was startled. "There should be several thousand people in a combat brigade, right? How could they be lost just like that?"

Hu Shuo was amused. "But they really were lost just like that. Therefore, full martial law has been enforced outside of Stronghold 108, and even trenches have been dug too. If you two go back at this time, you might not be able to get out of the town even if you got in."

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Ren Xiaosu frowned. "Then what can we do?"

"Wait a day." Hu Shuo laughed. "I'll handle things for you."

When Ren Xiaosu heard that, he did not say anything else. He was curious to see how Hu Shuo would resolve this matter.

As it got closer to the New Year during these two days, Hu Shuo started speaking less.

Everyone would often see Hu Shuo sitting on the cliff next to the outpost all day without doing anything other than looking out into the distance.

Ren Xiaosu walked up to Hu Shuo and asked, "Are you thinking of your family?"

Hu Shuo ignored him, but Ren Xiaosu asked again, "Other than that grandson of yours, don't you have any other family?"

Hu Shuo gave him a look. “No, why?”

“I’ve seen you in a strange mood of melancholy these past few days.” Ren Xiaosu said in worry, “If you don’t mind, we can become blood brothers. Since I have another younger brother, we can recreate something along the lines of the Oath of the Peach Garden[1].”

“Get lost!” Hu Shuo snapped at him. “Are you trying to take advantage of me? My grandson is older than you!”

Ren Xiaosu said rather sadly, “It’s almost the New Year, but he isn’t reuniting with you?”

“He has something more important to handle,” Hu Shuo said.

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu felt that Hu Shuo could be planning something big. That grandson he was talking about was probably a key figure in this entire plan. “Wait, is your grandson a Li?”

Hu Shuo looked at him with a half-smile. “Lots of people share the surname Li. Which one are you talking about?”

Ren Xiaosu froze. He should have thought of this long ago. If that grandson was the person he was guessing it to be, much of Hu Shuo’s behavior would be explainable.

The next morning, an off-road vehicle drove up to the outpost. Ren Xiaosu guessed it was probably here to look for Hu Shuo.

But when two officers got out of the vehicle, they were holding two additional sets of military uniforms in their hands. Hu Shuo, who was sitting in the front yard, pointed them to Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng and said, “Give them to the two of them.”

Ren Xiaosu asked, “What is it?”

“If you wish to go through town, you’ll have to don this uniform,” Hu Shuo said.

“But this is the Li Consortium’s military uniform!” Ren Xiaosu said in shock. “Won’t they require IDs when passing through town? If we get caught, won’t we get into big trouble?”

However, those two officers said, “We’ve prepared for that as well.” They then handed Ren Xiaosu a blue booklet.

Ren Xiaosu opened it up immediately and saw an officer’s ID of the Li Consortium. There was a serial number, a stamp, and even Ren Xiaosu’s photo in it. He did not even know when his picture had been taken without his knowledge!

Hu Shuo laughed and said, “The negatives have already been destroyed, so don’t worry. The serial number is real, the rank of captain is also real, all of it is real. You’re now my subordinates, so whoever checks on you won’t be able to find any trouble with you at all. But I doubt that anyone would dare to stop our staff for checks anyway. After all, normal soldiers are all pretty afraid of the Office of Special Investigations.”

Ren Xiaosu fell silent. This old man's influence within the Li Consortium seemed huge. Reaching the status of regular Li Consortium soldier was such a sought after dream by many people. But in this person's hands, it was nothing more than a small gift he could present to anyone he wanted.

Besides, this man probably had some other motives by granting him this status, right? Why would a sly old fox like Hu Shuo do so much for him? If he had to go through all this trouble to make him a Li Consortium officer, he might as well just send some of his own people to bring Xiaoyu and the others over.

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, "Aren't you afraid that I'll use this position to do other stuff?"

Hu Shuo was amused. "You? What could you possibly do?"

After lunch that day, Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng drove back to town in their Li Consortium military uniforms. Li Qingzheng looked very excited. "So I've become a regular officer of the Li Consortium just like that? I can get into the stronghold now?"

"Are you that desperate to get into the stronghold?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

Li Qingzheng laughed and said without any hesitation, "Who doesn't? I heard you don't even need to close the doors at night in the stronghold. There aren't even any burglars around."

"Then I'm afraid that I'll have to disappoint you," Ren Xiaosu said while looking out of the window. "I don't find it that great in the stronghold. In fact, I think it's much nicer living in town."

Li Qingzheng responded, "I don't believe you. You must be lying. In any case, the fortune teller told me I would get into the stronghold when I met my benefactor, and I'll only believe that."

Ren Xiaosu just smiled but did not say anything. If you chose to believe in fortune telling, you might as well depend on yourself.

When they reached the town's checkpoint, the two of them produced their IDs. When the sentry guard saw the words "Military: Office of Special Investigations," he looked astounded, and he hurriedly let Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng through.

Meanwhile, Wang Fugui and the others had already packed their belongings and were waiting for Ren Xiaosu to arrive.

When Ren Xiaosu said he was going to take them to the outpost to spend the New Year, no one doubted if Ren Xiaosu could do it. Now that Ren Xiaosu had really come to pick them up, they were all carrying big and small bags like they were going on an outing. It was in complete contrast with the tense atmosphere in town.

When the woman from the grocery store next door saw Ren Xiaosu dressed in a military uniform, she froze. 'Since when did he become a soldier of the Li Consortium? Wasn't he still just a private army soldier the last time?'

At that time, she treated Ren Xiaosu with derision due to his status as a private army soldier. As a matter of fact, her lover was a true blue soldier of the Li Consortium.

She knew how difficult it was to enter into regular service as a soldier of the Li Consortium's army. During this time, her business at the grocery store had plunged due to Wang Fugui's grocery store opening next to hers. In the past, people would beg her to sell things to them. But now, Wang Fugui would kindly do business with anyone, so of course everyone was more willing to buy from his shop instead. So she became angrier and angrier by the day seeing how busy it had become over at Wang Fugui's shop.

While Ren Xiaosu, Yan Liuyuan, and the others were packing their things, this woman secretly ran towards the military base stationed just outside of town.

Chapter 232 Complications arise

Other people might not have noticed that woman leaving her shop, but Yan Liuyuan noticed. Of their entire family, Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan were the wariest of their surroundings. Ren Xiaosu could feel most reassured of Yan Liuyuan on this aspect.

He quietly said to Ren Xiaosu, "Bro, I think that woman next door might be up to no good."

Ren Xiaosu glanced at the woman's receding figure. He thought for a moment before saying, "It's alright, there's nothing to be afraid of."

While they were packing, Wang Fugui cheerfully brought over the store's ledger to Ren Xiaosu and said, "Our grocery store's income has been really steady. The town's residents from near and far are all coming to our place to make their purchases. Here, Xiaosu, please check the transactions."

Ren Xiaosu laughed and shot Old Wang a glance. "Hey now, it's the New Year! Why are we checking the accounts? I have nothing to worry about with you taking care of things here. Get in the truck already. I'll take all y'all to the outpost to have a look-see and then take y'all back on the eighth day of the New Year."

Although the outpost was a nice place, it was still a location with defensive duties. There shouldn't be any inspections during the New Year, but if anyone discovered they had brought over their family members when the festivities finished up, it could get pretty troublesome.

Besides, Wang Fugui and the others were also living good in town now. The impish Yan Liuyuan had even become a friend of the women and used those relationships to find out a lot of information.

Yan Liuyuan whispered from next to him, "Bro, why has the Li Consortium also issued an arrest warrant for Xu Xianchu? Was it you

again?"

"Ahem!" Ren Xiaosu looked at Yan Liuyuan. "Don't tell anyone."

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan nodded cleverly. "Don't worry, my lips are sealed."

Right at this moment, the woman from the grocery store next door led a group of soldiers in a hurry back to the store. Even from far away, she was already pointing at Ren Xiaosu and shouting, "It's those two. When they came to town last month, that older guy was still wearing the uniform of the private army. But this time around, he's dressed in the military uniform of the Li Consortium. What's more, he's even a captain!"

Most people would not recognize what ranks the soldiers were from their shoulder marks. But anyone who ran a grocery store at the entrance of the stronghold would definitely be observant of people, so how could she not know about such things?

That group of soldiers surrounded Ren Xiaosu and company. A lieutenant walked forward and faced Ren Xiaosu. "Which division are you two from? Produce your military IDs."

Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng exchanged a glance. When Ren Xiaosu reached for his military ID, the sound of guns being cocked rang out and more than a dozen black barrels were suddenly pointed at them.

The woman from the grocery store smiled joyfully. If there were any problems with this young man's military ID, Wang Fugui's shop would surely not be able to continue operating, right?

Ren Xiaosu smiled as he produced his military ID from his pocket and handed it to these soldiers before him. He said calmly, "Not too many people dare conduct a spot check on those of us in the Office of Special Investigations these days."

Li Qingzheng gasped at this. He realized Ren Xiaosu was not panicking one bit. Moreover, he even learned to speak in the same condescending tone Hu Shuo used when he spoke. It was way too similar.

When the officer facing Ren Xiaosu heard the words "Office of Special Investigations," he frowned. He opened up the military ID book and was indeed greeted by Ren Xiaosu's photo, the stamp, the serial number, as well as the striking words that said "Military: Office of Special Investigations."

If these were normal times, he would definitely be panicking by now. If anyone were hauled to the Office of Special Investigations, they would never be seen again!

But after considering everything, there were far too many suspicious aspects to Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng. Regulars had a different bearing and posture while standing after they went through training. The sloppy way Li Qingzheng was wearing his uniform made it seem like they were imposters.

The officer said coldly, "We need to verify it first before we can confirm whether you're really from the Office of Special Investigations."

He then ordered his subordinate to take out a palm-sized device. That soldier inputted Ren Xiaosu's military identification number into it, and a picture of Ren Xiaosu was displayed.

The officer gasped, spun around, and gave that grocery store woman a slap that sent her flying to the ground. Following this, he turned around and bowed to Ren Xiaosu, "My apologies, sir!"

Ren Xiaosu took back his military ID and examined him. "I now suspect that you're a double agent who's trying to persecute our Li Consortium's officers. Is that watch on your wrist a comms device you use with other spies?"

In response, the officer immediately removed his watch and handed it to Ren Xiaosu. "Sir, please take this back for investigation. Consider it a little souvenir from me."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu's gaze swept over the others. "Are there any suspicious items on the rest of you? I suspect you might be smugglers."

This time, one of the soldiers said hesitantly, "Sir, I don't think the Office of Special Investigations covers smuggling, right?"

Ren Xiaosu fell silent for a moment. "We're going to start investigating that now!"

When Li Qingzheng witnessed this from nearby, he remembered how he was the one who was recently receiving bribes. But from the looks of it, Ren Xiaosu was even better at it.

This group of soldiers had approached them so aggressively at the beginning, but they were now standing in a row with their heads down. All of the money in their pockets had been confiscated by Ren Xiaosu for evidence.

"Alright," Ren Xiaosu waved them off. "You may go back now. I suddenly think that you do not look suspicious anymore."

Truly, this position Hu Shuo arranged for them was really useful.

The woman who had been smacked to the ground was still a little dizzy. After coming back around, the officer slapped her again. "Bring this insolent woman back with us!"

The group of soldiers carried the woman away. When Ren Xiaosu saw them leaving, he said with a sigh, "How nice of them to bring us so many souvenirs. They're such honest people!"

With that, he handed the watches to Wang Fugui. Wang Fugui had given away his own watch to Li Qingzheng in order to waive the manual labor obligations of the girls.

Li Qingzheng hesitated for a long time before saying, "I already sold off the watches you guys gave me. Why don't I pay y'all back?"

Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "Then wouldn't you have helped us for nothing? Just keep it for yourself. We're not that petty."

"Oh, alright!" Li Qingzheng said happily. However, why did something feel wrong? Why did it suddenly feel like Ren Xiaosu was the platoon commander instead of him?

On the way back to the outpost, Yan Liuyuan laid down in the back of the truck and said excitedly, "Bro, is it any fun at your outpost?"

"It's pretty fun," Ren Xiaosu said with a smile.

"What do y'all do every day?"

"We get to attend classes and eat meat daily. Occasionally, we'll take a stroll into the mountains where we can pick wild vegetables and mushrooms or catch some rabbits." Ren Xiaosu said, "There are a lot of rabbits in the mountains. When we get there, I'll teach you how to build snares to catch some."

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu thought of something. Even though Yan Liuyuan was also a supernatural being, he did not have any skills to defend himself with. He thought that maybe he should also gather some nanomachines for Yan Liuyuan to use.

When they got back to the outpost, Ren Xiaosu saw Hu Shuo cradling a satellite phone and explaining into it, "Our Office of Special Investigations does not investigate smuggling. Yes, yes, that's right, we really do not investigate that. It must be a misunderstanding. We don't intend to seize authority from the Audit Department..."

Chapter 233 On the brink of war

Hu Shuo had been pretty joyful all day. He practiced tai chi in the morning before holding classes for the children. Ren Xiaosu wasn't around then, and oh boy, was it a comfortable day.

Just as Ren Xiaosu had guessed, Hu Shuo could have sent someone else to fetch Yan Liuyuan and the others instead. If he had done that, it would have saved him a great deal of trouble. But of course, he had his motives for doing it this way.

If he had brought back Yan Liuyuan, Wang Fugui, and the rest of them himself, how could he have sent Ren Xiaosu away with an excuse?

All other reasons aside, it was totally worth the effort to grant Ren Xiaosu the status of officer of the Li Consortium if he could send him away from the outpost for the rest of the day.

As expected, Ren Xiaosu was busy almost all day. The return journey to town alone already took six hours and could even go up to eight hours if there were any delays.

This was as good as being given a day off!

But he couldn't have expected that someone would bring a satellite phone to him by the afternoon, saying that there was a call from the head of the Audit Department who was stamping with fury.

At first, Hu Shuo did not understand the issue. But after he took the call, he realized Ren Xiaosu had involved himself with investigating smuggling in town! Within a system, there was a clear division of duty. If you encroached on other people's authority, that wouldn't be acceptable at all.

Hu Shuo was shocked to hear that. 'Didn't you go back to town to fetch your family? So why did you get yourself involved in investigating smuggling?!'

When he hung up, he looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Did you investigate smuggling?"

Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "I was just helping your department expand into new areas. Aren't I great?"

Hu Shuo said bitterly, "When did I ask you to help us expand our area of activity? Why didn't you take on the duties of the Public Order Division as well then!"

Ren Xiaosu was not happy to hear that. "You didn't say that I couldn't do that. Before I departed, what did I ask you? You even asked me what I could possibly be capable of doing when I asked if you were afraid that I would abuse the position."

Hu Shuo's eyes looked like he was about to fly into a rage. But at this moment, Yan Liuyuan came over and smartly said, "Hello, Grandpa Hu Shuo, nice to meet you."

When Hu Shuo saw a clean-cut Yan Liuyuan speaking to him, he held back his anger and said with a smile, "Hello, nice to meet you."

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan said, "I've heard about you from my brother. He said that you're a really great man who is so learned that you can tackle any questions that they pose to you during classes. When I grow up, I wanna be as educated as you!"

"Hahahaha, is that so?" Hu Shuo's anger immediately dissipated. "Did that kid really say that?"

"Yeah," Yan Liuyuan said, "so please don't be angry anymore. He didn't do it on purpose anyway."

"Forget it then, I won't be angry." Hu Shuo said with a cheerful smile, "Hurry up and bring your belongings into the house. We're going to start preparing meals for everyone. Oh, there are so many young ladies here as well?"

"Then let me thank you first, Grandpa Hu Shuo," Yan Liuyuan said as he turned around and gave Ren Xiaosu a wink. The argument was resolved just like that. Ren Xiaosu did not even know whether to laugh or cry at this. That Yan Liuyuan was able to become a friend of the women in town was really a testament to his talent.

Then Hu Shuo looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, "Your younger brother is much smarter than you. Go and clean up the house. I don't want to see you right now!"

Meanwhile, Chen Wudi took Xiaoyu and the others around on a tour of the outpost. It wasn't a big place, and after Xiaoyu had seen all of their houses, she said with a frown, "Why is it so dirty in the houses? Don't you big boys know to clean the place on most days?"

Yan Liuyuan whispered, "Big Sister Xiaoyu has been particularly fussy about cleanliness recently. All of us at home are quite afraid of her and we would never think to start eating without washing our hands first. Even Uncle Fugui feels the same."

“C’mon, girls, get your hands on some cleaning tools. We’ll get these houses cleaned up first.” Xiaoyu coordinated the female students like a steward would. The female students were also particularly obedient to her.

This outpost was occupied by a group of men. Half of them were even former refugees who had not gone through any military training and had no concept of how to keep their quarters clean. But half an hour later, the entire place looked like new again. Even Li Qingzheng and his men could not believe this was where they used to live.

Xiaoyu and the female students had even cleaned the glass windows, which led to the inside of the houses becoming brighter. Everything was in perfect order.

Ren Xiaosu sighed. Xiaoyu was becoming more and more like a housewife.

When Li Qingzheng and his men saw this group of women walking in and out of their houses to clean them up, they couldn’t take their eyes off them.

Meanwhile, the female students kept showing sweet smiles whenever they saw Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan.

As the group of men sat around the campfire to barbecue the meat, Li Qingzheng lamented, “Brother Xiaosu is really too capable!”

Their eyes were brimming with tears of envy.

At this time, Xiaoyu stood in a doorway and exhaled. “We’re finally done cleaning.” She looked at the campfire. “How can y’all only eat barbecue? Let me cook some veggies for y’all.”

Wang Fugui said to Ren Xiaosu with a smile, “Our entire family is tied together by Xiaoyu now. Without her, it would be such a mess. Xiaosu, it looks like the Li Consortium is preparing for war. Will it affect us badly?”

Ren Xiaosu said, “Have you found out where Stronghold 88 is yet?”

“Not yet.” Wang Fugui shook his head and said, “But why don’t you ask that elderly man? It seems to me that he should know a lot.”

Ren Xiaosu looked at Hu Shuo. He used to be worried that Hu Shuo would believe him to be an enemy if he asked that question. After all, he thought that since Hu Shuo was a high-ranking officer of the Li Consortium, he would definitely take their side. But since Ren Xiaosu had obtained more information that he could judge him with, he thought he could safely ask Hu Shuo the question.

Ren Xiaosu beckoned everyone else to the campfire. Then he sat down beside Hu Shuo and asked, “Do you know where Stronghold 88

is?”

“The Yang Consortium’s Stronghold 88?” Hu Shuo gave Ren Xiaosu a look. “Why’re you asking?”

"I'll get straight to the point. We were actually heading to Stronghold 88 at first, but we got conscripted and ended up here instead," Ren Xiaosu explained.

"My advice to you is not to think so much for now." Hu Shuo said, "Stronghold 88 is northeast of Stronghold 108. The Li Consortium has already stationed a large force in that direction, the Yang Consortium as well. Three other strongholds lie between Stronghold 88 and Stronghold 108. If you're thinking of going there alone, you might be able to do so. But what about those with you? How are they going to make it there? This something you can rely on with your status as a member of the Office of Special Investigations."

"Is there really going to be a war?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"Not only that, even the Qing Consortium has deployed their troops to the borders of the three corporations." Hu Shuo looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, "The Li Consortium is trying handle the Experimentals at Stronghold 109, but we're already on the brink of a massive war. If you want to cross the battlefields and get to Stronghold 88 at this time, you had better be prepared for the death of your companions. Stray shells and bullets on the battlefield have no eyes. They couldn't care less about who you are."

Ren Xiaosu frowned. "Then will we be safe at the outpost? We can hide out here until it's over."

Hu Shuo sighed and said, "The Li Consortium does not have enough military strength yet and could deploy the private troops at the outposts to the front line as cannon fodder."

Chapter 234 Each other's secret

The outpost that Ren Xiaosu was at was somewhat cut off from outside news. Even if Yan Liuyuan had been constantly going around to gather information, the news he could find out was still only the tip of the iceberg. So they had no idea that war was on the verge of breaking out between the Li Consortium, the Qing Consortium, and the Yang Consortium.

There hadn't been a war for a long time in these wastelands. Humanity had been struggling along in an increasingly difficult world and finally got a chance to recover a little, but war was descending upon them again.

Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu would wonder why everyone kept trying to kill one another even though they had clearly survived against the odds during the Post-Cataclysm.

Based on Hu Shuo's explanation, the Li Consortium intended to clear the Experimentals from Stronghold 109 before they began the war. They had even sent a combat brigade over to carry out that mission. However, time would not wait for the Li Consortium, and neither would the Yang Consortium and the Qing Consortium wait for them.

Not only were the Experimentals at Stronghold 109 a threat to the Li Consortium, but they were similarly close to the Qing Consortium's Stronghold 111. Therefore, since war was about to break out, the two consortiums might as well make a bet on which way the Experimentals might go.

And now, the most dangerous thing that could happen was that Ren Xiaosu and company might also get sent to the battlefield. As they had too many things that hadn't been taken care of yet, they couldn't just drop everything and leave for good.

Even if they hid deep in the mountains, it would be equally dangerous, because the forested hills were a path the Experimentals would definitely take if they were coming here. Why else would the Li Consortium waste all that manpower by sending troops to these outposts?

“What if the Experimentals come and attack the Li Consortium’s stronghold?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

Hu Shuo looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, “Actually, there isn’t much danger around Stronghold 108. You can even consider sending your family into Stronghold 108 first. If there are defenses in place, the Experimentals won’t be able to force their way into the stronghold. What happened at Stronghold 109 was due to a lapse in its defense.”

Although Stronghold 109 was destroyed, the Experimentals would still find it hard to get close to Stronghold 108 if the Li Consortium installed heavy weapons atop the stronghold walls.

After all, the Experimentals were still flesh and blood. Their muscles might be able to block normal bullets, but they wouldn’t stand up to artillery fire. Even the metal storm “Mountain Obliterator” that Qing Zhen brought was enough to make them retreat.

It was just as Qing Zhen had said. Only a child would be afraid of these Experimentals. Qing Zhen understood full well how terrifying humanity’s firearms and explosives were.

So the only worry everyone had was if the Experimentals ambushed them in these wastelands during a battle. But there wasn’t much to worry about if it were just a stronghold defense.

Ren Xiaosu asked Hu Shuo, “Can you help me send them into the stronghold? I’d like for them to live there temporarily.”

Hu Shuo laughed. “That’s something you can also do now. A captain of the Office of Special Investigations has... great authority...” All of a sudden, Hu Shuo added, “Make sure you don’t abuse your authority, though....”

“Uh-huh, don’t worry. I won’t be investigating smuggling anymore.” Ren Xiaosu was surprised to find out that the Office of Special Investigations could actually send people into the stronghold. That really was a lot of authority.

However, it seemed like this old man was not on the Li Consortium’s side on this matter. He wondered how the higher-ups of the Li Consortium would feel if they knew the truth.

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, “Aren’t you afraid that I’ll snitch?”

Hu Shuo gave a half-smile and said, “Aren’t you afraid I’ll tell the Li Consortium that you’re hunting down their nanosoldiers?”

The two of them fell silent. Ren Xiaosu knew Hu Shuo was a sly old fox and that his odd behavior must have been noticed by him. However, he had not expected Hu Shuo to lay it all bare so abruptly.

But since they both knew each other’s secret, no one could snitch on the other.

In Ren Xiaosu's opinion, Hu Shuo was more trying to establish a friendship or alliance with him. The foundation of this trust would be based upon their knowledge of each other's secret, as well as the fact that the other party's grandson was... Li Shentan.

Hu Shuo had always been a high-ranking officer in the Office of Special Investigations all these years. In order not to implicate his family back then, he had kept the fact that he had a daughter a secret. Furthermore, he did not even concern himself with her. However, the Li Consortium forced his daughter to her death many years later.

The Li Consortium was too powerful. It was so powerful he could do nothing about it even though he was a supernatural being, as well as a high-ranking officer within the Office of Special Investigations. After all, his subordinates were all loyal to the Li Consortium, not him. But this situation completely reversed after Li Shentan became a Demon Whisperer. The young man who had escaped from the psychiatric hospital had an incredibly destructive power.

The female students started singing by the campfire while the group of roughnecks did not even dare to make a sound as if afraid of ending the girls' dulcet singing.

Xiaoyu was wearing an apron and stir-frying some vegetables in the kitchen. When they made the trip here, they had brought along quite a bit of supplies for the New Year. Old Wang had even managed to get ahold of a box of fish and shrimp from someone in the stronghold.

Suddenly, Li Qingzheng emotionally said, "This is probably the most proper Lunar New Year I've celebrated in the 29 years of my life."

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look and laughed. "To be honest, we also spent our Lunar New Years very miserably in the past."

"That's not true." Yan Liuyuan giggled and said, "We were clearly very happy. We used to run off to a hill somewhere far away where we would view the fireworks set off from the stronghold. The fireworks were beautiful to watch."

But at this moment, an off-road vehicle drove up to the outpost. An officer came over to Hu Shuo and whispered something to him for a while. Hu Shuo's expression grew even more solemn than before.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Hu Shuo and asked, "What is it?"

Hu Shuo looked at Ren Xiaosu and replied, "Get ready to send your family back to the stronghold after the New Year has passed. War has broken out."

Ren Xiaosu was surprised to hear that. It was just another hour until the Lunar New Year. Who would have thought a war would erupt on New Year's Eve?

Hu Shuo said, "The Li Consortium's commander has already given the order to start the assault. The frontline troops have already started advancing towards the area controlled by the Yang Consortium. In another few hours, it will be blanketed by the flames of

war."

“Aren’t you going to eat before you leave?” Ren Xiaosu asked calmly.

Hu Shuo laughed. “I’d thought we could celebrate the New Year, but we didn’t even get to eat the reunion dinner. What a pity, the thing I was most afraid of still arrived.”

In this world, things never turned out the way people wanted them to.

At this moment, Xiaoyu came out of the kitchen with several boxed meals in her hands. “Uncle Hu Shuo, I’ve filled these up with dinner. Eat them while y’all are on the road.

Hu Shuo was taken aback. He broke out into a smile and said, “Thank you.”

Suddenly, Hu Shuo looked at Ren Xiaosu and asked, “Ren Xiaosu, have you ever heard of Murphy’s Law? Anything that can go wrong, no matter how unlikely, will go wrong. To put it simply, that just means that whatever we’re afraid of will somehow happen.”

Ren Xiaosu froze for a moment. “Why are you talking about this?”

“Do you think we’re in a dream right now or living in reality?” Hu Shuo laughed and said.

“We’re definitely in reality. If you don’t believe me, I can pinch you,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“But isn’t reality based on probability? It’s only in dreams that things you’re most afraid of will somehow come true, isn’t that so?” After that, Hu Shuo laughed and turned around to leave. “I’d rather this be a dream.”

Ren Xiaosu could sense a hint of sorrow within this old man.

Chapter 235 Qing Zhen’s crosstalk performance

The Qing Consortium, Stronghold 111.

At the stroke of midnight, the copper bell in the middle of the stronghold was struck by someone working for the Qing Consortium

The sound of the bell that symbolized peace in the new year resonated across the stronghold. Soon after, firecrackers, of which many of the rich could afford, started popping in front of their houses. The children had also come out onto the streets and were excitedly taking in the sights. They were all wearing their new clothes and even holding little firecracker tubes that they picked off from the main bunch.

Qing Zhen was standing out in the yard of his villa. His hair had grown much longer since he wasn’t even able to get a barber to come over after being put under house arrest here with

Luo Lan.

Suddenly, a crow flew over in the dark of the night. It soared between the sound of the firecrackers going off and did not seem one bit affected by it.

Qing Zhen raised his hand, and the crow shrewdly landed on his arm. Qing Zhen picked up a tiny piece of bread and said with a laugh, "I hope you won't mind this. We don't have much food around here either. Luo Lan has almost been starved thin as well."

The crow lowered its head and pecked the bread into its mouth. Qing Zhen helped it ruffle its feathers straight with a smile.

The black crow was always an ominous symbol in the eyes of many people, because it loved flying to wherever there were dead people. But Qing Zhen did not shy away from the crow at all. Rather, he seemed to love it.

His gaze shifted to the crow's legs where a tiny bamboo tube was attached. Qing Zhen detached it and removed a slip of paper from it. The more he read it, the bigger his smile grew.

"Alright, I got the letter. You may return to your owner and have him feed you something nice. It's the New Year, but he didn't let you get any rest," Qing Zhen said as he threw his forearm up and released the large crow that spread its wings and flew into the night sky.

When Qing Zhen walked back into the villa, Luo Lan was lying down on the sofa and saying, "Don't you agree that those old fogeys of the Qing Consortium are too much? It's the New Year, but they won't even give us a full meal to eat, let us get a haircut, and our water and electricity keep getting cut off as well. We're accomplished servants of the Qing Consortium. How can they do this to us!"

Qing Zhen smiled and said, "You can have my share of the bread. I guess we can only blame it on ourselves for losing the strongholds we were put in charge of."

"Was that our fault?" Luo Lan said unhappily, "Who could have predicted that there would be an earthquake? Besides, it's the New Year now. Surely they can't make us go hungry during the New Year, right?!"

"Don't worry." Qing Zhen smiled and said, "These days will be over soon."

At this moment, the doorbell rang. Luo Lan stood up from the sofa, his fat rolls bouncing. "Could they be sending us food?"

"That uncle of yours isn't that kind. He did everything in his power to ride on the coattails of the Qing Consortium, so why would he risk all of that to help us?" Qing Zhen said calmly, "This is an especially good time to draw the line against us."

The infighting of the consortiums had always been downright dirty and nasty.

The Qing Consortium had not only imprisoned Qing Zhen and Luo Lan in this isolated villa, it even sent Luo Lan's uncle to watch over them.

Perhaps it was because the directors of the Board suspected that Qing Zhen and Luo Lan had betrayed the clan, so they decided to let the two of them have a taste of being betrayed by their own family as well.

Luo Lan and Qing Zhen shared the same father but different mothers. This uncle of Luo Lan's had obtained some status within the consortium with Luo Lan's aid in the past. And now he had been sent to watch over Luo Lan.

However, this uncle was not one for old times' sake. Instead, he was even harsher when it came to watching over the two. He even tried to express his stance and drew a line between Qing Zhen and Luo Lan by persecuting them.

Cutting their food rations, cutting off their water and electricity, refusing Qing Zhen and Luo Lan's demands, all of that was done by Luo Lan's uncle.

Sometimes, people found it hard to imagine what a person would do to play up to those in power.

Luo Lan went to open the door while mumbling, "My relationship with him isn't good either, so don't keep ridiculing me with those words of yours. The same goes for that uncle of yours..."

He opened the door and saw a middle-aged man standing at the entrance. He was holding a plate in his hand and smiling as he looked at Luo Lan.

Behind this middle-aged man were two rows of soldiers. Ever since Qing Zhen slipped away the last time, the consortium had deployed even more troops in the vicinity surrounding the villa. Even on New Year's Eve, they did not let their guard down.

Luo Lan looked at the middle-aged man at the door and said, "Is something the matter?"

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "Aren't you gonna greet your uncle?"

Luo Lan said disdainfully, "Are you fit to be my uncle?"

But the middle-aged man was not bothered. He smiled and said, "It's New Year's Eve. I came to see you two and also brought along some food."

"What food?" Luo Lan asked.

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "I had some leftovers from my dinner at home, and I knew that you two would definitely be hungry, so I quickly sent it over for you."

Luo Lan laughed. "Am I, Luo Lan, someone who would eat leftovers?"

The middle-aged man threw the plate in his hand onto the floor. "Since you don't want to eat it, I won't force you."

Luo Lan's face turned dark. He kept staring at the middle-aged man who was a blood relative.

Qing Zhen suddenly said to the middle-aged man, "Hey, go outside and wait for a while."

The middle-aged man was startled. But it was Qing Zhen who had spoken. Whatever influence this silent tiger of the Qing Consortium had left was still enough to strike some fear in him. The middle-aged man stayed silent for a long while before finally stepping out of the villa in the end.

As he stood outside and watched the fireworks bursting above the stronghold's sky, he was overjoyed.

But at this moment, the two rows of soldiers raised their guns when the villa's front door opened and took aim at it. They watched Qing Zhen lead Luo Lan out of the villa and stand still.

Qing Zhen said to everyone with a smile, "Because of us two, we've made it so that everyone can't go home to spend time with your families on New Year's Day. As such, we would like to extend our condolences to you."

Luo Lan said, "That's right, we just want to extend our condolences."

Qing Zhen smiled and said, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Qing Zhen, and standing next to me is Teacher Luo."

"Right, that's who I am."

Qing Zhen looked at Luo Lan and said, "Since we're expressing our condolences, we definitely have to put on a performance for everyone."

"What are we going to perform then?"

Qing Zhen looked at the middle-aged man and said, "Let's perform... a haircut on the first day of the New Year where the uncle dies!"

"Alright!"

The middle-aged man was so angry that he laughed. "Are you two still kids? What kind of dumbass games are you still playing?"

"Shh..." Qing Zhen put his index finger over his lips. Then he raised his right hand that was holding a pair of scissors and snipped off a bit of Luo Lan's hair.

The middle-aged man sneered. "Arrest them and lock them up!"

Qing Zhen looked at him and said with a smile, "Happy New Year."

A bright firework suddenly shot up into the sky above the stronghold. That shining, bright light illuminated Qing Zhen's smile as a sniper's bullet fired out of a gun several hundred meters away. In an instant, a bloody mist burst from the middle-aged man's chest in front of Qing Zhen. His body was even sent flying back by the inertia of the bullet!

Qing Zhen's gaze turned from the fireworks back to those two rows of soldiers. He smiled and said, "Did you all... enjoy this performance?"

Everyone was frightened. They had thought Qing Zhen was only trying to provoke them. But they never expected him to really do as he said he would

A soldier trembled as he said, "Mr. Qing Zhen, aren't you afraid the Board will mete out punishment on you?!"

Qing Zhen stood still and said with a sunny disposition, "They won't. After all, they need me now."

Right at this moment, a car whizzed down from the end of the street, with the white ginkgo leaf symbol becoming visible under the glow of the fireworks.

The car came to a stop outside the villa, and Secretary Zhou from the Board jumped out. When he saw Qing Zhen, he said coldly, "The Board has ordered that Qing Zhen and Luo Lan immediately head for the front lines to serve as military advisors!"

After saying that, he noticed the bloodstains in front of the villa's door. He looked at the soldiers and asked, "What happened here?"

The soldiers said, "They killed the commander."

Secretary Zhou looked at the broken corpse on the ground and said in contempt, "Dumbass."

Chapter 236 The beginning of a disagreement

In these wastelands, there stood 178 strongholds. Stronghold 178 in the northwest was the westernmost one in all the territory controlled by the strongholds. The weather was extreme in that locale.

If you stood on the rampart walls of Stronghold 178 and looked into the distance, all you would see would be an endless stretch of devastated loess, and even the river that ran east was murky yellow too.

The Qing Consortium, the Li Consortium, and the Yang Consortium were situated in the southwest of the territory. Due to their geography, these three organizations were always the most intricately linked in the southwest. As for the territories of the other organizations, they had always found it difficult to expand southwest due to the region being inaccessible to them.

Of the southwestern region, the Li Consortium was farthest south. Reportedly, if you headed south from there, you would reach a rainforest you would very likely get lost in. In it were countless venomous insects, and legend had it that no one had ever managed to trek through this forest to get even further south.

But due to the effects of tectonics, the weather in the region of these three organizations was becoming much colder. In recent years, the rainforest's ecology had also changed dramatically. The Li Consortium had even once planned to draw this rainforest into its own territorial lines and build a new stronghold within it.

The Qing Consortium was northeast of the Li Consortium on terrain that was easy to defend but difficult to attack. Stronghold 111 was even hailed as a mountain city due to it being built next to a mountain, and it acted as an extremely important land and water hub in the southwestern region.

The Yang Consortium was inside a huge basin with Longnan's[1] Zong Consortium and Stronghold 178 to its north. But in recent years, the Zong Consortium had been constantly plotting to usurp the northwestern territory that was controlled by Stronghold 178, although they didn't have much of a conflict with the Yang Consortium.

This geography meant the southwestern region was a tripartite division where a power struggle was ongoing. The three organizations did not share their resources, and whatever the Li Consortium had, the Yang Consortium didn't. Whatever the Yang Consortium had, the Qing Consortium didn't.

There would always be a reason for war, and resources tended to be the true motivation.

But there used to be people who said they had visited the Central Plains to the east before and described it as a very prosperous place. There were even large human settlements that existed outside of strongholds too.

But in the Post-Cataclysm world, the world they knew was no longer around.

As New Year's Eve passed, Hu Shuo probably arrived back inside Stronghold 108. The three war machines of the consortiums had already deployed their forces to hold their borders, where they waited within dozens of kilometers of each other for the real war to break out.

Yan Liuyuan and the others were very excited at first. But as it got later, they couldn't endure anymore and fell sleep. Ren Xiaosu was sitting by the campfire alone as he thought about their future plans. He was thinking of what he could do to ensure that everyone would survive the ravages of war this time.

According to Hu Shuo, he could send Yan Liuyuan and the others to live in Stronghold 108. Even if the Experimentals attacked, they wouldn't be able to break through the tight defenses of a stronghold. Besides, the effects of the war between the three consortiums wouldn't affect the stronghold so quickly either.

Fighting a war was like playing a game. Nobody smart enough would go all-in at the very beginning

It started snowing. One of the house's doors suddenly opened, and Yan Liuyuan came walking out wearing a coat. He sat down beside Ren Xiaosu. "Bro, are you worried about the war?"

"Mhm," Ren Xiaosu acknowledged.

"Why don't we leave this place?" Yan Liuyuan whispered, "Even if we have to head deep into the forested mountains, we could live very well there."

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look and said, "And not have any more contact with the outside world ever again?"

“Bro, I know that you want to go to Stronghold 88 to look for Big Sister Xiaojin. But why didn’t she come and look for you instead?” Yan Liuyuan said, “Actually, I’ve already found out where Stronghold 88 is, but I don’t want to tell you. That’s because I don’t think it will be any different for us there. She’s an important figure of the Yang Consortium and we’re just refugees.”

Ren Xiaosu looked at Yan Liuyuan. They often had disagreements in the past as well, for instance, when Yan Liuyuan did not want to attend school and learn how to hunt instead. Ren Xiaosu used to reject his requests, and it led to them quarreling.

But this time, Ren Xiaosu realized Yan Liuyuan was really resistant to the word “stronghold” from the bottom of his heart. This made him hate those who lived in the strongholds as well.

Yan Liuyuan said, “Bro, the stronghold doesn’t welcome people like us.”

Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, “It looks like you were lying to me when you said that you were getting along with your classmates quite well back at Stronghold 109.”

“Mhm.” Yan Liuyuan nodded and said, “No one wanted to talk to me and Wang Dalong. In fact, they even avoided us like the plague. Their parents were always nagging them as though they were afraid their children would make friends with us. When the teacher asked a question in class and I couldn’t answer it because I’d never learned it before, the teacher would say that it was only normal that we refugees did not know how to study and that we were stupid. Once, a classmate of mine lost something, and everyone immediately suspected me and Wang Dalong of stealing...”

Ren Xiaosu was silent. That was the stereotype the people in the strongholds had of refugees. It was a mindset that had built up within them over several decades.

Yan Liuyuan continued, “They searched both our desks and found nothing in the end. But at that time, Big Sister Xiaoyu often gave me pocket money for school, and it was a lot too, much more than what the other students would get. When the teacher saw the money, I was accused of stealing it, because they felt that a refugee couldn’t possibly have so much money.

“I tried to explain it to them, but it was of no use. Wang Dalong was so scared that he cried. But, Bro, don’t worry, I didn’t cry. You’ve mentioned before that this world doesn’t trust tears.” Yan Liuyuan said, “Bro, I don’t like it in the stronghold, nor do I like those who live inside of it. Maybe Big Sister Yang Xiaojin is different, but what about her family and friends?”

Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, “I don’t know.”

“So, Bro,”—Yan Liuyuan suddenly sounded resolute—“wait for her to come and look for you instead. If she doesn’t come, then it’s meaningless for you to travel all the way north to Stronghold 88. You once told me not to let the sorrows of our era become my sorrow as well, but this era’s sorrows have already become a cancer that’s ingrained within the stronghold’s residents.”

“You should have let me explain it to the teacher on your behalf,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“How would you have dealt with it?” Yan Liuyuan looked at Ren Xiaosu.

"I'd kill whoever dared to wrong you." Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh, "We can't go the north now anyway, so I'll send y'all back to Stronghold 108 early tomorrow morning. You don't have to attend school anymore. Just get Ms. Jiang to teach you. She might be a Chinese teacher, but she's had formal training in education. That should be more than enough to teach y'all math, physics, and chemistry."

Yan Liuyuan's eyes lit up at the words. "I like Ms. Jiang Wu. I think she's quite suitable for you."

"You little rascal!" Ren Xiaosu shot him a look.

Then Yan Liuyuan suddenly looked up at the hill. Ren Xiaosu followed his gaze and looked as well. He discovered the Wolf King standing there alone and looking straight back at Yan Liuyuan.

Ren Xiaosu was very certain the Wolf King was not looking at him but Yan Liuyuan. This was an event that had happened before when they were fleeing the previous time. However, Ren Xiaosu had some doubts in this moment. The Wolf King should have already led the wolf pack deep into the mountains. But on this night when Yan Liuyuan came to the outpost, it actually risked its own safety and came out just to have a look at Yan Liuyuan?

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Have you ever crossed paths with the Wolf King?"

"No." Yan Liuyuan shook his head.

Chapter 237 Massing for war

"Bro, can I go and see the Wolf King in the mountains?" Yan Liuyuan asked. "It somehow feels like it knows me."

Ren Xiaosu had already told Yan Liuyuan in private of the dealings he had with the wolf pack. So Yan Liuyuan was also privy to the fact that Ren Xiaosu and the wolves were cooperating in some way. They had even joined forces to hunt and kill the nanosoldiers. While it might sound bizarre, Yan Liuyuan was used to the strange things that happened with Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment before saying, "Sure, but you have to stay behind me."

Although he had been working with the wolves for a long time, Ren Xiaosu was still a little worried. What if the Wolf King suddenly went crazy and decided it wanted to hurt Yan Liuyuan?

With that, the both of them decided to head into the mountains. But all of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu saw the headlights of a vehicle speeding up the mountain. He frowned and said, "Go back into the house first. Wake Li Qingzheng and get him out here."

"OK." Yan Liuyuan went to wake Li Qingzheng up.

Shortly, Li Qingzheng walked out of the house wearing a military overcoat. "Xiaosu, you called for me?"

"Someone's heading up the mountain. It should be the Li Consortium's people." Ren Xiaosu said.

“It’s the New Year now. Who has the time to head up here into the mountains?” Li Qingzheng was surprised to hear that. The two of them stood at the entrance of the outpost and waited. An off-road vehicle came to a stop at the outpost entrance. Then a soldier got out and tossed a manila envelope to them. “We’re massing the private troops. This is the paperwork stating that you all must gather by 0700. Anyone who turns up with less than a full platoon will be investigated and held liable as deserters.”

The punishment for deserters was extremely harsh within the Li Consortium’s military. Not only would the person be arrested and charged with a crime, but their families would also get implicated as well and lose their eligibility to receive their portion of potable water as refugees of the town. In this era, not having a source of potable water meant certain death.

Some people might be able to find water in the wilderness, but there were still risks attached to that.

The soldier who came to send the documents got ready to get back into the vehicle to leave. But Li Qingzheng calculated that since it was already 2 AM, that meant they had five hours to gather and report to the outside of the stronghold. Otherwise, they would be treated as deserters.

He looked at that soldier and said, “We’re guarding the outpost here. What will happen to it if we leave? Can’t you make an exception for us?”

The soldier sneered as he got back into the vehicle. “It’s useless telling me that. If you don’t wish to assemble, you can choose not to.”

Ren Xiaosu looked at Li Qingzheng. “Do you have any family in town? If you don’t, you can choose to run away.”

Li Qingzheng said bitterly, “How can I? I might not have any family left, but more than a dozen people in our platoon still have family members living in town. If a single person runs away from our platoon, the entire platoon will be subjected to the same punishment.”

This was the Li Consortium’s cruel way of meting out punishment. It was done this way to make comrades watch over each other so that they wouldn’t run away. As long as a single person ran away, the entire platoon would be done for.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Li Qingzheng in surprise. Even though he knew they were going to end up as cannon fodder, he still chose not to run away for other people’s sakes.

Hu Shuo had already said before the reunion dinner that they all might end up becoming cannon fodder in the war.

Everyone also had their own verdict regarding this. What other reason could there be for sending private troops to the front line? Could they tackle the tough situations? No, they would only be fit enough to serve as cannon fodder.

But this Li Qingzheng was also quite a strange one. Before getting to know him, he would look to take as much advantage of someone as possible. But once they became friends, he became someone who was extremely loyal and dependable.

The regular officer status Hu Shuo had gotten for them was basically a permanent role. If Li Qingzheng made use of this status to run away, it wouldn't take any effort at all.

In fact, Ren Xiaosu had initially planned on bringing Yan Liuyuan and the others into the stronghold with him. After all, it would be incredibly easy to get that done with his status as an officer of the Office of Special Investigations.

But from the looks of it, the platoon would be done for if he brought his family into the stronghold and hid with them.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment before sighing, "Then let's wake everyone up. We have to set off now, but let me send my family back to town first. After that, we'll go and assemble."

"Deal," Li Qingzheng said.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu suddenly thought of something. "Can you teach me how to drive?"

If they were to leave the Li Consortium's territory in the future, whether it be for Stronghold 88 or Stronghold 178, driving there would be the most comfortable option. So Ren Xiaosu started thinking about learning how to drive.

Besides, after the troops assembled this time, they would definitely have to head north. If it were only Li Qingzheng who could drive, he would definitely be worn out driving all the way there.

Ren Xiaosu thought that since he couldn't master the bicycle, why not just jump straight to learning how to drive a car.

It wouldn't be worth wasting a Skill Duplication Scroll to learn a life skill like that. Moreover, he did not have any Skill Duplication Scrolls right now either. Even if he had one, he would definitely be better off using it on someone like Hu Shuo.

Li Qingzheng was taken aback. "Sure, I'll teach you along the way. We still have enough time! Driving isn't difficult at all, although you shouldn't drive on the mountain paths. Once we descend down the mountain and get onto the straight roads, you'll pick it up very quickly."

That was exactly how it was. For driving, if you didn't need to follow the traffic rules like within the stronghold, you could quickly understand it if you just drove around for a bit.

The people at the outpost all looked bleary-eyed when they got awoken. Li Qingzheng shouted at the top of his voice, "Stop fucking sleeping. Hurry up and pack all of the supplies we have at the outpost into your personal field packs. Don't load them up onto the truck. If they discover we're carrying all that cured meat during an inspection, we'll bear consequences."

Someone asked, "Lord of Wolves, what are we packing up for?"

Li Qingzheng swept his eyes over them and said, "To get ready to join the war..."

Everyone was stunned. "Now? Aren't we going to wait until the Spring Festival is over?"

"As if a war would wait for you to celebrate the New Year first." Li Qingzheng sighed and said, "Go and pack your stuff. We'll gather out here again in 15 minutes."

The outpost's troops' faces fell. Everyone had been getting on with each other like family recently and talking about living at the outpost from now on. But all of a sudden, they were about to be sent to the battlefield as cannon fodder.

"Can we not go?" someone asked. "It's much better here at the outpost."

When they first got here, everyone felt working at the outpost was a really tough job. But as time passed, they discovered it wasn't difficult living here at all. In fact, it was even more comfortable than living in town.

Li Qingzheng turned strict at this moment and said, "If we don't assemble, some of our comrades' families in town will not survive. Moreover, the Li Consortium will definitely arrest us, so we won't be able to run away."

Ren Xiaosu was observing this group of people from off to the side. There were only a total of 11 automatic rifles in the entire outpost and not even a single grenade, much less improvised mortars, anti-personnel mines, etc. They also did not have the most basic radio set for communication purposes. If they actually fought in the war, they wouldn't even be able to call for support in the large battlefield that could span two mountain ranges.

At that time, their enemies on the battlefield would learn these private troops were the weakest point where they could easily breach the defense.

Of course, if the enemies thought the platoon that Ren Xiaosu was in would be the same as the other private troops, Ren Xiaosu alone would be enough to teach them all a lesson.

Ren Xiaosu wondered if the wolf pack would follow as well. He turned around to look at the top of the hill and saw that the Wolf King was no longer there.

At this moment, Chen Wudi came over to Ren Xiaosu and said, "Master, are we also going to join the war?"

"Let's observe the situation before deciding whether to take part in the war or not." Ren Xiaosu said, "Go and help everyone carry their belongings. I'll go and get ready as well."

"Sure!" Chen Wudi replied.

Chapter 238 Treachery

After Ren Xiaosu ordered Chen Wudi to go and pack up, he went inside an unoccupied house by himself. He was planning on dismantling the nanosoldiers' weapons he had gained to retrieve the nanomachines within them.

Ever since hunting down the nanosoldiers with the wolf pack, the amount of Ren Xiaosu's nanomachines had increased severalfold. In fact, he was already able to cover both hands up to his biceps with the suit of armor. So he had been wondering all this while whether he should dismantle the weapons to get his hands on the nanomachines.

The principle behind how these weapons worked was probably by using a program to set the nanomachines to create an incision effect through high-frequency particle cutting action. Even though this concept sounded difficult to grasp, it was actually similar in logic with waterjet cutting.

Most high-frequency particle cutters tend to be heavy machineries. Due to the "blade" not having plasticity[1], these cutters couldn't be molded into swords.

But the nanomachines allowed the Li Consortium to overcome this problem, and they were able to create even sharper melee weapons for close quarters combat.

This weapon was definitely not better than the black saber for Ren Xiaosu. But if the students could be equipped with the nanoarmor in the future, it might prove useful for them.

But Ren Xiaosu couldn't afford to think that much about the future right now. He wasn't retrieving these nanomachines for his own use. They were going to be for Yan Liuyuan!

After resetting the nanomachines, Ren Xiaosu called Yan Liuyuan into the house. Yan Liuyuan asked curiously after closing the door behind him, "Bro, what's the matter?"

"Put your hand out," Ren Xiaosu said.

Yan Liuyuan stuck his hand out and watched as Ren Xiaosu grabbed his arm tightly. Following that, a silvery stream permeated out of Ren Xiaosu's skin and spread over to Yan Liuyuan.

"These are the Li Consortium's nanomachines. Since you're slightly smaller in build, this amount of nanomachines might already be enough to form a thin layer of armor around you. It can also help to increase your musculoskeletal strength when it resides in your body. I'm giving it to you so that you may use it to keep yourself alive. Don't ever reveal them to anyone under normal circumstances." Ren Xiaosu said, "If the situation becomes dangerous, you can use it to kill your opponents."

Yan Liuyuan looked at Ren Xiaosu in a daze. "Bro, what are you going to do if you give all of your nanomachines away to me?" He wanted to retract his hand to stop the nanomachines from transferring over to him. However, he couldn't pull his hand away as he was much weaker than Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu held Yan Liuyuan's hand tightly, gripping him so hard his arm ached. He enunciated each and every one of his words to Yan Liuyuan. "When it becomes necessary, you can use these nanomachines to protect everyone."

There wasn't any sentimental talk as Ren Xiaosu only spoke about the most practical of matters at this moment.

Just like Yan Liuyuan was willing to sacrifice his life to make a wish for Ren Xiaosu, Ren Xiaosu was also willing to give away all of his hard-earned nanomachines to Yan Liuyuan in one fell swoop. It was also precisely because of this that they made it through hard times in the past.

Ren Xiaosu did not have a habit of depending on these nanomachines, anyway, since he was already strong enough by himself. Besides, Ren Xiaosu believed there would be plenty more nanomachines waiting for him on the battlefield ahead. After all, the Li Consortium was pretty generous in that sense. He might even assemble enough nanomachines for the eight students after he got to the front lines.

Ren Xiaosu said in his mind, "Palace, pair the nanomachines again."

The palace replied, "A fee of 20,000 yuan will be charged."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Didn't he have exactly 20,000 yuan on him right now? Why was the palace even charging a processing fee to newly pair the nanomachines?!

But Ren Xiaosu could only eat the loss at this time. "Hurry up and pair. You can collect the money whenever."

After he finished speaking with his mind palace, the 20,000 yuan in his storage space disappeared. Meanwhile, the nanomachines that were originally connected to his neurons started disconnecting from him. Ren Xiaosu looked at Yan Liuyuan and said, "Allow the nanomachines to pair with you, then try to see if you can control them."

When the nanomachines fully integrated into Yan Liuyuan's body, the veins and arteries in his body turned silver. Yan Liuyuan said with some uncertainty, "They're really easy to control and seem very obedient to my commands. It feels the same as controlling my fingers."

Ren Xiaosu let out a sigh of relief. He was most worried that Yan Liuyuan's synchronization rate would be too low and that he would be unable to put the nanomachines to good use.

But from the looks of it now, Yan Liuyuan's synchronization rate seemed really high.

"Don't use them in normal circumstances." Ren Xiaosu said, "If you use them recklessly, it will definitely attract the attention of the Li Consortium."

"Alright." Yan Liuyuan nodded in agreement.

All of a sudden, a cry came from outside. "Where's Liu Zhaojiang?!"

Ren Xiaosu pushed the door open and went out. "What's the matter?"

Li Qingzheng looked at Ren Xiaosu with a terrified expression and said with great difficulty, "Liu Zhaojiang took some salt and cured meat and disappeared. He even took a rifle and half of the ammo we had."

“He disappeared?” Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. This outpost was on top of the mountain, and there was only one path leading to the bottom. If Liu Zhaojiang had disappeared, then it could only mean that he had gone into the mountains.

Liu Zhaojiang was formerly a refugee who had escaped to Stronghold 109 with Ren Xiaosu and the others. As he had no relatives here, he started getting thoughts of running away when he realized he would be going into battle as cannon fodder.

Not only did Liu Zhaojiang run away, he even took some supplies with him for his own survival.

Li Qingzheng turned ashen. “How could he run away! What will happen to the rest of us now that he’s fled!”

Li Qingzheng had only stayed behind because he regarded the soldiers at the outpost as his brothers. But he ended up getting betrayed by one of them.

Chen Wudi looked at Ren Xiaosu. “Master, why are there such people in the world?”

Ren Xiaosu said calmly, “They’re the darkness that’s trying to devour the light that you are.”

“What should we do now?” Li Qingzheng mumbled, “With one less person, all of us are going to get punished.”

Someone suddenly said, “Why don’t we flee as well? We’ll die on the battlefield anyway.”

But someone else started pleading with everyone else. “My wife and daughter are still in town. Please, we mustn’t flee. Who knows, we might escape being punished with only one soldier missing?”

Another man also begged, “Please, everyone, we can’t run away. If you run away, what are those of us with families here going to do?”

Li Qingzheng looked at Ren Xiaosu, and everyone else’s gaze followed his. In reality, everyone understood that the decision maker in the platoon was Ren Xiaosu, not Li Qingzheng.

Ren Xiaosu met their eyes and considered it for a couple seconds before saying, “Let’s go and assemble. I have a plan.”

“Really?” Someone asked, “Platoon Commander, you aren’t joking, right?”

Li Qingzheng felt reassured by Ren Xiaosu. “When has our Platoon Commander Xiaosu ever not been serious? It won’t go wrong as long as we listen to him!”

Finally, Ren Xiaosu became the real leader in everyone’s hearts.

Chapter 239 Ren Xiaosu’s plan

As they drove down the mountain, Ren Xiaosu realized Chen Wudi was a little sullen. Actually, whenever such betrayals happened in the past, Chen Wudi’s inner world would always be rocked to the core.

He was like a naïve, kind, and innocent child who was more than happy to help others. But slowly, he discovered that the kindness he had for this world was just like a triangle within his heart. Whenever this triangle turned, it would hurt his heart and cause him a lot of anguish.

Until the triangle's edges were milled round.

Ren Xiaosu did not try to enlighten Chen Wudi anymore. He had to experience for himself his inner demons and think it through before he would be able to step out of his predicament.

The military transport truck did not head straight for town after it arrived at the bottom of the mountain. The journey to town would only take three hours, or even two and a half hours if they drove a little faster. They still had about two hours or so now to burn.

Ren Xiaosu took them by another route, to which Li Qingzheng wondered, "What are we doing?"

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look. "You'll know when we get there."

On the side of the road, Ren Xiaosu had Li Qingzheng set up an ambush. He also requested that Li Qingzheng change into his Li Consortium military uniform and have his Office of Special Investigations identification with him.

At this moment, a military transport truck drove over from afar. Ren Xiaosu calmly walked to the middle of the road and blocked the path of the vehicle.

When the people in it saw Ren Xiaosu in his Li Consortium military uniform, they came to a stop. This truck was filled with the full platoon of another outpost. Their platoon commander jumped out and said with a fawning smile, "Sir, what is the matter?"

Ren Xiaosu flashed his ID and said, "The Office of Special Investigations is conducting an investigation. I suspect that there's a spy in the truck. Get everyone out."

The platoon commander was startled. He hurriedly claimed innocence and cried out, "Sir, could there be a misunderstanding? We're only soldiers of the private army."

"Don't fucking bullshit me!" Ren Xiaosu said with a cold expression, "Don't tell me you're the spy?"

The platoon commander immediately shut his mouth and beckoned for the other soldiers to get out of the truck. "Hurry up and get out. Cooperate with this officer's investigation."

After the group of soldiers stepped out of the vehicle, Ren Xiaosu asked, "Who still has family back in town?"

A man raised his hand weakly. "Sir, my family is still in town."

Ren Xiaosu said to that platoon commander, "It's him, come with me!"

Li Qingzheng led a group of soldiers over and tied that man up before taking him back to their own truck.

Li Qingzheng was startled when he realized that Ren Xiaosu's so-called plan was to actually kidnap someone into their group!

Actually, the Li Consortium was only worried that there would be deserters. As long as they showed up with a full-strength platoon of 30 soldiers, they would definitely not say anything about it. However, Li Qingzheng never expected that Ren Xiaosu would come up with something like that!

How ruthless!

But better you than me! As if Li Qingzheng and the others cared about the life and death of another platoon. In these times, it was already great to survive. It didn't matter how they did it!

When the platoon commander saw the uniforms of the soldiers beside Li Qingzheng, he felt that something was wrong. Why were some of them dressed in casual wear and others dressed in the uniform of the private army?

The platoon commander asked suspiciously, "Sir, are your men in the private army?"

Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment. "That's right, I've been hiding with the private troops for a very long time to find the spy!"

The platoon commander did not dare say anything. After all, the Office of Special Investigations had a reputation. Without any blood relations to the Li Consortium, no one would dare to offend the Office of Special Investigations.

Ren Xiaosu cast him a glance before saying to Li Qingzheng, "Set off!"

After he said that, their military transport truck turned around in the direction of town and drove off. Ren Xiaosu was looking at that man who had been tied up. He said to Chen Wudi, "Untie him"

The man nearly cried from fear. "Sir, I'm really not a spy."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Starting from today, you're now a part of this platoon."

That man was stunned. "But, sir, I'm not from your platoon."

All the private soldiers next to him pointed their guns at him. Ren Xiaosu said, "You are now!"

It was also at this moment that the dazed platoon commander behind them managed to react. "Fuck, they were here to steal our people! What fucking Office of Special Investigations? How despicable!"

The soldiers beside him were panicking a little. "Platoon Commander, what do we do now?"

That platoon commander clenched his teeth. "I doubt we'll be able to chase after them. Besides, I also can't be sure whether his Office of Special Investigations identity is real or not. Let's... go and steal someone from the other platoons!"

There were several dozen outposts around the area, which meant there were several dozen platoons as well.

Ren Xiaosu was still unaware of what he had sparked. All of these platoons were about to tussle trying to steal soldiers from each other to fill up their rosters.

Some of the platoons were at full strength and did not consider the possibility of something like this happening. But there were a lot more platoons that had a person missing just like Ren Xiaosu's platoon. All of them were still wondering what they should do, but with Ren Xiaosu doing what he just did, it was as though a new world had opened up for them.

After the platoons from the outposts got out of the mountains and headed for town, there were only two or three major roads that they could take. As such, this scenario would probably be best described with the saying, "The brave win when rivals cross paths."

As Ren Xiaosu's group sped towards town, the sun was rising. Then they were surprised to see several military transport trucks of the Li Consortium driving in the direction they had come from.

When those vehicles saw Ren Xiaosu's group, they stopped. One of the drivers in the Li Consortium group rolled down his window and shouted, "Are you all the private troops that came from the outposts?"

Li Qingzheng was taken aback. "That's right."

"Did you see any groups fighting on your way here?" the driver asked.

"No, we set off very early," Li Qingzheng said calmly.

The driver cursed as he rolled the window back up, "Fuck, I heard a riot broke out over there! It's so troublesome to have to go out there to look at what's happening!"

Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng sat in the front of the truck without saying a word. However, they could guess what had happened.

Li Qingzheng asked softly, "It should be fine, right?"

Ren Xiaosu also felt a little guilty. "I guess it won't really be much of a problem...."

Ren Xiaosu sent Yan Liuyuan and the others back to town and instructed them to be cautious of the circumstances before heading to the assembly point to report in.

In the morning, Hu Shuo had just finished a short meeting at the Office of Special Investigations when he received a satellite call from a deputy of his. "Lieutenant General, the commanding officer of the private army forces is looking for you."

Hu Shuo was taken aback for a moment. "Why's he looking for me?"

Hu Shuo then answered the phone. "This is Hu Shuo speaking."

As a result, he was met with a barrage of complaints on the other end of the call. Although the private troops were made up of refugees, their commanding officer was still a family member of the Li Consortium. The person on the other end of the line was complaining so much that it made Hu Shuo unhappy. "Why the fuck would I want to meddle in the affairs of your private troops? Even if you gave those lousy troops of yours to me for free, I wouldn't take them in. Stop trying to accuse me of something!" And with that, Hu Shuo hung up.

However, he immediately got a headache over this matter. He was quite certain Ren Xiaosu caused trouble for him again!

Chapter 240 The law is unenforceable when everyone is a criminal

Ren Xiaosu had thought there wouldn't be too many soldiers in the private troops, but he was wrong. After assembling, the soldiers even outnumbered a combat brigade of the organization. Li Qingzheng asked around and discovered that all of these private troops were actually gathered from the various Li Consortium strongholds.

The private troops of the various strongholds were currently under the command of an officer named Li Anjun. He was a family member of the Li Consortium and was also concurrently serving as the overseer of Stronghold 107. And the officer in charge of Stronghold 108's private troops was called Liu Taiyu.

By this moment, the private troops of the other strongholds had fully assembled. Liu Taiyu was looking disconsolately at the sole platoon in front of him that was made up of Ren Xiaosu's group. The rest of his soldiers were nowhere to be seen.

Liu Taiyu looked at Li Qingzheng. "Did anything happen on your way here?"

Li Qingzheng stood to attention and answered, "Sir, there were no incidents along the way. Our Eighth Platoon of the Iron Second Battalion has assembled on time. Awaiting your instructions, sir! I—"

"Alright, that's enough." Liu Taiyu waved his hand in frustration and dismissed him. "Do you think it's not chaotic enough? Just stand right here and be quiet!"

With that, Liu Taiyu left. No one knew where he went.

Someone in the platoon whispered, "Did everyone else that was behind us get into a spat?"

"Seems so. They're probably stealing from each other's platoons," Li Qingzheng said in embarrassment.

Ren Xiaosu was amused. "That could turn out to be a good thing. As y'all should know, they can't enforce the law on us if everyone is a criminal. If a fight breaks out between all of the outposts, there won't be a need for any punishment."

Actually, the soldiers from other outposts only dared to do so because they also understood this fact. Since the Li Consortium needed people to fight the war now, surely they wouldn't waste their efforts to hold them all accountable, right?

At this moment, someone looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, "Platoon Commander, could you have expected this too? So you only wanted to create chaos that would lead to a situation where the law would not apply to all those in the wrong?"

Ren Xiaosu cleared his throat. "Not bad, right? Everything is well within my control."

But at this moment, Chen Wudi said, "My master is not that smart."

Ren Xiaosu looked at Chen Wudi speechlessly.

Actually, the management of the private troops had always been a mess. It became even more chaotic now that the private troops had recently expanded.

Ren Xiaosu and his group had never been to other outposts before. If they had, they would know that many of the outposts did not have the required full strength. The platoon commanders of the platoons would even deliberately lie about the number of soldiers under them as they wanted to freeload off of the consortium's supplies. But in the end, they were all caught off guard when they were suddenly requested to assemble for war.

If the higher-ups knew they were freeloading off them, they wouldn't be let off with just a simple punishment. Perhaps some people would even get executed as a warning to the others. So some people deliberately continued stirring up the pot even further amid the chaos.

While Liu Taiyu personally went to bring the rest of the private troops back, the other strongholds' private troops set out. Only Stronghold 108's platoons remained behind.

They were supposed to assemble and report at 7 AM, but it was almost evening now.

During this period, no one bothered with Ren Xiaosu and his group. Their entire platoon was allowed to roam freely like grazing sheep. Ren Xiaosu even had time to take everyone to town where he bought an egg-stuffed flatbread for each of them. This was a treat from Li Qingzheng.

In the evening, Liu Taiyu returned with a large number of troops. These private soldiers all had bruised and swollen faces. But the most shocking thing was that several of the established platoons had completely disappeared.

Many of them had their clothes torn, and some even lost their shoes. Only Ren Xiaosu's platoon was still looking somewhat dignified.

Ren Xiaosu's group was the Eighth Platoon of the Iron Second. There should have been seven platoons ahead of them. However, the Sixth Platoon ceased to exist, with all of their soldiers stolen away by the other platoons. Even the platoon commander himself had been taken away.

At this time, Liu Taiyu no longer talked about meting out punishment. On normal days, he would also do all he could to embezzle everyone's provisions and never really cared about his military responsibilities. This time, he was getting a taste of his own medicine.

Ren Xiaosu did a rough count. Currently, there were still 33 full-strength platoons of the private army remaining. In effect, the number of soldiers here was around 1000 or so.

Liu Taiyu stood before everyone and said, "You've all been taken care of by the organization during peacetime. As the saying goes, armies are trained for a 1,000 days only to be used for a single battle. Now is the time for you to serve the organization. We'll advance to the front lines at Mt. Tantou, Mt. Fengyi, and Mt. Shuanglong where we'll construct bases on the high ground to prevent an invasion by the Qing Consortium's troops."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment. Getting the private troops to construct bases on the high ground? They really intended to send them to their deaths.

Although there were still huge advantages in selecting the right terrain to fight on, artillery shells that could impact with extremely high accuracy over a very long range were a problem. Even if they managed to occupy the high ground, their enemies could simply bombard the entire area with artillery shells if they had enough funding.

In a time like this, anyone guarding the high ground would surely die.

Generally, such situations required the construction of extremely strong defensive fortifications that would help play a strategic role on the high ground. But was there time for Ren Xiaosu and the others to build any defensive fortifications?

Everyone in the private troops burst into an uproar since no one was willing to give up their lives for nothing. But even as they protested, no one dared to run away.

Liu Taiyu was surrounded by a reinforced company made up of his trusted troops. There were 180 of them in total, and their weapons and equipment were much better than those that Ren Xiaosu and the others carried.

But these troops were not used to fighting in battle. On one hand, they were responsible for the security of Liu Taiyu. On the other hand, they were to supervise the platoons of the private troops and ensure that they carried out their orders properly.

Liu Taiyu said with a smile, "However, there's a big reward for taking on a responsibility as great as this. Those who perform well at the end of the war can gain direct entry into the Li Consortium's troops. Not only that, but you'll also be handsomely rewarded as well. At the very least, you'll be ensured the status of legal resident and get to live in the stronghold."

Some of the soldiers became excited and eager on the spot. "We can get into the stronghold and be recognized as legal residents?"

"Are you serious?"

Liu Taiyu smiled and said, "As the commander of the Iron Second, would I make such jokes with you? The higher-ups of the organization have already issued an official notice. You can rest assured."

A lot of people were moved by the thought of that as most refugees were not knowledgeable. Historically, this group of people were always cheated by others. Now that they were in a group together, it was even easier to fool them all.

But Ren Xiaosu knew exactly why Liu Taiyu dared to make such a grand promise. It was because he thought that none of these close to a 1,000 private soldiers would make it back alive!

Many others among the troops were well-aware of this too, but they did not dare speak out. They could only leave their comrades to discuss it excitedly.

Suddenly, Liu Taiyu clapped his hands and signaled for everyone to be quiet. "Get into the trucks. It's time to set out!"

Liu Taiyu's off-road vehicle and the reinforced company's military transport trucks did not drive at the front but stayed in a supervisory role at the back of the convoy. They were watching to see if anyone would try to escape midway.

Ren Xiaosu was watching this through the rearview mirror of the truck and said to Li Qingzheng, "That Liu Taiyu is a coward. When the time comes, he'll definitely be too scared to get onto the battlefield personally. Since that's the case, we'll have more leeway to do what we want."

Li Qingzheng was taken aback. "What are you playing at? Xiaosu, don't be rash."