

First Order 241

### **Chapter 241 Encountering the nanosoldiers**

When Ren Xiaosu said they would have more leeway to do what they wanted, he did not actually mean to cause any trouble. But if no one was there to watch over them daily, no one would know whether they were truly guarding the high ground.

With Liu Taiyu staying in the rear, they could easily find somewhere to hide or move from their original positions on the front line.

Someone leaned forward and asked through the gap between the driver's cabin and truck bed, "Platoon Commander, Platoon Sergeant, what if we really end up as cannon fodder on the battlefield?"

"Yeah, Liu Zhaojiang took half of all our ammo with him. When we defend the strategic high ground, we'll definitely run out of ammo in no time. Surely we aren't gonna have to resort to biting the enemy with our teeth, right?"

Even now, everyone was still resenting Liu Zhaojiang. They could understand why he chose to be a deserter since all of them had thoughts of running away as well. But by taking away so much cured meat and ammunition when he left, that was as good as condemning everyone else to their deaths.

The current situation for their platoon was almost no different from having to fight barehanded.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Li Qingzheng and asked, "If you knew that someone would run away, would you still have stayed behind?"

"Yes, there are still others in the platoon who have families to protect, after all," Li Qingzheng said.

What upset Li Qingzheng the most was that he had treated everyone like brothers, yet one of them ran away with his weapon and provisions without even saying a word of goodbye. Fortunately for them, there were enough provisions left for the rest, and they would not have to go hungry as a result.

Li Qingzheng sighed. "If someone offers y'all a 1,000,000 yuan, would any of you sell me out?"

"Don't think too much." Ren Xiaosu comforted him, "You aren't worth that much. We won't accept the money if it goes against our conscience."

Li Qingzheng was speechless.

The soldiers at the back of the truck started laughing at this. However, someone still said worriedly, "Jokes aside, what if we really end up becoming cannon fodder?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Don't worry, I'll come up with something when we get there."

Everyone felt relieved by Ren Xiaosu's answer. If Ren Xiaosu could come up with a plan, they would not have to end up becoming cannon fodder.

When they arrived at the forward operating base in the afternoon, all vehicles passing through here were required to get refueled. Otherwise, they would not be able to continue the long-distance journey.

However, this forward operating base was not required to provide meals and provisions to the private troops. Some of the private troops were starving since the beginning and thought they would surely be fed first before heading out to the battlefield. After all, superiors should not let their soldiers go hungry in the face of battle.

But who could have thought the Li Consortium's combat troops wouldn't treat the private troops as human beings!

However, these private soldiers of Stronghold 108 were unaware that the other private troops were still entitled to the usual military benefits. It was just that those benefits for them had been stopped by Liu Taiyu.

When it was mealtime, the soldiers in Ren Xiaosu's group hid in the military transport truck and secretly ate their rations they had brought from the outpost. Although Liu Zhaojiang took away quite a lot of cured meat, Ren Xiaosu and Li Qingzheng had bought a lot of wheat flour to make into buns and flatbread.

When the soldiers under Ren Xiaosu hiding in the back of the truck saw the other private soldiers enduring starvation, they suddenly felt they had followed the right leader.

After refueling the truck, Ren Xiaosu suddenly said, "Platoon Sergeant, teach me how to drive."

Li Qingzheng was taken aback for a moment. "Alright."

Currently, Liu Taiyu was at the FOB eating his meal. Officers like him were all served good food, and there would be people fawning upon him and showing him good hospitality upon reaching the FOB. As such, these officers didn't usually resume their journey quickly.

As for addressing him as "Platoon Sergeant," even Li Qingzheng himself did not feel anything wrong with it.

Li Qingzheng was teaching Ren Xiaosu how to drive in the open area. "You just need to remember to step on the clutch when you change gears when driving stick. It's not that difficult to change gears once you reach a certain speed."

About an hour later, Ren Xiaosu could somewhat manage to drive on the road. As long as he did not have to shift gears, he could drive very smoothly.

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu felt bad. He hadn't been able to learn how to ride the bicycle no matter how hard he tried. At the time, he kept blaming the palace. He thought it could be due to his ability to copy other people's skills that made him unable to learn a skill through his own means.

After all, he had to make some sacrifices in order to gain something, right? Ren Xiaosu understood this very well. So it occurred to him that it was not because he was stupid that he couldn't master the

bicycle, but that the palace had limited him. But right now, it seemed like... not being able to master the bicycle had totally nothing to do with the palace! It was just him!

Ren Xiaosu found this difficult to accept.

In the afternoon, Liu Taiyu even secretly had some wine at the FOB before setting off again. Ren Xiaosu thought that if even the officer in charge of the private army was drinking during the wartime, what kind of combat effectiveness would the Li Consortium's combat troops be capable of?

Upon setting off again, Ren Xiaosu insisted on driving the truck. As the saying went, "Strike while the iron is hot." He was determined to master this skill while he had the chance.

When they got here in the morning, everyone was still laughing happily in the truck bed. But by the afternoon, no one spoke as they were all trembling in fear in the back of the truck. All of them were tightly grasping the handrails in the bed.

Ren Xiaosu was driving so fast that he reached the front of the convoy in just a short while. He sat in the cab while controlling the steering wheel in high spirits. This was the first time in his life that he was driving a vehicle. It was a wonderful feeling.

Li Qingzheng who was next to him had already turned pale. He said, "Platoon Commander, the road is slippery during winter. If you drive so fast, the truck might flip over when you step on the brakes."

Ren Xiaosu pondered it for a moment before saying, "Then won't it be fine as long as I don't step on the brakes?"

Li Qingzheng was speechless. After Li Qingzheng took five minutes to calm himself down, he said in seriousness, "Platoon Commander, why don't I drive instead? I'm worried that you'll exhaust yourself."

Ren Xiaosu was finally persuaded to sit in the front passenger seat after the rest of his comrades on board strongly expressed their concerns. However, he was still very happy. After all, knowing how to drive in these wastelands was also considered as having a life-saving skill.

Ren Xiaosu said to the palace in his mind, "What's the proficiency of my driving? It should be at advanced or intermediate level since I can drive so well, right?"

The voice from the palace said, "It has been detected that the host does not possess any driving skills."

Ren Xiaosu was unhappy to hear that. "Who are you bluffing here? How can I not have any driving skills when I've already driven on the road? Can you at least have some logic in your judgment.... It's fine even if you just judge that I'm at a basic level!"

All of a sudden, Li Qingzheng said, "Platoon Commander, there's a situation up ahead."

Ren Xiaosu looked and saw some officers wearing the Li Consortium's military uniform standing in their way. It looked like there were quite a few of their soldiers there.

"Just stay in the vehicle." Ren Xiaosu said, "Let Liu Taiyu handle them since we're just normal soldiers."

Liu Taiyu's off-road vehicle sped over from behind. The officer in front of Liu Taiyu maintained his high and mighty attitude as he said, "All of your trucks have been commandeered. Have all of the men in the vehicles get out."

Liu Taiyu was dumbfounded. "We were ordered to quickly head to the front lines at Mt. Fengyi. If we hand over all of our military transport trucks to you, how are we supposed to get there?"

"Why should I care?" The officer sneered. During their conversation, the blood vessels in his face became silvery strands. It was as though something was glowing inside his blood vessels. "All of you, get out of the trucks now!"

### **Chapter 242 Triple identity, Ren Xiaosu!**

When the silvery strands appeared on the officer, the Iron Second Battalion's commander, Liu Taiyu, froze. He lowered his head and did not dare to refute him further. Because he knew this was the most elite unit of the Li Consortium. They were the nanosoldiers of the organization!

The Li Consortium's main battlefield was divided into two areas, with one at the front line at Mt. Fengyi facing the Qing Consortium, and the other at the front line at Mt. Ping facing the Yang Consortium. The distance between the two battlefields was several hundred kilometers.

Liu Taiyu received news earlier that those nanosoldiers were already heading towards Mt. Ping because the Yang Consortium was the Li Consortium's main opponent, while the Qing Consortium was just here to take advantage of the situation. However, Liu Taiyu was not expecting the nanosoldiers to appear here.

Did they intend to catch the Qing Consortium off guard? Was that why the organization had even withheld this information internally?

Liu Taiyu grew cold with fear when he realized the situation was worse than he had expected. The front line at Mt. Fengyi where he was being deployed to would definitely end up as ground zero for this war!

But how could the nanosoldiers not have their own vehicles? The nanosoldiers were always given the best equipment. They did not even need to take military transport trucks as they were all issued with off-road vehicles.

Liu Taiyu asked in a whisper, "Sir, where are your vehicles?" While saying that, he took a look at the officer's shoulder patch that displayed the words "Divine Arms Battalion." There was also the white logo of a nanospider on it.

This was the legendary Divine Arms Battalion of the Li Consortium.

The Divine Arms officer looked at Liu Taiyu out of the corner of his eye and said, "Our vehicles are parked right up ahead. I want your soldiers to get out of the trucks and take our off-road vehicles instead. On top of that, have all your private troops take off their uniforms."

"We'll freeze to death if we take off our clothes in this cold weather," Liu Taiyu said anxiously.

In response, the officer of the Divine Arms Battalion lunged over and punched Liu Taiyu in the abdomen. He left Liu Taiyu in such pain that he laid on the ground in the fetal position and could not even make a sound!

The Divine Arms officer said calmly, "Why must you speak so much?"

The truck Ren Xiaosu's platoon was in was the closest to the Divine Arms officers, so he could hear their entire conversation. When the officer said they wanted the private troops to take off their uniforms, Ren Xiaosu realized these nanosoldiers might be planning to pose as private troops on the march.

The Li Consortium's nanotechnology had always been the subject of much attention. Now that it had been fully put into practical use on the battlefield, it would definitely be regarded as a great threat by the Qing Consortium and the Yang Consortium.

The Li Consortium knew there were spies in their military. Therefore, the Divine Arms Battalion would have to hide their whereabouts if they wanted to spring a surprise on the Qing Consortium.

As the soldiers of the Divine Arms Battalion walked over to the trucks, the lead soldier shouted to Ren Xiaosu and his platoon, "Get out here and change out of your uniforms—" The person speaking froze when he realized Ren Xiaosu and his platoon were not in uniform.

Ren Xiaosu was amused. Wasn't this such a coincidence? They had not even been issued with uniforms.

The Divine Arms officer wondered, "Where are your uniforms?"

Disgruntled, Ren Xiaosu explained, "We were never issued with uniforms. Not only that, we weren't even equipped with guns."

The Divine Arms officers were stunned for a while. Since they did not have much contact with the private troops before, this problem never once crossed their minds!

The officer who beat up Liu Taiyu got so angry he laughed. He looked at Liu Taiyu, who was lying on the ground, and said, "Aren't you too rampant with your embezzlement of their pay and equipment?! Do you think our Li Consortium is raising you all as parasites?" He then angrily kicked Liu Taiyu's head so hard that Liu Taiyu fainted.

To be honest, this commander of the Divine Arms Battalion believed his plan was well thought out. They would first pretend to be private troops and get close to the battlefield while avoiding the spies' attention. Afterwards, they would head into the mountains and flank the Qing Consortium to deal them the fatal blow.

The fitness of these nanosoldiers was fantastic, and they could take routes that normal soldiers couldn't. So they could reach places the Qing Consortium wouldn't expect.

This plan was also approved of by Headquarters. They felt that everyone would think they would target the Yang Consortium now, so sneak attacking the Qing Consortium would catch them by surprise and lead to a victory.

If any weak points appeared in the Qing Consortium, the Yang Consortium would also be very happy to seize any gains from them.

Ultimately, the reason for the war between the three organizations was mainly influence. Whoever became the weakest link on the battlefield first would definitely end up facing the most violent attacks from the other sides.

So even though this plan was not considered perfect, it was still a great plan. But the Divine Arms officer never expected their plan would be screwed up right off the bat.

By looking at their uniforms, everyone could tell they were from the Divine Arms Battalion. Even if they drove the private troops' vehicles, they would not be able to hide that fact from the more observant people.

"What do we do now then?" one of the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion asked.

The commander of the Divine Arms Battalion clenched his teeth and said, "Let's put on their civilian clothes and have them wear our uniforms instead. Let them continue advancing to the front line at Mt. Fengyi and have the enemy's spies in our military focus on them."

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. At this moment, he was considered to be holding three different identities—that of a private soldier, a member of the Office of Special Investigations, and a member of the Divine Arms Battalion—all at the same time! However, Ren Xiaosu was not afraid of taking on too many identities. After all, it would be easier for him to get things done with these identities.

When the Divine Arms soldiers slapped Liu Taiyu awake, one of them whispered to him, "Continue marching to the front line at Mt. Fengyi and get there within ten days. If you don't get there in ten days, you'll be brought in for a court martial. I'll send five nanosoldiers with you, so don't try any tricks."

The commander of the Divine Arms Battalion even placed an electronic ankle monitor on Liu Taiyu. A red light was flashing on the shackle, and it seemed like it would be used for tracking Liu Taiyu's location. But its functionality was probably not just as simple as tracking him. Why else would they rest easy that Liu Taiyu would carry out their orders accordingly?

They not only had surveillance equipment on him, but also sent their nanosoldiers to follow the private troops as they headed to the front line at Mt. Fengyi together. This could be considered as a dual-layered security measure for the plan.

The Divine Arms Battalion's decision to temporarily take over the role of the private troops was also a part of the plan. Everyone in the organization knew what the private troops' behavior was like, so most people would not generally care to plant spies within the private troops.

Besides, even if they were to abruptly disrupt the battle plans of a battalion of private troops, it would have little impact on the big picture.

The commander of the Divine Arms Battalion said coldly, "All of you will camp here for the day before setting off again tomorrow."

However, Ren Xiaosu was very curious. This group of people in front of him were definitely not the entire strength of the Divine Arms Battalion. After all, he had not even seen Lin Qi and that Captain Zhou around. He wondered if there would be a chance to collect some more of the nanomachines.

At this moment, Li Qingzheng asked, "So are we going to change into the uniform of the Divine Arms?"

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "It's a good thing."

Li Qingzheng saw the enthusiastic look in Ren Xiaosu's eyes. "Xiaosu, did you think of a plan? Tell us about it."

"After we change into the uniform of the Divine Arms," Ren Xiaosu said, "let's first go back to the FOB that we just left from and have a good meal there!"

Everyone was shocked. So the first thing to do after changing into the uniform of the Divine Arms Battalion was to return to the forward operating base to steal their meals?!

Li Qingzheng realized that no matter what identity Ren Xiaosu was given, he could always make use of them like it was fully within his rights to do so...

### **Chapter 243 Mooching**

"Xiaosu, is it really OK to do that?" Li Qingzheng asked flusteredly in a low voice.

Ren Xiaosu led the way as they walked off into the wilderness. They had already changed into the uniform of the Divine Arms Battalion while the nanosoldiers had already left the campsite for some time. Only five of the nanosoldiers stayed behind to supervise the private troops to ensure they reach the front line at Mt Fengyi on time.

All of the private troops had changed into the uniform of the Divine Arms Battalion. However, the five nanosoldiers put on the maintenance uniform of the private troops and blended into the group. These uniforms were originally made for mechanics and were also standard issue for every formation of the private troops of the organization.

The wages of the maintenance personnel had always been relatively higher, and since some soldiers within the troops were also slightly skilled in repairing vehicles, Liu Taiyu chose to direct the salary for this job into his own pockets. As the uniforms were issued by the organization, there was no need to pay for them. But if they were sold separately, Liu Taiyu would probably embezzle the soldiers' allowance for it as well.

The private soldiers had already accumulated a lot of resentment for Liu Taiyu. After all, they could not even afford to eat enough to fill their stomachs. Back when the soldiers were still at the outposts, wasn't it Liu Taiyu who ordered his subordinates to mix sand into the bags of rice?

As Ren Xiaosu led Li Qingzheng and the others to the forward operating base, he said, "What are you afraid of?"

"We still have those Divine Arms soldiers back at the campsite. What if they find out that we left the place without permission?" Li Qingzheng said in a halting fashion.

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Ren Xiaosu said totally unafraid. “How do you expect five people to watch over nearly a thousand people? It’s only possible if we’re in a dream. Since they still can’t recognize everyone at the moment, it’s a good opportunity for us to move around on our own. Once they understand the private troops’ situation better after some time, it won’t be that easy to move around on our own.”

Li Qingzheng realized that Ren Xiaosu was really ballsy. But Ren Xiaosu’s analysis was quite reasonable.

Ren Xiaosu continued, “And think about it, we’re just going for a meal. Since there’s no rations back at our campsite, why aren’t we allowed to find food for ourselves? We’re helping the officers relieve their burden!”

“That’s true.” Li Qingzheng echoed, “But what if the people at the FOB discover our identities?”

“We’ll be fine. Don’t say anything later and just let me handle them.” Ren Xiaosu said calmly.

All of his teammates next to him looked at Ren Xiaosu in silence and remembered that they had really never seen him afraid of any situation before...

The private troops’ campsite was only several kilometers away from the FOB. They had encountered the Divine Arms Battalion not long after they left the FOB. If it weren’t for the close distance, Ren Xiaosu would not have decided to take them there for a free meal.

When Ren Xiaosu’s group arrived at the FOB, the person at the sentry post immediately stopped them. Just as Li Qingzheng was about to step forward to negotiate peacefully, he watched Ren Xiaosu go up to him and kick him aside. “How dare you stop the Divine Arms Battalion? Getting ballsy, eh?”

Earlier in the afternoon, they had also thought of eating at the FOB. However, they ended up getting mocked by the FOB’s staff who said that refugees were not fit to eat here.

Now that Ren Xiaosu had the opportunity to return the favor, he would not pull any punches.

When the soldier at the sentry post saw the Divine Arms Battalion’s shoulder patch on Ren Xiaosu’s arm, he didn’t even dare to lodge a protest. Ren Xiaosu swaggered straight into the base.

Li Qingzheng and the others were still a little afraid at the beginning. But as they walked in, they also started swaggering like Ren Xiaosu.

When they entered the FOB’s chow hall, Ren Xiaosu’s group immediately smelled the aroma of food.

Many of the Li Consortium’s troops were heading to the front lines. But they weren’t the only ones, as there were also troops returning from the front lines. So meals at the FOB were served around the clock, and even the hot water supply in the barracks was available throughout the day.

While a group of cooks were busy cooking in the kitchen, Ren Xiaosu’s group casually went to collect their food with stainless steel meal trays.



The manager of the chow hall came over when he saw this. He said cautiously, "I'm sorry, but we haven't received advance notice of your group's arrival."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned as he did not understand military regulations. As a result, he did not know that troops needed something like advance notice to enter the FOB. In that instant, Li Qingzheng and the others started sweating.

However, Ren Xiaosu said coldly, "Our Divine Arms Battalion is just here to eat. Why is there a need to give you all advance notice? Are you looking down on our Divine Arms Battalion?"

The group of soldiers around Ren Xiaosu looked at him in adoration. No one knew how Ren Xiaosu could say something like that so confidently.

The manager of the chow hall said humbly, "No, I wouldn't dare. But can I have a look at your military ID?"

Sporadic groups of soldiers were already starting to gather around them amid the commotion. Ren Xiaosu sneered and took out his Office of Special Investigations military ID. He went up to the manager of the chow hall and said, "You're the only one who can see this. Feel free to check the ID number, but watch out if you dare to leak it."

When the manager of the chow hall read his military ID, he was stunned. Why was this person showing a military ID of the Office of Special Investigations while dressed in the uniform of the Divine Arms Battalion? This was getting too strange. He surreptitiously got his subordinate to do a quick check on the ID number. However, all the details displayed on the machine turned out to be genuine.

The manager of the chow hall was dumbfounded. He went to inform the commander of the FOB of this matter. However, his superior was also dumbfounded. They thought this might be a very special situation, so it was better to not provoke him. Since it was just a meal, wouldn't it be better to let them finish and wash their hands of this matter?

Ren Xiaosu sighed as he ate. He felt that his dual identity as member of the Divine Arms Battalion and Office of Special Investigations was really quite useful.

The food in the chow hall was sumptuous and delicious. Just counting the meat dishes alone, there were more than ten varieties. After eating and before they left the place, they even stuffed more than ten buns into their arms. The sight of this left the chow staff in a daze. This was the fucking Divine Arms Battalion? Didn't people say the Divine Arms Battalion was treated very well?

The manager of the chow hall comforted himself, 'It's only 30 of them. Surely they won't take away much even if they can't finish their food, right?'

As Ren Xiaosu led platoon back to the campsite, Li Qingzheng and the others were burping from the feast. "There should be another four or five FOBs ahead of us, so we definitely won't have to go hungry anymore."

“Platoon Commander is almighty. The buns that we took are enough for us to eat for several days.” With the soldiers in his platoon flattering him nonstop, Ren Xiaosu’s vanity shot through the roof.

When they got back to camp, they happened to bump into the other soldiers. When those soldiers from the other platoons saw Ren Xiaosu’s group looking all energetic and in high spirits with their arms stuffed full of buns, a platoon commander got so envious he almost cried. “Can you share some of your buns with us? We’ve not eaten all day.”

Suddenly, the palace assigned a quest: Help a comrade ease their hunger pangs.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment. He looked at the platoon commander before him and said kindly, “Let me recommend you a good place where I guarantee you can eat your fill...”

#### **Chapter 244 An excellent harvest of gratitude tokens**

The platoon commander was stunned. “What place is that?”

Ren Xiaosu lowered his voice and said to him, “The FOB. It’s at most four kilometers away from us. Not only can you eat your fill while in this uniform, but you can also take some food back with you as well.”

When the platoon commander heard Ren Xiaosu telling him that he could eat at the forward operating base, he hesitated for a moment. What if someone at the FOB discovered their true identity?

But when he looked at Ren Xiaosu’s group again, he thought, ‘Isn’t this a successful example right in front of me?’ If Ren Xiaosu’s group already had their fill, anyone else wearing the Divine Arms uniform would also be able to do the same.

The platoon commander said sincerely, “Thank you, my brother!”

“Gratitude received from Wang Dingguo, +1!

“Quest complete. Awarded Basic Skill Duplication Scroll.”

When Ren Xiaosu received this gratitude token on top of the notification from the palace for the quest’s completion, an idea suddenly came to him!

Just as that platoon commander was about to take his men to get food, they were stopped by Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, “Aren’t the rest of you going to thank me?”

The platoon commander was stunned at first, but he hurriedly got his men to thank Ren Xiaosu. The private soldiers were starving badly. As the information provided by Ren Xiaosu really helped with their survival issues, most of their gratitude was expressed sincerely.

It was so sincere that it could not get any more sincere than this!

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu received a total of 18 gratitude tokens!

As a matter of fact, he had more than 400 gratitude tokens as of this moment. If he could make the others in the camp thank him as well, this new weapon might just be unlocked in the blink of an eye!

Ren Xiaosu turned around and looked at Li Qingzheng. “You guys head back to the tent first and rest. There’s something I need to do.”

Li Qingzheng wondered, “Platoon Commander, what are you gonna do?”

Ren Xiaosu said righteously, “Although we’ve had our fill, many people in our Iron Second Battalion are still hungry. We can’t be this selfish. We have to let them know about this!”

Li Qingzheng was a little ashamed when he heard that from Ren Xiaosu. He suddenly felt that he couldn’t compare to Ren Xiaosu as he wasn’t as noble as him!

Li Qingzheng took the initiative and said, “Then let’s split up so that we can inform everyone a little quicker.”

Ren Xiaosu’s expression immediately changed. “No, y’all’ve been working hard all day, so you should get some rest quickly! Hurry up and go to sleep. Don’t tire yourselves out further!”

The soldiers in the platoon were almost moved to tears. They didn’t realize in the past that Ren Xiaosu actually cared this much about them. Li Qingzheng thought the reason he had been relegated to the role of platoon sergeant was because he wasn’t as enlightened as Ren Xiaosu was.

After Ren Xiaosu compelled Li Qingzheng and the others to quickly go and rest, he started going around to each tent to inform the other platoons. The tents issued by the Supply Division were all large tents and were big enough for a platoon to sleep in.

Ren Xiaosu went around patiently to inform the rest of the private troops. Everyone was still quite doubtful at the beginning, but when Ren Xiaosu showed them the buns in his arms, they were convinced!

The platoons informed by Ren Xiaosu felt that he was such a good person...Although, they did find it a little strange that he insisted they thank him.

As Ren Xiaosu counted his gratitude tokens, he saw they had increased to over 900 in just an hour. This harvest of gratitude tokens was much greater than he had ever received in the past!

Sure enough, in times of hunger, people’s feelings for food would become especially sincere...  
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Ren Xiaosu lifted the next tent’s flap and asked, “Are you all hungry? I know a place—”

The five nanosoldiers in the tent quietly looked to Ren Xiaosu. Then Ren Xiaosu calmly replied with a smile, "Haha, sorry for the disturbance."

He had been too careless!

Every tent at this campsite looked identical to Ren Xiaosu, so how could he tell who was in them?

Immediately, the nanosoldiers rushed out of the tent and shouted, "Stop right there! What was the meaning of that?!"

But as they had finished speaking, they discovered that many of the tent flaps on the outside were open with no one inside them.

The nanosoldiers quickly went around the camp to check before gasping at the discovery that they had not even noticed that the camp was already half empty!

Just then, the private soldiers who had finished eating their fill returned from the FOB in groups, and some of them were even picking their teeth with toothpicks. Not only that, it was clear at a glance that they were carrying a lot of things in their arms.

But the returning private soldiers were all petrified when they saw the nanosoldiers walking up to them. A nanosoldier from the Divine Arms Battalion asked coldly, "Where have you all been?"

One of them answered while trembling, "We went to the FOB to eat."

The nanosoldier was stunned by his answer. "Was it as simple as just eating?"

Gradually, more and more people returned after eating at the FOB. In the end, all of them were punished to stand at attention in the camp.

The nanosoldiers paced around these people and sneered, "Do you know what the crime is if you leave the barracks without permission?"

He then slapped some of the private soldiers' buns they were carrying in their arms onto the ground, and stomped on them. "You, you, you!"

The nanosoldier pointed at three of the private soldiers. "Eat the buns on the ground!"

The private soldiers who were singled out were afraid to backtalk. They immediately picked up the flattened buns and stuffed them into their mouths.

The nanosoldier looked at them. "Who said you all could go to the FOB to eat?"

As soon as he finished saying that, he was shocked to find that almost everyone's gaze had landed on Ren Xiaosu. Not only that, someone even pointed out Ren Xiaosu.

So did this mean that all the soldiers at the camp who went to the FOB to eat were all told to do so by Ren Xiaosu?

This should be easy to handle then. By punishing Ren Xiaosu alone, that would help avoid a mutiny.

Actually, the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion felt helpless. If only one or two people had broken the law, they would be severely punished for it. But too many had committed the crime. What if they punished too many people and that resulted in a mutiny breaking out at the camp? Hence, the best thing to do would be to punish only one person as a warning to the others.

But one of the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion could not figure out something. He looked at Ren Xiaosu and wondered, "Why did you tell the others they could eat at the FOB?"

Ren Xiaosu gave it a bit of thought. "Because the braised chicken cuts at the FOB are delicious."

The officers of the Divine Arms Battalion was speechless.

While Ren Xiaosu spoke, the expression of one of the Divine Arms officers changed. He decided he would use Ren Xiaosu as a warning to the others tonight!

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu whispered to one of the Divine Arms nanosoldiers, "Can we step aside to have a word?"

Puzzled, the nanosoldier went with Ren Xiaosu a ways away where Ren Xiaosu flashed his Office of Special Investigations' military ID without hesitation. "I suspect that there's a spy from the Qing Consortium within our ranks, so y'all will have to cooperate with me to identify him. However, I have no clue who it might be. No one else can know about this other than the two of us."

The nanosoldier stayed silent.

Ren Xiaosu thought that since Hu Shuo and Li Shentan were plotting something major, they would definitely be more than OK to help him resolve a small matter like this. If that were the case, he might as well just pass the buck since he could do it.

Tonight's turn of events upset the nanosoldier. He felt that he had to give it more careful thought.

A captain of the Office of Special Investigations telling everyone to go to the FOB to eat in order to flush out the Qing Consortium's spy?

That didn't make any fucking sense!

The Office of Special Investigations was a military unit that even the Divine Arms Battalion was afraid of. After all, not even the Divine Arms Battalion was confident enough to proclaim that no spy could infiltrate their ranks.

Meanwhile, espionage was one of the most serious crimes that could happen in wartime.

**Chapter 245 Abandoning vehicles and entering the mountains on foot!**

Ren Xiaosu asked pleasantly, "What's your name and rank?"

The nanosoldier answered, "I'm First Lieutenant Dong Mingshuai."

Ren Xiaosu patted the nanosoldier on his shoulder and said, "Well, I'm a captain. You've performed pretty well. Hurry back and get some rest quickly."

The nanosoldier nodded in a daze. He silently memorized Ren Xiaosu's military ID number and planned on checking it after returning to his tent. He wanted to know if this guy was really from the Office of Special Investigations.

Meanwhile, the commander of the FOB was speechless when he saw the mess in the chow hall. The manager of the chow hall broke the silence. "Sir, there is something off about this Divine Arms Battalion. Their appetite is a little too large."

It wasn't only their appetite that was a little too large, but that their habit of taking some food away with them when leaving made the chow staff a little uncomfortable.

When Ren Xiaosu's group came to eat, they felt a group of 30 people wouldn't eat much anyway, so they just let them have what they wanted. However, a strange turn of events happened after that. Weren't they just here to have supper? How did it end up with all their friends coming over for supper as well?

Suddenly, a soldier ran into the chow hall from outside. The commander of the FOB asked, "Have you found out what happened yet?"

That soldier hesitated before saying, "I've reported the matter to both the Divine Arms Battalion and Office of Special Investigations. As it turns out, both sides said... We have no right to question whatever goes on here."

If they were told they couldn't question the matter, then it was as good as tacitly admitting to it. If the people who came to eat were really imposters, the higher-ups would have already kicked up a fuss and demanded them to investigate thoroughly.

The commander of the FOB was unaware that the Divine Arms Battalion immediately knew upon receiving their information that the people who went to eat were only the private troops in disguise. But in order not to expose their plans, they had no choice but to admit they were their people.

As for Hu Shuo, he was used to it.

Actually, the commander of the Divine Arms Battalion did not care how much food these private soldiers had eaten since they were not eating into their battalion's quota of rations anyway. What they were more bothered about was the fact that the Office of Special Investigations was actually investigating if there was a spy within their battalion's ranks.

Hu Shuo had also gotten used to this.

When Ren Xiaosu and the others returned to their tents, everyone wondered why he did not receive any punishment. However, no one dared to ask him about it.

Actually, Ren Xiaosu had been very kind to inform them of where they could go to eat at, but they ended up betraying him in return. This made everyone feel somewhat guilty.

Chen Wudi sat down in the tent and asked Ren Xiaosu, "Master, don't you blame them? You clearly helped them eat their fill, yet no one was willing to step forward and speak up for you."

At the time, Chen Wudi was prepared to fight their way out together with Ren Xiaosu. But in the end, Ren Xiaosu used his Office of Special Investigations identity to defuse the situation.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Of course I blame them, but I also expected it."

"But, Master, I couldn't feel any anger from you." Chen Wudi said softly, "I was infuriated, and I'm still infuriated. I'll probably still get infuriated whenever I think about this in the future. And those things that happened in the past too and those evil people as well."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "It's alright, they can't hurt us."

"Mhm." Chen Wudi nodded. "Master, please sleep. I'll keep watch for the first half of the night."

"Alright." Then Ren Xiaosu went straight to sleep. He did not have to worry about getting attacked with Chen Wudi keeping watch. In this tent, he only trusted Chen Wudi and the eight students. Not even Li Qingzheng was trustworthy to him.

The trust between him, Chen Wudi, and the students had built up little by little over time. None of them had betrayed him since the time in Stronghold 109. Of course, the most trustworthy person was still Chen Wudi.

Li Qingzheng and the others looked at Ren Xiaosu and wondered how he could remain so calm. After all of tonight's events, he could still fall asleep so quickly?

Chen Wudi sat cross-legged next to Ren Xiaosu and forbade anyone from approaching him. He did not allow anyone to get close to him.

After daybreak, the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion continued on their journey with the entire battalion of private troops as though nothing had happened last night.

The front lines at Mt. Fengyi, Mt. Tantou, and Mt. Shuanglong were very deep. If a battle really broke out, there was a mountain path there the Qing Consortium would have to pass through to invade the heart of the Li Consortium. Therefore, the Li Consortium had sent a large number of private troops there to fill their defensive gap and act as cannon fodder.

It was said that there used to be a city north of Mt. Shuanglong in the Pre-Cataclysm times. It was located at the intersection of three rivers where a dam used to exist upstream.

However, that dam was neglected after The Cataclysm. As a result, no one opened the floodgates to release the excess water until it finally burst its banks. That caused the river to change its course, turning the once prosperous city into a floodplain.

In summer, the entire area would get covered by clouds and experience continuous rain due to the water cycle.

Fortunately, it was winter right now. Winter had gotten colder over the days, causing some of the smaller tributaries to freeze as a result.

But upon setting off, they encountered yet another problem.

The real Divine Arms Battalion had already driven off in all of their military transport trucks. They had only thought about switching their vehicles and forgot the private soldiers were not trained to drive. The private soldiers here who could drive were the minority.

While they were traveling by the truck, 30 of them could get in at once. If there were others on board who could drive, they could occasionally take turns at the wheel.

But now that they had switched to the off-road vehicles... there were not enough drivers to go around.

One of the Divine Arms officers was a little dumbfounded as he stood in front of the numerous off-road vehicles. Why were problems constantly messing up his plan?

However, this Divine Arms Battalion officer was also a decisive guy. He resolutely said, "Abandon the vehicles. We'll enter the mountains on foot. Don't take the main road so that it'll look like we're trying to cover our tracks on purpose!"

Ren Xiaosu understood this decision. By trekking through the wilderness of the mountains, it would create a sense of secrecy. If a spy discovered these troops wearing the uniform of the Divine Arms Battalion were trying to move under the cover of the wilderness of the mountains by deliberately avoiding the main road, they might get more interested in tracking their whereabouts.

But didn't he just learn how to drive? And now they were just going to abandon the vehicles on the side of the road and not use them anymore?

Moreover, based on the physical fitness of these private soldiers, at least half of them were probably not going to make it to the specified destination if they really had to walk there via the wilderness of these mountains.

At this moment, Chen Wudi asked, "What if we don't get discovered by the spy when we go into the wilderness of the mountains?"

Ren Xiaosu nearly applauded that. "That's a good question."

A spy would not wander into the mountains for no good reason. They would definitely travel on the main road with the main force, so the other possibility would be that the spy could be unaware of troops marching secretly in the mountain wilderness... due to them being too well-hidden....



The officer of the Divine Arms Battalion was speechless for a while. "Just do as I say!"

Even if Ren Xiaosu were from the Office of Special Investigations, he could not influence the Divine Arms Battalion's battle plans. He could investigate the spy, but they would still have the final say on how to fight the war!

Even though the Divine Arms Battalion did not wish to offend the Office of Special Investigations, if something made their plan to fail, should the blame fall on the Office of Special Investigations or the Divine Arms Battalion?

Naturally, Ren Xiaosu did not actually care about whether the Office of Special Investigations would take the blame or not.

### **Chapter 246 The Qing base**

Countless Qing Consortium troops were already garrisoned on the front lines at Mt. Daping and Mt. Xianlin, and black tents could be seen scattered throughout the clearings in the valley. This place had become the internal transportation hub of this entire mountain range.

The roads in the mountains were no longer dirt roads but concrete surfaces that the Qing Consortium had constructed beforehand. Just by looking at the structure of the roads, it was clear that the Qing Consortium had been operating here for a long time.

This was the only path to reach the Li Consortium in the south. If they wanted to attack the Li Consortium, they would definitely have to pass through here.

The conflict between the three organizations in the southwestern region was not something new at all. The Qing Consortium was extraordinarily well-prepared as they had constructed a forward operating base and defensive fortifications in the mountains way in advance.

Two off-road vehicles were driving over from northeast of the mountains. Qing Zhen and Luo Lan sat in one of the vehicles and looked at the scenery outside. Qing Zhen said with a smile, "This place has to be defended well. If we lose our position here, the roads will have been built for nothing. Our enemies can simply drive straight in without any obstacles."

"Rest easy, we won't lose this place." Secretary Zhou sat in the front passenger seat and said coldly, "Qing Zhen, you can say we're letting you atone for your crimes by having you act as a military advisor. I hope that you will carefully consider the Board's decision and stop acting recklessly."

Qing Zhen said calmly with a smile, "Atone for my crimes? What crimes have I committed?"

The soldier driving the vehicle acted as though he were deaf. He only focused on driving and did not dare to react unusually. Meanwhile, Secretary Zhou frowned, thinking about something.

After the off-road vehicle traveled for dozens of kilometers in the mountains, it finally arrived at a huge base. When they came to the sentry post, Secretary Zhou flashed his ID, and they were allowed to pass through.

Qing Zhen looked at the layout of the surrounding barracks and commented, "The security here is a little lax."

"We've arrived. Get out." Secretary Zhou looked at Qing Zhen and said, "You probably know the combat commander here. I think he can be considered a younger brother of yours? His name is Qing Yun."

"Oh." Qing Zhen nodded. "That snotty brat? He cried a lot when we were young."

Qing Yun was the person who discovered the Experimentals had disappeared from Stronghold 113.

After getting out of the vehicle, Qing Zhen started walking towards the command post tent. "Since I'm here as a military advisor, what happens if Qing Yun does not heed my advice? Have you ever considered this problem? If he insists on doing things his way, am I supposed to take the fall along with him?"

Secretary Zhou's frown grew deeper as he said, "Don't try anything, Qing Zhen. Since he's the commanding officer of the troops, he'll definitely bear the main responsibility if something goes wrong. But as the military advisor, would you dare say that you won't be liable if any battles are lost? Both of you are working for the Qing Consortium, so I hope you can be more serious and not deliberately play a passive role."

Actually, this was the most worrisome matter for the Qing Consortium Board of Directors. They felt uneasy in letting Qing Yun face the other two organizations by himself. After all, Qing Yun's combat experience was far less than Qing Zhen's. Moreover, no one in the entire Qing Consortium could match Qing Zhen when it came to wisdom in warfare.

For an organization that large and filled with so many people, it was natural to think that powerful leadership figures abounded. But even throughout history, only a handful of famous leaders had ever existed in this world. And sometimes, some people were really just that exceptionally talented.

But what they were more worried about was that they had been suppressing Qing Zhen too much recently. If Qing Zhen just showed up at the front lines and did not put in any effort for the war, that would also affect the overall situation.

It was not that the Board was being stupid by insisting on suppressing skilled people, but that they had long been accustomed to skilled people yielding to the huge machine that was the organization. An arrogant Shadow had wanted to place himself above the organization. But what happened to him in the end? Didn't he also become a tool for the Board after admitting defeat?

But the Qing Consortium Board could never have expected Qing Zhen to be so unyielding!

Qing Zhen walked into the tent with a smile. Officers were trotting back and forth within the command post tent. They were all either holding intel of the latest military updates in their hands or about to carry out orders issued by Qing Yun.

Everyone in the tent was stunned for a moment when they saw Qing Zhen walk in. It was like the air in the command post solidified the instant he went in.

Qing Zhen greeted everyone, "There's no need to get nervous. Just get back to whatever you were doing. Luo Lan and I are just here to see all of you."

When Qing Yun, who was standing next to the sand table<sup>[1]</sup> in the command post, saw Qing Zhen, his expression darkened. He looked at Secretary Zhou. "Why did you bring him here?"

Secretary Zhou said calmly, "Your Second Uncle wanted him to come and assist you."

"Assist me?" Qing Yun sneered, "I don't need a prisoner to assist me."

Luo Lan smiled and said, "Qing Yun, do you still remember the days when you used to stick to our behinds and play in the dirt? When I was out on campaign, you were probably still wetting the bed."

Secretary Zhou said angrily, "That's enough! A great change will be sweeping over the southwestern region soon, and you're still in the mood to quarrel like children here? Qing Yun, the two of them will serve as your military advisors. Brief them first, then hold a military meeting."

Qing Yun gave them a look and said to his second-in-command next to him, "Inform all the commanders of the fighting forces to attend the meeting!"

Ultimately, Qing Yun still did not dare to disobey the Board's order. Since the Board sent Qing Zhen here as the military advisor, he would have to somehow cooperate with him on the surface. This way, no one could point their fingers at him even if something went wrong.

During the meeting, Qing Zhen sat at the table with his eyes closed throughout. No one knew whether he was listening to the updates given by the commanders of the fighting forces. Meanwhile, Luo Lan sprawled out on the table and openly slept.

An officer said, "We're currently garrisoned on the front lines at Mt. Daping and Mt. Xianlin. The Li Consortium and the Yang Consortium won't be so reckless to come and attack us since this war is still mainly a conflict between their two organizations—".

"How stupid!" interrupted Qing Zhen as his eyes shot open.

The command post fell silent. Qing Zhen bluntly said, "The philosophy on this battlefield is that anyone involved in the war is an enemy, other than our own. Why do you think the Li Consortium and the Yang Consortium won't take the initiative and attack us just because their grudge is with each other?"

Qing Yun said coldly, "Because the Yang Consortium stole the Li Consortium's—"

Qing Zhen was guffawed. "That was not stolen by the Yang Consortium. It was I who stole it and gave it to the Yang Consortium. Mark my words, since we've already come all the way out here, we'll certainly be targeted by the Li Consortium. If our defenses slip up, we could very well end up becoming the priority target of the other two organizations. When that happens, they might even be willing to put aside their feud temporarily. The possibility of gaining the Qing Consortium's interests for themselves would be more than enough to tempt them."

Qing Yun glared at Qing Zhen as he had been living in Qing Zhen's shadow for more than 20 years now. When he was in preschool, everyone said there was a person better than him, and that person was called Qing Zhen. When he got to elementary school, high school, or university, it was still the same. Even after entering the military, everyone was still saying that Qing Zhen was better at waging war than anyone else in the organization.

But even if he hated Qing Zhen to the core, he would still sit at the same table with Qing Zhen to discuss the war as he wanted to let the Board know that he was more obedient than Qing Zhen.

### **Chapter 247 Qing Zhen seizes command**

Qing Yun looked at Qing Zhen. "I hope you can understand that I'm the commanding officer here. You can offer advice, but don't think you're the only smart one at the command post."

Qing Zhen glanced at Qing Yun, startled. "I never claimed I was the only smart one around. Luo Lan is also quite smart as well."

Luo Lan was awoken by the noise. He asked sleepily, "What? What'd you say?"

Qing Zhen smiled and said, "I was saying that other than you and me, everyone else in this command post is stupid."

Luo Lan sat bolt upright. "Qing Zhen is right!"

Qing Yun's face grew ugly in an instant. "Smartass. But aren't you still just a prisoner?"

But as soon as he finished speaking, Qing Zhen smiled at him and said. "If you're allowed to continue being the commanding officer here, the Qing Consortium will be done for. With immediate effect, I shall take over command of all the fighting forces on the front lines. Secretary Zhou, you can go back and tell those old fogies to wait until after the war has ended if they have any opinions on this."

As his voice trailed off, the second-in-command next to Qing Yun suddenly unholstered his pistol and pulled the trigger while pointing it at Qing Yun's head.

The gunshot was so loud that the other officers in the tent nearly screamed in fright! However, their screams didn't even make it out of their mouths before they swallowed them down.

Qing Yun's trusted aides immediately unholstered their pistols to fight back, but they realized five people in the tent had already drawn their pistols at the same time and were pointing them at them!

Everyone in the tent fell silent. At this moment, they remembered the atrocities Qing Zhen had committed in the past.

This was the craziest person of all in the Qing Consortium!

Qing Yun had carefully played his every card on the table to earn the appreciation of the Board.

But he could never have expected that Qing Zhen would just flip the table.

The silent tiger of the Qing Consortium had finally returned to the mountains.

Secretary Zhou was in shock. "Qing Zhen! How dare you murder the commanding officer of the fighting forces? And how dare you plant your people around Qing Yun!"

Qing Zhen grinned and remarked, "Secretary Zhou, I might have planted some of my people around you too."

Secretary Zhou was so frightened he ran out of the command post and jumped into the off-road vehicle. He did not even dare to take his driver with him and just drove off by himself.

"It's peaceful again." Luo Lan stretched and laughed heartily. "So how are we going to fight this war?"

Qing Zhen said, "Let's straighten out our internal affairs first." After taking a look at the sand table, he said, "Concentrate the defensive lines and don't scatter our troops out to Mt. Daping. The recon forces are to continue doing their job on the battlefield to prevent any ambushes by the Li Consortium and the Yang Consortium. Heavy weapons will not be of much use if their usage is restricted to the mountains, and they're not as good as us when it comes to paving roads. However, we should still be careful of the nanosoldiers these two organizations have."

Qing Zhen continued giving out instructions. "Although we haven't seen what a nanosoldier looks like, we're likely going to be considered a vulnerable target since we're the only combatant among the three organizations without nanosoldiers. If we reveal any signs of weakness first, this war could get a little tricky. So what we should do now isn't to invade the others; rather, don't make any mistakes."

As this chessboard was too big, only the players that made the least mistakes would last until the end.

Qing Zhen looked at Luo Lan. "I want you to go to the Yang Consortium tomorrow and negotiate with them. Tell them we'll be eliminating the Li Consortium first."

Luo Lan nodded, but he heard Qing Zhen say to another person, "I want you to go to the Li Consortium and negotiate with them. Tell them we can help them take out the Yang Consortium's defenses at Mt. Ping. You'll have to set off immediately. If you're successful in the negotiations, I'll make sure you get recognized for your meritorious service upon returning."

Although this person was Qing Yun's trusted aide, Qing Zhen did not kill him and even entrusted him with an important responsibility.

After this person left, Luo Lan lowered his voice and asked curiously, "Why didn't you have me approach the Li Consortium?"

"Because the Li Consortium is already out of their minds." Qing Zhen said softly, "Besides, they do have a real lunatic there, so anyone who goes will die."

Luo Lan finally understood. It turned out Qing Zhen knew right from the start they would not be able to join forces with the Li Consortium. By sending Qing Yun's trusted aide to the Li Consortium, it was as good as sending him to his death.

Qing Zhen said, "Furthermore, he's probably scared to the bone right now, so the forces he took with him will definitely be those he trusts most and are likely to be a part of Qing Yun's inner circle. By sending them to the Li Consortium, the problem will take care of itself."

Luo Lan's eyes lit up. "Brilliant!"

Qing Zhen suddenly said with a sigh, "I was wrong just now."

Luo Lan was taken aback. "What were you wrong about?"

Qing Zhen looked at Luo Lan. "Actually, I'm the only smart one around here. You don't count."

Luo Lan was confused.

Then Qing Zhen looked at the other officers and said, "Start thinking about how we should concentrate our defensive lines. I want to see a new strategy in place on the sand table tomorrow morning."

Someone hesitated for a moment before saying, "An elite troop of soldiers have already been sent to the Li Consortium's territory. Qing Yun was planning on intercepting the Li Consortium's Divine Arms Battalion based on the intel they relayed back. This Divine Arms Battalion is being too careless by acting independently without coordinating with their other fighting forces. Therefore, Qing Yun thought this would be an opportunity to nip the threat in the bud."

Qing Zhen was taken aback. "When did he send our troops out? And where are they now?"

"It's been a week since they set off. They were headed to the front lines at Mt. Fengyi and Mt. Shuanglong," that officer said.

Qing Zhen said, "Recall them. There's no need for such an unnecessary move at this moment."

That officer hesitated before saying, "I'm afraid it's too late."

Ren Xiaosu and the others were trekking in the mountains on foot at this moment. The snow on the ground had not melted yet because of the low temperatures in the mountains. It was very difficult for them to march in such conditions, yet it started snowing yet again.

Sniffing back mucus, Li Qingzheng said, "If I knew it would be like this, I would've gone into hiding back then. I thought I could enjoy my days after joining the private army, but life now is even worse than before.... I really miss the days when we were at the outpost where we led a carefree life!"

Next to him, a soldier from another platoon asked curiously, "Was it very comfortable at the outpost for y'all? Why did it feel so miserable for us?"

Li Qingzheng immediately shut his mouth after hearing someone else chip in with this question. He couldn't possibly tell them they had wolves sending all that game to them at their outpost, right?

As the snowstorm got heavier, Ren Xiaosu looked up at the sky. “When snowfall becomes this heavy in the wilderness of the mountains, it tends to keep snowing for at least a week. We can’t march any further. I’m afraid that if we keep moving, we’ll end up losing our way.”

The Divine Arms officer in front turned around and said, “What’s there to be afraid of? We’re equipped with GPS devices, so we won’t lose our way! Everyone is to obey our orders right now! We’re going to keep marching forward!”

After Liu Taiyu, the commander of the Iron Second Battalion, was punched and kicked, he fell into a coma and then started running a high fever. Without him, no one in the Iron Second could call the shots. So everyone had no choice but to follow the Divine Arms Battalion’s orders and continue marching.

Although Ren Xiaosu’s identity was very unique, the soldiers from the Divine Arms Battalion had spoken to him about this before. If their plans were affected, no one would be able to bear the consequences. In such situations, even being a member of the Office of Special Investigations would not allow him to violate this military order. For a moment, Ren Xiaosu even wanted to convince himself that since he had already infringed on the Custom Division’s authority by investigating smuggling, it wouldn’t be a big deal if he also took over the role of the Divine Arms Battalion.

However, this was still not the right time.

#### **Chapter 248 The Office of Special Investigations guards against spies!**

“The snow’s getting even heavier.” Ren Xiaosu sighed as he observed the weather.

“It’s said that it was even colder than this right after The Cataclysm occurred.” Li Qingzheng was panting as he trudged through the snow. “Some of the older people said they had to store enough food to last them the entire winter during those years. If there wasn’t enough food, they would even resort to stocking up with tree roots. No one could go outside in the winter at all.”

The snow in the mountains gradually reached their feet, then their ankles, and finally, their knees.

This heavy snowfall came so fast and unexpectedly that the Divine Arms officer even started to waver on whether they should continue marching. When he looked at his GPS device and saw it was still functioning normally, he felt a little reassured.

However, there was only a narrow dirt road in the mountains, and it was currently covered in snow. Someone who was not careful enough sprained their ankle when they accidentally stepped onto a rock. Fortunately, the sprain was not too serious as the snow was relatively soft.

Ren Xiaosu walked against the blizzard to get to the front of the troops and shouted to the officer of the Divine Arms Battalion, “We can’t walk any further. The snow is too deep for everyone to move.”

But that Divine Arms officer didn’t care. Since the nanomachines in their bodies were constantly providing them with powered assistance, they did not have much difficulty walking in the snow. Besides, the nanomachines’ battery life would definitely be sufficient to support them for the entire way if they were going to slowly walk like this. Moreover, they were carrying wireless chargers on their backs.

The wireless chargers were standard issue for the combat troops of the Divine Arms Battalion and had to be carried around during a war.

Awhile ago, the Divine Arms officer was adamant about marching even though it was snowing heavily. If he suddenly changed his mind, wouldn't he be embarrassing himself?

One of the other Divine Arms officers said coldly, "If we can't get to the specified destination on time, are you going to shoulder the responsibility?"

Ren Xiaosu did not bother contending with them and just said, "Have y'all seen how a wolf pack moves in the snow? We need to keep rotating the people at the front to create a trail so that it'll be much easier for those at the back to walk. It'll be easier to advance if every platoon takes turns creating a path in the snow!"

After hearing this, the Divine Arms officers turned around and looked at the exhausted private soldiers behind them.

The officers looked at one another until one of them said, "We'll do as you described. Every platoon is to walk at the front for 15 minutes each. No one is allowed to slack off!"

After the order was passed down, the entire group of marching troops went from moving in a swarm to forming a single long and narrow file in the snow.

Ren Xiaosu heaved a sigh of relief. By doing this, it would at least relieve some of their burdens and help the troops march in a more orderly fashion.

Suddenly, the voice from the palace in his mind said, "Quest: Help your comrades who have fallen behind keep up with the troops."

This quest dumbfounded Ren Xiaosu as no one had fallen behind yet. Besides, these bastards had betrayed him before, so why should he help them?

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu saw someone in the troops behind him run off towards the mountain. He knew something was not right. This was a deserter who could no longer bear it and was trying to run away!

Before now, Liu Taiyu had the support of the reinforced company to help him oversee the private troops and prevent anyone from becoming deserters. But now that Liu Taiyu was in a coma, the soldiers of the reinforced company couldn't care less about maintaining order. Furthermore, they still had to take turns carrying Liu Taiyu. Ren Xiaosu felt that these people might even abandon him along the way and become deserters themselves.

As Ren Xiaosu watched that man run off to the nearby mountains, he could only think of one thing. 'Would a deserter count as someone who's fallen behind?'

Of course it fucking would!



A lot of people noticed that deserter as well. Before the others felt tempted to follow suit, they saw Ren Xiaosu dash over. His speed in the snow was unhindered and as fast as running on flat ground!

Within half a minute, Ren Xiaosu caught the deserter and even took his weapons away from him.

As Ren Xiaosu dragged this deserter back by his legs, he earnestly tried to comfort him. "It's not safe in the mountains. What if something happens to you after you've escaped into the mountains?"

The deserter was in despair. "I won't try to escape anymore, so please let go of me. I'll stand up and walk by myself!"

A deep trail was carved out in the snow when Ren Xiaosu dragged the deserter back by his legs. Actually, Ren Xiaosu had not meant to get rough with him. Although the deserter had outed him yesterday, it wasn't worthwhile for Ren Xiaosu to do anything to him.

And there was nothing wrong with being a deserter either. All the soldier wanted was to live!

So Ren Xiaosu only took away the deserter's weapons when he caught him and did not hit him at all.

But was Ren Xiaosu in the wrong for wanting to complete his quest? He wasn't in the wrong either!

There was another point that Ren Xiaosu was not lying about. If anyone ventured into the mountains alone in such heavy snowfall, they would die. At the very least, he would never have ventured into the mountains during a violent blizzard.

Ren Xiaosu said to the others, "Everyone, keep walking. Don't be a deserter, ya hear me!"

Then Ren Xiaosu went over to the reinforced company and said, "Although the Iron Second's commander is in a coma, y'all have to assume your duties, understand?"

The soldiers of the reinforced company who were carrying Liu Taiyu were a little dumbfounded. Why had this refugee taken control of them?

Ren Xiaosu looked at the Divine Arms officer and said, "If anyone escapes at this time and your plans get discovered by enemy troops, all that you've done up til now will have been for naught."

The Divine Arms officer also thought what he said was true. They turned to the reinforced company's soldiers and said, "Go keep an eye on the troops. If anyone attempts to desert, shoot them on the spot!"

Li Qingzheng looked at Ren Xiaosu's back and said with emotion, "Although I don't know what our platoon commander is up to, his ability to sway people is amazing."

But at this moment, someone in the troops suddenly fell down in the snow looking utterly exhausted. The people who passed by did not even bother looking at him. Even his comrades from the same platoon were not planning on helping him.

Ren Xiaosu gave a mental sigh. He had thought his quest would be completed after he had caught the deserter, but he had not expected this quest to turn out more difficult than the ones he had before.

Before he could finish lamenting, another person in the troops fainted.

These people were not pretending. After all, the Divine Arms Battalion had just given the order that if anyone deliberately tried to delay the mission, they would be shot.

Ren Xiaosu walked over and fireman-carried the man who had fainted. He said to Chen Wudi, "I guess we're helping people in need. Piggyback the other person and walk ahead."

Ren Xiaosu had been waiting for the palace to confirm that he had completed the quest, but it did not say anything even after a long time.

However, Chen Wudi appeared to be quite happy. Doing good deeds together and being a hero with his master felt quite good and fun to him.

After a while, Chen Wudi was even carrying two people on his shoulders. Ren Xiaosu could only explain to the others that his friend was born with great strength.

Although it was rare to see people who could carry two people at once, quite a few refugees at the coal mines outside the stronghold could do it, so it was still explainable.

But if he carried more than that, Ren Xiaosu would probably not be able to explain it.

When the lead officer of the Divine Arms Battalion saw this, he said in surprise, "The Office of Special Investigations is really doing all it can just to guard against spies. No wonder all the other fighting forces in the military are afraid of them!"

### **Chapter 249 Standing up for Chen Wudi**

At noon, the group found a slope downwind and decided to take a short break there. The buns everyone was carrying had frozen hard. But they had no other choice as this was what it was like in the wilderness.

Based on what the private soldiers were saying, it was quite good that they had buns to eat at all.

While the soldiers ate their field rations, someone suddenly complained, "They're really inhumane for making us march in such accursed weather!"

"But what can you do 'bout it?" One of the soldiers took a bite of the cold, hard bun and said, "If I hadn't stocked up on some buns last night, I would've starved to death along the way today. It's impossible to keep moving in this weather if we have no food to eat."

"Hey, you don't say! Seeing Liu Taiyu's current plight can't make me any happier." Someone said, "All of our pay and entitlements must have been embezzled by that bastard, Liu Taiyu!"

"But I still feel like it isn't enough. Why didn't that Divine Arms officer just kick him to death?" one of the soldiers said angrily.

"We're still dozens of clicks away from the nearest mountain, Mt. Tantou, and Mt. Fengyi and Mt. Shuanglong are even further north. I wonder when we'll reach our destination since it's snowing so

heavily now,” someone said in total despair. “Moreover, those bastards from the reinforced company are even starting to keep an eye on us now, so there’s no chance that we can escape.”

“Forget about it,” one of them said. “Escape? It requires tremendous courage in this weather just to head into the mountains alone to seek a quick death. There’s still a chance of survival if we stick with everyone. But once you become a deserter, death is certain.”

“Let me give y’all a suggestion.” Someone chuckled. “When we set off again later, just pretend you’ve fainted. As soon as you faint, that idiot called Chen Wudi will come over and carry you. We can walk much less that way!” But as soon as he finished speaking, he felt a chill creep up behind his back, causing him to shudder even more in this already cold weather. But when he turned around to look, everything seemed perfectly normal. ‘That’s strange! What’s going on?’

As Ren Xiaosu was furtively cutting pieces of cured meat to share with Chen Wudi and the students, he noticed Chen Wudi looked dismayed. “Wudi, what’s the matter?”

Chen Wudi whispered, “Master, I’ve regained my super hearing.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. “But Wudi, the Great Sage doesn’t have that power.”

Chen Wudi replied, “Well, the version of the Great Sage that I am does.”

“Hm.” Ren Xiaosu nodded. ‘Alright, whatever you say.’ Honestly, Ren Xiaosu did not even know which version of the Great Sage Chen Wudi was anymore. How amazing it was to be able to “patch” oneself like that.

“Master,” Chen Wudi said dejectedly, “I don’t want to help them anymore.”

“Why’s that?” Ren Xiaosu asked, “What did you hear?”

“They said that they’re going to pretend to faint when we set off again so that the idiotic Chen Wudi will carry them,” Chen Wudi answered.

Ren Xiaosu’s eyes narrowed at the answer. “Who said that?”

Chen Wudi did not mention the man. “Master, you’d kill the man if I told you.”

“What’s the big deal with killing some people?” Ren Xiaosu sneered.

“Master,” Chen Wudi said, “I just don’t understand why some people in this world are so evil?”

“They’ll get their comeuppance,” Ren Xiaosu said as he looked at the private soldiers around him with a dark expression. For the first time in recent days, he was keen to kill someone.

When they resumed their journey in the afternoon, Ren Xiaosu was silent as he walked along with the troops. Suddenly, five people dropped to the ground at the same time. Ren Xiaosu slowly walked up to these people and seemingly stepped on the back of a person’s hand accidentally. The man trembled in pain but pretended to remain unconscious and did not open his eyes no matter what.

Ren Xiaosu said to Li Qingzheng with a smile, "Get me a rope. We have some in our field

packs."

"OK." Li Qingzheng did not know why Ren Xiaosu wanted a rope, but he still got it for him.

He watched Ren Xiaosu tie the rope around the calves of these five people who were on the ground. Then, he started dragging them forward in the snow!

When one of those people on the ground sensed something was wrong, he wanted to quickly get up and say that he had regained his consciousness. But as soon as he got up, Ren Xiaosu kicked his chest. The man coughed up blood on the spot!

Everyone turned around and looked at Ren Xiaosu's back as he stood in the snow. Snowflakes in the air swirled around him, and he was full of killing intent.

He said calmly, "Did I say that you could get up?"

In response, someone on the ground got up and shouted, "We're going to die if we get dragged like this in the snow by him. Let's fight him!"

But when they tried to stand up, Ren Xiaosu kicked all of them back into the snow. These people could only feel a foot as hard as steel when the kicks landed on their chests, while the people watching could not even see how fast Ren Xiaosu's movements were. But they only thought the snowfall blurred their vision.

Ren Xiaosu turned around and grinned at the others. "You're all adults, so walk on your own, got it?"

Chen Wudi stared dumbfoundedly at Ren Xiaosu while standing in the snow. "Master..."

As the young man's figure faced the blizzard in the wilderness of the mountains, he smiled at Chen Wudi and said, "Master will help you get back at them."

Then Ren Xiaosu dragged the five of them behind him through the snow with the rope. Li Qingzheng went up to him. "I'll help you

pull."

Jiang Wu's eight students also came over. "Monitor, we'll help too."

In this moment, no one in the troops dared to speak up for these five men. Those in the know all knew Ren Xiaosu had probably realized the five of them were deliberately trying to take advantage of Chen Wudi's kindness.

Sometimes, there were just some people who stood head and shoulders above millions of others. Before Ren Xiaosu had revealed himself, everyone thought he was just a normal young man. But in this moment, his ruthlessness made everyone terrified of him. They knew Ren Xiaosu was going to drag all five of them through the snow until they died!

When the Divine Arms officer standing furthest ahead of the troops watched this occur, he was a little dumbfounded. "I heard there were many ruthless people in the Office of Special Investigations. I didn't believe it before, but I do now."

Another Divine Arms officer muttered, "When we meet up with the others after the war ends, we must tell them not to ever mess with those from the Office of Special Investigations. Their ways are extremely cruel."

In fact, Ren Xiaosu had never openly admitted to his master-disciple relationship with Chen Wudi. After all, he had never taught him anything before, and the way he became his disciple was also inexplicable.

But Ren Xiaosu really liked Chen Wudi addressing him as master. Chen Wudi was just like a pure, flawless crystal. Who wouldn't enjoy getting along with someone like that? As a result, Ren Xiaosu had long since acknowledged this master-disciple relationship in his mind.

But today, Ren Xiaosu was not actually that insistent on standing up for Chen Wudi. All he wanted was to help Chen Wudi hold on to his last ray of light.

#### **Chapter 250 Side quest unlocked: Seeds!**

On the same afternoon, the blizzard had become so heavy that even the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion were finding it unbearable. The private soldiers with the responsibility of forging a path in the snow had to lift their legs high each time they took a step forward.

In this accursed weather, even though everyone was taking turns to create a path in the snow, it was still extremely taxing, even though the terrain was flat.

However, no one else dared to faint for the rest of the afternoon as they were all afraid they would get dragged to their deaths in the snow by Ren Xiaosu.

"Let's set up camp here." One of the officers of the Divine Arms Battalion said, "We'll continue on our march after the snow has stopped."

It was not the time to think about saving face. If they continued marching, all of them might just end up dying in the snow.

If that happened, they would similarly not be able to accomplish their mission since they wouldn't even be able to get to Mt. Shuanglong.

That officer of the Divine Arms Battalion felt he could still keep marching, but the private soldiers were simply not fit enough to go on.

When they learned they could finally set up camp and get some rest, all of the private soldiers seemed like they had been injected with a new lease on life. They were trembling in the cold weather and even wanted to sit down in the snow, but Ren Xiaosu roared at them, "Get up and set up your tents. How can

y'all think of resting when you don't have a tent to take shelter in? Do you want to die out here in the snow?"

Actually, they could also rest in the snow without setting up a tent. All they had to do was dig a snow pit and bury themselves in it. This wasn't some derisive suggestion but a genuine solution if tents were not available while trekking through deep snow. Most people would think it would be colder in a snow pit, but being in one actually helps keep a person warm, because the surroundings outside of a snow pit are even colder than the inside.

Ren Xiaosu had heard from Zhang Jinglin that some human settlements in the far north would build igloos to keep themselves warm in the winter.

Everyone struggled to get up and were using their last bit of strength to set up their tents when faced with the threat of death. However, some of the platoons were in terrible shape. In order to conserve their energy along the way, they had even thrown away their tents at some point. If they could manage to squeeze into other people's tents, it wouldn't be so bad. But if the others did not share their tents, they would have to dig snow pits and gamble on whether they would be able to endure the cold in there.

Ren Xiaosu ordered Li Qingzheng and the others, "I'll set up the tent while y'all go and gather some firewood from the ground. If you can't find any, tree branches will do too. We have to get a campfire going so that we can keep ourselves warm. Have a bowl of hot porridge, each of you. Otherwise, we won't be able to bear it for much longer."

"Alright." Li Qingzheng's face was flushed from the cold. "Leave it to me. Follow me, brothers. Let's go and collect some firewood."

Branches that were collected from trees would produce a lot of choking smoke when burned. But this was nothing compared to having a campfire to warm themselves with.

At this moment, the voice from the palace in Ren Xiaosu's mind said, "Quest complete. Awarded Basic Skill Duplication Scroll."

It wasn't until this moment that his quest was finally completed. This was probably the hardest standard quest he had ever done.

At present, Ren Xiaosu had two Basic Skill Duplication Scrolls on him. But he didn't intend to use them since there was no target nearby for him to learn from. But if he met Hu Shuo again, he could probably give it a try. Although the Basic Skill Duplication Scroll couldn't copy superpowers, Hu Shuo must have some skills that would prove useful for Ren Xiaosu. Even if he was just trying his luck, he could probably still get something good from him.

But the palace was not finished as it continued, "Side quest complete. A new product, Seeds, has been unlocked for purchase in the vending machine!"

Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. His patience for this side quest had finally paid off. It felt like it had taken such a long time for it to be completed. But upon recounting the days carefully, he realized it was only the second day of the new year today.

He had a look inside the palace and saw the vending machine standing quietly within it. A new transparent window had appeared next to the Explosive Poker slot.

There were some seeds scattered within the window. But to Ren Xiaosu's surprise, they all looked somewhat different from each other. Could it be that different plants would grow from different seeds?

The newly unlocked window slot was just like a candy box in a grocery store. The colorful packaging represented different flavors while different colors of seeds represented different

uses.

He placed a gratitude token into the slot and watched a crimson seed about the size of a thumb get dispensed into the pick-up compartment at the bottom. As Ren Xiaosu held it in his hand, the palace did not explain what this item was for.

"Do I have to plant it before I know what it does?" Ren Xiaosu wondered. 'But more importantly, shouldn't the palace at least tell me what kind of environment it grows in?'

It had to have magical properties since it was a product of the palace. However, he would have to test it for himself.

For example, Ren Xiaosu also had to discover how to activate Explosive Poker by himself. If he had not managed to do so, they would have remained bog-standard playing cards.

What should he do now? Should he try planting it in the ground? What if this seed could germinate and sprout immediately? In this winter weather, how great would it be if the plant that grew from the seed bore fruit or something immediately?

Ren Xiaosu had always had great expectations of the side quest rewards awarded by the palace. They were items that basically ignored the laws of nature!

Ren Xiaosu said to Chen Wudi, "Keep watch here at the tent. When they get back, tell them that I spotted a small wild boar and that I'm planning to catch it for our dinner tonight. If I come back late, just improvise and make up an excuse."

"OK." Chen Wudi nodded.

Ren Xiaosu headed out into the snow alone. As he walked further and further, he felt that he might have been too hasty to tell Chen Wudi to improvise a reason for his disappearance.

He headed further north to look for a suitable location to experiment with the seed and find out just how magical it was.

He kept heading north until he found a spot that was slightly downwind. Then he started digging up the snow and soil before planting the crimson seed.

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As Ren Xiaosu patiently waited, he saw the seed he had just planted suddenly sprout. Bramble grew outwards as the thorny vines spread out dozens of meters across the snow before gradually stopping.

If Ren Xiaosu cleared away the snow on the ground, he would see the red bramble spread out on the ground like a spiderweb where it laid in wait for its prey.

At this moment, the plant connected with Ren Xiaosu's consciousness like it did for Explosive Poker. Ren Xiaosu was shocked when he realized that this plant was extremely aggressive. If it were not controlled by him, it would attack any creature that came near to it!

What was this? Ren Xiaosu had thought this plant could bear fruit that could be eaten, but it turned out to be an attack plant.

No, rather than an attack plant, it was more appropriate to call it a defensive type.

If Ren Xiaosu and the others went and lived in the forested mountains in the future, they would not have to be afraid of any wild animals as long as he planted this thing in their surroundings.

As Ren Xiaosu looked at the other colored seeds in the palace, he wondered what kind of abilities they had. Surely one of them had to be edible, right?

After some thought, he placed an additional five gratitude tokens into the vending machine to trade for five seeds all at once. Then he planted them in the soil at long distance from each other.

As Chen Wudi sat in the tent and waited, Li Qingzheng asked, "Wudi, where did your master go?"

Chen Wudi thought for a moment and said, "My master went out to catch a wild boar for our dinner."

Li Qingzheng asked, "Then why isn't he back yet?"

Chen Wudi gave it some thought. "The boar probably doesn't agree to it."