

Chapter 321 The guest from Stronghold 178

In the afternoon, Ren Xiaosu, Yan Liuyuan, and Luo Lan swaggered out of the house. Initially, Yan Liuyuan was a little worried. But after Luo Lan joined them, he felt much more relaxed. The fatso who could eat a lot was still a pretty loyal person at times.

After eating lunch, the three of them set off for the function. They first took a streetcar to Resurgence Road where they transferred to another streetcar that traveled north.

They were dressed in casual attire but did not feel embarrassed one bit.

After they arrived at the terminal station, they had to continue walking further north. Luo Lan suddenly said, "Ren Xiaosu, why don't you follow me back to the Qing Consortium's territory in the future?"

"Eh?" Ren Xiaosu looked at Luo Lan. "Why?"

"I know you aren't an average person. The average person couldn't survive after going through the destruction of three strongholds. Of course, I'm not trying to make use of you. You can do as you wish after we return to the Qing Consortium's territory." Luo Lan remarked, "Of course, if you're willing to help us, I can also get Qing Zhen to pay you."

Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, "There's no need. I'm not used to living in a stronghold."

When he said this, it was Yan Liuyuan's eyes that lit up. He realized Ren Xiaosu had already made his decision to leave, but he still did not know where Ren Xiaosu had decided on going.

However, it was not a big deal for Yan Liuyuan no matter where they were headed. He was fine with following Ren Xiaosu to the mountains where they could reign as kings.

Of course, this would all still have to wait until Ren Xiaosu had fully recuperated, as well as for the right opportunity to arise. The Yang Consortium would probably not let them go for now.

Luo Lan replied, "If you aren't used to living in a stronghold, I can have you all live in town. Since you've all lived in town before, this shouldn't be a problem."

Ren Xiaosu felt a little tempted by his words. Humans were social beings. If he made friends with Luo Lan and Qing Zhen, that would probably solve many problems.

Ren Xiaosu did not answer the question directly. He said with a smile, "You might as well think about how you're going to leave this place. I don't think the Yang Consortium will release you."

"That's fine." Luo Lan said nonchalantly, "Qing Zhen will definitely arrange for someone to come and save me. I'll just wait patiently until that happens. When the time comes, you all can come with me if you want to leave the Yang Consortium's stronghold!"

This time, Ren Xiaosu felt that the information revealed by Luo Lan was very crucial. Qing Zhen would definitely save Luo Lan, and Ren Xiaosu could take Xiaoyu and the others to leave with Luo Lan at that time.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that Luo Lan and Qing Zhen were just as close as Yan Liuyuan and him. They did not need to explicitly convey their thoughts to each other, as Luo Lan firmly believed Qing Zhen would do things for him.

It was a kind of tacit understanding and trust to place their lives in the hands of the other. Just like back at Stronghold 108, even though the Experimentals almost caught up to them, Yan Liuyuan still stayed together with Ren Xiaosu even though he could have died.

When Ren Xiaosu thought of this, he empathized a little more with Fatty Luo.

All of a sudden, several cars drove past them. They would arrive at the Yang Consortium's Bronze Ram Manor if they headed a little further to the north. It seemed like those people were here to attend the gala as well.

Luo Lan noticed Ren Xiaosu's gaze and explained with a smile, "Don't be jealous of them driving those expensive cars and being able to attend such a grand gala. The people who attend these functions are generally called socialites. For example, they could be the director of the Logistics Division or the director of the Commerce Division. They pretend to lead glamorous lives, but once they get into trouble, they will probably be much worse off than a dog."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Didn't Yan Liuyuan kill a director from the Li Consortium's Logistics Division while they were escaping? When he thought of that, Ren Xiaosu despised them even more.

In this era where supernatural beings were starting to rise, absolute power was beginning to have an impact on the social order that was in place. Ren Xiaosu realized he was gaining a condescending mentality when he looked at these people. Ren Xiaosu shook his head. This was the mentality that came with the increase of his strength. He had to remain clear-headed as it was not the time to get arrogant yet.

Meanwhile, Luo Lan, who used to be the true controller of Stronghold 113, would naturally look down on these so-called socialites who were part of a stronghold. When the fatty returned to the Qing Consortium safe and sound, he would likely become one of the most powerful people in the world.

Of course, whether he could return or not was another matter...

As the luxury cars drove past them, no one deliberately stopped to mock them for walking in. Everyone was very busy, and they were not expecting Ren Xiaosu and company to be attending the gala as well.

In contrast, the well-dressed celebrities were sitting in luxury cars to attend the gala, while Ren Xiaosu and company had to walk inside dressed in their casual wear.

The person from the Yang Consortium who invited them here seemed to be telling Ren Xiaosu in a direct way that the refugees did not stand a chance of integrating into their social hierarchy.

When they arrived at the gate, the security guard immediately came to check their invitations. After Luo Lan handed over the invitations, Ren Xiaosu could see that the security guard was taken aback. Then he politely opened the gate and let them through.

Luo Lan said with a smile as he walked in, "The watchdogs who work for the rich families are all very clever people. As long as you have an invitation, they won't dare to offend you regardless of how you're dressed. It's because his master was the one who invited you."

A lot of people were already standing on the lawn in the manor. All of them were holding crystal wine glasses in their hands as they toasted one another.

If he had not seen this with his own eyes, Ren Xiaosu would not have believed the people here led completely different lives from the refugees.

Luo Lan stopped a servant and took three glasses of wine from his tray and handed one each to Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan.

But before Yan Liuyuan took the glass from him, Ren Xiaosu snatched it out of his hand. "You're still too young to drink." Then Ren Xiaosu placed the glass down on the table next to him.

All of a sudden, he heard someone say, "I heard a VIP from the Zong Consortium will be here tonight."

Someone asked, "Do you know who it is?"

Someone said, "I heard it's an up-and-comer who already commands an important position in the Zong Consortium. He's in charge of the entirety of Stronghold 141's garrison troops. And Stronghold 141 is the Zong Consortium's headquarters."

Luo Lan whispered to them, "The garrison troops are usually where the family members of an organization are posted. It's a place where worthless people gather together."

However, someone else said, "But I heard today's main guest is not from the Zong Consortium."

"Ah? It's not the Zong Consortium's people?"

"Yeah, it seems like someone from Stronghold 178 has come as well. Apparently, the most favored current subordinate of Zhang Jinglin has come to discuss a joint defense plan with the Yang Consortium and the Zong Consortium," the person answered.

"I heard it's not about a joint defense plan. It seems they'll be working together to exterminate the banditry happening out there in the unincorporated zone between the Yang Consortium, the Zong Consortium, and Stronghold 178. They're looking to reopen the trade routes between the three organizations."

Chapter 322 Dumbfounded

Listening to the discussions around him, Ren Xiaosu had not expected today's gala to be so important. This was the beginning of a relationship between the Yang Consortium, the Zong Consortium, and Stronghold 178.

Meanwhile, Luo Lan, who was next to him, cursed in a low voice, "Fuck, this Yang Consortium's old fogey is ganging up with the Zong Consortium and Stronghold 178 to put pressure on our Qing Consortium."

The seemingly clueless Luo Lan immediately understood what the Yang Consortium was trying to achieve. Currently, the Li Consortium had no chance of winning the war and the outcome would be decided soon. But before the end of the war, the Yang Consortium was already starting to plot against the Qing Consortium.

As the saying went, those who did not think and plan ahead would find trouble right on their doorstep. Yang Yu'an had already planned far ahead in the buildup to this war. At the moment, he was seeking an immediate alliance with the Zong Consortium and Stronghold 178 to exert pressure on the Qing Consortium once the Li Consortium fell.

The Yang Consortium could join forces with the Zong Consortium and Stronghold 178 in the north, while the Qing Consortium would be left to battle alone by themselves in the corner.

Actually, the eastern region of the Qing Consortium's territory was quite near the Central Plains. However, the natural barrier of the mountains not only protected the Qing Consortium from external threats, it also stopped them from forming alliances with other forces.

If the Yang Consortium succeeded in forming their alliances, the Qing Consortium would probably become the lone chess piece on the chessboard. If everyone in the Northwest were to target them, the Qing Consortium would end up becoming the next Li Consortium!

While they were fighting the Li Consortium, Qing Zhen sent Luo Lan to form an alliance with the Yang Consortium. But in the end, the Yang Consortium turned around and used the same strategy against Qing Zhen.

But Luo Lan was more concerned about himself. "These old fogeys even invited me to such a gala? It looks like they're fucking not planning on letting me go back."

Ren Xiaosu looked at him. "Then what will you do?"

"I'll be fine. Qing Zhen will think of a way." Luo Lan drained the glass of wine and said, "Anyway, I'm a hostage right now. This group of hillbillies won't be able to deal with Qing Zhen, but we will have to be wary of Stronghold 178. I've already told him to finish off Zhang Jinglin secretly, but he wouldn't listen to me! See what happened now!"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Is it possible that Qing Zhen has made more considerations than you?"

Luo Lan was taken aback. "That's possible too. After all, my little brother is much smarter than I am."

It was at this time that Ren Xiaosu realized Luo Lan had a subconscious habit of praising his little brother no matter where he went.

Then Ren Xiaosu wondered if Xu Xianchu had gone to Stronghold 178 or not after handing the letter of recommendation to him. He also wondered how Xu Xianchu was doing since no one made any mention of Xu Xianchu so far.

Although he always made Xu Xianchu his scapegoat, it was only because his hand was forced by the circumstances. He really liked Xu Xianchu because the guy was very sincere to his friends.

Back when Xu Xianchu fled to the stronghold and met him there, he even asked Ren Xiaosu if he wanted something to eat when he only had half a cornbread left.

So Ren Xiaosu sincerely hoped that Xu Xianchu could succeed and do well at Stronghold 178.

Luo Lan suddenly looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Aren't you on good terms with Zhang Jinglin? Go and tell him that our Qing Consortium will join forces with Stronghold 178 to eliminate the Yang Consortium and the Zong Consortium."

Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow. "We're not that close, so don't even think about it."

"Haha, I'm just saying," Luo Lan said with a laugh.

The public figures around them were giving toasts to those they knew. Some of them even introduced their friends to other friends of theirs. This was probably how the smaller social circles were formed. The people here were mostly only making friends with those who would benefit their own interests and then come together as they aligned their interests for even greater benefits.

At this moment, some people noticed Ren Xiaosu's group and chuckled, "Look at those three wearing casual clothes. While I was on my way here, I saw them coming in on foot. I wonder how they got past the gate."

"Haha, I saw them too. Those who can come in definitely have an invitation, but I'm not sure who invited them."

These people were speaking in whispers. Although Ren Xiaosu's group could not hear what they were saying, Ren Xiaosu was pretty sharp. He could tell they were discussing them by their gazes. As for what they were discussing, he could think of it even with his toes.

Gradually, more and more people around them shifted their attention to Ren Xiaosu's group. They were whispering among themselves like they had found a good conversation topic. But they kept their voices low so it wouldn't get awkward if Ren Xiaosu's group heard them. This was what their "demeanor" and "culture" were really like.

Beautiful lights around the manor shone down upon the lawn as Yan Liuyuan found himself amid the grand and glamorous affair. If it were up to him, he would rather gaze down on the gala from above than be part of it where he had to hear this gossip. The people around him wore hypocritical masks as they mockingly criticized them behind smiling faces.

He had previously dreamed of getting into the stronghold with Ren Xiaosu, but that dream felt so ridiculous now when he recalled it. Actually, the stronghold wasn't that great either. Rather, it was not a world that he liked.

Luo Lan looked around them and then saw Yan Liuyuan's sad eyes. He suddenly shouted, "Who the hell are you all looking at! Who says we must wear suits to attend the gala? Can't I dress as casually as I like?"

A middle-aged man frowned and said, "Please be more civilized. This is an event held for the upper class. We don't condone your atrocious behavior here."

Luo Lan got so angry he laughed. He went up to the man and slapped him. Then he snarled, "How can you speak to me in that manner? I noticed you just now. You were the one who laughed the hardest!"

Everyone nearby looked dumbfounded by Luo Lan's slap. They had not expected someone would actually hit others at such a glamorous event!

That middle-aged man held his face in pain and said dumbfoundedly, "Do you know who I am?"

Luo Lan laughed. "You wanna talk about who we are now, do you? Why? A man like you who's too afraid fight back after getting slapped? Where are your balls! You're acting like a sissy!"

The middle-aged man retorted, "I'm the director of Stronghold 88's Public Order Division!"

Luo Lan's eyes narrowed. "Do you know who I am then?" Luo Lan looked around like a dangerous tiger.

Everyone knew Qing Zhen was the silent tiger of the Qing Consortium. But they did not know about how Luo Lan had restrained himself so Qing Zhen could stand out even more brilliantly.

He said that his life was worthless, so everything good deserved to be given to Qing Zhen instead of him.

But a tiger was still a tiger. Something inherent would eventually reveal itself to the world.

Luo Lan said with a sneer, "Listen up, my name is Luo Lan. Let's see who dares challenge me."

The crowd erupted into a furor. Who in Stronghold 88 did not know that Luo Lan was here? Although the Yang Consortium had placed him under house arrest in the stronghold, Qing Zhen was now the head of the Qing Consortium. If Luo Lan remained alive, it would be fine. But if he died, who would bear the wrath of Qing Zhen?

Then the crowd fell silent. It sounded like a 1,000 flies had suddenly stopped buzzing.

The crowd looked at the end of the lawn where a young girl stood, sporting a similar attire to the boy.

Chapter 323 Two weeds

Under everyone's gaze, the cap-wearing Yang Xiaojin walked up to Ren Xiaosu. All of the well-known public figures of Stronghold 88 knew of her status.

Meanwhile, the young man who was similarly dressed stood in a daze out on the lawn. It was as though he had not expected to witness such a twist today. He had thought she would make her appearance in a stunning gown, shining bright as the stars. At the moment of her appearance, even the stars in the night sky would have paled in comparison. He had come here today because he had wanted to enjoy that sight.

But what happened here blew Ren Xiaosu's mind. Not only was Yang Xiaojin not dressed formally for the function, she even deliberately wore white sportswear with red wording on it that matched well with his that had blue wording.

The young man had many fantasies that made him the hero saving a damsel in distress. But the entire world was apparently playing a joke on Ren Xiaosu. He had only saved her once, yet she stood by him on so many occasions after that, ready to pull him out of any sticky situations he got himself into.

At the venue of the gala, everyone was holding their champagne flutes with stunned looks. They were staring in shock at the two like spectators would.

It might have been an illusion, but Ren Xiaosu felt that everyone around him had turned into statues. The world was no longer bustling, while time also stopped briefly.

The two of them were similar in that they were somewhat out of place with the neatly mown lawn, the smooth stone steps, and the tasteful decorations found around the manor.

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu realized he had been mistaken. Yang Xiaojin was never a princess of the organization like he had imagined her to be, but a weed willing to grow freely in the wilderness just like him.

Ren Xiaosu said in a stunned manner, "Why are you dressed in such—"

Yang Xiaojin leaned forward and grabbed Ren Xiaosu's hand with everyone watching. "C'mon, it's pretty boring here. Let's go out for a walk."

The young girl led Ren Xiaosu out and disappeared from everyone's sight. It was only then that the glacier cold atmosphere started thawing.

Someone asked in a whisper, "Who is that young man?!"

Yan Liuyuan watched quietly as Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin left the manor. He had wanted to go after them, but he thought they were like the stars on the stage, and that he should just stand quietly in the audience and watch in the darkness.

He knew how much hardship Ren Xiaosu had suffered. During the period Ren Xiaosu was injured, Yan Liuyuan got a sense of it. So when Ren Xiaosu's happiness arrived after all the suffering he had gone through, Yan Liuyuan knew not to disturb Ren Xiaosu's hopes.

He had told Ren Xiaosu that if Yang Xiaojin did not come look for them, they should not head to Stronghold 88.

But now Yang Xiaojin had used her actions to prove she could do a lot more for them.

Since it was that way, Yan Liuyuan had nothing more to disagree with. He was willing to sacrifice his personal inclinations for Ren Xiaosu's happiness. Wasn't it just suffering some grievances in the stronghold? That wasn't a big deal to him.

If Luo Lan was willing to act like a silly fatso whose life was worthless for Qing Zhen's sake, Yan Liuyuan could do likewise for his brother.

When he thought of that, Yan Liuyuan felt like Luo Lan had suddenly become much more affable. "Hey, fatty, let's head back first."

Luo Lan scolded, "Brat, who are you calling a fatty? Come on, I'm taking you home."

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When they walked out of everyone's sight, Yang Xiaojin suddenly let go of Ren Xiaosu's hand. She hesitated for a moment before saying, "Just now..."

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Thanks for bailing us out."

Yang Xiaojin seemed relieved. "You don't have to care about them since they're still obsessed with the world they've built and are complacent about things. But you and I know this world is about to change."

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu nodded.

"You still haven't eaten yet, right?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"Yeah." Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "I discussed beforehand with Luo Lan to scrounge off your family tonight, but we ended up leaving before I could do that."

"Let's go. I'll take you to a diner that serves delicious wontons.[1]" Yang Xiaojin said, "There's also something I want to tell you about. We'll be setting off to the northwest in seven days."

Ren Xiaosu wondered, "What's in the northwest? Are we going to Stronghold 178?"

"No." Yang Xiaojin said, "We're going to exterminate the bandits with the Zong Consortium. It's going to be a joint operation by the Yang Consortium and the Zong Consortium this time. We're not going to exterminate the banditry completely, so we'll return once we've killed enough of them."

"Who else will be going with us?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

"The Zong Consortium's people." Yang Xiaojin said calmly, "We have to be careful along the way. Don't trust anyone besides me."

Ren Xiaosu was shocked. He suddenly recalled the time they were on the expedition to the Jing Mountains. Although they did not trust each other at the time, they still formed a temporary alliance. Now that he thought about it, that alliance felt rather nice.

Neither of them mentioned holding hands. The stars were shining brightly in the night sky, and it was the perfect time to have supper.

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The uproar at the gala did not subside even after Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin had departed. Everyone seemed to have found a new topic to gossip about.

Many of the higher-ups knew the purpose of the gala tonight. A young and promising man from the Zong Consortium who was known to be a supernatural being would be here for the function. In addition, Yang Yu'an had arranged for Yang Xiaojin and Zong Cheng to exterminate the bandits together. His intention could not be any more straightforward than this. It was not like the higher-ups were stupid.

The gala had not even started yet. Yang Yu'an, the representative of Stronghold 178, and the young man from the Zong Consortium were still discussing some matters inside the villa. The gala would only officially begin when they were done with the discussion and after they walked out of the villa. But before the function even began, one of the stars for the night had already run off with someone else. In fact, she was the one who made the other person run off with her!

At this moment, Yang Yu'an and two young men stepped out of the villa. As he smiled at the guests, Yang Yu'an calmly took a glass of champagne and said, "Honored guests, what's going on here? Is there something interesting you're discussing?"

Someone hesitated before saying, "Your niece left with a young man...."

Yang Yu'an's expression remained unchanged. He maintained his smile and said, "Oh? Which young man?"

Some people secretly sighed at how shrewd Yang Yu'an was. He could still keep such a straight face at a time like this.

Someone replied, "I don't know where he popped out from. But he came here with Luo Lan and was dressed in casual attire."

Yang Yu'an took a deep breath and said with a smile while looking at Zong Cheng and Xu Xianchu next to him, "Zong Cheng, Brother Little Xu, I'm sorry about this, but I have to deal with some family matters first."

Xu Xianchu did not mind and said with a smile, "What's the matter? Who ran off with your niece?"

"It's just a refugee called Ren Xiaosu. There's nothing worth mentioning about him," Yang Yu'an answered.

But Xu Xianchu was stunned. He suddenly asked the others around him, "Where did Ren Xiaosu go? Which direction did he head off to?"

The people at the gala were dumbfounded. What the hell was going on?! The situation was such a mess. "I think they took off towards the south."

Xu Xianchu bade farewell to Yang Yu'an, "I'm sorry, Chairman Yang. Ren Xiaosu is a good brother of mine. We haven't seen each other in a long time, and he's also my benefactor. I'll go look for him first, so let's discuss the other matters tomorrow."

Then Xu Xianchu ran out and chased after Ren Xiaosu.

Chapter 324 Commander Zhang

The previously bustling gala fell silent as everyone held their breath. It was as though they were waiting for someone to break the silence.

A servant accidentally knocked down a champagne tower on a table due to his nervousness and broke the silence with the shattering of glass. A group of servants frantically cleaned up the area while the guests heaved sighs of relief.

With the collapse of the champagne tower, the tense atmosphere was finally broken.

Someone asked, "Third Uncle, was that the representative from Stronghold 178 just now?"

Yang Yu'an handed the champagne in his hand to a subordinate beside him. He was no longer in the mood to drink. "Yes, that's Xu Xianchu."

Everyone knew the main guest tonight was actually Xu Xianchu. The war in the Southwest was very intense, yet Stronghold 178 remained standing amid the fighting. It was as though they were not the least bit interested in the war happening in the Southwest.

But while they remained quiet, it did not mean others could disregard them.

As the older people knew, there was a group of ferocious beings hiding behind the walls of that fortress.

The other strongholds were all simply known as strongholds. Only Stronghold 178 was sometimes referred to as a fortress by people in private. It also seemed like it was the only stronghold that was qualified to be named as such.

When an all-out war arrived, that magnificent fortress would turn into a sophisticated war machine. With its gigantic and strong gears working together, it could destroy any targets that were a threat to the fortress.

Of course, a lot of people had not seen it for themselves. Stronghold 178's status in the Northwest had long become a thing of legends.

Therefore, compared to the Zong Consortium's Zong Cheng, Yang Yu'an was far more concerned about Stronghold 178's stance. But the problem now was that Stronghold 178's representative had left before the function could even begin.

“That young man called Ren Xiaosu, were you the one who invited him?” Someone asked, “What’s his background, and why does that Xu Xianchu care so much about him?”

Yang Yu’an frowned. He knew from the intelligence reports that Ren Xiaosu had traveled alongside Xu Xianchu on an expedition to the Jing Mountains. But as Ren Xiaosu was just a refugee, he didn’t think much of him. He only treated that young man as a refugee who had been accidentally embroiled in the situation.

But to his surprise, his niece had a different view of Ren Xiaosu, and even Xu Xianchu saw him as a good friend.

He must be a very important friend, a best friend he really wanted to see. Why else would Xu Xianchu leave such an important gala just to go and meet him?

However, Yang Yu’an did not say anything else. He smiled at the guests and said, “There’s been a small incident at the function, but I hope this matter will not affect everyone’s mood. Please continue to enjoy yourselves here.” His words meant he did not want to continue talking about the matter.

The guests were very understanding. After all, everyone worked for the Yang Consortium, and Yang Yu’an was now the second most important person of the entire Yang Consortium. As such, no one would want to set themselves against him for the sake of some gossip.

However, after tonight, Ren Xiaosu’s name would probably become widespread. Some people would even add their own narratives of what happened here and make the story even more bizarre than it really was.

Yang Yu’an looked at Zong Cheng beside him and said, “I was planning on introducing you to Xiaojin tonight, but unfortunately, she left with her friend first. I think she must have something important to attend to. However, there’s no need to rush things. After all, you two will be heading northwest next week. There will be more opportunities for you to get to know her.”

Zong Cheng had good facial features with sharp eyebrows and bright eyes and exuded a strong aura from head to toe. He smiled and said, “Don’t worry, Uncle Yang. I’ll get along great with Xiaojin.”

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When Ren Xiaosu returned to his residence at night, he saw Xu Xianchu standing at the doorstep like he was waiting for something. Ren Xiaosu understood the moment he saw Xu Xianchu here. So the representative sent by Stronghold 178 to the Yang Consortium was him!

When Xu Xianchu saw Ren Xiaosu, he got excited. He raised his arm and waved. “Xiaosu! Xiaosu!”

Ren Xiaosu smiled. “Why didn’t you go in and have a seat? How did you find out where I’m living?”

“I actually chased after you from the gala but couldn’t catch up, so I had no choice but to go back and ask for where you lived before I could make my way here,” Xu Xianchu said and smiled.

“Go on, come in and have a seat.” Ren Xiaosu pulled Xu Xianchu into the house. For some reason, Ren Xiaosu felt a sense of familiarity for Xu Xianchu. Perhaps the way he treated others sincerely could be sensed, so no one would want to reject such a friendship. Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu made up his mind to not let Xu Xianchu take the blame for himself anymore in the future.

Ren Xiaosu asked, “So you went to Stronghold 178? How are you doing there?”

“I still have to thank you for the recommendation letter,” Xu Xianchu said while he sat on a stone bench in the yard. Xiaoyu brought a cup of tea over to him. Xu Xianchu smiled at Xiaoyu and said, “Thank you.”

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, “Did you get to meet Zhang Jinglin?”

“Only you would directly address him by name.” Xu Xianchu was amused. “We all call him Commander Zhang.”

“Oh.” Ren Xiaosu nodded. It seemed like Zhang Jinglin really called the shots at Stronghold 178. He asked again, “What did he say after he saw the letter?”

“Nothing much.” Xu Xianchu said, “After he found out that I’m a supernatural being, he assigned me an entry-level role at the lowest level so that I could get to know the other brothers. Then he realized I was quite capable and quickly promoted me.”

“What’s Stronghold 178 like?” This was one of the questions Ren Xiaosu most wanted answered.

“The people there are all very talented. I really get along with them, so I really like it there.” Xu Xianchu chuckled and said, “Oh yes, Xiaosu, why don’t you go to Stronghold 178? Commander Zhang has been asking about you a lot.”

“If there’s a chance in the future, we might go and see what’s there,” Ren Xiaosu said.

Then a voice floated over the wall. “Xiaosu, ask him if he’s here to form an alliance with the Yang Consortium to attack our Qing Consortium.”

Ren Xiaosu was startled for a moment. That was clearly Luo Lan’s fucking voice.

Both Xu Xianchu and he turned their heads to have a look and were greeted by Luo Lan’s large head slowly rising up from behind the wall. It was a really weird sight to behold.

Xu Xianchu was taken aback. He knew Luo Lan too well. “Xiaosu, why are you and him neighbors?”

“Ignore him. He was placed under house arrest here, but I’m not,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Hey, Xiaosu, ask him for me,” Luo Lan said anxiously.

But before Ren Xiaosu could respond, Xu Xianchu answered first. “I’m not here to form an alliance with the Yang Consortium. Our Stronghold 178 does not form alliances with any organizations.”

Luo Lan let out a sigh of relief. “That’s good! Back then, I personally sent Zhang Jinglin away, so don’t forget the friendship!”

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself about how shameless Fatty Luo was. Earlier in the evening, he said that he had tried to persuade Qing Zhen to kill Zhang Jingling.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Xu Xianchu. "Then why are you here at Stronghold 88?"

"I'm just here to discuss bandit extermination in collaboration with the Yang and Zong clans. Commander Zhang wants to open up the trade routes again."

Chapter 325 Look at this cauldron, it's so big and round

"What do y'all have to sell?" Ren Xiaosu asked, "Isn't Stronghold 178 said to be a very desolate place?"

"The area around us is indeed very desolate," Xu Xianchu replied. "But there are still many things that I can't talk about for now. It's a secret."

At the mention of it being a secret, Ren Xiaosu felt it could be something very important. Otherwise, Xu Xianchu would not be so serious about it.

"Oh, is the Northwest safe?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Sometimes it's safe, sometimes it's not." Xu Xianchu smiled and said, "It really depends on the situation. But recently to the north... forget it, I can't talk about that either"

"Alright then." Ren Xiaosu had a feeling that Stronghold 178 was keeping a secret and that secret had something to do with Zhang Jinglin's departure from Stronghold 178. But what exactly was it that made Zhang Jinglin feel like it was meaningless for him to stay behind in Stronghold 178?

Zhang Jinglin had once said to Yan Liuyuan that war would not save humanity.

What did he really mean when he said that?

However, that didn't really have anything to do with Ren Xiaosu. He looked at Xu Xianchu and said, "Hmm... have you heard of anything recently?"

Xu Xianchu was taken aback. "Hear about what?"

"Haha," Ren Xiaosu laughed. "It's nothing important."

Then, Xu Xianchu said, "Oh yes, I have some big news to share with you. My original power was to summon a shadow clone, y'know?"

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu nodded. "I know."

"The shadow I summon has gained an additional cauldron!" Xu Xianchu said excitedly, "This cauldron is so strong it can even block an RPG!"

Xu Xianchu then summoned his shadow. It stood quietly in the yard with a large black cauldron floating behind it.

It was extremely large, so large that it could even envelop an entire person.

Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at the cauldron. "Damn..."

Xu Xianchu looked particularly excited. "Don't look down on this black cauldron. Y'know, it can be used as a shield against bullets and also to smack people. It's infinitely powerful and there are many wonderful uses for it as well. I can even use it to stir-fry vegetables! When I lead troops out to the Gobi, we don't even have to bring along a mess kit. How convenient!"

"Mhm, it is convenient," Ren Xiaosu said.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that the cauldron looked very familiar. Wasn't it a larger version of the black iron cauldron he had used for catching sparrows?

Wait a minute! When Ren Xiaosu took a more careful look, he suddenly felt very uncomfortable, because he noticed a small crack in Xu Xianchu's cauldron. Back then, his metal cauldron had formed a small crack when he accidentally knocked it over. However, it did not really affect the functionality. This was a power the shadow formed on its own. So how could there be a crack?

Ren Xiaosu's expression grew concerned and weirder. Meanwhile, Xu Xianchu was still showing off his power. "It might be because my power is getting stronger, so the cauldron is also becoming bigger. I wonder how big it can get in the future. If I can even use it to block an artillery shell, that would be even better!"

Ren Xiaosu said with mixed feelings, "Yeah, it will grow bigger..."

Ren Xiaosu realized Xu Xianchu's cauldron must have appeared after he pushed the blame onto Xu Xianchu. And as he pushed even more blame onto Xu Xianchu, the cauldron would just get bigger and bigger. He did not know why, but since Xu Xianchu wanted the cauldron to grow bigger, he would naturally have to help him fulfill his wish as a friend.

But as for why? Ren Xiaosu could not understand it at all. So as long as he pushed the blame onto Xu Xianchu, it would result in Xu Xianchu conjuring up a cauldron?

What was the principle behind that? There was absolutely no logic!

From the other yard, Luo Lan suddenly said, "Oh yes, Old Xu, thank you."

Luo Lan was leaning against the wall and seemed like he was about to say something. However, Ren Xiaosu suddenly roared, "Can't you go back and sleep already? I'm talking with my friend here, so don't keep bringing up your Qing Consortium's matters and interrupting us. Isn't it already clear that they aren't gonna form an alliance with the Yang Consortium?"

Luo Lan cursed as he retracted his head back down. The soldiers who were charged with carrying him behind the wall let out sighs of relief.

It was only when Ren Xiaosu saw Luo Lan leave that he heaved a sigh of relief. He was a little worried Luo Lan would suddenly mention how "Old Xu" had saved his life back at Stronghold 109.

If he brought that up, Xu Xianchu would definitely understand everything!

Xu Xianchu looked utterly confused. "Why did he thank me?"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, "Maybe he's thanking you for not forming an alliance with the Yang Consortium. Don't worry about the details."

"Hm, alright." Xu Xianchu suddenly whispered, "Xiaosu, why don't you follow me back to Stronghold 178? The people there are really nice. I've lived in the stronghold before, so I know how the people in Stronghold 178 are different."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and asked, "How many people can you bring?"

"How many of you are there?" Xu Xianchu asked.

"30," Ren Xiaosu replied.

"Then I can't make that decision." Xu Xianchu frowned and said, "I'm mainly here to negotiate with the Yang Consortium. Why don't I go back to Stronghold 178 next week and inform Commander Zhang about this."

Ren Xiaosu considered it seriously and said, "Sure."

But after tonight, once Yang Yu'an realized how important Ren Xiaosu really was, he would most probably not allow him to leave so easily. However, Ren Xiaosu was well-prepared now. One plan was to follow Luo Lan when Qing Zhen came to rescue him, while the other plan was to rely on the successful negotiations between Xu Xianchu and Zhang Jinglin and the Yang Consortium.

No matter which plan succeeded, he would have to seize the opportunity. Only one thing made Ren Xiaosu hesitate. But it didn't matter as he still had time.

...

Xu Xianchu's arrival seemed to have added some small episodes to Ren Xiaosu's life, and it also gave him another possibility to consider for his future.

However, Xu Xianchu did not stay at Stronghold 88 for too long. After he, the Yang Consortium, and the Zong Consortium had agreed to eradicate the bandits, he immediately headed back to give his report.

Someone found the opportunity to ask him about his relationship with Ren Xiaosu. In the end, Xu Xianchu only said he was indebted to Ren Xiaosu, and that it was Ren Xiaosu who hooked him up with Stronghold 178.

With that revelation, a lot of people were stunned. What was Ren Xiaosu's background? He could even recommend people to go to Stronghold 178?

As a matter of fact, it was quite difficult for someone living in the stronghold to arrange a job for their relatives. But somehow, Ren Xiaosu could leapfrog the chain of command of the stronghold and promote someone to officer?

However, as Xu Xianchu did not mention the details, everyone did not know how Ren Xiaosu managed to do it.

After Xu Xianchu left, Ren Xiaosu's life returned back to normal. It was not yet time for Yang Xiaojin and him to go out to exterminate the bandits, but he was still very happy to study and practice hand-to-hand combat every day.

The only surprise was that the woman named Zhou Yingxue appeared again after disappearing for a week. Moreover, the woman seemed to have made up her mind to follow Ren Xiaosu all the time. She would be at the library whenever Ren Xiaosu went there.

Ren Xiaosu guessed it must have been Yang Yu'an who had ordered her to get close to him again to fish for some useful information.

Chapter 326 New rules

When Zhou Yingxue appeared again, she did not deliberately try to make conversation with Ren Xiaosu. She would wear different outfits every day despite the winter weather and also put on elaborate makeup. Then she would sit quietly in the corner of the library and flip through her books.

If anyone passed by, she would not turn to look at them, not even if it was Ren Xiaosu.

When it got slightly more crowded in the library in the afternoon, there would be youths going over to hit on her, only to get rejected gently.

As time passed, it seemed as though she were really here because she wanted to read. She was just like a quiet beauty who had become a unique scene for others in the library.

Ren Xiaosu thought that if the other party were really willing to get along peacefully with him, he would be fine with it. After all, he wasn't doing anything illegal here, so there was no reason he should be afraid of being monitored. Although he had hired An Yuqian to teach Wang Yuchi and the others, there was nothing out of place with the lessons. At most, they would have to be more careful when discussing how to design the armor. So Ren Xiaosu simply ignored Zhou Yingxue's presence.

However, Ren Xiaosu realized An Yuqian kept getting distracted with staring at Zhou Yingxue. That was especially so today after Zhou Yingxue entered the library and actually took off her coat to reveal a qipao underneath.

The hem of the qipao had a slit that almost went up to her hips. As Zhou Yingxue sat quietly, An Yuqian stared straight at her.

Ren Xiaosu felt helpless. He wondered if Zhou Yingxue might be a supernatural being too. Why was she not afraid of the cold?

At this moment, Wang Yuchi asked, "Teacher An, about this question..."

An Yuqian came back to his senses and said, "Ah, this question is really fair... no, I meant this question is really slender. I don't mean that either..."

Ren Xiaosu looked calmly at An Yuqian. "Say, shouldn't you focus on your class? We paid you for it."

An Yuqian was a little embarrassed. "Don't you think she looks really elegant sitting there quietly?"

Ren Xiaosu sighed. He went to the bookshelf and found three books before walking over to Zhou Yingxue. An Yuqian was thinking how ballsy Ren Xiaosu was to try to hit on her in such a direct way.

Zhou Yingxue pretended not to see Ren Xiaosu. When Ren Xiaosu walked up to her, she finally looked up. "Hello, is something the matter?"

Ren Xiaosu placed the Spare Me, Great Lord novel in his hand in front of Zhou Yingxue. "I think this book is quite interesting. You should read it."

After that, Ren Xiaosu went back to sit down and continued with studying by himself. Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue flipped open the book in front of her curiously, hoping to find out more about the book Ren Xiaosu liked.

Eventually, while Ren Xiaosu and the students were getting their afternoon lessons, Zhou Yingxue was laughing so hard in the corner of the library she was curling into a ball. Her face went numb from laughter. The quiet and demure image she had painstakingly built up was completely ruined.

Zhou Yingxue did not do anything for the entire afternoon other than laugh like a lunatic.

Ren Xiaosu looked at An Yuqian. "Do you think she's still elegant now?"

An Yuqian took a deep breath and said, "Not anymore."

"Then focus on teaching," Ren Xiaosu said.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not expect Zhou Yingxue to start pestering him ever since then. Every day, she would ask him what books were good reads and would even go over to discuss what she thought of the books he recommended.

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself that this woman was indeed someone who specialized in getting close to someone. She could really make the best of a given situation.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not reject Zhou Yingxue too obviously either and would still recommend some extremely boring books to her every day. In the end, Ren Xiaosu realized she would still finish reading them no matter how boring they were. Afterwards, she would go over and chat with him.

Actually, if he were qualified enough, Ren Xiaosu could have recommended Zhou Yingxue some very high-level math texts. This way, even if Zhou Yingxue had to force herself to read it, she wouldn't understand anything. However, he wasn't qualified enough. In fact, Ren Xiaosu might not even be as good at math as Zhou Yingxue. He was too severely limited by his knowledge to even use this method against her.

An Yuqian went up to Ren Xiaosu and suddenly said, "Bro, I can tell that girl named Zhou Yingxue really likes you!"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. 'Like me? She's a fucking spy!'

Even if he had not spotted Zhou Yingxue among the spies previously, Ren Xiaosu could still sense there was something wrong with her based on his intuition built up in the wilderness. One who was unaccountably solicitous had to be hiding evil intentions.

Zhou Yingxue thought it would be very easy for someone of Ren Xiaosu's age to get seduced by her beauty. Would a 17-year-old boy have much experience? Any extortionist in the game[1] would prefer boys of this age.

As a matter of fact, Zhou Yingxue was not wrong. If it were Wang Yuchi and the others, they might have already fallen into the trap. However, Ren Xiaosu was different.

At night, Ren Xiaosu bade farewell to Wang Yuchi and the others. He told them to go home first while he headed off to Lu Yuan's place to learn hand-to-hand combat. But when he left the library, he saw Zhou Yingxue standing at the entrance.

Ren Xiaosu pretended not to see her as he walked out. Zhou Yingxue called out to him, "Do you have time? There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

"No," Ren Xiaosu said.

Suddenly, the voice from the palace said, "Quest: Help the woman asking for help."

This quest appeared too suddenly and caught Ren Xiaosu off guard. "I suddenly have time now. How can I help you?"

Zhou Yingxue froze for a couple seconds but quickly adjusted her emotions and smiled. "It's my birthday today, but I don't have any relatives in the stronghold anymore. Can you accompany me tonight?"

Ren Xiaosu was at a loss. "How?"

"Let's go to my place. We can play some games." Zhou Yingxue smiled.

"Play what games?" Ren Xiaosu was already starting to feel like giving up on this quest.

"A game that can't be played alone." Zhou Yingxue winked at Ren Xiaosu.

What kinds of games were there that could not be played alone?

Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought and said, "Do you mean jump rope? I'm really good at that!"

Zhou Yingxue was confused. She said, "We can't jump rope with just two people."

At this moment, An Yuqian walked out of the library. Seeing that the library was about to be closed, Ren Xiaosu said, "There! We have enough people!"

Zhou Yingxue smiled awkwardly. “Forget it, I don’t want to play anymore.”

Ren Xiaosu checked the palace’s quest and said, “No, we have to play!”

Zhou Yingxue was speechless. What kind of fucking person was this?!

Half an hour later, the voice from the palace said, “Quest complete. Awarded Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll!”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. This Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll that came out of nowhere nearly made him jump for joy. After all, it was a really rare item.

Perhaps with this one Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll, he could gain another new power.

Even if he did not manage to learn a superpower, he could still gain a master-level skill.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, “What if I copy someone else’s master-level skill without having the corresponding advanced-level skill?”

“Invalid,” the palace said coldly.

“That isn’t fair!” Ren Xiaosu protested.

The palace explained, “A Basic and Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll can be used at the same time to completely learn a master-level skill in the event you do not have the corresponding skill set.”

Chapter 327 The special Yan Liuyuan

In the past, when Ren Xiaosu was learning the duplicated skills, they would be categorized into five levels—beginner, intermediate, advanced, master, and perfect.

The Basic Skill Duplication Scroll could only learn a skill up to the advanced level. Even though Yang Xiaojin’s firearms proficiency was perfect, Ren Xiaosu only managed to learn it to the advanced level. It also did not allow the user to learn any superpowers.

If he wanted to continue learning, he had to use the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll after his firearms proficiency reached the advanced level.

Meanwhile, the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll would allow the user to randomly copy the target’s master-level skill or superpower. If he had duplicated Yang Xiaojin’s Perfect Firearms Proficiency and did not have the corresponding Advanced Firearms Proficiency, then this Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll would have been useless.

Thus, the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll was not without its risks. However, the palace had now given him an easier choice. When paired with a Basic Skill Duplication Scroll, the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll enabled him to learn anything in one shot.

Now that Ren Xiaosu had obtained the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll through his quest, he definitely had to learn some superpowers with it. So it was better to use it on someone who had superpowers.

But after thinking for a long time, he realized there was no one around him he could learn any powers from.

No, he could learn from Yan Liuyuan!

Although a selfish person like him had no use for a power such as making wishes, if he gained the ability to manipulate curses instead, that was something he could really play around with. Moreover, it didn't seem like Yan Liuyuan had any other master-level skills. That way, the palace would automatically decide to learn his superpower!

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu ran back home excitedly. He did not even go over to Lu Yuan's place.

Both An Yuqian and Zhou Yingxue were left dumbstruck.

When Ren Xiaosu returned home, he called Yan Liuyuan into the house. He immediately said to the palace, "Use the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll."

However, something Ren Xiaosu didn't expect happened. The palace answered, "Unable to use the Skill Duplication Scroll on the target."

This time, Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He never expected this outcome.

This had never happened before when he used the Skill Duplication Scroll on anyone else. Moreover, based on the palace's answer, he couldn't even use the Basic Skill Duplication Scroll on Yan Liuyuan either.

Ren Xiaosu scrutinized Yan Liuyuan. Why was Yan Liuyuan an exception to the palace? After all, the palace was a power that could even reset nanomachines.

Yan Liuyuan was not a refugee, or rather, Ren Xiaosu was not sure if Yan Liuyuan was a refugee in the past. That was because... he picked Yan Liuyuan up in the wilderness.

That winter, he had found Yan Liuyuan unconscious out in the wilderness. Initially, Ren Xiaosu wanted to leave Yan Liuyuan there and not do anything about it. But in the end, he started feeling uneasy after leaving him there for some time before going back to bring Yan Liuyuan to the town. Back then, he asked many people while carrying Yan Liuyuan on his back if they knew whose child it was. In the end, no one was able to answer him.

After Yan Liuyuan woke up, he could not remember anything and only addressed Ren Xiaosu as his brother. But it was at that moment that Ren Xiaosu was touched, because he had never felt anything like having a family before.

However, Ren Xiaosu was a ruthless guy. If he could not even support himself at that time, how was he going to support others? He had thought of chasing Yan Liuyuan away when he regained consciousness.

But Yan Liuyuan kept staying outside his shack the entire day while in tears. At that time, Ren Xiaosu hardened his heart again and asked him, "Can't you go to someone else's house and cry? I can't support you!"

Yan Liuyuan replied in confusion, "But you're my brother."

Ren Xiaosu's heart softened for the first time ever. "If you want to survive in this wilderness, you have to at least have one skill, right? Tell me, what can you help me with?"

In truth, Ren Xiaosu was trying to find an excuse to keep him. If the child in front of him could help him out a little, even if it was just doing some simple chores for him, he would grit his teeth and keep Yan Liuyuan with him.

But Yan Liuyuan cried for a long time and was not able to say what skills he had. All he did was say he could make wishes.

At first, Ren Xiaosu did not believe it. He thought that having this ability was as good as having nothing. He could also make wishes, but they could not be fulfilled!

But after testing it out with Yan Liuyuan twice, Ren Xiaosu realized what Yan Liuyuan said was true!

All these years, Ren Xiaosu had never bothered to investigate Yan Liuyuan. After all, who had the time to delve into such matters these days?

But now that even the palace couldn't duplicate Yan Liuyuan's power, it left Ren Xiaosu deep in thought. Why had Liuyuan appeared outside in the wilderness alone? Was he abandoned by his parents?

Thinking about it carefully, Yan Liuyuan's power to make his wishes come true and manipulate curses seemed like a power only gods should possess.

All mortals wanted to be gods since only gods could get whatever they desired.

Yan Liuyuan blinked at Ren Xiaosu and thought for a long time. "Bro, what's wrong with you?"

Ren Xiaosu pinched Yan Liuyuan's cheeks like how he would knead dough and laughed. He said, "Just where did you come from, kid?"

Yan Liuyuan's voice was distorted from his face being pinched. "If you continue doing this to me, I won't go easy on you."

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. "You're all grown up now, aren'tcha?"

All of a sudden, a loud crash came from the yard next door. It was followed by the sound of people crying out in pain. Ren Xiaosu frowned. "What the hell was that!"

Then they heard a familiar voice shout, "Six assassins! Two have been shot down!" The voice obviously belonged to one of Luo Lan's men.

As he wondered what was going on, he went straight out the door and jumped over the yard's wall. He discovered that six assassins dressed in black had entered Luo Lan's yard and were holding guns fitted with silencers.

Two of the assassins had already been shot dead by Luo Lan's men. One of Luo Lan's men was hiding behind a tree in the courtyard, unable to come out from his cover due to the enemy's heavy firepower.

Meanwhile, Luo Lan and his other men were stuck inside the house. They had tried to rush out but were stopped by the assassins firing at them.

When Ren Xiaosu saw this, he quickly guessed these people were probably here to assassinate Luo Lan. However, they must not have expected to find Luo Lan and his men with their guards still up and that there would still be people patrolling in the courtyard during his house arrest. So the moment they entered the front yard, they were shot dead by Luo Lan's subordinate in the cover of the darkness who similarly had a silenced gun.

Ren Xiaosu sighed. For an arrogant fatso like Luo Lan to be able to live up till now, there had to have been a reason.

When he jumped in, the people who were here to assassinate Luo Lan were not expecting someone from next door to jump over. They instantly pointed their guns at Ren Xiaosu, but it was already too late.

The assassins only saw a blur as Ren Xiaosu dashed in an arc towards them.

Ren Xiaosu hacked the gun out of one of their hands while grabbing the back of the assassin's neck to use him as a human shield. With just three shots, he finished off the remaining three assassins in the yard. Meanwhile, the assassin he was holding as a human shield was like a fearful little chick as he lost all will to resist. Ren Xiaosu had wanted to leave a survivor for Luo Lan to interrogate. But before he could even call Luo Lan to come out, the person swallowed a suicide pill to kill himself.

Ren Xiaosu frowned as he threw him onto the ground. He could only watch helplessly as his opponent started foaming at the mouth. This was the first time he had seen "suicide agents" with his own eyes.

"Come on out, Fatty, they're all dead," Ren Xiaosu shouted into the house.

Chapter 328 Visiting to deliver some gifts

Luo Lan ran out of the house swearing. He was really angry from being suppressed by the enemy forces just now. "Dammit, someone is actually trying to kill me. Luckily, I didn't let my guard down."

However, Luo Lan was also a little surprised. Although he had guessed Ren Xiaosu was a supernatural being, he did not think he was that powerful.

Thinking about this, Luo Lan asked his subordinate who had been hiding behind the tree earlier in a whisper, "Did you see how he killed those people?"

That soldier shook his head. "I didn't see it clearly."

"Who are these people?" Ren Xiaosu looked at Luo Lan and said, "You better not tell outsiders that I helped you. I don't want to get into trouble for it."

“Alright, that’s for sure.” Luo Lan looked at the corpses and said, “Search them and see if there are any clues. However, it should be quite meaningless to do so. Suicide agents won’t carry anything that might offer a clue to them.”

As expected, they discovered nothing else on these people except for guns and magazines after searching through their bodies.

Luo Lan squatted and thought for a moment. “Let me think about this. If I were to die, who would benefit?”

Ren Xiaosu sat on a stone stool beside him and let him think about it slowly.

“Could it be the Zong Consortium?” Luo Lan asked doubtfully. “If they had me killed, then the Yang Consortium and Qing Consortium will immediately descend into war. The natural environment in the north around the Zong Consortium is not as good as the south. They’ve been plotting to get this region for a long time now but aren’t a match for us. So they tried to infiltrate Stronghold 178 and use them as leverage. If the Yang Consortium and Qing Consortium were to start fighting, they could just sit back and reap the benefits.”

However, Luo Lan changed his mind and said, “But the Zong Consortium’s people are still in the stronghold. If they kill me, Qing Zhen would probably think in that direction as well and might then focus his anger onto the Zong Consortium instead. So it could also be possible that the Yang Consortium is trying to kill me while the Zong Consortium’s people are in Stronghold 88, making it difficult to discern what really happened. That way, they can force the Zong Consortium to face Qing Zhen together with them since the Zong Consortium couldn’t prove it wasn’t they who assassinated me.”

Ren Xiaosu snapped, “Your analysis is as good as useless.”

“What else can I do?” Luo Lan stared at him. “Since there’s no fucking clues here, I can only make some wild guesses.”

“Alright, take your time to guess.” Ren Xiaosu said, “Remember not to tell anyone that I was the one who saved you. I’ll be leaving the stronghold the day after tomorrow, so don’t create unnecessary trouble for me.”

Luo Lan’s expression immediately changed. “What am I to do if you leave? What if someone tries to kill me again?”

“Don’t worry, Liuyuan is staying just next door.” Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly, “Besides, that guy from the Zong Consortium is going with me too. You’ll probably be safe after he leaves.”

“Eh, where are you all off to?” Luo Lan wondered.

“We’re going to exterminate the bandits.” Ren Xiaosu jumped back over to his yard.

He heard Luo Lan lower his voice and shout, “Wait, you said that Liuyuan will protect me? Can he really...”

By now, Ren Xiaosu was really treating Luo Lan as a friend. It was the same for Luo Lan, so Ren Xiaosu did not mind helping Luo Lan out.

It was just that tonight's incident was really strange. The Yang Consortium and Qing Consortium seemed to be getting along peacefully with both their armies still working together to fight the Li Consortium at the front lines. It was as though Luo Lan were not under house arrest in Stronghold 88.

But underneath the surface of this seemingly calm sea, turbulent waves were rolling.

Right now, the Li Consortium's front line at Mt. Guangying was in grave danger. Many of the Li Consortium's military forces were forced to resort to guerrilla warfare against the Yang Consortium and Qing Consortium inside the mountains in an attempt to destroy the supply lines and marching routes of both parties. After all, they were no match for the Yang Consortium's armored brigade on the front lines. The Qing Consortium's artillery troops were especially brutal, so the Li Consortium could only use this method to delay their impending defeat.

When their defeat finally arrived, the Yang Consortium and Qing Consortium would probably start fighting each other immediately. This was what a lot of people speculated.

Luo Lan and Ren Xiaosu both knew Qing Zhen would send someone to save him, but no one knew what method Qing Zhen would use to conduct the rescue operation. Launch a frontal assault? In that case, it would definitely be over for Luo Lan as well.

Ren Xiaosu felt that based on his level of understanding, he probably couldn't guess what Qing Zhen was planning.

...

With the imminent departure to exterminate the bandits, Xiaoyu got busy again. She rushed everywhere to buy all sorts of supplies for Ren Xiaosu as she was afraid he would suffer when he went outside.

And now, Ren Xiaosu's storage space was equipped with a vacuum preservation zone, so the food would not go bad when stored inside.

"This is a new tent, a waterproof cushion, a blanket, and a mattress," Xiaoyu said. Although she did not know how Ren Xiaosu would take them with him, she knew Ren Xiaosu had the ability to carry a lot of things with him.

After all, she was one of the closest people to Ren Xiaosu. How could she not have noticed anything after living together every day?

"I just bought these stainless steel bowls and chopsticks. Take them with you as well."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Wait, why are there two sets of bowls and chopsticks?"

"Aren't you going with Ms. Xiaojin?" Xiaoyu paused. "Since you can bring more things with you, you should bring an extra set for her just in case."

“Then why is there only one tent?” Ren Xiaosu was dumbfounded.

Xiaoyu started laughing. “Why are you being so shy? I only packed one tent because it’s for your own good. It’s fine if you don’t get to use it, but if you do, you’ll thank me for it later.”

These words startled Ren Xiaosu quite a bit. He did not know how to respond.

Then at this moment, a car stopped outside the house. Someone knocked on the door after getting out and asked, “Hello, is anyone around?”

Ren Xiaosu raised his eyebrows. This voice was a complete stranger, for he had never heard it before.

He walked over to open the door and found a young man he had never seen before standing there.

“Hello, my name is Zong Cheng. Nice to meet you.” Zong Cheng was the same height as Ren Xiaosu. He was standing there holding some gifts with both hands.

Zong Cheng’s subordinates who were standing behind him wanted to help him carry the gifts, but Zong Cheng smiled and said, “It’s alright, I can handle it myself. Wait for me outside. Don’t come in and dirty their front yard.”

Ren Xiaosu had to admit that Zong Cheng looked quite friendly when he smiled. He had the cleansing presence of a spring breeze and was completely different from what Ren Xiaosu had imagined. He had originally thought Zong Cheng was here to find trouble with him, but in the end, it seemed like he was here to give him some gifts?

Then Zong Cheng said, “You must be Ren Xiaosu. I brought you some gifts from up north. They’re our hometown’s specialty fruit, wolfberries.[1] These gifts are very cheap, so I hope you won’t mind it.”

Ren Xiaosu thought Wang Fugui might have some use for these items, so he decided to accept them.

Zong Cheng said happily, “I won’t be going inside. As we’ll be going to exterminate the bandits together, there’s still some supplies I have to purchase at the market. Is there anything you need to buy? I can get them for you.”

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Please do take care of me on our expedition to exterminate the bandits,” Zong Cheng said politely.

“Sure, I’ll take care of you,” Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly.

“Thank you so much,” Zong Cheng said.

Ren Xiaosu was waiting for this moment. He did not receive any gratitude tokens from Zong Cheng.

Chapter 329 The zealous Yang Yu’an

The palace could not lie to Ren Xiaosu, so gratitude tokens came with every sincere gratitude. If it wasn't sincere, he wouldn't receive any tokens.

No matter how earnest and sincere Zong Cheng behaved, Ren Xiaosu did not believe him. Even without the palace, Ren Xiaosu would still not have believed him. Otherwise, he would have lived a wasted life for the past 17 years.

Zong Cheng did not stay around for longer. Ren Xiaosu did not know what this guy was up to. He just smiled and answered whatever he said.

Yan Liuyuan watched as Ren Xiaosu clasped hands with Zong Cheng. All there was left to do was to take vows to become blood brothers with the other party.

After Zong Cheng finally left, Ren Xiaosu heaved a sigh of relief. "It's really difficult dealing with these people from the strongholds. We all know that we're just putting on an act, yet we still have to go along with it and cooperate with each other."

"Bro, you were smiling very sincerely just now." Yan Liuyuan laughed and said, "I seriously thought you were about to acknowledge him as your blood brother."

"Don't you know how capable your brother is?" Ren Xiaosu said proudly.

After sending off the visitor, someone knocked on the door again. Ren Xiaosu thought that rascal, Zong Cheng, had come back again. He immediately put on a smile and went to answer the door. When he opened it, he was almost about to shake the other party's hand. "Bro!"

Yang Yu'an, who was standing outside, looked at Ren Xiaosu in surprise. He did not understand what was happening.

"Hahaha." Ren Xiaosu was embarrassed. "That was just a misunderstanding. Who are you?"

Although Ren Xiaosu had gone to the gala the other night, Yang Yu'an only came out of the villa after he left the function with Yang Xiaojin. So Ren Xiaosu had not seen Yang Yu'an, nor knew who he was.

Yang Yu'an smiled and said, "Hello, my name is Yang Yulan. I'm Yang Xiaojin's third uncle."

"Oh!" Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment before quickly moving aside. "Please, come in."

Ren Xiaosu was thinking to himself that it must have been this manchild who had invited him to the gala without giving him any prep time. He was probably trying to make him stay away from Yang Xiaojin when he did that.

But of course, Ren Xiaosu would not mention that explicitly. Yang Yu'an had personally come over with his bodyguards and subordinates following behind him. They entered the yard as well and kept watch on the surroundings.

Without waiting for Ren Xiaosu to say anything, Yang Yu'an started speaking. "I'm really sorry. My arrangements had not been properly thought out, so there was a lack of preparation when I invited you to attend the gala. The main issue was that this gala had already been in the plans for a long time. But since you just arrived at the stronghold, I was a little negligent in hosting you."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "No, no, I'm just a refugee. It was great that I got to see what these parties are like."

Wang Fugui watched their interaction through the window and mumbled, "Those two foxes."

Yan Liuyuan chuckled and said, "My brother is no fox."

"Then what is he?"

"A predator of foxes."

At this moment, Yang Yu'an had someone bring the gifts over. "I didn't prepare anything too lavish on my first visit, but I hope you'll like it!"

"I like it, I like it. I like any gifts from you." Ren Xiaosu laughed.

Ren Xiaosu waited for Yang Yu'an to get down to business. He did not believe the second-in-command of the Yang Consortium would come here just to pay him a visit and offer him gifts in apology. There was definitely something more important than that.

In the end, Yang Yu'an beat around the bush for half an hour before changing the topic to what he wanted to discuss. Ren Xiaosu really admired the patience of such people.

Yang Yulan said, "Xu Xianchu had been talking a lot about you for the past few days before he departed back to Stronghold 178. Are you close with him?"

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "We went to the Jing Mountains together, and Xiaojin was there too."

"Oh." Yang Yulan seemed to have just found out about this. He then asked, "Do you know Commander Zhang then? Zhang Jinglin."

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback a little. "Yes, I know him."

Yang Yu'an smiled and said, "You and him..."

"He's my teacher," Ren Xiaosu said decisively.

It was Yang Yu'an who was startled this time. He had not expected Ren Xiaosu and Zhang Jinglin to have such a relationship. Teacher and protégé?

Ren Xiaosu had a calm expression on his face. Who wouldn't know how to borrow someone else's prestige to protect themselves? He had also used the silk banner Luo Lan had given him as protection

from persecution. For Ren Xiaosu, the practical usage of such things was much more important. Gaining a few more of these amulets be much more powerful than anything else.

He would not bother to hide anything at a time like this. Since he knew Yang Yulan had thoughts of allying with Stronghold 178, it wouldn't really matter if Ren Xiaosu decided to put on an act here. Besides, he was not lying about Zhang Jinglin being his teacher. Not only that, but he had also even worked with Zhang Jinglin before. Weren't they both teachers of the school back in that town?

Yang Yu'an deliberated for a moment before saying, "Then why didn't you go to Stronghold 178?"

"It's not that I'm not going." Ren Xiaosu said in a grave voice, "But I was planning on going there after some time. After all, there are more important matters to attend to, so I had Xu Xianchu head there first after giving him a recommendation letter."

Yang Yu'an looked calm on the surface, but his mind was racing. Could Xu Xianchu be commanding such an important role in Stronghold 178 because of Ren Xiaosu's recommendation letter?

It was no wonder that when Xu Xianchu heard Ren Xiaosu's name, he did not even care how it would look to the gala when he took off in search of Ren Xiaosu!

Although, the more important thing Ren Xiaosu had mentioned was probably Yang Xiaojin, wasn't it?

Ren Xiaosu also wore a calm expression. He did not feel guilty when telling the half-truths.

"It looks like Commander Zhang values you a lot." Yang Yulan smiled amiably.

"I guess it's not too bad. Teach once wanted me to take over his job, but the timing wasn't right yet," Ren Xiaosu said seriously. He wasn't telling a lie. After all, Zhang Jinglin had indeed chosen him as the substitute teacher. He was planning on making him the teacher of the school.

However, it sounded different to Yang Yu'an. Did Zhang Jinglin really want this young man in front of him to take over Stronghold 178 in the future? The "timing wasn't right yet" should mean that Zhang Jinglin was planning on grooming him some more. Many of the old-timers knew Zhang Jinglin worked at the grassroots level for a full ten years until everyone was convinced before he took over command of Stronghold 178. Therefore, this explanation made sense to Yang Yu'an. Zhang Jinglin had been chosen as the commander of Stronghold 178 even though he used to be a refugee. At Stronghold 178, it did not matter what your birthright was.

The way Yang Yu'an looked at Ren Xiaosu turned gentler. "You're a promising young man." He seemed to have completely forgotten what he had said to Yang Xiaojin. "I heard you're also going on the expedition to exterminate the bandits?"

"Mhm. This is an issue for the Northwest, so of course I won't hesitate to do it," Ren Xiaosu said righteously.

"Good, good." Yang Yulan reminded, "You must watch out for yourself. There's no hurry to exterminate the bandits. I believe we can definitely get rid of the banditry issue in the future. Alright, I won't stay

around any longer. You should also be preparing to set off on your trip, so I'll leave you to do what you need."

"Thank you, Third Uncle," Ren Xiaosu said.

Yang Yu'an's smile grew wider at the words "Third Uncle." Compared to the Zong Consortium, he was definitely hoping to work with Stronghold 178 much more. That was what true support was really like. If Stronghold 178 could offer him a helping hand, it would probably be a piece of cake to devour the Zong Consortium as well.

However, Yang Yu'an would not place all his chips on one person alone. He still had to verify the veracity of Ren Xiaosu's claims.

But from the looks of it, his credibility was very high. After all, there was already Xu Xianchu's testimonial.

Chapter 330 Exterminating the bandits

According to Yang Xiaojin, they would set off from Stronghold 88, then pass through Stronghold 97 and Stronghold 99, before arriving at the valley in the north.

The banditry originated over there. At the beginning, the Zong Consortium made use of these activities to plunder the traveling merchants and seize precious resources left behind in the valley by the Pre-Cataclysm civilization.

The entire valley's surface and underground had a large number of urban structures that remained from before The Cataclysm. Most of the things left behind were useless, but if anyone found something useful there, it would be priceless.

There was a group of merchants who pretended to pass through the area and claimed they were on a business trip, when in fact, they stayed around to excavate any useful resources and technologies from the valley.

Some people used to try to excavate the technologies and secrets within the valley with the aid of electronic devices, but in reality, the massive nuclear haze and radioactive clouds from the fallout would destroy any kind of electronics on the ground.

The things they found were either already rusted or could not be used even if they were relatively well-preserved.

At first, the Zong Consortium did not interfere with those merchant groups and allowed them to excavate as they wished. But after the excavation, bandits would arrive as expected and plunder all of their valuable possessions.

As a result, some of the bandit gangs grew bigger and stronger because of the plundering. Meanwhile, the Zong Consortium also rose and became a force to be reckoned with in the Northern Wastes.

However, the proper organizations generally despised the Zong Consortium as they always felt the Zong Consortium did not have much depth in the way they did things.

In order to exonerate themselves, the Zong Consortium started breaking off their relations with the bandits in recent years. But when they attempted to kill the bandits, they realized the bandits had become familiar with all the terrain in the valley and were scattered in every corner of the place. The Zong Consortium had quite a problem on their hands.

All the bandits in the valley had become irritated with the Zong Consortium now. Although they used to pay tribute to the corporation annually, the Zong Consortium was suddenly trying to kick them to the curb after they had outlived their usefulness. They were too merciless!

And now, the Zong Consortium had suddenly joined forces with the Yang Consortium and Stronghold 178 with the intention of leveraging both their strengths, all in order to make a clean break with their evil past. As long as they exterminated all the bandits, everyone would naturally forget how they started out in hundred years or so.

In the house, Xiaoyu said, "I made some snacks for you. This one is apparently a very famous mung bean cake[1] here in the stronghold. Take it with you and..."

Ren Xiaosu listened to Xiaoyu's chatter. Xiaoyu would always help ready his belongings whenever he went on long trips now, so he did not have to pack on his own anymore.

Luo Lan leaned over the wall and watched. He interrupted, "You're bringing so much food with you, eh? Why don't you bring me along as well? I'm quite the fighter."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless as he stared at Luo Lan. "Do you know why quiet people seem smarter than talkative ones?"

Luo Lan was surprised. "Why?"

"Because they hide all their stupid thoughts on the inside."

Luo Lan was speechless.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Have you heard of a person named Zong Cheng?"

"Zong Cheng?" Luo Lan tried to remember. "I've never heard of him before. But I suppose he's a family member of the Zong Consortium? We aren't really familiar with them."

"Doesn't your Qing Consortium share a border with the Zong Consortium's territory in the north? Ren Xiaosu asked.

"The Zong Consortium is a cackle of hyenas. None of the proper organizations are willing to deal with them. Tigers will never make friends with hyenas." Luo Lan said, "In any case, you should be pretty careful of him."

Ren Xiaosu knew it was time to leave when he heard the sound of a vehicle coming to a stop outside. Wang Fugui, Yan Liuyuan, and the others sent him off together and reminded him to be careful.

Ren Xiaosu opened the door and came out onto the street. He saw Yang Xiaojin driving an off-road vehicle, and no one else was in it besides her. There were also two military transport trucks following, and they looked like they were transporting quite a few soldiers and supplies.

“Get in,” Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu turned around to Yan Liuyuan and instructed, “While I’m not around, you must watch over our family.”

“Mhm.” Yan Liuyuan nodded vigorously.

Then Ren Xiaosu opened the vehicle’s door and left. Along the way, Ren Xiaosu nonchalantly asked, “How many soldiers are in the trucks behind us?”

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. “30 nanosoldiers. They’re here to help with the extermination of the bandits.”

“Nanosoldiers?” Ren Xiaosu’s eyes lit up, but he immediately dismissed the idea of harming these nanosoldiers. After all, they were here to protect Yang Xiaojin, so he should not be attacking any of them. When he thought of this, Ren Xiaosu felt quite at odds. Although he and Yan Liuyuan did not lack nanomachines, Wang Yuchi and the others still did not have enough.

Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, “What did you say to my third uncle? Why did he suddenly change his attitude? He actually asked me to get along with you.”

“I didn’t really say much.” Ren Xiaosu chuckled. “I only said that I was Zhang Jinglin’s student. There’s nothing wrong with saying that, right?”

Yang Xiaojin gave him a look. “My third uncle only cares about his interests, so don’t be fooled by his appearance. If he finds out you were lying to him, he’ll probably change his attitude immediately.”

If Yang Yu’an found out Ren Xiaosu was only talking about taking over as the schoolteacher when he said Zhang Jinglin had asked him to “take over his job,” his attitude would definitely be very different. He wouldn’t immediately abandon Ren Xiaosu as a choice, but Zong Cheng would appear to be much more important than Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, “Then what about you?”

Yang Xiaojin smirked. “Guess.”

She stepped on the gas, and the off-road vehicle sped towards the northern gate of Stronghold 88. They were going there to meet up with the others from the Zong Consortium.

When Ren Xiaosu and the convoy left, Yan Liuyuan stood at the door and looked in the direction of the departed off-road vehicle for some time. Xiaoyu came up to him. "Don't worry, your brother's injuries have already gotten much better. He'll be fine."

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan said, "I wasn't worried about that."

"What are you thinking about then?" Xiaoyu asked with a smile.

Yan Liuyuan looked at Xiaoyu. "Big Sis, they're holding a parent-teacher conference at school tomorrow. Can you go on my brother's behalf?"

Xiaoyu felt a little awkward. "Me? Am I allowed to?"

"You're my big sister. Of course you can," Yan Liuyuan replied with a smile.

Although Xiaoyu had been with them for a long time, and Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan had also accepted her wholeheartedly, she sometimes still worried about it in the middle of the night. She was unsure if she had really integrated into their family.

They had to be a real family for her to be asked to attend the parent-teacher conference, right? Moreover, Yan Liuyuan had addressed her as "Big Sis" instead of "Big Sister Xiaoyu." It somehow felt like the relationship between them had gotten much closer at this moment.

Xiaoyu asked curiously, "Then should I dress up a little?"

When Xiaoyu was living back in the town of Stronghold 113, she would always wear makeup. But ever since she followed Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan, she no longer wore makeup most days because she had to do housework. She would present herself with her natural appearance almost every day.

Now that she was going to attend a parent-teacher conference with Yan Liuyuan, she could not possibly disgrace Yan Liuyuan and let his classmates think that his big sister was an unrefined woman. She had to give herself a makeover!

Yan Liuyuan looked at Xiaoyu and said with a smile, "Big Sis, you're pretty even without any makeup. It's true."

Xiaoyu rolled her eyes at him. "You're such a sweet talker!"