

### **Chapter 331 The parent-teacher conference**

This was Yan Liuyuan's first time hearing about something called a parent-teacher conference in the stronghold's school. He didn't know about it until the teacher informed him, but he wondered what it was for.

Jiang Wu told him it was just a meeting to summarize the students' progress at school and to explain some issues to the parents for them to take note of. There was nothing special to it. When Jiang Wu said that, Yan Liuyuan was relieved.

But he did not tell Ren Xiaosu because he was worried it would affect Ren Xiaosu on his expedition. Of course, there were also other reasons for not telling him.

This was also the first time Xiaoyu was attending a parent-teacher conference. She purposely went to a shop in the stronghold to get new clothes and even bought some new cosmetics and jewelry.

After Xiaoyu got dressed and walked out of her room, Yan Liuyuan's eyes lit up. "Big Sister Xiaoyu is so beautiful."

Xiaoyu had put on a simple pair of earrings and wore a new down coat and boots. She originally wanted to wear a skirt but was persuaded by Yan Liuyuan not to as the weather was too cold.

Xiaoyu had initially put on too much makeup due to nervousness. However, Yan Liuyuan helped her clean it off after laughing at her for a long time.

Yan Liuyuan said, "Big Sis, you're naturally beautiful. Even if you don't put on any makeup, you still look good."

Xiaoyu poked his forehead and said, "Aren't you the sweet talker? Let's go to the parent-teacher conference now."

"The students probably won't be able to take their eyes off you after they see you," Yan Liuyuan said with a smile.

It was no wonder Yan Liuyuan could be a friend of the women wherever he went. Although he might not know how to compliment them, he made up for it by complimenting them often. Women always loved receiving compliments, after all.

However, Yan Liuyuan really felt a sense of happiness when he saw Xiaoyu so happy.

Xiaoyu took the streetcar to school with Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong. While on the streetcar, Yan Liuyuan even said, "Look, that old man behind us has been staring at you the entire time."

When they arrived at school, Yan Liuyuan realized most of the people were already there. As this school was mainly attended by the children of the rich and influential figures of the stronghold, everyone

owned a private car. Since they took the streetcar here, it wouldn't be out of the ordinary if they arrived late. Fortunately, they weren't late.

But when they entered the classroom, Yan Liuyuan felt the parents' eyes looked a little strange. They were all checking them out. Then they started whispering to the children and parents next to them.

A middle-aged female teacher walked into the classroom. She said with a smile, "In last semester's final exams, the students in our class fared extremely well. So let's give our children a round of encouraging applause."

Xiaoyu also clapped her hands. However, Yan Liuyuan whispered next to her, "Big Sis, I didn't take those final exams, so you don't have to clap."

Xiaoyu looked at him askance. "I can still encourage you even if you didn't take those exams. You're such a good child, so I must encourage you."

Yan Liuyuan held back his laughter.

From the front of the room, the teacher talked about the curriculum and matters regarding the children's weekday prep classes. She encouraged the children to attend more tutors because the students in this class would have to make a final sprint for their university placings in the future. If they picked up knowledge beyond their years early, they would be one step ahead of those from the other high schools.

As the saying went, once you got a head start in life, you would have an advantage. That was the logic.

Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu were not really listening to the teacher's speech. Although Ren Xiaosu had always urged him to study hard, Xiaoyu was afraid that Yan Liuyuan would get exhausted from studying, so she did not place too much emphasis on his learning progress. She knew this was a form of pampering, but she couldn't help it.

At this moment, the teacher said, "It's like this: I held the parent-teacher conference on a weekend afternoon because I'd like to take the opportunity to discuss some matters with everyone."

The classroom fell silent. The teacher said, "Yan Liuyuan? Wang Dalong? Are your parents here?"

Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu looked up at her. The teacher smiled at Xiaoyu and said, "You must be Yan Liuyuan's guardian, right?"

Xiaoyu replied with a smile, "Yes, I'm Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong's elder sister."

"You look really young. Where are their parents? Why aren't they here?" the teacher asked.

Xiaoyu was stunned for a moment before saying, "Miss, it's fine, you can speak with me."

"Alright, look here." The female teacher said, "The parents have recently given us some feedback that Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong are not performing as well as the others. Our class is the elite class in

school. When the teachers are lecturing, they will definitely add in a lot of knowledge beyond their grade. Since their foundation is quite poor, they can't keep up with the rest of the class."

Xiaoyu's mood gradually sank as the teacher went on. She had thought this would be a normal parent-teacher conference. Jiang Wu also said it was just a session for discussing some of the more common issues and that there shouldn't be anything special to it.

But things seemed to have turned out a little different from what they had expected.

Xiaoyu said, "Miss, what do you mean? My Liuyuan and Dalong are very smart children. How could they possibly not keep up with the class?"

"Please don't misunderstand." The female teacher said with a smile, "What I mean is that I would like for them to switch classes. The principals also know about this, and we're doing this for their own good. If they can't keep up with the class, they can't follow the lessons, and that won't be good for them. We want to transfer them to a normal class. There's no other meaning to it, so please don't mind it."

What this teacher said was right, and she had also used the same reasoning to persuade the principals about this matter. This was all for the sake of Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong as they really could not keep up with the progress of their class.

Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong had close ties to Lu Yuan, so the principals did not agree to it at the beginning. But they eventually relented when they could not refuse the constant requests of the rich and influential parents. After all, their reasoning was not wrong.

Even though Lu Yuan had entrusted someone to handle the enrollment for Yan Liuyuan and Wang Dalong, that person was not an authoritative figure. After weighing the pros and cons, the principals instructed the homeroom teacher to handle the matter.

Xiaoyu said firmly to the female teacher, "Although I don't quite understand your arrangements, and maybe the decision that you brought up might turn out to be really good for them, I'm certain of something else. You should discuss matters like this in private with me and not use such a humiliating method to deal with the issue in front of the entire class." Although Xiaoyu was not a cultured person, she understood what was reasonable in this world.

All of a sudden, a short female parent said, "Why should we talk reason with a refugee like you? My husband is the director of the Public Order Division. Even if I say those two kids are not allowed to attend school, so what?"

If the director of the Public Order Division were here, he would definitely not speak like this. If he knew these two students were Ren Xiaosu's younger brothers, he might even slap his wife on the spot. But he probably did not know about any of this. In this day and age, which authoritative man cared about trivialities like parent-teacher conferences?

On the contrary, his relatives, friends, and wife would only talk like that because they were used to throwing his name around.

Such behavior was common everywhere in society.

A male parent tried to persuade the female parent, "You can't say things like that either. We should talk things over peacefully and not use authority to oppress people."

Meanwhile, the other parents stayed silent.

### **Chapter 332 The origin of a disaster**

The female parent looked at the male parent who spoke and sneered at him "It's none of your bloody business how I speak. You might want your child to be friends with the refugees, but I don't!"

The male parent choked on his words and couldn't come up with anything in response, but he wasn't going to stoop to her level either.

Xiaoyu sneered, "And if I refuse to let them switch classes?"

"Refuse to switch classes?" The short female parent stood with her arms on her hips and said, "Do you think you can make that decision? Why don't you ask the parents and students in class if they agree to it or not first? Why should the 30 of us have to accommodate you?"

Xiaoyu said, "Stand up if you want to talk to me. I'm standing up while you're sitting down. Where are your manners? Is this how stronghold residents behave?"

Yan Liuyuan burst out laughing. Wang Dalong looked on from next to him, apparently enjoying the show.

The female parent was immediately enraged. Her height had always been her sore spot and she hated anyone who brought it up. Yet now she was being ruthlessly mocked by Xiaoyu on it.

She raised her voice and said, "What an uncultured thing you are! How dare you speak to me like this? Watch your-"

"Watch what?" Xiaoyu said with a smile, "Watch out in case you jump up and hit my knee?"

Yan Liuyuan died of laughter. He sat in his seat and looked up at Xiaoyu, her thin stature suddenly looming much larger.

For the sake of Ren Xiaosu and him, this little woman ended up becoming a housekeeper who did the laundry and cooking for them. Having been used to spending generously without a second thought in the past, she had now become willing to haggle with shopkeepers for a long time just to save a few cents.

And now she was acting like a hero as she tried her best to protect Yan Liuyuan from getting hurt.

Normally, Yan Liuyuan was actually quite annoyed by Xiaoyu. She demanded him to wash his hands before eating and made sure he wore his fall clothing when it got cold. He also had to eat some vegetables he didn't like because Xiaoyu said he needed to have a balanced diet.

But as he thought back on the past, that was the warmth of family.

It seemed that only with Xiaoyu around did their family feel complete. If they were without her, this family would lack a kind of warmth.

Looking at Xiaoyu, the female parent was so irritated she couldn't utter another word. She rushed at Xiaoyu and wanted to slap her face. However, Xiaoyu dodged in time and slapped her back, knocking off her glasses as well. After slapping her, Xiaoyu did not take the opportunity to hit her again. Instead, she retreated.

Some of the parents quickly stood up to stop the fight. The female parent tried again to slap her, but there was no chance to do so anymore. Xiaoyu had gained the upper hand, and it was as though she had expected such a thing to happen.

The refugees were much fiercer than the people from the stronghold when they fought. That was regardless of whether they were male or female.

Someone suddenly said, "Why don't we hear the children's opinions? See what they have to say about the matter?"

A child spoke up, "Ever since they arrived, there's been cases of pencils and erasers going missing in class—"

Xiaoyu was unable to stand it any longer. She started cursing, "Bullshit, whose badly disciplined child is that to cast stones at others? Who doesn't have pencils and erasers? I bought many of them for Liuyuan, so why would he need to steal yours?"

However, that parent who had been slapped exploded into anger again. "How dare you say that about my son! Your mouth is filthy. One look at you and I know you do illicit activities outside the stronghold. The money you earn is dirty too, isn't it!"

Yan Liuyuan was stunned. He immediately turned to look at Xiaoyu, but he found that the usually glib Xiaoyu was dumbfounded. That was her most painful emotional scar, and it was suddenly uncovered by someone now. Xiaoyu looked a little confused and helpless. She was like an injured little animal.

The darkest and most depressing time of her life was a burden Xiaoyu constantly had to carry around. That was why she always felt like she couldn't integrate into the family. It was not that Yan Liuyuan and Ren Xiaosu did not treat her well, but because... she felt she was unworthy of them.

Early this morning, Li Xiaoyu thought the world was fresh and exciting. It was like she climbed out of her nightmarish hellscape in the middle of the night and into the world to enjoy the scenery. But now she was dragged into hell once again.

When the female parent saw Xiaoyu's reaction, she got smug. "See! Look at her! I wasn't wrong. I was spot on, wasn't I!"

Yan Liuyuan looked at her and said, "I'm warning you, don't say anything else."

"Why can't I?" The female parent snarled, "How can a promiscuous woman like her be allowed to attend the parent-teacher conference!"

Yan Liuyuan roared, "I told you, don't say anything else!"

Done speaking, Yan Liuyuan broke through the crowd and slapped her face. Many of the people had wanted to stop Yan Liuyuan when they saw him charging. But when Yan Liuyuan collided with them, they realized they could not stop him.

The young man was surprisingly strong! The classroom was in complete chaos, and many of the tables were even overturned!

But when he was about to kill that woman, Xiaoyu hugged him from behind and said softly, "Liuyuan, let's go home."

Yan Liuyuan stood there quietly. Tears suddenly streamed down his cheeks. Xiaoyu said softly again, "Liuyuan, let's go home."

"Dalong, let's go." Yan Liuyuan held Xiaoyu's hand and walked out of the front door. He no longer wanted to attend school.

Wang Dalong quickly followed closely behind them. Before he left, he even spat at that female parent. Yan Liuyuan hit her so hard she was still in a daze.

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On their way back, Xiaoyu held Yan Liuyuan's hand tightly in the fear that he would get impulsive and kill someone. She knew that if Yan Liuyuan used the nanomachines and started killing people, the classroom would have turned into a river of blood, and no one could've stopped him. She also held Yan Liuyuan's hand tightly like she was afraid she would lose him. It was as though she were scared Yan Liuyuan would abandon her.

But just as they were about to reach home, a car suddenly sped towards them. The driver of the car was so drunk he kept flooring the gas pedal.

The pedestrians on the streets cried out in alarm, but the driver paid them no heed and continued accelerating.

A vehicle speeding rampantly on the road like that was as good as the Grim Reaper waving his sickle at them.

But just as the car was about to hit Yan Liuyuan, he pulled Xiaoyu and Wang Dalong to safety like he already knew beforehand what was going to happen.

Xiaoyu stared dumbfoundedly at Yan Liuyuan. "You..."

Curse Manipulation was a new world Xiaoyu had personally opened up for Yan Liuyuan. So she knew Yan Liuyuan possessed such a power and also knew he would receive a similar backlash whenever he used it.

She asked in a whisper, "Has she died already?"

Next to her, Yan Liuyuan said calmly, "She must die."

“Let’s head home right away.” Xiaoyu pulled Yan Liuyuan with her. Her feeble little body dragged Yan Liuyuan along in a stubborn yet helpless manner.

### **Chapter 333 Blessed with mines in the backyard**

If Yan Liuyuan did not have the nanomachines, he would already have died, and Xiaoyu and Wang Dalong might even have been implicated. It seemed precisely because of this reason that his strength did not increase like the others after becoming a supernatural being. The world was apparently preventing him from abusing his power.

That was supposed to be his shortcoming, but Ren Xiaosu had helped him mitigate it. It was not an exaggeration to say that his fate had been changed.

Xiaoyu did not say anything. She could sense the beast in Yan Liuyuan’s heart that had previously been restrained by Ren Xiaosu was about to crawl out and start attacking people. But she did not know how to stop it. She only knew that Yan Liuyuan shouldn’t become like that.

A moment later, the neon sign hanging above them suddenly crashed down due to a loose screw.

Yan Liuyuan once again pulled Xiaoyu and Wang Dalong aside and avoided the accident.

Xiaoyu asked softly, “Who was it this time?”

“Big Sis, don’t bother yourself with this,” Yan Liuyuan answered.

“Can you stop killing people?” Xiaoyu said to Yan Liuyuan.

“No.” Yan Liuyuan shook his head. He thumped his chest. “Something’s weighing heavily on my chest, and it makes me very uncomfortable, yet I can’t seem to get it off my chest.”

Xiaoyu suddenly started crying. “Liuyuan, stop it. I’m not worthy for you to do all this for me. Let me bear the responsibility since it was my own fault.”

Yan Liuyuan looked at her stubbornly. “No, you’re worth it.” Then Yan Liuyuan reached out and wiped her tears away. “Don’t cry. I’ve already killed her for you, and I’ll send her family members to hell with her.”

Xiaoyu did not know what to do anymore. Without Ren Xiaosu around, there was not a person who could restrain Yan Liuyuan.

Seeing Yan Liuyuan’s murderous rage getting stronger, Xiaoyu hugged Yan Liuyuan tightly. “Don’t you remember what your brother said? Don’t let the sorrows of our era become your sorrow as well.”

Ren Xiaosu’s name seemed to have a strange, magical effect on Yan Liuyuan. The words touched a soft spot in Yan Liuyuan. After Xiaoyu said that, Yan Liuyuan finally started to calm down.

The wife of the Public Order Division’s director was killed in a car accident, and the accident caused quite a stir in the stronghold. Someone even told the director his wife had only dashed out onto the streets because she was looking for someone who had argued with her at school.

The director of the Public Order Division flew into a rage in his office and vowed to punish the murderer severely. He even wanted to seek out the student and parent who had hit his wife at school!

But before he could conduct a thorough investigation, Yang Yu'an summoned him to the Yang Consortium's manor and gave him a dressing down, claiming that he did not discipline his friends, family, and wife properly. Yang Yu'an even said that as the director of the Public Order Division, he could not differentiate right from wrong. If he caused any further trouble, he would be removed from his position as the director of the Public Order Division. When Yang Yulan reprimanded him, Yang Yu'an spoke pompously.

However, the director of the Public Order Division knew there had to be a reason for this. Yang Yu'an was definitely not someone who would reprimand him because of "justice." This matter must have affected the interests of Yang Yu'an!

It was only then that he calmed down and recalled what had happened. Then he remembered someone saying it was a refugee who was the cause of the matter!

Wait a minute, there weren't that many refugees in the stronghold.

There were probably less than ten refugees who had gotten into the Yang Consortium's stronghold over the years, so it would definitely be easy to find out who it was. However, there was one young refugee who had been enjoying the limelight recently.

No, wait! There was also a group of refugees who had come into the stronghold recently!

When he finally got someone to investigate the matter and found out the truth, he was shocked to discover the young man who had quarreled with his wife was actually Ren Xiaosu's younger brother! After finding out about this, he immediately understood why Yang Yulan was not on his side this time.

However, his first reaction was not to risk his position as director of the Public Order Division, nor was it to take revenge for his wife. He just mentally cursed at her for being such an idiotic woman. Afterwards, he instructed his subordinates to stop investigating the matter. Whatever happened at the school was wholly unrelated to the traffic accident. That stupid woman had brought it upon herself for failing to obey traffic rules, and her death had nothing to do with anyone else.

Once the case was concluded, the entire stronghold flew into an uproar. Those who were in the know understood why the director of the Public Order Division had bowed his head in regards to the investigations. As for those who did not know, they thought he had been looking forward to his wife's death and getting a promotion since a long time ago.

What surprised everyone most was that the director of the Public Order Division actually headed to Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu's place to apologize to them. However, Yan Liuyuan kept their door shut and did not have any intentions of meeting him.

The principals also came down to their place. However, Wang Fugui was the one who met them to handle Yan Liuyuan's and Wang Dalong's withdrawal from the school.



Eventually, everyone in the inner circle caught wind of this matter. So it turned out that the refugee, Ren Xiaosu, was actually a protégé of Zhang Jinglin. It was no wonder Ren Xiaosu could recommend Xu Xianchu to Stronghold 178.

Meanwhile, the bandit extermination group Ren Xiaosu was part of had just arrived at the first stronghold on their journey. Everyone was to use a half-day to do quick repairs and maintenance work here before they continued north.

After entering the stronghold, Ren Xiaosu did not do anything other than visit gold shops using his official identity as part of the bandit extermination task force and exchanged his gold for the devalued currencies of the Li Consortium and the Qing Consortium. But as he was in a hurry, he did not manage to trade too much.

During this period, Yang Xiaojin also disappeared for a while. It seemed she had gone to meet up with the Saboteurs' planted spy here. And Zong Cheng remained behind with the convoy and happily waited for the others to return. He was a polite, talented young man who was confident in himself yet friendly to others.

On the way here, he had tried talking to Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin. While Yang Xiaojin couldn't care less, Ren Xiaosu and Zong Cheng almost became blood brothers, the way they chatted.

There were more than 60 people from the Zong Consortium who were traveling with them, and they were split between the two military transport trucks. The Zong Consortium's people were in charge of basic tasks like cooking for the journey.

The nanosoldiers portrayed a sense of superiority and only showed a nice attitude to Yang Xiaojin, Ren Xiaosu, and Zong Cheng. When the normal soldiers talked to them, they would ignore them.

Ren Xiaosu found an opportunity to ask Yang Xiaojin, "Hey, why is everyone so interested in Stronghold 178? Is it because they're great at combat?"

Yang Xiaojin explained, "In modern warfare, no matter how good you are at combat, you can't fight if you don't have money. There are four military factories in the vicinity of Stronghold 178 that are extremely vital. And you might not be aware of it, but there are more than 30 kinds of minerals found in the territory controlled by Stronghold 178. Their grain reserves are ranked first among those in the entire stronghold system. Some of their mineral reserves are even estimated to be at 90% of all reserves!"

Yang Xiaojin continued, "Besides, the exploitable oil reserves there amount to as much as 40% of what the entire stronghold system has access to. Modern development is dependent on mineral and energy sources, so these things are all indispensable."

Ren Xiaosu was shocked. He had thought Stronghold 178 was extremely poor. After all, that place was located in such a harsh environment, so it sounded like it would be a very poor area. He had not expected Stronghold 178 to be so rich!

Come to think of it, you could not win a modern battle with just courage alone. Fighting a war was all about money, and the reason Stronghold 178 could still stand intact in the Northwest without having any close ties to the other organizations was not because they were asocial or conceited but because they were blessed with mines in their backyard.

### **Chapter 334 Zong Cheng the magician**

Ren Xiaosu felt that he could not be faulted for thinking that Stronghold 178 was very poor. After all, it was not like a place that was located in such a harsh environment should have much wealth to begin with. But Yang Xiaojin's explanation made him understand why so many people were eyeing Stronghold 178 even though it was situated at the border.

It was no wonder that Stronghold 178 wanted to exterminate the bandits and reopen the trade routes. Those minerals needed to be transported to the Central Plains!

More importantly, Zhang Jinglin had once refused to be the commander of Stronghold 178 even though they were so rich? Was he being melodramatic or what! Ren Xiaosu started judging Zhang Jinglin.

When they arrived at the second stronghold to do repairs and maintenance, Yang Xiaojin disappeared off to somewhere again. Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu traded some more gold for money before returning to the assembly place in advance. When he got back, Yang Xiaojin hadn't returned yet. Zong Cheng was laughing and chatting with the Yang Consortium's nanosoldiers.

His own soldiers had brought over some folding chairs for the nanosoldiers and even provided them with some specialties from the North as snacks.

It seemed that Zong Cheng was highly interested in these nanosoldiers and was willing to interact with them. No matter how arrogant the nanosoldiers might be, they would still not put on any airs in front of an important figure from the Zong Consortium and conversed quite happily with him.

When Ren Xiaosu returned, he did not approach them immediately. Instead, he observed them from afar. It looked like Zong Cheng was performing some magic tricks for them. Zong Cheng asked one of the nanosoldiers while holding a water bottle in his hand, "What do you usually like to drink?"

The nanosoldier smiled and said, "You're too polite. I'll just have some water."

"OK," Zong Cheng said as he tilted the bottle slightly and poured some clear liquid out of it.

Zong Cheng turned to look at another soldier. "What do you like to drink? Say something different this time."

"I like grape juice," the nanosoldier said.

"Alright." Zong Cheng was still holding the same bottle in his hand but the previously clear liquid was no longer there. This time, he poured some purple grape juice out.

The nanosoldiers exclaimed, "There must be a mechanism in the bottle, right?"

“Come here, you can inspect it for yourself.” Zong Cheng handed the bottle to one of the nanosoldiers. The nanosoldier looked into the bottle and found no mechanisms inside.

Then Zong Cheng turned around and saw Ren Xiaosu. “Brother Xiaosu! Why are you watching from there? Come and sit with us for a while. We’ll set off when Yang Xiaojin gets back.”

Ren Xiaosu walked over and said with a smile, “Can you do card tricks?”

“That’s something every magician has to learn.” Zong Cheng took out a deck of playing cards from his breast pocket and asked, “What kinda trick would you like to see?”

Ren Xiaosu suddenly sensed that something was not right. Why would a core figure of an organization be obsessed with magic tricks? He had heard Zong Cheng was a supernatural being, so could his superpower be related to magic?

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, “Why don’t you conjure up four ‘fours’ for me?”

“That’s simple.” Zong Cheng said confidently, “Pick out any four cards as you like.”

He fanned the cards out face down so that no one could see what the cards were.

Ren Xiaosu reached out and picked the cards. These were cards used for magic, and he happened to have similar cards.

“Wow, they really are four ‘fours,” Ren Xiaosu said in surprise as he looked at the cards in his hands. “Brother Zong Cheng is truly amazing.” Then Ren Xiaosu returned the cards to him.

Zong Cheng was stunned. He felt like something was off but could not tell what it was exactly.

“Please don’t say that. It was no big deal.” Zong Cheng smiled as he put the cards back into the box and then stuffed it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

Then Zong Cheng said with a warm smile, “By the way, Brother Xiaosu, I just heard about something. Are you very close with Xu Xianchu?”

Ren Xiaosu looked at him and said with a smile, “I guess. I was mainly trying to recommend talented people to my teacher.”

He knew what Zong Cheng was getting at, but Ren Xiaosu would also not let slip any opportunity to increase his own “amulets.”

Zong Cheng’s smile remained. “I’m also very familiar with Brother Xu. It seems like we were fated to meet. But if I could ask, your teacher is...”

“Zhang Jinglin.” Ren Xiaosu whispered, “Usually, I don’t tell a secret like that to anyone. It’s better to keep a low profile.”

Zong Cheng’s eyes twitched. ‘You’re still calling this a secret? The entire Yang Consortium already knows about it!’

Even he had already received news of it. At first, he was still a little skeptical and had to check with the other party again to confirm if it was true. As a result, that person said everyone in Stronghold 88 already knew about it, and that Ren Xiaosu's younger brother had made the director of the Public Order Division eat humble pie.

Before setting off on the expedition, Zong Cheng had realized there was something strange about Yang Yu'an's attitude. So this was the reason for it.

After confirming the truth, Zong Cheng's smile for Ren Xiaosu became even more sincere. At the beginning, he would occasionally talk to Yang Xiaojin. But now it was like he did not even know Yang Xiaojin anymore, even though they were traveling together. He never said another word to her again, and the way he addressed her had changed from "Xiaojin" to "Yang Xiaojin."

This was completely different from his original plan in which he was the leader of this attack to exterminate bandits.

It was not that he was afraid of Ren Xiaosu. Because the Yang Consortium was so bold as to detain Luo Lan despite both sides being equally powerful, it demonstrated the Yang Consortium was not necessarily afraid of the Qing Consortium. It was the same for the Zong Consortium when they faced Stronghold 178. After operating in the North for so many years, they had become a force to be reckoned with.

However, he felt that he should be more ambitious as a man rather than creating unnecessary trouble over a minor issue like romance.

The Zong Consortium had endured for so long in the impoverished Northern Wastes, yet everyone claimed they were hyenas and even refused to acknowledge them as a consortium.

Now that the South was at war, it was the best opportunity for the Zong Consortium to rise up. He could not screw this up.

Before setting off again, Ren Xiaosu sat in the passenger seat of the off-road vehicle and asked, "Can you let me drive for a while?"

Yang Xiaojin looked at him in surprise. "Why do you want to drive all of a sudden? Do you know how to drive?"

"Of course." Ren Xiaosu said confidently, "How can a man not know how to drive?"

"Alright then." Yang Xiaojin stopped the vehicle and changed seats with him.

Ren Xiaosu excitedly stepped on the accelerator. But after driving for ten minutes, Yang Xiaojin took out her pistol and pointed it at Ren Xiaosu. "Stop the vehicle, I'm driving."

Ren Xiaosu reluctantly stopped the vehicle. "Let's talk nicely. Why do you have to point a gun at me?"

Yang Xiaojin rubbed her temple and changed the topic. "After we leave the stronghold, north of that is the valley. When the time comes, I'll shake off Zong Cheng and the nanosoldiers so that we can act on our own."

“Eh?” Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. “Aren’t we going to exterminate the bandits? How are we going to exterminate the bandits with just the two of us?”

“You probably don’t know how serious the banditry to the north is.” Yang Xiaojin explained, “There are already hundreds of large bandit gangs living there, with the smallest groups with members numbering in the double digits. They’re all threats the Zong Consortium created over the years.”

“There’s that many of them?” Ren Xiaosu was surprised to find out there were hundreds of bands of bandits.

“So we won’t be their match if we encounter a larger gang of bandits with only the 100 of us,” Yang Xiaojin said.

### **Chapter 335 Acting alone**

“Then why didn’t they send some more people?” Ren Xiaosu asked, “Aren’t they sending us to our deaths? They could have just sent the army to eliminate the bandits!”

“Do you know why that place has become an unincorporated zone?” Yang Xiaojin said, “It’s because it’s the transit hub of the Northwest with links to four different places, of which three lead to the Zong Consortium, the Yang Consortium, and Stronghold 178. Whoever sends their troops into this area will attract the suspicion of the other two. In the past, there was no lack of friction among the three groups over this matter. None of them wants anyone else to gain control of this route.”

“So that area eventually became a gathering place for the bandits since no one could do anything about it?” Ren Xiaosu asked. “No wonder the three organizations are conducting this operation together at the mention of exterminating bandits. Even Xu Xianchu had to specially make a trip to the Yang Consortium.”

“Yes, some large bandit gangs even settled down over there and turned to stealing women from the refugees to keep them company.” Yang Xiaojin said, “If there’s a need to deploy troops there to exterminate the bandits, the three organizations have to work together. Since everyone wants to kill the bandits, the mission must be carried out no matter what.”

“Everyone should have just sent their troops together then,” Ren Xiaosu said in a speechless manner. “What’s the point of sending us there?”

“It’s extremely easy for the bandits to hide in the valley because of the complex and peculiar terrain.” Yang Xiaojin said, “So someone has to first get a better understanding of the bandit situation in the entire valley and find out where they’re located to assess if there’s a chance of killing them in one fell swoop before making further plans.”

With that, Ren Xiaosu understood they were just going there to scout the path and did not have to participate in any battles. He and Yang Xiaojin weren’t even a part of this plan at the beginning. The primary mission was supposed to be conducted by the 30 nanosoldiers along with the Zong Consortium’s soldiers.

If the troops were deployed directly into the valley, many of the bandits might go into hiding or run away. Furthermore, it would be very easy for the three organizations to fight each other.

“When you say that you want to shake them off, it’s mainly Zong Cheng that you want to shake off, right?” Ren Xiaosu probed.

“Yes.” Yang Xiaojin nodded and said, “As the Zong Consortium is more familiar with the valley, they suggested they should lead the way this time. However, the banditry issue originated from them, and many of the bandit gangs have ties with them as well. If they lead the way, we can only see what they want us to see.”

In any case, they would have to avoid the Zong Consortium and not get led by the nose.

Ren Xiaosu did not have any problems with that. Honestly, Yang Xiaojin was a daredevil. How could a normal person barge into a bandit’s lair just like that? Ren Xiaosu asked, “Aren’t you worried that something will happen along the way?”

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. “Don’t I have you to protect me?” Then she stomped on the gas at an intersection.

When they exited the stronghold, Yang Xiaojin deliberately drove to the rear of the convoy. By now, the convoy in front of her had turned down a side road. So when Yang Xiaojin suddenly took the other route and drove west, the vehicles ahead of her could not react in time.

By the time they realized the off-road vehicle driven by Yang Xiaojin had detoured, it was too late for them to turn around. They could only stop their vehicles and watch Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin drive all the way northwest, leaving a huge trail of dust behind them.

The Southern wilderness was filled with lush greenery. But in just the short distance spanning two strongholds, the landscape had suddenly changed from a lush green to a khaki land filled with sand mounds. From here to the north, it would be hard to see an entire forest again. The remaining vegetation that could be seen were squat shrubs,

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Severe soil erosion had happened here before The Cataclysm, and desertification was already an unstoppable trend back then and could only have been prevented by putting in a great deal of manpower, logistics, and funding into its reversal.

But with the advent of The Cataclysm, the lands became completely deserted.

Zong Cheng had a calm expression as he stood outside the vehicle and looked at the off-road vehicle departing west.

One of the nanosoldiers on the ground asked, “Platoon Commander, what do we do now?”

The platoon commander gave it some thought and said, “We’ll continue with the original plan and carry out our mission.”

Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu were not included in their original mission plans to head deep into the northern valley. So even though Yang Xiaojin had just left, it did not fluster them.

Zong Cheng looked at the nanosoldiers and said with a smile, "They might have a more important mission to conduct. But that's alright. I hope that we can happily work together in the coming days."

Based on the established plan, Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu should have followed the convoy east where they would pass by the front lines at Mt. Shangying, Mt. Lianta, and Mt. Dingyuan before proceeding to the core of the valley.

But with Yang Xiaojin's detour, she would have to pass through Mt. Daban, Mt. Tangwang, and Mt. Guan before meeting up with the rest of the convoy again. She had already planned for this as she wanted to see for herself what the banditry situation in the valley was really like.

After driving for a short while, they abandoned their vehicle and walked on foot. Although this would slow their progress, they would not be easily identified as members of an organization.

Yang Xiaojin had even prepared specific rags just so it would make them look like refugees who had escaped from a Yang Consortium factory.

Yang Xiaojin said, "Actually, there's still many small human settlements in the valley. They're all refugees who can't stand the exploitation of the consortiums and have fled here to farm near a water source."

"Aren't they afraid of the bandits?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"The bandits deliberately left quite a few refugees alone in the valley and won't harm them." Yang Xiaojin said, "I wonder who gave them the idea, though. Whenever an organization conducts an operation to exterminate them, if there isn't enough time for them to go into hiding, they'll simply stash their weapons and escape to the refugee settlements where they pretend to be refugees who live there as well."

Ren Xiaosu was surprised by her answer. "What's the point of doing that?"

"To the organizations, people are also a kind of resource." Yang Xiaojin said, "When the Yang Consortium first started their operations to exterminate the bandits, they would escort any refugees back to the stronghold's town if they came across them and make them work at the factories to continue creating value. But after about a year, the bandits who had impersonated refugees would abduct some of the refugees and head back to the valley."

"It isn't easy for the bandits either, huh?" Ren Xiaosu sighed.

"I suspect there's someone behind the scenes advising them," Yang Xiaojin said.

"Or it could be their own smarts," Ren Xiaosu said as he stood atop a mound.

“I’m not saying the bandits are stupid, but someone powerful must be backing them.” Yang Xiaojin said, “Some years ago, the ruins of the Cataclysm civilization were cleared out. With nothing much left to scavenge, and the merchants too afraid to come by, what did they survive on in recent years? We also found out these bandits often acquire brand-new weapons and motorcycles. Some of the bandit gangs are even quite up to date with the latest news. If you tell me they don’t have some sort of corporation backing them, I’d refuse to believe it.”

### **Chapter 336 The people supporting the bandits**

Ren Xiaosu wondered, “Could it be the Zong Consortium? Didn’t you say that the bandits originated because of them?”

Yang Xiaojin shook her head. “No, it seems the forces supporting the bandits with their resources are likely to be against the Zong Consortium. That’s also why the Zong Consortium is helpless about the situation. The people behind it are especially hard to seek out. It’s like they’re rats or something.”

Ren Xiaosu had been confused. But when Yang Xiaojin mentioned the word “rat,” he suddenly thought of Luo Lan for some reason. Although there was an extreme difference in their body size, they had one thing in common, and that was how they loved scuttling around in the sewers.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt he could guess who was supporting the bandits to gross the Zong Consortium out. If it was really as he had guessed, Qing Zhen and Luo Lan’s foresight would be much greater than the Yang Consortium’s.

After all, the Yang Consortium had only thought of forming an alliance with the Zong Consortium in the past one or two years, while the bandits had been troubling the Zong Consortium for five to six years.

If it were really Qing Zhen and Luo Lan who were behind this, just how scheming would they have to be? What were they really after?

Of course, Ren Xiaosu was unaware of the entire story behind the change in leadership at the Qing Consortium, nor did he know how long Qing Zhen had been planning for it.

And now, it seemed like the Zong Consortium truly had a problem with the bandits. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have sought the Yang Consortium and Stronghold 178’s help. After all, they were the ones who developed the bandits at the beginning, but the issue got out of control in the end. If the problem were leaked, wouldn’t they become the butt of the joke?

Ren Xiaosu shared his assumptions with Yang Xiaojin. “I think it’s the Qing Consortium who’s secretly helping them.”

“It doesn’t really matter.” Yang Xiaojin shook her head and said, “It doesn’t really have anything to do with me.”

“Your relationship with the Yang Consortium...” Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment but did not ask further.

“You don’t need to be apprehensive.” Yang Xiaojin said, “The Yang Consortium is starting to decline, and family ties are something that’s become dispensable. Let’s head to Mt. Daban now. There’s some small bandit lairs and refugee settlements congregated there.”



“Are you familiar with this region?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“I’m pretty familiar with the outer perimeter of the valley.” Yang Xiaojin said, “I came by here frequently some years back.”

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. “What were you doing here?”

“I came to practice shooting,” Yang Xiaojin answered.

Ren Xiaosu realized Yang Xiaojin had actually used the bandits out here in the wilderness for target practice. It was no wonder Ren Xiaosu felt like Yang Xiaojin was sometimes very similar to him. They were like the grass that grew in the wilderness.

“Would you like to learn?” Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, “I can teach you.”

Ren Xiaosu’s eyes twitched. “My marksmanship is also quite good.”

“I don’t know what kind of power you have that you can actually learn the skills of others directly,” Yang Xiaojin said, “but you didn’t manage to learn it completely, right? Your breathing technique is wrong.”

Ren Xiaosu smiled. As expected of someone with Perfect Firearms Proficiency, she immediately noticed his shortcomings at a single glance. Although he had managed to copy her proficiency, there had to be a huge gap in proficiency between the Advanced Firearms Proficiency and Perfect Firearms Proficiency.

He stopped acting unreasonable. “How do you plan to teach me?”

“I’ll teach you through actual combat,” Yang Xiaojin said calmly.

Ren Xiaosu muttered, “And I was thinking you would place your hand on mine to teach me.”

“What?” As Ren Xiaosu’s voice was too soft, Yang Xiaojin could not hear him.

Ren Xiaosu said, “Nothing!”

Yang Xiaojin looked at him and asked, “How should I make myself look more like a refugee?”

“You’ve asked the right person. You can’t wear this cap anymore.” Ren Xiaosu said, “What refugee wears a cap?”

Yang Xiaojin decisively took off her cap. Ren Xiaosu was stunned as he rarely saw her without her cap.

“And then?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

Ren Xiaosu examined her and said, “Your hair is too neat, but you don’t have to make it too untidy. You can just leave it slightly disheveled.” Although her clothes seemed rather refugee-like, some details were still quite different upon closer inspection. As refugees tended to cut their own hair, everyone’s hairstyle was always unkempt.

But after he finished saying that, he saw Yang Xiaojin take out a dagger from her sleeve and cut off her hair without hesitation. After that, she ruffled it a little.

Yang Xiaojin originally had a chin-length bob that was neat and tidy. But after she cut it off with the dagger, her hair became disheveled.

Although she would return to her original appearance in another month or two, Ren Xiaosu was surprised by how Yang Xiaojin did not care about her image just so that she could look more like a refugee. He knew that some girls in the stronghold cherished their hair as much as their lives. This Yang Xiaojin was really willing to go all out to get things done.

Yang Xiaojin gave a few slight shakes of her head and said, "What about now? Do I look more like one now?"

"Mhm, that's more like it." Ren Xiaosu held in his laughter and said, "Your face still looks a little clean, as well as the lining of your clothes. But never mind that. Based on what you said earlier, it will still take us another day before we arrive at Mt. Daban. After we travel in the dusty wilderness for a day, we won't be clean anymore."

"OK." Yang Xiaojin nodded. "Let's come up with a narrative first. I don't want us to blow our cover when we find a human settlement and someone asks us about our relationship. H-How old are you?"

It seemed like this was the first time the two of them were asking each other the more personal questions. They had never discussed these matters before. Back at the Jing Mountains, they talked about what might lie in the mountains. When they were at Stronghold 109, they talked about the Li Consortium's breakthrough in their research. These days, they discussed the banditry that was going on in the valley. Somehow, they had never really gotten to know each other. It was as though they were not too worried about that.

Ren Xiaosu vaguely remembered that Yang Xiaojin should be 18, while he was 17. If he told the truth, he would probably have to address her as big sister, and that would be quite unfortunate for him.

Ren Xiaosu gave it some consideration. "I'm 20 this year."

Yang Xiaojin nodded. "Well, I'm 21, so you can just call me Big Sis. Don't have a slip of tongue when we encounter other people."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

Wasn't she fucking lying through her teeth? In the past, Ren Xiaosu was always the one who tricked others, so how did he end up getting tricked by someone else today!

"You're 21?" Ren Xiaosu said unconvinced, "Take out your ID card and let me have a look."

"I lost it." Yang Xiaojin said nonchalantly, "Enough, you don't have to mind those details. You were the one who lied first."

Ren Xiaosu could only take the loss silently. Even as the two of them advanced northwest, he was still thinking about how to get back at her.

In the vast wilderness, the two of them were two tiny black dots, and the hills on the land were waves rolling across the ground.

During the evening, their shadows were stretched extremely long on the ground. The sparse clouds above their heads also extended all the way into the distance and connected with the ground.

At night, the sea of stars in the sky was so dense that they looked like they could be touched with an outstretched arm.

Yang Xiaojin said while hurrying along, "I'm hungry."

Ren Xiaosu echoed, "Me too."

"That's not what I wanted to hear."

"Hey, why didn't you bring any food with you?"

"I'm a refugee now. How can a refugee have any food?" Yang Xiaojin justified. "And with you following me, there isn't a need to bring any food either."

### **Chapter 337 Sniping is a natural talent**

"Sniping is a natural talent."

Yang Xiaojin laid prone behind a mound, hiding herself completely within the cover of some bushes. Unless someone were to look down from above, it would be near impossible to notice that someone was lying there.

Yang Xiaojin said to Ren Xiaosu, who was also prone next to her, "In our training, your sense of balance and the steadiness of your advanced neural activities determine your 'ceiling' from the day you're born. These terms might not match the scientific expressions used in biology, but we're used to calling them that."

"It's not just talent alone, though. There's also your personality, which is difficult to foster and change." Yang Xiaojin said, "In a personality assessment, there are 16 possible types based on the assessment of a set of judgment criteria. The first criterion is introversion and extraversion. On a scale of zero to ten for snipers, zero represents introversion and indecisiveness, while ten represents risk-taking and bravery. For a sniper, one should have a score between five and eight, inclusive, with the most ideal score being eight."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "What's your score?"

"Eight," Yang Xiaojin answered.

In fact, her answer was what Ren Xiaosu expected. Since she had Perfect Firearms Proficiency, she should be perfect in every aspect. If there were any flaws, it wouldn't be called perfect.

“Let’s talk about the training method we’ll employ for the day after tomorrow.” Yang Xiaojin said, “You’ll have to keep your body steady and learn how to breathe evenly. All of that is done to ensure that when you finally pull the trigger, the bullet hits where you want it to. In that moment, all of the hormones secreted by your body should be at the bullet’s service. All of this can only be achieved with a long period of training.”

“There’s also biofeedback[1] training to go through. When a sniper encounters a situation, they can’t have their heart start racing and start sweating profusely like a normal person would,” Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. “How do you train that? It goes against your instincts, doesn’t it?”

It was no wonder Yang Xiaojin felt a little aloof. Upon careful observation, it was a calmness behind the powerful self-control that allowed her to completely restrain her instincts.

It was just like how she had covered Ren Xiaosu from the top of that building. Seeing the Experimentals about to get to her, she could still continue calmly pulling the trigger and only left at the last possible moment.

Luo Xinyu was scared to death on that day as she thought she would not get Yang Xiaojin out of there.

Yang Xiaojin said, “There’s some methods to train your biofeedback. For example, one of my old training routines was to immerse my arms into two buckets, with one containing cold water and the other hot water. After training to a certain extent, I can even increase the temperature in just one hand by two degrees through mental suggestion.”

Ren Xiaosu said in surprise, “You can even do that? Can you do it now? Let me touch your hands.”

Yang Xiaojin rolled her eyes at him. “The purpose of this training is not to control the temperature of your hands, but to let the sniper master their instincts. When they want to take a deep breath, their heart rate will immediately slow down.”

Ren Xiaosu realized the difference in their sniping level was not just a small amount. Yang Xiaojin’s success was only achieved after she put in many years of effort. How could it possibly be duplicated with just a Basic Skill Duplication Scroll? It was no wonder that even the Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll could only copy up to master-level skills. You had to put in a lot more effort if you wanted to break past your limit and achieve perfection. Of course, his skill to annoy people was an exception. It seemed he was born with it and did not require any training.

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, “How did a girl like you get into firearms?”

“I like them.” Yang Xiaojin said, “They have a power I can use to protect myself with.”

Yang Xiaojin’s words made Ren Xiaosu realize that only those who lacked a sense of security would seek strength to protect themselves with.

“Was it tough?” Ren Xiaosu said with a sigh.

“It’d be a lie if I said it wasn’t tough.” Yang Xiaojin said, “But I enjoy it as well.”

“Why did you come out into the wilderness to practice your marksmanship?” Ren Xiaosu said.

“For desensitization training.” Yang Xiaojin explained, “It’s so I would not be affected mentally after seeing corpses, blood, and death.”

Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at Yang Xiaojin and wondered what this girl had been through.

Yang Xiaojin wondered, “We’ve already been waiting for a day now. Why aren’t any bandits passing by yet? This used to be a necessary route for bandits to take.”

They had been lying here in wait for the entire day. On one hand, Yang Xiaojin wanted to see if Ren Xiaosu possessed the right qualities to be a sniper. On the other hand, they could observe the movements of the bandits from here.

As a result, Yang Xiaojin realized Ren Xiaosu seemed to have as high an endurance as her. Although they had been lying in the bushes for more than eight hours, Ren Xiaosu did not even change his posture once. But what surprised Yang Xiaojin most was that even though Ren Xiaosu did not change his posture or even move a little, she could clearly feel him tightening and relaxing his muscles all the while. This was to help his blood circulation so that his muscles would always remain in a relaxed state.

Yang Xiaojin had no doubt that if danger appeared, Ren Xiaosu, who had been lying here motionlessly all day, could quickly engage in a high-intensity battle. She wondered how this young man had trained himself to such a state.

She slowly got up from the ground. “Let’s go. Something might have happened to the bandit lairs around here. Let’s go and check them out.”

Then Yang Xiaojin walked off in the direction she remembered. An hour later, she stood in a mountain gap and frowned as she looked at the white skeletal remains there.

They were surrounded by mud shelters[2] that had been dug out by the bandits. Wooden tables, chairs, and benches were placed inside of them, but they were discolored and covered in a solidified layer of black matter.

Black matter was what blood would become after being left out to dry for a long time.

“Someone ransacked this place.” Yang Xiaojin said, “I wonder who did it. There are bullets and empty shells lying around on the ground, while the firearms and motorcycles have all been taken away.”

When Ren Xiaosu looked at the skeletons on the ground, he noticed some teeth marks on them, suggesting that wild animals had been here as well. “Are there any women in the bandit lairs?”

“Most of them have some. The bandits head into the towns or factories and abduct some of the women back,” Yang Xiaojin said.

“There’s no skeletons of women or children in here,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“This place must’ve been plundered by other bandits. Strange. Why would anyone target such a poor group of bandits?” Yang Xiaojin said, “It seems the valley is no longer as peaceful, and something must have happened within the circle of bandits. They didn’t kill each other in the past because the people funding them had always maintained a certain kind of balance from behind the scenes.”

“Someone is trying to consolidate the valley bandits? Is that even possible?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“It’s possible, but we still have to head to the other hideouts and investigate them before we can be sure of it,” Yang Xiaojin replied. “Let’s go, there’s nothing more to see here.”

The two of them continued going northwest. Mt. Daban was right in front of them now. Based on Yang Xiaojin’s memory, they would come across the first small human settlement there.

### **Chapter 338 Civil strife among the bandits**

“Take note of your breathing.” Yang Xiaojin said, “Breathing in will cause a rapid change to your posture. It might not be obvious, but every detail that isn’t adhered to can be fatal for a sniper.

“The hawk is flying too high, you have to wait for it to spiral down and seize that opportunity when the distance closes. But the chance will be brief.”

A sniper had to be decisive whenever an opportunity arose.

Boom. Ren Xiaosu pulled the trigger at the hawk soaring high in the sky. The sniper rifle’s heavy recoil and burst of gas from the muzzle swept a large cloud of dust and smoke up off the sandy ground around him.

This was Yang Xiaojin’s sniper rifle she had materialized from thin air to lend to Ren Xiaosu.

Today was Ren Xiaosu’s real combat training day, and he was supposed to shoot a hawk out of the sky. But right from the start, Yang Xiaojin wanted him to hit the hawk’s head, which was the highest degree of difficulty.

After he fired at it once, the hawk was unscathed and flew away after getting frightened by the gunshot.

Yang Xiaojin smirked. “So do you still think your marksmanship is quite good?”

Ren Xiaosu pretended to be puzzled. “I clearly shot it in the head, so how did it escape unharmed? Could it possibly be a mutant?”

“Oh, come on.” Yang Xiaojin curled her lips. “It’s still a hawk no matter how much it mutated. Since it’s not a product of genetic modification done by the Pyro Company, it can’t survive a sniper’s bullet. You said you hit it in the head, so why was it unharmed?”

Ren Xiaosu pondered the question. “Maybe because its head is empty and the bullet went right through?”

“Ha, ha.” Yang Xiaojin put away her sniper rifle. “We can’t do any more shooting if we advance further. The sniper rifle is too loud and will attract the attention of the bandits.”

“Mhm.” Ren Xiaosu nodded. In the past two days, he had learned a lot of advanced knowledge about firearms, but he still needed much more practical experience.

He had already delayed the journey by a day due to his target practice, but Yang Xiaojin did not seem anxious or in a rush at all. She patiently accompanied him to practice his shooting

But right now, the mission to exterminate the bandits was obviously more important, and he was not in a hurry to practice his shooting at this time either.

“If we encounter the refugee settlement, will they welcome us?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“They probably won’t, but it’s also not to the extent of ostracizing us.” Yang Xiaojin said, “Everyone depends on a water source for farming and will grow their own crops. A lot of refugees who have just escaped here won’t have any food on them. They will use the money they saved up while working in the factories to purchase some food and seeds from the others. After all, it will take quite a while for the crops to grow. This is something the refugees at the settlement will want to see. Furthermore, new refugees will also bring news of the outside world with them.”

“It’s really strange that we never encountered any bandits along the way.” Ren Xiaosu frowned.

If they could not see any bandits in a place infested with bandits, it would be similar to not seeing any fish in the sea. Something strange must have happened out in this valley.

After crossing a hill, Yang Xiaojin suddenly pointed ahead and said, “Look over there.” There was a stream meandering across the land in front of her. Many refugees were digging ditches by the stream to get ready to irrigate the crops before spring arrived.

When the refugees saw Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu dressed in refugee attire, they were relieved.

The people here were very smart and could tell at a glance whether these were stronghold residents in disguise or not. It all depended on the details Ren Xiaosu had mentioned.

When Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin approached them, an older woman wiped away her sweat and spoke before they could say anything, “Do you want to buy some sorghum seeds? You’re just in time for the spring sowing season.”

“Yes.” Ren Xiaosu took out a bag wrapped in cloth and flipped through several layers before he found some loose coins. When the refugees saw this, they were even more relieved. Could important people from the strongholds possibly act as natural refugees?

But still others worried. “Where did the two of you escape from?”

Ren Xiaosu railed, “From the coal mine. They promised to pay us 21 yuan for every ton of coal carried, but then suddenly reduced it to 20 yuan and 60 cents. Furthermore, they even wanted to deduct some fees to cover the material cost. They were totally inhumane.”

One of the refugees laughed. "That's even worse than the time when I worked at the coal mine."

But at this moment, an older woman said, "But it's not the right time for you and your wife to escape."

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were both stunned. They had schemed against each other over who would be older, and it ended with Ren Xiaosu grumpily accepting that he would be the younger brother while Yang Xiaojin was to be his elder sister. But after all that discussion, their "relationship" suddenly changed the moment they got here.

Refugees tend to get married and have children at a very young age. When the children grew up, they could help out at home with some of the work. That was the mindset of the refugees. So while they might look too young to be a couple in the stronghold, they were just the right age for marriage out here.

Furthermore, no one would flee together if they were not a couple these days. If either one told on the other, the person who reported it would get rewarded.

This caught the two of them off guard. Ren Xiaosu stole a glance at Yang Xiaojin and wondered how she would react. If Yang Xiaojin insisted on clearing it up and arousing the suspicions of the refugees, they would have to retreat from this place. In any case, it shouldn't be much of a problem for them to find another way into the valley.

However, Yang Xiaojin just smiled and did not explain their relationship. She chose to quietly accept it. She asked, "Why is it not the right time for us to come out here? Could something have happened?"

"Lemme tell you, the state of the bandits in the north is chaos right now, and many people have been killed in this period." The older woman said earnestly, "We're panicking and nervous at the moment and wonder if all that will affect us as well."

"What's wrong with the bandits?" Ren Xiaosu asked, "Why would they do anything to us when we're only farmers?"

"I heard there's three gangs in the north that dislike each other. They're trying to unify the bandit gangs in the valley regardless of size. Two of the gangs are especially fierce, and there's apparently a superhuman among them as well. If they bump into anyone who goes against them, they kill them immediately." The older woman explained, "Let's come to an agreement beforehand. It's not a problem for you and your wife to stay here. We can always farm together. But if the bandits come and ask if we'll submit to them, all of us will have to agree to it. We can't go against them."

"OK." Ren Xiaosu responded, "But what if another gang comes after that gang leaves?"

The older woman waved it off. "It doesn't matter. We'll submit to whoever comes as long as they let us farm here."

This was the refugees' law of survival-give in and don't cause trouble. The bandits could fight among themselves all they wanted, and the refugees would submit to whoever came.



In any case, the bandits no longer eyed their seeds and crops. For some reason, even though they did not have anyone left to steal from, the bandits were somehow getting richer, and their equipment and weapons were also getting better.

Last year, the Zong Consortium's combat troops had entered the valley but left with their heads hanging after getting beaten by a few bands of bandits!

How could ordinary bandits be capable of that? If they could fucking defeat the regular combat troops, could they still be called bandits?!

### **Chapter 339 Conceited bandits**

There were only a few hundred refugees in this small settlement. Ren Xiaosu saw a child running around the entrance of a mud shelter a distance away. By the looks of it, this small settlement was formed only a short time ago.

There were many rivers in the valley. In Ren Xiaosu's opinion, places near rivers should be lush with vegetation. However, the valley here was not like that.

Most of the sand here had turned into soil, and where the rivers cut through, the flow of water would sweep away the soil from the two banks. Perhaps in another few years when the rivers dried out or changed course, the riverbed here would turn into a new valley like a scar running across the ground. Across the land here, the formations all looked to have been carved out by rivers.

The area the refugees chose to settle was relatively flat and suitable for planting crops.

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin had planned on staying here with the refugees for some time to get a better understanding of the banditry in the region.

As they were talking, a cloud of dust suddenly emerged in the distance. From afar, it could even be mistaken as a small sandstorm.

An older woman said nervously, "Why are they here again? Which group is it this time?"

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Are those the bandits?"

"Definitely. That dust cloud is made by the motorcycles they ride." As the older woman spoke, she ran towards the mud shelters and shouted, "Take the children back into the houses."

But the bandits in the distance were rapidly approaching. Everyone could already see their figures. The motorcycles they were riding were like taut and muscular beasts, while the rumbling of the engines and exhaust sounded like their roars.

This was an especially rough and savage sight to behold.

Even from afar, the refugees could hear the excited cries of the bandits. When they saw the refugees, it was as though they had spotted their prey.

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin looked at each other and blended in with the refugee group. They wanted to observe the situation first.

The refugees seemed to already have experience in dealing with such situations. After hiding their children away, they stood in line on the flat ground as though they were about to welcome their superiors. The only difference was that their line was rather crooked, and everyone in the group had starkly different moods.

Ren Xiaosu did a count and found slightly more than 20 bandits in this band. A group of this size would not be considered a very powerful force in this valley. However, he did not know how many other members they had back at their lair.

The gang of bandits rode their motorcycles and circled around the refugees while roaring. This was a show of force by the bandits. Round after round, the circle became smaller, and the refugees cowered together in fear.

When the refugees became visibly scared, the bandits slowly came to a stop. One of them jumped off his motorcycle and pulled down the scarf covering his mouth. "You people are farming here?"

"Yes, that's right!" One of the refugees said in fear, "We've been farming here for several years already!"

"What's so interesting about farming?" the bandit said as he spat out the sand in his mouth onto the ground. Then he smiled and said, "I see quite a few men here. Men are born to do lofty deeds. How can you call yourselves men when you're cowering here and farming every day?"

"But what are we gonna eat if we don't farm?" The refugee said meekly, "We only want to grow some crops to feed ourselves with."

"From today onwards, all of you will become my subjects." Patting the face of the refugee in front of him, the bandit boss said, "Follow me and you'll have meat to eat and wine to drink. In the past, the consortiums bullied you. Join me and we'll go bully them in the future!"

Ren Xiaosu observed these people and thought about what Yang Xiaojin had said. There was an 80% chance their motorcycles were new, while the automatic weapons in their hands were even newer than the motorcycles. It was obvious they had just changed their equipment.

Even more ridiculous was how many of these people were carrying two guns on their backs. It was as if they had too many guns and nowhere to use them.

Perhaps the new equipment had given additional confidence to these bandits. With only a few more than twenty people, they even boasted about bullying the consortiums!

When the refugees heard these people were going to declare war against the consortiums, they became even more afraid. "We don't want to fight the consortiums. We only know how to farm."

The bandit boss's face sank. "You have to fight even if you don't want to fight. Gentlemen, round them up and bring them back!"

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. So it turned out they were here to abduct them. They were probably doing so because they had too many guns, more than the people in their group. So they knew they had to expand.

This had to have something to do with the bandit's civil strife that was going on in the north. The entire valley was in a state of chaos as everyone started deviating from the "rules"!

"Are we gonna go with them?" Ren Xiaosu asked in a low voice.

"We should." Yang Xiaojin replied, "We might get to understand more about the situation in the valley this way. Besides, they only have about 20 people. If we really want to leave, they won't be able to stop us."

"Well, why don't we just eliminate them here," Ren Xiaosu mumbled.

With so many guns pointed at them, the refugees had no choice but to return to the mud shelters to take their children with them. Then they started being escorted north.

The bandit boss was riding a motorcycle next to the group of refugees. With the motorcycle's engine rumbling noisily, he shouted proudly, "Don't you people think that I, Jin Lan, am a tyrant. It's just that you were living in the outermost region of the valley, so you might not know about the situation in these lands. The people in the northern settlements have already been abducted by the other groups from the other mountain places. Even if we don't take you away today, others would come for you tomorrow."

"But we don't know how to fight," the refugees said in distress.

"Who doesn't know how to fight? I'll give y'all guns, and don't worry 'bout saving ammo. Just shoot! Besides, even if you don't wanna fight, you can contribute in other ways." Jin Lan laughed heartily.

Nobody knew what these other ways Jin Lan mentioned were, but what he said was enough to confirm Ren Xiaosu's suspicions. It looked like they had really captured all these people because they had an excess of guns and ammunition.

However, Ren Xiaosu wondered how many firearms Qing Zhen and his people had invested in this area. Why did it seem like the entire valley was chaos?

If this went on, a lot of people in the valley would die.

The big fish devours the little fish; the strong prey on the weak. This had always been the case since ancient times.

And when the war subsided, an even more powerful bandit organization could rise up after all the bandit gangs in the valley had been unified.

Was that Qing Zhen's goal? To use a massacre to clear away the "tainted impurities" in the valley and achieve the goal of consolidating all the bandits who were active here? After that, would he take control of this force for his own gain? And all he had to do was invest some guns and ammunition to make these bandits get conceited.

Although automatic rifles were a favorite among the bandits, the consortiums knew well that these guns and ammunition were worth close to nothing.

Although he had no evidence, Ren Xiaosu was certain that Qing Zhen was behind all this. No one else would do something like it.

Moreover, Ren Xiaosu was also certain that Qing Zhen still had subsequent plans for the valley, and that would be the power he would eventually use to complete the consolidation of the bandits here.

At this moment, because the Yang Consortium was at war with the Li Consortium in the South, their defenses in the North were virtually empty. They would have, at most, an independent force garrisoning each of their strongholds.

If this bandit army attacked south, they would definitely not be able to bring down the strongholds. However, they could easily destroy all the factories outside the strongholds, and that could set the Yang Consortium's economy back by three years.

Meanwhile, the Yang Consortium was probably still thinking that the northern bandits would not amount to any threat. After all, which organization would be afraid of bandits? They were totally fine with leaving them in the valley to play by themselves.

Facing such an opponent, the Zong Consortium and Yang Consortium would most likely have a really bad headache to deal with.

#### **Chapter 340 She's mine now**

Just over 20 bandits were enough to threaten the hundreds of refugees. Furthermore, Ren Xiaosu did not see the refugees putting up any resistance.

The bandit leader, Jin Lan, was still chattering nonstop. "Don't y'all worry. I, Jin Lan, also studied for two years in the town's school. I'm not an oaf who kills without batting an eyelid, and I won't do anything bad to y'all."

Someone nearby buttered up to him. "That's right, our boss is very knowledgeable. Those bandits from the other gangs can't compare to him."

Jin Lan smiled humbly. "Don't exaggerate. Speaking of which, I'm bringing y'all back to the mountains so that I can provide everyone here a better life. Look at how skinny y'all are, especially you!" He pointed at Ren Xiaosu. "Look at how skinny you are. Your face is so bony and pale. It's like you don't even have any strength left."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a while. He looked at his own body and realized that since his Strength and Dexterity had reached equilibrium, it did make him look like he had lost some weight.

Next to him, Yang Xiaojin was laughing like she had heard something really funny.

Jin Lan did not care about Ren Xiaosu's reaction and continued to ramble, "Y'all don't know how intense the fighting to the north is. I don't know where all these forces came from either, but the fighting is getting more and more intense. Y'all can only survive by following me, understand?"

Ren Xiaosu looked at Yang Xiaojin speechlessly. They had walked for more than ten kilometers under the escort of the 20-odd bandits before they finally arrived at their camp.

The camp was extremely simple and crude. It was just an empty area surrounded by wooden fences up in the mountains. There were some mud huts in the camp, and the roofs even had large holes in them. Apart from the new firearms, everything else was junk!

Ren Xiaosu could imagine how miserable these people were before they started receiving support from the Qing Consortium.

But it was different now. There were even dozens of brand-new motorcycles parked in the clearing of their campsite. Next to the motorcycles were dozens of green jerrycans used for storing fuel, and entire boxes of ammunition laid beside them. There were grenades and bullets piled up beside the jerrycans, and if anything blew up there, the explosion would probably swallow the entire ridge in an instant.

Seeing this, Ren Xiaosu had some misgivings. He didn't want to die due to the stupidity of these bandits. That would be such the injustice. And right after that, he saw the bandits who had just returned to the camp start a cooking fire ten meters away from the jerrycans.

Ren Xiaosu's hair stood on end. He muttered to Yang Xiaojin, "If the other groups attack, these people won't even know how they died, right? The Zong Consortium can't even beat bandits this stupid?!"

But despite saying that, he looked at how miserable Jin Lan's gang of bandits were and realized they were probably the weakest bandit gang in the entire valley. They didn't even know if they would survive until their next meal.

Jin Lan suddenly said, "If you're willing to fight alongside me, go and collect guns from over there. This is your only chance to make a choice!"

Ren Xiaosu was shocked. How did this fellow conquer this part of the mountains? Wasn't he afraid these refugees would kill him with the guns they picked up?

However, something else shocked Ren Xiaosu even more. More than 30 male refugees went to collect guns in the end, but after they took their guns, they just sat woodenly on the ground and let Jin Lan continue to lecture them.

They had no intention of resisting!

The sight unfolding before his eyes was just like the fantasy novels he had read back at Stronghold 88's library. But it was even stranger than fiction.

These refugees had been told to submit since they were young and to obey orders. If they were disobedient, they would get beaten up. They did not have the courage to resist the organizations. They would choose to pledge allegiance to whichever mountain place they settled down at. This was a habit forced upon them by their difficult living conditions.

At this moment, one of Jin Lan's subordinates came up to Ren Xiaosu. When he saw Yang Xiaojin, he was stunned. Although Yang Xiaojin had deliberately dirtied her face, it was still difficult to conceal her good looks.

The bandit said excitedly, "This chick is a looker. If she washes her face clean, she'll definitely be very pretty. She's mine now."

Ren Xiaosu sighed at the words. Bandits were still bandits. He said, "Sorry, but lemme break into this."

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu flew into a rage. He punched the right side of the bandit's ribs while he was off guard, caving in the bandit's chest.

The people around him were shocked. He really meant it when he said that he wanted to break in! He broke his bones just like that? He literally broke him?!

Jin Lan and the others were building a fire, and they were shocked by what they saw. They wanted to pick up the guns beside them to defend themselves.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not stop moving. Before Jin Lan could get his hand near his gun, Ren Xiaosu had already come up to him and kicked him in the face!

Jin Lan instinctively leaned backwards, and it was precisely this reaction that saved his life. However, he could feel his entire head buzzing.

Gunfire rang out. Yang Xiaojin was holding a decorated pistol and covering Ren Xiaosu. The bandits who had picked up their guns suddenly felt their hands go numb. The wrists of their gun-toting hand were bleeding profusely.

The refugees around them were all dumbfounded. Who was this couple who had just joined them?

A clever bandit had already thudded onto his knees. "Superhumans! Please spare my life!"

The speed and strength Ren Xiaosu displayed were definitely beyond that of a normal human. The bandits were not stupid either. They knew what they were facing right now.

As for Yang Xiaojin's marksmanship, it was so shocking it could be seen.

Jin Lan dizzily knelt on the ground with his nose bleeding profusely. "Sir, please spare my life. It was all a misunderstanding! We haven't been bandits for long and have never killed anyone before!"

Ren Xiaosu looked around and realized these useless things were all kneeling on the ground. They had even consciously thrown their guns far away from themselves. What kind of fucking bandits were they? Why were they not the least bit bloodthirsty?

Ren Xiaosu looked at Jin Lan and frowned. "How did you even become a bandit?"

Jin Lan was nearly crying as he wiped the blood from his nose. "We used to be farmers from Mt. Tangwang to the north. But someone came around and told us to become bandits and even handed out guns, motorcycles, and food, so we decided to head into the mountains to become bandits. We've only been bandits for two months now."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless for a long time. What on earth was the Qing Consortium trying to achieve?

Jin Lan looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, "Boss, you'll be the leader of this mountain from now on. I hope you can lead us to be strong!"

"No, wait." Ren Xiaosu facepalmed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Jin Lan flattered with a smile, "You don't know, right? There's a gang of bandits to the north who are especially fearsome because their leader is a supernatural being. Since you're also a supernatural being, you'll definitely do better than him and be more powerful than him!"