

Chapter 341 Trapping

Ren Xiaosu had originally wanted to stay in this mountain hideout for a while to observe them. However, Yang Xiaojin's looks sure made it easy for the bandits to want to lay their hands on her. If it weren't for this matter, Ren Xiaosu wouldn't have suddenly made that move.

But since he acted, he would have to ensure there wouldn't be trouble afterwards. He wasn't going to learn from the stronghold residents and fake mercy.

However, the turn of events seemed a little unexpected. Ren Xiaosu realized that after Jin Lan and the others had been overpowered, they did not have any hate for him or even say any harsh words. Instead, they wanted this supernatural being to lead them to something greater!

What kind of freaking mindset was that?!

Seeing this band of bandits addressing Ren Xiaosu as their boss, even the refugees standing nearby were stunned. They could never have expected such a reversal!

It was also at this moment they realized Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were no ordinary people. The couple had not come to their settlement because they wanted to farm. In fact, they might even be bandits from another mountain hideout.

Yang Xiaojin went on guard. She was responsible for preventing anyone from secretly attacking them with their guns. But after a while, she realized these people were actually serious about acknowledging Ren Xiaosu as their boss.

He was here to exterminate the bandits, so how did it end up with him becoming the bandit leader?

However, the first thing Ren Xiaosu said was, "Hurry up and move the firearms and fuel cans far away from me. By placing all the firearms in one spot, aren't y'all afraid you'll blow yourselves up?"

Jin Lan, whose nose was bleeding, hurriedly stood up. "Listen to the boss. Hurry up and shift the things away. Don't keep them there and cause an eyesore to the boss!"

Yang Xiaojin came to Ren Xiaosu's side and watched the group of people busy themselves with their tasks. She said in a low voice, "How are we going to put a stop to this mess now?"

Ren Xiaosu pondered for a long time. "Look at the logic you're going by! We're here to destroy the bandits, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"We're here to figure out where all the bandits are hiding so we can capture them all!"

"Yes."

“Then look at it this way. If we go through so much effort to find them and then draw the terrain map,” Ren Xiaosu said, “when the Zong Consortium and Yang Consortium’s troops come storming, we might not be able to find them.”

These bandits were like rats, and the valley that had been cut through by rivers was like a sewer. It would be really easy for the regular combat troops to come here to fight them. All they had to do was send more people here, and they would have no problem dealing with the bandits. Ren Xiaosu did not believe the Zong Consortium would be so utterly defeated unless they had other motives.

However, if the combat troops were not familiar with the terrain here, it would be impossible to exterminate the bandits entirely. Strictly speaking, it was not that it couldn’t be done, but it was just not worth the effort.

“So...” Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu.

“We’ll have the bandits come to us instead,” Ren Xiaosu decided.

At this moment, Yang Xiaojin did not realize what it would lead to, mainly because Ren Xiaosu’s thinking was quite different from others. Under normal circumstances, it would not be possible to guess what he was thinking.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the refugees. “Let’s go back to farming!”

The refugees were stunned for a moment. “We can go back to farming?”

They had thought Ren Xiaosu would stay here at the mountain hideout as the bandit leader while they continued being their captives. After all, the bandits in the valley were all birds of a feather. But Ren Xiaosu was actually thinking of bringing them back to farm?

“That’s right.” Ren Xiaosu said excitedly, “Haven’t y’all dug the irrigation ditches already? Since they’ve already been dug, we have to sow the land! Now that we have weapons, we can choose not to be bandits and use them to protect our crops so that other bandits can’t hurt us!”

The refugees were stunned. However, they still did not dare pick up the weapons. It was as though they would get into trouble the moment they picked one up.

Not everyone liked fighting and killing. They chose to escape here to farm because they wanted to avoid everything that was going on in the outside world and find a quiet place where they could settle down.

Among the refugees, if there were ruthless people such as Ren Xiaosu, then there were also cowardly ones who sought to avoid conflict. However, it was not exactly as simple as calling them cowardly. It could only be said that they were unwilling to fight others.

Ren Xiaosu said, “We will definitely not take the fight to others. But if you don’t have any means of protecting yourselves, then don’t even think about being able to farm in peace. Think of your family and children!”

At the mention of the word “children,” some of the refugees were moved. Being used to the easy and comfortable life in the valley, they’ve realized it was no longer as safe in recent years. They had started becoming the targets of the bandits.

Just like today when the bandits came and took them away, they were not even capable of retaliating. The children had to suffer as a result, while their wives might even end up becoming someone else’s wife.

Weapons could be used to invade, but they could also be used for protection.

Some of the refugees slowly picked up the brand-new firearms. However, they did not even know how to use them. All it did was boost their courage for now.

But when they held the cold and unfeeling firearms in their hands, they somehow felt a sense of security.

Ren Xiaosu beguiled the refugees and escorted Jin Lan and the others back the way they came while riding pillion on Yang Xiaojin’s motorcycle. Earlier on when no one was looking, Ren Xiaosu even threw an entire box of grenades into his storage space.

A grenade was similar in power to the Explosive Poker’s four “threes,” so this could save Ren Xiaosu quite a few gratitude tokens.

After returning to the settlement, Ren Xiaosu gave Jin Lan and the others a mission. “All y’all used to be refugees too. For now, don’t think about being a bandit anymore. Behave yourselves and tend to the land here, ya hear?”

Jin Lan and the others had bitter looks on their faces. The bandits from the other mountain hideouts all abducted refugees and turned them into bandits. Meanwhile, even though they were also bandits, they had been abducted back to the settlement by refugees to farm.

Yang Xiaojin watched as the refugees started plowing the fields again. She asked, “What do you plan to do with these refugees and bandits?”

Ren Xiaosu looked at the sky and smiled. “We wait.”

Right at this moment, another cloud of dust kicked up in the distance. Yang Xiaojin looked at the gang of bandits screeching their way over and realized, “You were waiting for them to come knocking on our door....”

Just as Ren Xiaosu had said, it was too slow to go around looking for these people one by one.

Based on what Jin Lan had said, all the bandit gangs were trying to expand their strength and would not pass on raiding any human settlements they came across.

In that case, why would Ren Xiaosu bother to go looking for them? He could easily wait for the bandits in the entire area consisting of Mt. Daban, Mt. Tangwang, and Mt. Guang to find him instead.

Trapping!

“But we can only catch some of the small-time bandits in the south this way,” Yang Xiaojin said with a laugh.

“That’s fine. I would be really afraid if the stronger bandit gangs showed up. Don’t worry, we’ll be able to defeat the bigger bandit gangs soon!” Ren Xiaosu said in high spirits.

When this new band of bandits was about to arrive, the refugees who had just returned to the settlement started panicking and did not know what to do. They had just returned home, and now they were about to get taken away again by other bandits? But while they were panicking, they saw Ren Xiaosu rush up to those bandits excitedly.

Just by looking at Ren Xiaosu’s expression, it was as though he were going out to receive his relatives!

Yang Xiaojin had already set up her sniper rifle atop a hill and was prepared to give Ren Xiaosu some long-range cover. Through her scope, she gazed at the band of bandits who were still unaware of what was going to happen. She suddenly felt that this expedition would turn out to be very interesting

At the very least, it was going to be much more interesting than when she last came here.

Chapter 342 The people from Stronghold 178

Laying a trap was somewhat a technical skill. Ren Xiaosu had originally planned to head deeper into the valley. But after thinking over it carefully, he felt that if they encountered the larger bandit gangs with hundreds of members, it could get difficult for him and Yang Xiaojin to deal with them.

Staying here and waiting for the few dozen bandits to show up each day would not even make Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin break a sweat to handle them.

What was a Perfect Firearms Proficiency user? If one could not even handle a situation as simple as this, then they would not qualify to be called a Perfect Firearms Proficiency user.

It was at this time that Ren Xiaosu felt the joy of having a teammate protect him. He did not even have to worry about anyone sneaking up on him since the sneak attacker couldn’t defend against getting sniped.

Of course, Ren Xiaosu was also thinking about how he should integrate Jin Lan and the bandits into the group. They might be respectful to him now, but that was because they were no match for him. Moreover, they had also been stripped of their firearms by him and the other refugees, so they had to behave. If he let Jin Lan find an opportunity, who knew what he might try? However, Ren Xiaosu had still not thought of a solution to integrate them.

At this moment, Jin Lan and his gang of bandits were squatting on the ground and watching Ren Xiaosu capture the bandits who had just arrived. They whispered to each other, “Did you see that? Those two are freaking strong! It was definitely wise that we did not fight them head-on. Especially that lady, she doesn’t even bat an eyelid when killing people. I’ve heard legends of that sniper rifle of hers before, but I’m seeing it for myself for the first time.”

One of his lackeys said, "But, Boss, we did go head-on against them. We just didn't win, that's all!"

"...You talk too much."

"Boss, according to what you said, could these two people be linked with the consortiums?" The lackey wondered, "Could they be specialists from the consortiums?"

Jin Lan shook his head. "No, they don't feel like the typical consortium people."

"But what if they are?" Someone wondered, "Where else would such specialists come from? I've never heard of anyone in the entire valley who knows how to use a sniper rifle."

"Look at the two of them. They aren't even bothered by the living conditions here nor wash their faces. How can they be from the strongholds?" Jin Lan continued arguing against the possibility. "Could the important people from the strongholds endure this!"

Just like Ren Xiaosu in his earlier years, much of their views of those who came from the strongholds were largely based on their imagination. Stereotypes were already deeply embedded in the minds of all the refugees. In their opinion, people from the strongholds were all similar.

Of course, the people from the stronghold also looked at them the same way.

"Then where do you think they're from?" someone asked softly.

"Wait a minute." Jin Lan was taken aback. "Don't fucking tell me they're from Stronghold 178? Didn't they say that highly skilled people all hail from Stronghold 178? I think only talents from Stronghold 178 would be this highly skilled and strong! Moreover, it's said that most of those in Stronghold 178 were former refugees. Holy shit, surely they can't really be from Stronghold 178, right?"

As Jin Lan eliminated the possibilities, he came to the conclusion that Ren Xiaosu's and Yang Xiaojin's backgrounds seemed to suggest they were likelier to be from the legendary Stronghold 178. They were not particular about the living conditions, did not have the delicate characters of those living in the strongholds, were vicious, mysterious, and really strong.

In recent years, Stronghold 178's reputation in the Northwest had been spreading to the point of being a little too legendary, especially among the refugees.

Jin Lan muttered to himself, "If the people from Stronghold 178 have really come down to the valley, then this is our chance. If we perform well, we might even get recruited into Stronghold 178 in the future!"

These days, Stronghold 178 no longer accepted outsiders into their ranks. Otherwise, it would definitely be a million times better to go to Stronghold 178 than be a bandit here in the valley!

If Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were from the consortiums, Jin Lan would not even think about joining them. After all, everyone knew what the consortiums were like, so why would they go there to suffer?

But Stronghold 178 was different. It was a sacred place in the hearts of many refugees in the Northwest.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu returned with a group of bruised and swollen bandits. He called out to Jin Lan, "Are you done with your tasks yet?"

"Yes. Please give me my next orders." This time, Jin Lan wasn't putting on an act like he was earlier. Instead, he was speaking with complete sincerity from the bottom of his heart.

Ren Xiaosu threw him a gun. "You'll be the leader of 1st Squad from now on. Take care of these people."

Jin Lan was touched. "Thank you, Boss!"

"Gratitude received from Jin Lan, +1!"

Ren Xiaosu looked at Jin Lan in surprise. He only wanted to test this guy a little, but what was this sincere gratitude about? Ren Xiaosu wondered if he actually possessed a legendary leadership aura and that it had somehow caused this guy to submit to him.

He said to Jin Lan, "Confiscate this group's guns and learn 'em. They'll be part of this settlement from now on."

"Alright, don't you worry!" Jin Lan said, "Boss, may I ask you something?"

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look. "Ask away!"

"Where are you from?" Jin Lan asked softly, "You aren't from around the valley, are you?"

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback for a moment. He looked at Jin Lan. "Is this something that you should be asking about?"

"Alright, I won't ask anymore!" Jin Lan said guiltily.

Then Yang Xiaojin walked over and said, "Don't bother with him for now. We have updates from the northwest."

Ren Xiaosu shot a look at Jin Lan. "Go and do what you need to do. Keep an eye on them and make them recognize the reality of things. They'll have a bright future ahead by joining us."

Jin Lan stifled his excitement. So they really were important figures from Stronghold 178!

He believed Yang Xiaojin definitely had a slip of tongue earlier when she spoke to Ren Xiaosu. However, he had been listening for any clues that might give up their identities. And now everything matched his guesses!

After Jin Lan left, Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu looked at each other and smiled. They had been discussing how to handle the issue of their identities last night and whether they could use it to make these bandits stay. They came up with a plan to pretend they were from Stronghold 178.

In the end, before they could resort to doing so, Jin Lan had already sent himself straight into the trap. This way, the effect was going to be even better!

“What if there really are people from Stronghold 178 here?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“At most, I’ll take a special trip to Stronghold 178 to explain things to Zhang Jinglin. Don’t worry, it’ll be fine.” Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, “Hey, why do the refugees in the Northwest fall so easily for something like that?”

“Mhm.” Yang Xiaojin nodded and said, “You’re from the South, so you probably don’t know how good Stronghold 178 is in the eyes of these people. A powerful organization that’s impartial in accepting refugees into their stronghold is a one of a kind existence out here in the Northwest.”

“But aren’t they no longer accepting refugees?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

Yang Xiaojin answered, “It’s usually the things you can’t have that make them even more precious.”

“Alright.” Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, “Then let’s continue to remain mysterious and let this matter develop on its own. We’ll see how it turns out.”

By this point, Jin Lan had already walked over to the other bandits with a mysterious smile on his face. Someone asked, “Boss, you look very happy, but you can’t forget our original plans just because they gave you a gun!”

Jin Lan snapped, “What do you know? Am I such a shallow person? I’m telling you, those two really are from Stronghold 178!”

Chapter 343 Surrendering together

As soon as Jin Lan finished speaking, his lackeys were stunned. They looked at one another and said, “Boss, could they be tricking you?”

“No.” Jin Lan shook his head. “They were trying to keep it a secret, but I’ve already discovered the truth based on some clues!”

“What do we do now?” The lackey said, “Are we still running away?”

They were definitely not a match for Ren Xiaosu. So while they were coming here, Jin Lan and the others had secretly discussed if they should escape at night while everyone was sleeping. That way, they would stand a chance of regaining their freedom.

However, Jin Lan had changed his mind now. He said, “Run? My ass! I’m not running anywhere! I’m gonna stay right here! If I get a chance to go to Stronghold 178, I’ll be rich!”

The others were also tempted by his words. “But will they allow us to join them?”

“That’s why I’m telling y’all to behave!” Jin Lan said, “Alright, I’ll talk to the newcomers and settle them in first. This is the first mission the boss has given me, so I must not disappoint him.”

His lackeys fell silent. Fine! What else could they say since their boss had already acknowledged a new boss?

Jin Lan came over to the new bandits and said with a smile, "Hey, guys, which mountain hideout are y'all from?"

"We're the gang from Mt. Daban's west face." The bandit leader of the newcomers said, "I'm warning you, we still have over 50 brothers back at our lair. Hurry up and release us, or y'all will be in serious trouble when the rest of our brothers get here."

Jin Lan laughed, "Bro, who are you trying to threaten? How dare you make threats in front of Stronghold 178's people? You said that you still have more than 50 brothers back at your lair, but do you know how many brothers we have in Stronghold 178?"

The person standing across from Jin Lan was stunned. What the hell? People from Stronghold 178?

It was no wonder the young man and woman who had just given them a good beating were so strong. He looked at Jin Lan and asked uncertainly, "Are all of you from Stronghold 178?"

Jin Lan hesitated. "Not yet for me..."

"Then what are you blabbering about?" the bandit leader snapped.

"But those two lords who beat y'all up are!" Jin Lan lowered his voice and said, "Bro, I used to be from the North Face. You know where Mushroom Ridge is?"

"Wait." The bandit standing across from him was stunned. He said, "You were also captured by them? I've heard about those twenty or so people over at Mushroom Ridge. Someone said that they lived real awfully there."

Jin Lan's face darkened immediately. "How can you speak like that! I've turned my life around. Do you see the gun at my waist? It's a reward from our two lords over there! From now on, I'll be your leader, so you better wise up!"

The bandit said meekly, "Are those two really from Stronghold 178? How do you know that?"

"Hehe." Jin Lan whispered, "Lemme tell you, I discovered it myself, so it's definitely true. Think about it again. Do you still want to go back to your West Face, or would you rather stay here for a better future?"

At this point, the bandit was close to believing what he said. Most people would not use Stronghold 178's name as a joke. Moreover, the immense power displayed by Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin in combat made their hearts pound.

Jin Lan said in a low voice, "Last year when winter had just arrived, Master Xu happened to pass by this place. Did you hear about it?"

"Yeah." The bandit leader said as his eyes lit up, "Are those two related to Master Xu as well?"

"I'm not sure about that." Jin Lan said, "But when Master Xu passed by here back then, a reckless gang of bandits tried to rob him. At first, two of the bandits were finished off by some sort of magic. That

angered the rest of the bandits, and more than 50 of them attacked all at once. However, they still couldn't hold him down despite that. That flying black cauldron was the best!"

"I also heard about it. It's true." The bandit leader said, "I heard that Master Xu has another power that summons a shadow."

"How can the shadow be more powerful than the cauldron?" Jin Lan said excitedly, "I heard that the cauldron is extremely powerful. The 50-odd bandits shot at it for half an hour with their guns but still couldn't break it."

"Hey, that's an exaggeration. What I heard was that they fired at it for two whole minutes."

"Let's not get too bothered with the details," Jin Lan said unhappily. "In the aftermath, those bandits regretted their actions. At that time, Master Xu had still not risen to power. If they followed him at that time, they would've found salvation. That same opportunity has now presented itself right in front of us, so my advice to you is to give it a rest."

"More importantly, who can confirm that the two of them are from Stronghold 178?" the bandit leader said unconvinced. "Even though they might be strong, I still don't really believe they are who they say they are."

"Do whatever you like then," Jin Lan said coldly. He suddenly felt that everyone was drunk whereas he was the only sober one.

But at this moment, Jin Lan saw a dark shadow darting past in an irrigation ditch. He thought he was seeing things, so he asked the people next to him, "Did y'all see anything just now?"

Someone said, "I think I saw a dark shadow moving extremely fast."

The bandit who'd just been captured today started laughing. "I'm afraid that our brothers at home are getting worried about us. They must be here to rescue us!"

"Bullshit!" Jin Lan spat out, "As if you people are that close!"

Some of the bandits hurried after the shadow by following the ditches while Jin Lan followed close behind them in the fear they would escape. However, they did not find anyone there. Some of them could not accept this and continued chasing. But less than two minutes later, they were surprised to see Ren Xiaosu talking face to face with a shadow. The shadow that felt like a physical being handed Ren Xiaosu a letter before sprinting off into the wilderness.

A lot of others who were following Jin Lan also witnessed what just happened.

"What did y'all say about Master Xu's other power?" someone asked in a soft, quivering voice. "Two different superhumans can't have the same power, that much I do know...."

Jin Lan said in a low voice, "Let's get out of here! They definitely won't want anyone to discover them if they've chosen to meet in such a secretive spot. If they find out that we saw them, they might even try to silence us!"

But before they could leave, Ren Xiaosu had already looked up and discovered Jin Lan and the others. His face darkened and a killing intent seemed to slowly start forming.

Jin Lan immediately knelt on the ground and cried, "Boss, I didn't see anything! Please don't kill me, please don't kill me!"

Immediately, everyone behind Jin Lan also knelt down in fear that Ren Xiaosu might silence them.

Ren Xiaosu slowly walked up to Jin Lan and the others. After a long pause, he said, "Alright, get up, but y'all must keep it a secret."

Jin Lan and the others nearly cried. "Boss, thank you for sparing us! Thank you for sparing us!"

"Gratitude received from Jin Lan, +1!"

"Gratitude received from..."

With this wave of gritudes alone, Ren Xiaosu harvested over a dozen gratitude tokens and his number of gratitude tokens was back to around 900 or so!

Jin Lan and the others got up and ran towards the settlement. Along the way, Jin Lan asked while panting, "So do you still want to run away? Do you believe me now?"

However, the new bandit next to him said, "Can you please let me return to my lair?"

Jin Lan was stunned. "You still want to run away?"

"No, I want to get all my brothers to come back here with me and surrender together."

Chapter 344 Depends on my mood

Once someone saw a brighter future for themselves, they would naturally think of their bros. It was rare for a bandit to come to a good end. If there hadn't been someone who suddenly supported them with money and supplies in this desolate place, they would still be leading quite a difficult life.

For the past five years, no caravans had passed through the valley. If the bandits wanted to fill their stomachs, they would have to go and rob the other bandits. All these days of fighting left them wondering when they could finally call it quits.

In their poorest days three years ago, the bandits even reached a stage where they had to eat wild vegetables and chew on bark and tree roots. As bandits, they were leading terrible lives.

Some of the bandits even ran back to the consortiums' factories to work...

Two years ago, their situation improved after the Qing Consortium set their sights on this place. At the beginning, they only brought food to them so they would not starve to death or leave the valley. From last year onwards, they started secretly sending weapons here.

This was a gradual process.

Naturally, the bandits were unaware it was the Qing Consortium that supported them. They did not care who they were and were only concerned about how long the aid would last.

Everyone knew that whoever was sending them the firearms had to have other motives. All of this was probably done so there would be chaos in the valley and in turn lead to an easier consolidation of forces.

But so what if they knew the motive behind all this? They still had to at least survive. If they got unified later, that wouldn't be too bad either. At least, they would have their meals taken care of.

But now there was a brighter path put ahead of them. It was just up to them whether they chose it.

Jin Lan whispered, "There's no point saying that. You'll have to speak to the two lords."

"Alright then." The bandit hesitated for a while before finally going off to look for Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu was currently having a discussion with Yang Xiaojin about the outcome. "I wonder if they've heard of old Xu's power before. What if they know nothing of it?"

Actually, Ren Xiaosu's move was an unnecessary one. He thought that if he used Xu Xianchu's signature power and called upon the shadow clone, these people might link it to Xu Xianchu since his reputation was rather well-known now. In this way, their identities as members of Stronghold 178 would be even more realistic.

But what Ren Xiaosu was worried about was that these bandits had never heard of Xu Xianchu before.

Yang Xiaojin looked at him and said, "Aren't you afraid you'll mess things up?"

"At worst, we'll just go back," Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly.

As they were discussing this, the bandit came up to them. Ren Xiaosu looked calmly at him. "What's the matter?"

"Boss," the bandit hesitated for a moment before saying, "can you let me return home for a while?"

Ren Xiaosu raised his eyebrows. "Do you think you can ask for sick leave to return home? Who said you could go home?"

"No, please hear me out." The bandit explained, "I just wanted to go back and bring all my brothers here."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned as he looked at Yang Xiaojin. The strategy was working! It seemed like these people knew about Xu Xianchu!

He deliberated for a moment before saying, "What do you know?"

The bandit quickly shook his head in fear. "I don't know anything, really! I don't know that you're from Stronghold 178!"

"Shoo!" Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. "You have a day."

"Yes, yes! Thank you!" The bandit took it as an opportunity bestowed by Ren Xiaosu and was deeply grateful.

"Gratitude received from Zhang Yiheng, +1!"

After that, Zhang Yiheng hopped on his motorcycle and rode off by himself. Ren Xiaosu was not afraid he would not return. Even if he did not, Ren Xiaosu would only lose one person. He was not bothered by that in the slightest.

He turned to Yang Xiaojin and said, "My strategy should be working."

Initially, Ren Xiaosu was most worried about the fact that even though he could lay the trap to capture all of these bandits, they would be beyond his control after a few hundred or even thousands of them had been forced to stay here. So Ren Xiaosu could finally heave a sigh of relief now.

Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu with a smile as she sat on a mound and quietly rested her chin on her hand. Who would have thought that Ren Xiaosu could come up with so many tricks when all she did was invite him along to exterminate the bandits?

To be honest, Yang Xiaojin did not care about the success of the bandit extermination operation. What did this have anything to do with her anyway? She just did not want to quarrel with Yang Yu'an because of it.

Yang Xiaojin could have enjoyed leading a rich person's life in the stronghold, but she did not like being in there. She would rather lay down in the wilderness for three days and three nights than stay in the stronghold.

And now she was really looking forward to seeing what other ideas Ren Xiaosu could come up with.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Yang Xiaojin. "The more I think about it, the more I feel that the Qing Consortium must be behind the chaos happening in the valley. In fact, they've been planning for this since last year."

Yang Xiaojin tilted her head. "Mhm."

"The Qing Consortium's plans here are definitely to plot against the Zong Consortium and your Yang Consortium. However, the Qing Consortium still does not have much authority in this place. We've already heard about how the North is caught in a deadlock between the three forces. Who knows, maybe someone from the Zong Consortium is trying to thwart the Qing Consortium's plans for this

region.” Ren Xiaosu said, “But if the Qing Consortium ends up as the victor, there will be no more bandits here and only their puppets will remain. Qing Zhen is... not a person who’s easy to deal with. Aren’t you worried about it?”

“I’m not worried,” Yang Xiaojin said calmly.

“Are you blaming the Yang Consortium for treating you as a chess piece in all this?” Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

“I don’t hate them nor do I feel close to them.” Yang Xiaojin changed the subject. “What’s your next step going to be? Why do I get the feeling that you’re very interested in this valley?”

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while and then said with a smile, “Perhaps I’ll come here someday and settle down for the long term?”

“You want to leave the stronghold? Is it because of Yan Liuyuan? I can feel the aversion he has for the strongholds,” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“Liuyuan is one of the reasons. I don’t want him to feel wronged.” Ren Xiaosu took a look at the sky. “It’s not only him; I dislike the strongholds too. I think it’ll be more comfortable living out here.”

“So you’re thinking of establishing a foothold here, right?” Yang Xiaojin gave it some thought and said, “But that won’t be easy. This is only just the beginning. There’s still a long way to go.”

In response, Ren Xiaosu asked, “Will you come and help me?”

Clouds were scudding across the blue sky while the dusty ground of the wastelands remained still. The refugees had just finished digging irrigation ditches and were ready to go home. Even the wind had stopped blowing.

Ren Xiaosu seemed to have asked her casually

Yang Xiaojin was stunned for a moment. She chuckled as she got up and walked back towards the settlement. “That depends on my mood.”

In the evening, the sound of motorcycle engines came from the wastelands in the distance. It sounded like there were a lot of them as well. As Ren Xiaosu watched from afar, Jin Lan ran to him. “Boss, should we grab our weapons? What if those bastards are up to no good?”

Ren Xiaosu turned around and saw that Yang Xiaojin had already reached a hidden spot on a hilltop and occupied a commanding position. He laughed and said, “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine.”

Even without him, Yang Xiaojin alone would be enough to frighten away those useless bandits.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered the sniper who had wiped out the remainder of the Divine Arms Battalion deep in the Li Consortium’s territory. That was probably Yang Xiaojin too, wasn’t it?

Chapter 345 Is it cozy in the tent?

Ren Xiaosu stood still and watched as the bandits approached. The leader of the group was Zhang Yiheng, the same person he had let go earlier today.

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Zhang Yiheng shouted from afar, "Boss, don't shoot. It's me!"

Yang Xiaojin lay prone on a mound and scrutinized the subtle movements of these people using her scope to prevent anyone from sneaking an attack on Ren Xiaosu.

However, she realized these people were not at all aggressive. Their guns were slung across their chests and the safeties weren't even off.

Furthermore, these people were really here to join them. They not only brought along all of their firearms and ammunition from their mountain hideout, but were carrying their own ragged bedrolls along as well.

The bandits looked rather fierce as they rode on their muscular motorcycles. And they had their tattered blankets wrapped around their backs...

The sight really could not get any stranger than this...

It looked like they really planned to live here for an extended period. Yang Xiaojin sighed when she thought about how she and Ren Xiaosu had initially come to exterminate the bandits. So how did Ren Xiaosu suddenly end up becoming the leader of the bandits?

Even Yang Xiaojin, who had witnessed the entire development for herself, was left a little confused at the unexpected turn of events.

When Zhang Yiheng came up to Ren Xiaosu, he immediately jumped off his motorcycle and said respectfully, "Boss, I've brought all my brothers here. We'll all listen to your orders from now on."

Zhang Yiheng's brothers behind him quietly sized up Ren Xiaosu. So this was the specialist from Stronghold 178 their boss had mentioned? He looked really young!

Wait a minute, wasn't there supposed to be a sniper around?

At this moment, everyone realized they might already be in the sniper's sights. When they thought of this, they shuddered in fear at the possibility that the sniper might accidentally shoot them if they made any sudden movements.

Ren Xiaosu found it a little awkward hearing a man in his thirties addressing him as boss. But now was not the time to contemplate that. "Jin Lan, find a place for all these brothers. We'll have a meeting tomorrow."

The refugees living here from the beginning grinned when they saw this sight. The children were playing around their parents in a relaxed mood. At the beginning, the refugees were quite afraid of the bandits. But after thinking about it, didn't the bandits also dig irrigation ditches with them? They did not even

dare to slack off one bit either! When they thought of this, the refugees gradually accepted the reality of their situation.

Furthermore, Ren Xiaosu told them earlier in the evening that since they had already solved the issue of having enough people to defend the settlement, those who wanted to farm would not have to bear arms and fight anymore. That responsibility would naturally fall to the bandits.

When it was time to sleep at night, Ren Xiaosu lay down outside the tent with his arms acting as a pillow for his head. He said to Yang Xiaojin, who was in the tent, "For some reason, I still feel that something's missing. Although we can fool them into staying put with our identities, they're barely capable of fighting."

Inside the tent, Yang Xiaojin was still awake. Before Ren Xiaosu set off, Xiaoyu had prepared the tent for him. At the beginning, they did not use it because they were pretending to be refugees. But it was unnecessary to do so anymore after they had deliberately "exposed" themselves. They decided to stop pretending and laid all their cards on the table.

Based on Xiaoyu's intentions, this was definitely the kind of opportunity she had identified for Ren Xiaosu. But when the moment came, Ren Xiaosu got timid and ended up volunteering to sleep outside the tent. He even built a campfire out here!

Yang Xiaojin said, "You want them to be combat-ready?"

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu said, "You've seen the standard of those bandits for yourself. If they really end up fighting others, I doubt they'll even know how to use the guns. And they'll probably run away covering their heads if some of them get killed or injured. How are soldiers usually trained in the military?"

"Under normal circumstances, if the weaker units lose 20% to 40% of their numbers, their entire unit is as good as gone. Only the soldiers with conviction persevere." Yang Xiaojin said, "The training a soldier goes through in the military is based on two aspects. First, it trains their military skills, and second, it enables them to become fearless through ideology. Neither of these two aspects are something that can be achieved overnight."

"I have to give it a try no matter what." Ren Xiaosu chuckled.

"Alright then, I'll teach them how to use the guns," Yang Xiaojin said.

"As for the ideology, we should unite them first." Ren Xiaosu asked, "Do you have any ideas?"

"They have to suffer together until they can find joy amid hardship," Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu understood what Yang Xiaojin meant. It would be easy to see who their real friends were after they got put through adversity. But if they were allowed to get rich, they would become greedy instead.

"Er... is it cozy in the tent?" Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked.

Yang Xiaojin calmly replied, "Why don't you come in and see if it's cozy?"

“Hahaha.” Ren Xiaosu laughed in embarrassment and said, “I was just asking.”

Ren Xiaosu was the first to back down.

The next morning, Ren Xiaosu woke everyone up from their slumber.

Those bandits who were sleeping soundly were suddenly awoken. Just as they were about to lose their temper, they calmed down when they saw it was Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu gathered everyone and said, “Have any of you used a brick kiln before?”

The bandits looked at each other. Why was this boss so different from the bosses at the other mountain hideouts?

The bosses in the other mountain hideouts would at least say some decent words when recruiting new brothers, things like “stick with me and we’ll have good food and good wine” or “I’ll lead everyone to something greater.”

But over at Ren Xiaosu’s place, they were first asked to dig ditches and were then made to build brick kilns?

Someone raised his hand and said softly, “I worked at the Zong Consortium’s brick factory.”

“Do you know how to build a brick kiln?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“Although the conditions here suck, we can still build a simple one with less bricks.” That bandit said, “But we don’t have enough firewood here, and it won’t be enough to just use the shrubs in the area.”

Yang Xiaojin chimed in, “The spring floods will come soon. The melting of the upstream glaciers will trigger a flood. When the time comes, there’ll be a lot of wood drifting downstream, and we’ll definitely get enough firewood to use.”

“Alright.” Ren Xiaosu said to Jin Lan, “Bring the weapons over.”

Last night, Ren Xiaosu had ordered Jin Lan to seize everyone’s weapons. Ren Xiaosu said, “I know what y’all are thinking, but it won’t be easy to gain my approval.”

Everyone looked at each other. These words were clear as day. It seemed like it would not be that easy to become a part of Stronghold 178.

If Ren Xiaosu had said it was incredibly easy to join Stronghold 178, they would not have believed it. After all, this was Stronghold 178 they were talking about! So the more difficult their tests, the more realistic the trial would feel.

Zhang Yiheng said, “Just name the place. We’ll attack wherever you want us to.”

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, “I don’t want bandits who only know how to clamor for war. With your combat strength, you’re still not worth my attention.”

The bandits started murmuring among themselves again. "The people from Stronghold 178 are so capable. They don't even have eyes for people like us..."

Jin Lan said resolutely, "Just tell us what to do!"

"We'll start making bricks today. Since we're still digging ditches, I want all of you to get into the river and dig up the silt to make into clay bricks. Every ten bricks made earns you one bullet. Once you amass a 100 bullets, I'll return your guns to you. When that happens, you'll have the chance to prove yourselves to us. Instructor Yang here will teach y'all how to properly use a gun."

The bandits bit their tongues nervously. Even qualifying for the test was going to be this difficult? This was definitely not a trick!

Chapter 346 No pain, no gain

The lengthy winter in the Northwest was finally coming to an end. Ren Xiaosu saw some plants sprouting along the river, and the insects hibernating in the soil started waking up as well.

The spring floods were approaching, and the snowy mountains that stretched for thousands of miles in the Northwest would gradually start melting. The sunlight would turn the snow into tens of thousands of rivulets, and they would then flow east and merge to become a raging river.

Someone once said this water was from the Heavens and that it always flowed east without stop.

The valley that had been dry for many months would receive an abundant source of water by spring. This was the best time for them to farm and irrigate. When the time came, the massive source of water from the river would fill up the irrigation ditches and turn the dusty channels into a riverbed.

Ren Xiaosu and the bandits had to make enough clay bricks before the spring floods arrived.

When the tree trunks were sent floating downstream by the spring floods, it would be time for them to start firing bricks.

Someone remarked that they shouldn't have to work so hard to fire bricks. It would be good enough to just build some mud huts. Hadn't everyone always lived like that?

However, Ren Xiaosu said, "Why should the stronghold residents get brick houses to live in, but not us? And we're not just going to build houses, but defenses too."

When a refugee asked if he was planning to build a new stronghold here, Ren Xiaosu was surprised. He smiled and said, "Isn't it better to live in the wilderness? Why do we have to wall everyone up?"

When he said that, the refugees fell silent. However, they started working more diligently after that.

The bandits put down their guns and dug for silt in the riverbank barefoot. After digging up baskets of silt, they got back to dry ground and made them into clay bricks.

The idea of digging for silt sounded easy, but it was much harder when they did it. The bandits had only brought guns with them to this settlement and did not have any shovels. If they wanted to dig for silt, they had to do it barehanded.

The weather was frigid. Although the fierce bandits were freezing their balls off, they still insisted on working.

“If you keep pushing them like this, won’t they give up?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“No.” Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, “The more tired they are, the more they’ll believe that all of this is real. The more relaxed they have it, the more they’ll suspect that things might not be what they seem.”

“But they’ll surely find out someday,” Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu turned to Yang Xiaojin and said in seriousness, “I wanna build a home here. In the past, it was just a blurry idea in my mind. But when I saw them working, the idea became much clearer over time. When the time comes, I’ll give them a proper explanation.”

This was also the first step Ren Xiaosu would be taking to train these bandits. He wanted to change the habits of these bandits who were used to being lazy and robbing others of their possessions. By making them go through all kinds of hardships here, he would build a peculiar feeling called camaraderie.

After a tiring day, the bandits were grumbling endlessly, and even Jin Lan started to waver. He was so tired he felt like crying when he looked at the mud on his hands and feet. “Why don’t we just go back to being bandits instead of trying to get into fucking Stronghold 178? This is way too tough!”

“Yeah.” Someone slumped down on the edge of the riverbed and looked up at the sky in a daze. “What are we really after?”

Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng were currently the leaders of the 1st Squad and 2nd Squad, respectively. When the others saw the leaders starting to waver, their conviction was shaken even more.

At noon, some of the refugees from the settlement suddenly came over carrying baskets and placed them down on the ground. Curious, Jin Lan asked, “Hey, mate, what’s that?”

A good-natured refugee smiled in embarrassment and said, “We have yet to thank y’all for helping us dig the ditches. We made this cornbread ourselves. If they taste bad, we hope y’all won’t mind it.”

Jin Lan was stunned. He did not know how to react to this situation. When he finally managed to speak, his speech was filled with expletives. “Why are you being so fucking polite? You don’t have to be so fucking polite with me. Just put the damn cornbread down. Feel free to yell for me if you need any fucking help with anything.”

Jin Lan made it sound like he was just doing his work, not because he wanted to help the refugees. That shocked the refugees.

At this moment, someone asked Jin Lan, "Boss, why don't we escape this place tonight?"

However, Jin Lan hesitated for a moment before saying, "Let's endure it for another two days and keep an eye on things. It won't be too late to run away by then! Our fellow villagers have made us some cornbread, so we should at least build houses for them first!"

After work at night, everyone lay on the ground and did not want to move. Ren Xiaosu came to the riverbank and saw the clay bricks stacked on wooden planks. "Get up and come over here to collect your bullets. You should only report the number of clay bricks that you made. Every ten bricks get you one bullet in exchange."

Humans were very strange beings. These bullets were theirs to begin with and were not worth anything at all. Even though they did not seem to care much about it when they were working, everyone was still quite happy when they knew they could trade the bricks for bullets.

Jin Lan got up and said, "Me! I made 30 clay bricks today. I could've made even more if it was easier to dig out the silt!"

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Mhm, you get three bullets in exchange."

Looking at the three brass-colored bullets in his palm, Jin Lan felt a sense of accomplishment was inexplicably touched.

But these were clearly just three normal bullets, so why was he feeling that?

This was the idea that Ren Xiaosu had come up with. If they just focused on working hard, the bandits would get depressed because they could not see their "progress" or the "end" of it.

But by breaking down the progress into a 100 bullets and letting the bandits measure their own achievements, they would have an objective to work towards.

At this moment, Jin Lan started calculating. If he could earn three bullets in one day, he might be able to earn up to five bullets a day once he got the hang of it. Then he could find salvation in less than a month.

How long was a month at most? Thinking of it this way, Jin Lan suddenly felt he could endure this a bit more. At worst, he would just leave after the month if things didn't go according to plan. That would not cause much of a delay anyway.

At this moment, he looked at the others. When he saw Zhang Yiheng with only two bullets in his hand, he laughed and said, "Buddy, you don't seem to be doing well. You only managed to receive two bullets?"

Zhang Yiheng was so angry his face turned red. "I just haven't gotten good at the work yet, but I'll definitely get more bullets than you tomorrow."

Then Zhang Yiheng looked to his side and saw someone without any bullets at all. He also laughed. "I'm still not the worst here!"

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything. He did not criticize those who had done less work nor praise those who did more.

Jin Lan laughed and went up to him. "Boss, what do you think of me? I did the most work today."

Ren Xiaosu said noncommittally, "Y'all have to understand that I'm only giving you a chance because you want to pass the test. It's not like you're helping me with anything." Then Ren Xiaosu turned around and left.

Jin Lan was stunned in the wake of Ren Xiaosu's words. He said in shock after snapping out of his daze, "Boss, thank you for giving us this opportunity!"

"Gratitude received from Jin Lan, +1!"

Suddenly, Jin Lan turned around and roared, "It isn't dark yet, but y'all can go back first, I still want to work a little longer!"

The bandits looked at each other. They were already very tired, but they suddenly gained a little more motivation when they heard that. But at this moment, Yang Xiaojin came up to them and said, "Stop working. Everyone, wash your hands clean and prepare for class."

Chapter 347 Strict discipline

Completing a day of menial work tended to be the limit for an adult. It wasn't like Ren Xiaosu was trying to squeeze the most work out of them, so he didn't intend on tiring them out completely. He only wanted to make them tired enough so they would not have any energy to think about their own self-interest and start accepting a new realm of thoughts.

Some of the bandits would definitely adjust to this new mindset slowly, but there would also be some who were more stubborn and remain skeptical of all that was happening. But because of their fascination with getting into Stronghold 178, they decided to keep an eye on things for now.

Ren Xiaosu did not think he could control everyone else's behavior since he was not a god. But he was not in a hurry to convince them because he still had time.

In the evening, Yang Xiaojin did not give them any firearms lessons. Jin Lan and the other bandits who were amateurs at shooting were looking forward to the firearms lessons most of all. When Yang Xiaojin fought them, she displayed her superior shooting. So everyone got very excited when Yang Xiaojin told them that they would be attending her lessons.

However, Yang Xiaojin said to them, "Let me tell you about the five Disciplines of our group. Everyone is to memorize them without leaving out a word."

Jin Lan started panicking. Why did they have to memorize disciplines? He was most afraid of memorization when he attended the school in town years back. So why did he still have to memorize now that he had become a bandit?

Jin Lan asked, "Um... Boss Lady!"

Yang Xiaojin raised her eyebrows when she heard him address her that way, but she did not say anything about it in the end. "What's the matter?"

“Didn’t Boss say that he wanted us to learn about firearms?” Jin Lan said anxiously, “So why do we still have to memorize all these fucking disciplines?”

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Yang Xiaojin sneered, “Do you have guns right now? How are you supposed to attend a firearms lesson without guns?”

The bandits were stunned. So they had to earn enough bullets and retrieve their weapons before they were qualified to attend the firearms lessons. Jin Lan touched the three bullets in his pocket bitterly and thought how it would take him another 20 days or so before he could start learning more about firearms.

Then Yang Xiaojin said, “Those of you who manage to trade for a gun will be able to attend the lessons. I wonder if any of you are suitable to be snipers.”

Jin Lan’s eyes lit up at the words. “You can teach us how to use a sniper rifle too?”

Yang Xiaojin said calmly, “Don’t be so happy yet. Since sniping depends on your natural attributes, out of the two hundred of you, only two or three will get selected for sniper training. So you all better not have high hopes.”

Yang Xiaojin deliberately gave them something to look forward to before personally extinguishing their hopes.

But how could that thought be stifled? When Jin Lan heard that two or three of them could become snipers, he immediately thought he might be one of the chosen ones.

Before hitting the brick wall of reality, everyone would hope they could be the lucky ones!

They were talking about getting a role as a sniper after all. It felt really exciting just to think about. All the rough and tumble men loved guns since they represented a form of power, security, and authority. And the sniper rifle represented the pinnacle of firearms.

Yang Xiaojin glanced at them. “It’s still too early to be happy now, so you’d better memorize the disciplines first. Otherwise, don’t even think about touching the guns.”

Jin Lan whispered, “Boss Lady, can I have a look at your sniper rifle? I haven’t had the chance to get a close look at it.”

Yang Xiaojin gave him a look and then pulled her sniper rifle out of thin air. Jin Lan and the others gasped at the sight. So it fucking turned out that these two were supernatural beings!

At first, they thought Yang Xiaojin was just a sniper and did not expect that she could actually pull a sniper rifle out of thin air. It was no wonder they did not see where she had hidden her gun.

Yang Xiaojin put the sniper rifle away and said, “Now, I’ll explain to you what the disciplines are. First, obey the order and execute it without fail...”

After reciting them several times, the dumb bandits still couldn't memorize the disciplines. Yang Xiaojin had Jin Lan write the Five Disciplines on the ground with a tree branch. They did not have to understand them and only needed to memorize them.

When these people started trying to memorize the disciplines, Yang Xiaojin went over to Ren Xiaosu, who was not too far away. "We're really making things difficult for them."

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. "Without discipline, no army can exist. This is something that they need to go through. There's no other way."

Yang Xiaojin said calmly, "You're really not afraid they'll just fall out with each other?"

"What's there to be afraid of?" Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "Since ancient times, strict teachers have produced outstanding students, strict parents have raised filial children, and strict discipline has made strong armies. You might think that making them go through this suffering will tear them apart, but I think that these hardships will make them band together even more tightly."

What was discipline to an army? Discipline was the code of conduct, the external manifestation of combat power, the morale of the soldiers, and the image and honor of a unit.

It was not useless. On the contrary, Ren Xiaosu thought no army could exist without discipline. He could not forget how the private troops were so messy in behavior and appearance when he first saw them, nor could he forget how Qing Zhen's troops awed him when he witnessed how disciplined they moved.

Discipline was the first step of their ideology. Only after they achieved that could they start talking about things like a sense of belonging or honor.

Unfortunately, some of these bandits were illiterate. Even though the disciplines were written clearly on the ground, it was illegible to them.

Jin Lan was exasperated by this. "I'm telling you, Yan Laoliu. You have to fucking memorize it even if you can't. Don't disgrace our 1st Squad. I'm still waiting to go through the sniper training."

Yang Xiaojin had told them that no one could start learning about guns if any of them could not fully memorize the disciplines.

Ren Xiaosu specifically ordered this. He was hoping they could all learn to be a little more united through helping each other.

This was also the first time he played the role of instructor. He was feeling his way forward, but it would be good enough if these bandits could pick up a little of what he was trying to teach them.

Ren Xiaosu turned to Yang Xiaojin and said with a smile, "What do you think of my methods?"

Yang Xiaojin smirked. "Not bad, I guess."

She thought this was really getting more and more interesting. There was even a moment when she suddenly started looking forward to the day when there would be plenty of brick houses and farmland here, with groups of children playing and lots of laughter in the air.

But could there be such a possibility in this chaotic world?

Yang Xiaojin suddenly asked, "I can work out something with the Yang Consortium and let this settlement remain. But what if the Qing Consortium is really trying to consolidate the forces in the valley? What do we do after they find us here?"

How could bandits possibly stand up to the capabilities of an organization. The reason the bandits could survive in the valley was because they were flexible. To put it bluntly, they were good at running away. But once they built a fixed settlement, they couldn't run away anymore. If they ended up running away, all of their previous efforts would have come to nothing.

Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "That's fine. Both Qing Zhen and Luo Lan still owe me big favors."

Whether it was saving Luo Lan or helping the Qing Consortium attack the Li Consortium's defensive line, these were both favors he had done for them.

So when Ren Xiaosu guessed several days ago that it was the Qing Consortium behind the chaos in the valley, he no longer panicked. After all, he had worked with them on many occasions...

"Alright." Yang Xiaojin nodded. She did not object to Ren Xiaosu being friends with Qing Zhen and Luo Lan, nor would she request Ren Xiaosu to help her locate the Qing Consortium's nuclear test site. That was the Saboteurs and her own business. It had nothing to do with Ren Xiaosu, so there was no need to impose such a responsibility onto Ren Xiaosu.

Chapter 348 Why pretend

While digging for silt to make clay bricks two days ago, everyone was discussing whether they should run away, go back to being bandits, or rebel. But by the third day, everyone suddenly had a different topic of discussion. "How many bullets do you have now?"

"Hehe, I already have ten bullets." Jin Lan said, "I think I can definitely get my gun back in less than a month!"

After arriving here, they ended up having to work for the guns that were theirs to begin with. That sounded incredibly absurd but everyone suddenly seemed to be enjoying it. It was as though it had suddenly become an honor to be able to carry guns again.

At the beginning, quite a few people slacked off. They only pretended to be busy while the others worked hard. They would lie on the edge of the riverbed to sleep and bask in the sun or watch the others as they worked.

But that changed by the third day. Those who did not do any work previously started feeling a little embarrassed of themselves. When the others were resting, they would continue working just to make up progress after falling behind for the past two days. Otherwise, it would be too fucking embarrassing when the others received their guns again and they were still empty-handed.

Furthermore, Yang Xiaojin had already informed them that she would not give any firearm lessons as long as a single person was still without their gun.

This left Jin Lan in a dilemma. He and Zhang Yiheng were each put in charge of more than a 100 people, so both of them were well aware of who was fast or slow in their progress.

Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng counted all the bullets and found that some people were still missing quite a few. As such, Jin Lan took the lead and called for a meeting. "Well, our goal was to quickly save up a 100 bullets each so that we can trade them for the guns, but some people have fallen behind. If it were because they were slacking, I would not care about them. But y'all saw for yourselves how anxious they are to get to a 100 bullets too, so as the leader, I'll donate one bullet to each of them."

Then Zhang Yiheng also said to his 2nd Squad, "I'll donate a bullet to each of those who are short from my stash as well."

The bandits looked at each other for a while before someone hesitantly said, "I'll donate too, but on one condition: They have to be returned!"

Soon after, a large number of bandits donated around six bullets each. Although there was still a shortfall, the gap was considerably closed.

Jin Lan was very pleased and nodded. "Well done, brothers. Let's continue our work!"

Ren Xiaosu looked at them from afar. Suddenly, he said to Yang Xiaojin beside him, "I came across a book in the library of Stronghold 88 hidden away in a corner. It was called The Crowd.[1]"

"There's a passage in the book that states that once a person becomes part of a group, their intelligence will be badly lowered. In order to be accepted, an individual must be willing to abandon their capacity for reasoning and exchange their intelligence for a sense of belonging, which makes them feel safe," Ren Xiaosu continued. "Maybe that's the reason why it's so easy to get influenced when you're in a group."

Yang Xiaojin said calmly, "Do you mean they're going through this situation now?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I'd rather believe that this is the power of hope."

Now that this group had a common goal, these bandits who went through hardship together were also seeking ways to achieve that goal as quickly as possible. Friendship would be established in the process.

Jin Lan was working with the others when he suddenly sensed that another two people had appeared next to him. After he took a closer look, it turned out to be Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

They saw Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin taking off their shoes and rolling up their sleeves. Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng hurriedly said, "Lords, you two don't have to work. Please rest and leave the work to us."

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "It's fine, we're not spoiled. You can divide the clay bricks that we make equally among your two squads. I'll leave the squad leaders to assign them to their members."

The bandits were stunned. They never thought Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin would also work together with them.

Shouldn't these big shots be resting on the sidelines? Back when they were working at the factories, the foremen did not do any physical work. While they went down to the coal mines, the foremen would sit outside and supervise the workers while resting.

Furthermore, the two people in front of them were much more impressive than those foremen. Both of them were supernatural beings, after all. Especially Yang Xiaojin, who was a woman, even she got to working together with them. Their boss lady was really quite different from the others.

Ren Xiaosu's face darkened. "What're y'all still standing around for? Trying to be lazy?"

Jin Lan chuckled. "No, we're not! Brothers, let's keep working!"

The bandits carried on working in silence. It was still the same work and the goal was still the same goal they had set out to achieve. But when Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin jumped in the trenches with them, it felt like a little more. It was a little more human compassion.

At this moment, a cloud of dust billowed in the distance. Ren Xiaosu was all too familiar with this sight. He knew a new band of bandits had arrived.

According to Yang Xiaojin's estimation, there should have been more than 3,000 bandits on the front lines of Mt. Guan, Mt. Tangwang, and Mt. Daban. And they had only gathered around 200 people here, far from the numbers of those to the north. They already knew there were far more bandits further north and much fewer of them here in the south.

But Ren Xiaosu was still a little disappointed when no new bandits came by yesterday.

This new bandit group that had just arrived consisted of about 30 people. When they saw a large group of people working from a distance, they were ecstatic. With so many refugees in this settlement, they were going to be rich!

In the distance, Jin Lan, Zhang Yiheng, Ren Xiaosu, and the others all had mud over their arms and legs. They were not even carrying guns. If they were not refugees, what else could they be?

Out here in the wilderness, refugees were the most obedient group of people and could be easily captured like livestock.

However, when they arrived at the settlement, the bandit leader suddenly felt that something was off. He saw Ren Xiaosu and the others stand up and watch them calmly as they approached.

The bandit leader suddenly muttered, "Why do I get the feeling that they aren't afraid of us?"

Meanwhile, Jin Lan said with a sigh, "Why the fuck are there newcomers again? They'll have zero bullets when they join us!"

Jin Lan already knew the fate of these bandits who had come from elsewhere. He was just feeling a little ripped off.

That bandit stopped his motorcycle beside the ditches and pointed his gun at Ren Xiaosu. "All of you, step out of the ditches right now! Haha, you're still in the fucking mood to make clay bricks? Who says that you can make them?"

Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng looked at each other and began feeling sorry for the new bandit leader at the same time.

Half an hour later, the bruised and bloodied bandit leader had his sleeves rolled up inside the ditches. With his eyes swollen, he asked Jin Lan, "How many clay bricks do we have to make every day?"

Jin Lan snapped, "Do you know that you people are delaying us? I'm telling you, you can forget about sleeping if you can't produce 30 clay bricks by the end of today."

Then the bandit leader glanced at Zhang Yiheng beside him. "Wait a minute, I know you. Aren't you the leader of the bandit gang on the west face of Mt. Daban? What're you doing here?"

Zhang Yiheng also snapped at him, "Just dig silt and cut the crap."

The newly arrived bandit leader felt ganged up on. "Aren't y'all bandits too? Why pretend to be refugees here? If I knew that there were so many of you here, I wouldn't have come at all!"

Chapter 349 Building houses for our fellow villagers

The bandits who had just arrived were confused. They saw Jin Lan and the others happily digging for silt in the river and making clay bricks with it. After that, they would trade the bricks for bullets. For every ten clay bricks, they could only get one bullet.

Even at the sight of this, they did not really find it strange. But the moment Jin Lan, Zhang Yiheng, and the others received their bullets, the newly arrived bandits wondered what the fuck was with the happy smiles on their faces. Weren't y'all supposed to be bandit leaders? Why were you so happy to receive one bullet?! Could it be that you hadn't had much real-world experience yet?!

The river channel was starting to be widened by these people digging. Originally, the riverbed here was just a channel that had been formed after a small stream had changed its course. But now, the channel was getting wider to the point of almost turning into a large river.

Initially, the refugees were worried the elevation of the riverbed would cause the channel to burst its banks when the spring floods arrived. That would definitely affect the crops if it happened.

But now, they did not have to worry. The spring floods did not scare them.

In the river, Jin Lan and the others whose pockets were filled with bullets were making noisy clinking sounds. The new bandits were shocked by this strange scene. "Have these people been put under a spell?"

After Jin Lan finished his work, he called for the new bandits to gather and formally briefed them on their duties, what the bricks could be exchanged for, and the long-term plans they had. For example, they were planning on building ten small houses after the spring floods and then in the summer...

When they heard that, the new bandits were dumbfounded. Could these people still fucking be considered bandits?

Then Jin Lan got straight to the point. "Do you know who's in charge of this place? You think you're unlucky to have been caught, but I'm telling you, you're actually very lucky!"

Jin Lan kept rambling. The bandits switched their attention from Jin Lan to Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin every now and then, while their eyes gradually became more confused.

Currently, Ren Xiaosu did not have anything more to do. Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng would take care of everything for him. He and Yang Xiaojin were only required to reduce the number of casualties when they subdued the bandits at the beginning.

Band after band of bandits came here and ended up joining the kiln forces. During the day, they would dig for silt to make clay bricks. In the evening, they would memorize the Five Disciplines. Their lives had never been more enriching than this.

When the spring floods arrived as expected, everyone could feel the current in the river getting stronger. They could even catch fish in it quite often, but the fish would bite anyone they encountered. If they did not have so many people, it would have been a really challenging task.

More and more firewood were piled on the riverbank to be dried, while whole tree trunks broken off by the floods from upstream washed in as well. The thinner branches would be used as firewood, while the thicker trunks could be used for the beams of the houses later on.

The refugees in the settlement also helped to construct some temporary mud houses and a small brick kiln for them.

The bandits had helped the refugees dig irrigation ditches, as well as the river. And the refugees gave them some help in return.

The refugees were no longer afraid of the bandits. All of them were just like residents of a small village living together.

One of the refugees came up to Ren Xiaosu and said, "Boss, let's start firing the bricks. Otherwise, when the first rain arrives, a lot of the clay bricks we made will get destroyed."

"Sure!" Ren Xiaosu responded. A large area of clay bricks had already been laid out at this moment. It looked like it was enough to build more than ten houses with.

Firing bricks was not a particularly difficult task. After placing the bricks into the kiln, the door would be closed. All that needed to be done afterwards was adding firewood into the kiln.

As for the process to cool the kiln down with water, that would be left to the bandit who knew how to do it.

Bricks were categorized into red and black bricks. The silt clay the bricks were made with contained iron. During the firing process, red bricks were produced when the iron content was completely oxidized to form ferric oxide. If the iron content did not completely oxidize during the firing process, they would end up as black bricks.

The brick kiln built by Ren Xiaosu and the others had a roof that did not allow oxygen to enter. Therefore, the fired bricks would all be black in color.

“How long does it take to fire bricks?” Ren Xiaosu asked the bandit with experience in making them.

“Our kiln is small, so it can only burn around 20,000 bricks in one go. I reckon that it’ll take a little more than ten days from now for the bricks to be ready. However, if we include the time for them to cool down, it’ll take another two days.” The bandit explained, “It’ll require roughly 2,000 bricks to build a house measuring about 20 square meters. The batch of bricks in the kiln now should be enough to build a dozen houses with.”

Thinking about living in brick houses soon, the bandits got quite excited.

After all, most of the people here had never lived in a brick house before in their lives. A brick house was a symbol of status in town.

“Alright.” Ren Xiaosu said to the refugees from the settlement, ‘Y’all should send some people over to guard the place. When the bricks are ready, we can build some houses for y’all as well.”

Jin Lan mumbled, “Why do we have to build houses for them too when we’re the ones making the bricks?”

Ren Xiaosu shot him a look. “Quit complaining.”

Jin Lan ran off with his head hanging. He shouted for his brothers to produce more clay bricks before the rainy season arrived. Right now, there were more than 400 bandits at the settlement, so they were extremely efficient at their work!

But after just a few days, the sky started to turn overcast. Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng got really worried that it might start raining soon, so they said, “Hurry up, bring the clay bricks in. Carry the dried clay bricks into the mud houses!”

Halfway through the retrieval, a drizzle enveloped the entire wasteland like a cotton towel.

“How unlucky!” While hiding under the eaves, Jin Lan said, “Why did this rain have to fall now of all times?”

“Captain, can we go into the houses and take shelter from the rain?” a bandit muttered.

At this moment, the houses were filled with bricks, and there was no room for anyone to stand inside. When Jin Lan heard that, he stared at the bandit. "If you go inside, where do we put the bricks! These are all the bricks that everyone has worked hard to make. Are you gonna waste 'em?"

The bandits pouted. They had even become inferior to bricks.

A large group of people were squatting in the rain around a huddle of mud houses and guarding the bricks within.

Jin Lan muttered, "Boss still wants to build houses for the refugees. I dunno what he's thinking. They won't even be enough for our brothers to live in."

"Why, Captain, are you complaining against Boss now?" someone whispered.

"I'm not complaining." Jin Lan curled his lips. "I can tell that those two are really different from those big shots in the strongholds. Those big shots look down their noses at us, but neither of them do. Have you seen any big shots from the consortiums dig for silt in the river like us? I'm utterly convinced by this couple, if only because they were willing to do work with us."

"What d'ya mean, Captain?"

"I'm just annoyed. Why should those refugees be allowed to live in a house when they did not even make a single clay brick?" Jin Lan said angrily.

"But the brick kiln was built by them," someone muttered.

Jin Lan glared at him. "You talk too much."

But at this moment, some refugees braved the rain and came over, calling for Jin Lan, "Don't just stand there in the rain. Get in our huts and take cover from the rain. We've discussed this with the others. Y'all can go into whichever house you want. There's definitely enough space for everyone. We also have hot soup at home, so y'all can drink some to warm yourselves up."

Jin Lan was stunned for a moment. Then he hurriedly said, "Oh... yeah, we'll come over right away!"

A bandit next to him asked in a whisper, "Captain, aren't we supposed to be angry about building the houses for them?"

"Who says I'm angry?" Jin Lan rebutted, "Our fellow villagers are so kind to us. What's wrong with building some houses for them? We have to be more open-minded like our boss, understand? We should be more kind! Once the rain stops, we'll start building the houses for them!"

Chapter 350 Ulterior motives

On a rainy mountain road near Mt. Daban, a large group of motorcycles suddenly drove up the mountain. A large banner embroidered with the image of a tiger's head was being carried by the lead motorcycle.

Each of these bandits had a blue bandana covering their nose and mouth. From afar, there were two rows of motorcycles, and all of the riders were wearing the same type of blue bandana on their faces. This was a spectacular sight to behold.

Furthermore, there were a lot of people in this group. With more than 300 of them heading up the mountain together, they would not be mistaken for some small gang at a glance. At the very least, they looked way better than the ordinary bandits just in appearance alone. Some bandits were so poor that they even wore tattered pants, much less had bandanas and a large banner.

When they arrived on the North Face, they parked their motorcycles by the side of the road. The leader of the group walked towards a small mountain path that would lead to a campsite.

These fierce-looking bandits trekked on the path up the mountain silently. No one was speaking. Everyone was carrying their guns in front of them so they would be ready to deal with anything unexpected.

They had thought there would be people lying in ambush to put up a fierce resistance against them. However, the whole stretch of the mountain path was silent, and there wasn't even anyone keeping a lookout.

When they reached the entrance of the mountain hideout, the leader pushed open the wooden door with a creak. He was not afraid of anyone sneaking up to attack him and entered first. But when he went inside, he saw this mountain hideout was totally empty. It seemed like no one had been living here for some time.

The leader said softly, "There's something strange about this Mt. Daban. We've come across five or six empty hideouts along the way already. What's happened here?"

"Could it be that it's been getting too hard to get by these days, so everyone decided to head back to the consortiums' factories to work? Since there's still a few hideouts on the mountain. Should we go and look at them?" the leader's trusted aide asked.

"Let's go! I don't believe that all the bandits on Mt. Daban turned over a new leaf." The leader sneered as he led his group further up the mountain.

It wasn't until they checked another three hideouts before they discovered a few sporadic bandits in one of the campsites,

When these solitary bandits saw the turnout, they immediately knelt down on the spot and begged for mercy, "Please don't kill us!".

The leader thought for a while and asked with a frown, "Where are your other men?"

The two-bit bandits wailed, "They were captured by bandits!"

The leader was stunned. "Aren't y'all fucking bandits yourselves?"

This group of people got so angry that they started laughing. They were only supposed to be abducting refugees. Why would anyone even abduct bandits?!

But actually, they were also here to recruit the bandits from the other mountain hideouts. They had thought their plans were well ahead of the other groups', but who would have expected that someone had beaten them to it.

The leader asked, "Who's the leader here? Stand up and talk!"

The bandits shouted, "Our boss was taken away as well."

The leader was shocked. "Damn... Who captured them? How did the few of you escape unharmed?"

One of the bandits said, "They were captured by the refugees from a settlement at the foot of a mountain to the south. Us few only managed to escape because we ran away in advance when we sensed that something was wrong."

"How large is that settlement?" the leader asked curiously.

"4 to 500 people live there. They are extremely fierce, and there's two supernatural beings among them as well!" the bandit said.

The leader became wary at this moment. There were two supernatural beings in a refugee settlement? How could that be a normal refugee settlement?

The leader thought for a moment and asked, "What kind of people do they usually capture? And how do they capture them?"

"They take anyone they come across. Basically, the two supernatural beings do all the work so the others don't have to do anything at all. Our boss was beaten to the ground."

"What do they do with the people after capturing them?" the leader asked.

"I don't know. In any case, I don't think they killed them. The group just gathers there to dig ditches and make bricks."

The leader said to his trusted aide next to him, "It seems like this group of people don't have any sense of vigilance. Xu Jinyuan, take a group of people with you and let them capture you. After you join them, get a better understanding of their situation and wait for my signal to concentrate an attack on them."

The bandit named Xu Jinyuan nodded. "Got it!"

He picked out 11 people to head down the mountain with him.

The leader looked at another person and said, "Head back north and get some brothers to come over. It seems like we might be in for a tough battle, but we should still be able to handle it without much effort. In any case, just get them to come here."

All of a sudden, the original bandits of this mountain hideout noticed the Tiger Head Banner. "You're that bandit gang from the north!"

The leader smiled. "You're pretty observant."

Xu Jinyuan aggressively led a group of people to attack the refugee settlement. As expected, they were also captured by Ren Xiaosu.

In order to make it more realistic, Xu Jinyuan and the others deliberately resisted capture with all their might. Although they couldn't land a shot on Ren Xiaosu, they still looked quite aggressive in their attacks.

After Ren Xiaosu handed Xu Jinyuan over to Jin Lan, Yang Xiaojin suddenly whispered, "Something's a little off with this group."

"How?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Someone's trained them on how to hold their guns, and there's also some form of cooperation between the 12 of them. You can see that there should have been a group symbol engraved on their motorcycles, but it was deliberately scratched off on their way here." Yang Xiaojin had a very keen eye, so there was no way of hiding any details from her, especially when it was related to firearms.

These people only knew there were two supernatural beings here. Although they had played their parts well, Yang Xiaojin could still see the problems with their act.

"Are they soldiers?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Not really. There are no signs they've been through the tough training regimen of the tary. I'm guessing this group of people must've been sent by one of the larger bandit gangs in the valley. Who knows, they might have bad intentions," Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu chuckled. "It's alright, we can let them stay here."

Ren Xiaosu didn't seem worried about this group of people in the slightest.

When the rain stopped, Xu Jinyuan and his group started digging for silt in the river after being put through Jin Lan's systematic training. What surprised them was Jin Lan's claims that these two supernatural beings were from Stronghold 178.

Why would Stronghold 178 get involved with matters in the valley? Xu Jinyuan was rather skeptical. Then he was shocked to discover that the people digging silt with him were all bandits as well. Could it be that they were all here because they wanted to join Stronghold 178, just like what Jin Lan had hinted at?

"Brother Xu, what do we do now?" someone asked in a whisper.

Xu Jinyuan thought for a moment and said, "We'll continue making clay bricks with them. Didn't they say that we can get our guns back once we collect a 100 bullets each? We can only coordinate with our brothers back at the lair if we get our guns back."

"Alright!"

A few days later, the brick firing process was completed. Jin Lan and the others happily waited for the temperature in the kiln to cool down before carrying the black bricks out.

Someone next to Xu Jinyuan said, "Brother Xu, why did they come here and work so hard to make bricks when they could have been bandits instead?"

Xu Jinyuan thought for a moment before answering, "They could be building defenses."

"No way. I heard it's because they wanted to build houses for the refugees. I also heard that the refugees are quite good to these bandits and even offered them food."

"Cut the bullshit." Xu Jinyuan snapped at him, "How could it be possible that bandits would build houses for refugees? Isn't that like a weasel dropping by a chicken coop for a visit? And you said that refugees offered food to the bandits? I don't believe it one bit!"

But at noon, the refugees came over to the riverbank with baskets and said with warm smiles, "Everyone, come and eat lunch. We've cooked some ears of corn for all y'all. Please don't mind the simple fare."

Jin Lan and Zhang Yiheng took the baskets from the refugees and distributed the corn to everyone one by one. The ears of corn were from last fall's harvest, and the refugees could not finish eating them during the winter, but no one minded that.

Xu Jinyuan was stunned for a while. "What the fucking hell is this!"

Just as he finished saying that, Jin Lan stuffed a piping hot ear of corn into his hands and said, "Talk less, eat while it's hot."