

Chapter 491 The girl I like is much prettier than you

ren xiaosu glanced at zhou yingxue's wound. "don't worry, it's not a fatal wound. you won't die within the next three days."

zhou yingxue was furious. what did he mean that she wouldn't die within the next three days? "it's not like i only want to live for three days. if i'm dead, who's gonna take care of my mother? she's over 50 and has been diagnosed with cancer! do you think i chose to become a hired gun for my own sake? i needed to make money to treat her illness!"

when he heard this, ren xiaosu went silent for a moment before untying her ropes. he just could not bear to hear such things.

zhou yingxue heaved a sigh of relief. she considered herself to have made the right bet this time. ren xiaosu was still someone with principles. if he could let her go the previous time, he would do the same this time.

if it had been someone unprincipled, they would not care about the life and death of her mother. back then, zhou yingxue would definitely not have escaped from their clutches and could even end up being humiliated before her death.

she was fortunate she bumped into ren xiaosu.

but upon further thought, would zhou yingxue have been tied up easily by anyone if she had not encountered a powerful supernatural being like ren xiaosu?

after her ropes were undone, zhou yingxue said in a low voice, "i have to treat my wound, so can you go outside for a while?"

"why do i have to go outside when you're treating your wound?"

zhou yingxue said softly, "i have to undress."

ren xiaosu calmly replied, "if you're gonna say that, i won't feel sleepy anymore...."

"i know that you're not that sort of a person," zhou yingxue said softly.

ren xiaosu raised an eyebrow but did not say anything in the end. then he walked out to the backyard to peel some potatoes.

zhou yingxue heaved a sigh of relief again. she was lucky to meet a principled man like him in these current times. she suddenly wondered why a powerful supernatural being like ren xiaosu would have a bottom line. if she hadn't been let off by ren xiaosu before, she would definitely find this unbelievable.

while she was taking off her t-shirt slowly in the room, some rustling came from the room. even so, ren xiaosu still continued peeling his potatoes as though no one were around.

zhou yingxue was quietly watching from the room. when she realized ren xiaosu was really not going to come into the room, she suddenly made her way towards the main door. she wanted to take this opportunity to escape.

however, ren xiaosu's voice drifted in. "do you believe i won't kill you if you take another two steps?"

zhou yingxue immediately froze. she explained, "i'm just looking for a sewing kit to stitch up my wound. i have a very deep knife wound that needs to be stitched up."

a sewing kit and a vial of black medicine were thrown in from the outside. "apply this medicine after the wound's been stitched up, and remember to thank me after that."

zhou yingxue felt helpless. she realized that even though she was an a-rank hitwoman who would usually bring fear to people, she still felt a sense of powerlessness at all times when facing ren xiaosu.

back at stronghold 88, the young man appeared to be a very harmless person. how could anyone expect that he would actually be this terrifying? it was only later on that she understood how powerful ren xiaosu was after she had fallen into his hands once.

even if the official members of the anjing house were here, they would probably not be able to do anything about ren xiaosu either.

zhou yingxue could only focus on treating her wound. while stitching it up, she asked, "why did you also become a contract killer for the anjing house?"

ren xiaosu answered while peeling potatoes, "to make money."

"then you could have just declared to the anjing house that you're a supernatural being," zhou yingxue said as she did not understand. however, she then realized it. "no, wait! you don't wish to reveal your identity?"

ren xiaosu said with a deadpan voice, "you know too much."

zhou yingxue shuddered in her mind and quickly changed the subject. "but with your strength, you should've been promoted to the next rank very quickly. why are you still stuck at d-rank?"

"i just bought the cell phone recently." ren xiaosu asked, "are you done changing?"

"yes."

ten minutes later, zhou yingxue growled as she sat on the chair and looked at the rope that was retied around her body, "we're old acquaintances, and i'm an injured girl, so how could you do this to me? do you still consider yourself a man?!"

however, ren xiaosu was lying on the bed and sleeping soundly as though no one were around. before sleeping, he even patiently instructed, "because of you, i'm still awake when it's close to daybreak. stop your whining, or i'll have to gag you. can you be more conscious of things?"

zhou yingxue did not say anything else. she realized ren xiaosu still had his gun pointed at her even when he was sleeping.

it was already noon when zhou yingxue slowly woke up in her chair. although she had slept a little last night, she did not have a good night's sleep in the slightest.

when she woke up, she could smell an aroma coming from the kitchen. curious, she asked, "what are you cooking?"

"potatoes," ren xiaosu answered calmly. "don't you know what those plants in my backyard are?"

zhou yingxue replied blankly, "no."

although she was also capable of getting friendly with plant life, she could only control the plants that were planted with her superpower.

in reality, zhou yingxue's power was not strong at all. or at least, in actual combat, she was far inferior to the supernatural beings who could manipulate metal and summon a painted dragon.

it wouldn't be too much to say that she was one of the weakest a-rank hitmen around...

at this moment, an alert rang on zhou yingxue's cell phone. ren xiaosu picked it up and was surprised to see a text message. "please reply '1' if you're still alive and have already fled from the scene. please reply '2' if you need a safe house or require any assistance."

ren xiaosu untied the rope for zhou yingxue and said, "reply with 1 yourself."

zhou yingxue was a little confused. "what's the point of tying me up here? if you're afraid i'll expose your whereabouts, wouldn't it be more convenient for you to just kill me? if you're not afraid that i'll leak your secret, why not just let me go instead? that would be safer for you since i won't be found here if anyone searches your place." but then zhou yingxue panicked. "don't tell me you intend to keep me here as a mistress!"

"what the hell are you babbling about?" ren xiaosu snapped, "just stay here quietly for three days, and then you can go wherever you like after that. as for my place getting searched, you don't have to worry about that. those hitmen and the members of the pyro company in the stronghold have likely already been killed. that's why the wang consortium did not conduct a follow-up pursuit to come after you. in any case, i didn't even see any wanted posters."

zhou yingxue's mind was a mess. she felt that the situation had only become utterly confusing after she encountered ren xiaosu. she could not understand what he was after. he even requested her to jump rope with him the previous time, so he was obviously not a normal person.

curious, zhou yingxue asked, "you really don't want to take advantage of me?"

ren xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. "the girl i like is much prettier than you!"

zhou yingxue got so angry she nearly flipped out again. he might as well have answered that he wanted to take advantage of her! she really could not accept this injustice!

ren xiaosu found it a little strange when he saw zhou yingxue sulking. why was this woman so weird? when he expressed that he did not want to impose upon her, she got angry!

Chapter 492 Black marke

zhou yingxue looked at ren xiaosu. "the girl you like is yang xiaojin, right?"

ren xiaosu stayed silent and did not answer her question.

zhou yingxue continued, "if it's yang xiaojin, then i admit that she's indeed much prettier than me. but didn't you leave stronghold 88 with her? why don't i see her around?"

zhou yingxue remembered that ren xiaosu and yang xiaojin were tasked with heading to the valley to the north to exterminate the bandits some time ago. but after that, yang xiaojin was nowhere to be seen.

ren xiaosu glanced at zhou yingxue. "mind your own business. have you heard any news regarding the saboteurs in the central plains while you were here?"

"no." zhou yingxue shook her head. "although the saboteurs have been active in the central plains in recent years, their organization is much more secretive and vigilant than we thought. some people say they're hiding behind another organization and giving orders remotely, but no one knows which organization it is."

"alright." ren xiaosu sighed. although he had already been in the central plains for two months, he still had not found any of them.

the fighting in stronghold 61 finally stopped. the refugees had already gotten tired of watching the commotion in the middle of the night, but they were somehow unable to fall asleep when they returned to their shacks. when they woke up in the morning to go to work at the factory, all of them had dark circles under their eyes and were yawning.

but on their way to the factory with the other workers, they were still discussing last night's battle with great enthusiasm and speculating happily about how the battle might have broken out.

unlike the gloomy expressions on the stronghold residents, the refugees did not feel that the battle had anything to do with them.

the refugees and stronghold residents seemed to be living in two different worlds. there was even a clear distinction between their stand on matters and values.

ren xiaosu would often get emotional when he saw such things happening, but zhou yingxue did not care about these matters. the only question she had for ren xiaosu was, "why are we always eating potatoes for every meal!"

ren xiaosu said nonchalantly, "just make do with it. it's great to even have potatoes to eat."

then ren xiaosu untied the rope for zhou yingxue and stuffed two boiled potatoes into her hands. zhou yingxue took advantage of this rare free time to quickly stretch herself to prevent her joints from going stiff.

ren xiaosu was still rambling, "yesterday, you asked me why a supernatural being like me would live in a town? that's because i was originally a refugee. you're already getting sick of eating potatoes after having them for two meals. but did you know that the refugees in the northwest and southwest don't even have potatoes to eat sometimes? who wouldn't like to eat rice and noodles every day? but can they afford to have those?"

zhou yingxue was stunned. then she asked in a whisper, "do you usually only eat potatoes too?"

"no." ren xiaosu shook his head. "i usually eat at the tavern since i have money."

zhou yingxue was surprised. she wanted to smash the two potatoes in her hands onto ren xiaosu's face, but she dared not do it as she really could not afford to offend him.

zhou yingxue said with a stern expression, "i want to eat at a tavern too."

"i think you're thinking too much." ren xiaosu chuckled and said, "do you really think that the wang consortium's people are all deadbeats? you're gonna swagger around in town after creating trouble in their stronghold?"

zhou yingxue immediately felt aggrieved. why did she, a supernatural being, feel so powerless before ren xiaosu?

back when she was at stronghold 88, many young and talented people had tried wooing her. she was also one of the top performers in the yang consortium's intelligence agency in terms of assassination, intelligence gathering, and infiltration. otherwise, she would not have been able to escape the stronghold while the other a-rank hitmen fought for their lives there.

but a supernatural being like her was now reduced to eating potatoes to survive.

wait a minute. zhou yingxue suddenly asked, "where did the plants in your backyard come from?"

zhou yingxue finally felt that something was off. she had seen ren xiaosu make those plants spit out the potatoes with her own eyes. that sight almost upended her understanding of things. shouldn't potatoes grow underground?

ren xiaosu said with a smile, "they were already around when i bought the house."

"do you think i believe that?" zhou yingxue said stubbornly.

"then i must have bought the seeds from someone." ren xiaosu chuckled.

"nonsense, i've never seen anyone selling strange seeds like that on the black market before." zhou yingxue frowned.

“black market?” ren xiaosu’s interest was piqued. “there’s even something like a black market in the central plains?”

“you’ve never seen a black market before?” zhou yingxue was taken aback. “there’s always illicit trading hubs like that everywhere, and the things they sell there are all banned items.”

“are there any flying treasures that can soar in the sky? or perhaps legendary magical weapons? aren’t we in the era of supernatural beings?” ren xiaosu asked curiously.

“no, there’s nothing like what you’ve mentioned there.” zhou yingxue rolled her eyes. “the main trades involve firearms and medicine, as well as some pre-cataclysm technology that various small groups dug out from somewhere. finally, there’s also intel trading. i also bought my initial cell phone from the black market.”

ren xiaosu gasped. “you can even buy a contract killers’ cell phone on the black market? how much does a cell phone cost?”

“500,000 a piece!” zhou yingxue said.

ren xiaosu was startled. “that much? the reward for a d-rank mission is only 20,000 yuan!”

“but if you get promoted to c-rank, you can easily earn it back after completing five missions.” zhou yingxue said, “besides, some cell phones are not purchased by hitmen. they’re bought by some important figures who are enemies of the anjing house as a form of self-preservation. although they can’t receive details of a-rank missions, they can receive missions that are b-ranked and below. if the anjing house releases a mission that targets them, they can make preparations in advance.”

“eh, doesn’t the anjing house know about this?” ren xiaosu wondered.

“they don’t seem to care,” zhou yingxue said.

“what else can you find on the black market?” ren xiaosu asked.

“oh, there’s many hitmen that stay long term near a black market, because those places have the safest hotels around. whenever the anjing house releases group missions, the hitmen there can form a party with the help of the hotel and disband after the mission is completed.” zhou yingxue said, “for example, the mission at stronghold 63 two days ago, or the mission at stronghold 61 yesterday, they could both be carried out as a group.”

realization dawned upon ren xiaosu. when he saw the text messages, he was wondering how those hitmen were supposed to work in groups when they usually hid their tracks and did not know each other.

so it turned out that there was a whole other world in this underworld organization.

ren xiaosu became a little interested in the black market. he wondered what level he was at compared to the other hitmen on the black market. furthermore, there should be a lot of a-rank hitmen there as

well, and he might even get to meet the members of the anjing house too. simply thinking about it, anyone would know that this would be a place where supernatural beings gathered.

he would finish the quest of taking in the injured zhou yingxue soon. after that, how great would it be when he could use the skill duplication scroll to copy a superpower? he still had his mind set on that sugar painting power.

“bring me to the black market in two days,” ren xiaosu told zhou yingxue.

Chapter 493 Hostage and railroad

it was now september, and the nights at fortress 178 were already getting chilly. the residents working outside the fortress began to return home with a rich amount of pay. due to the generous wages received from working outside the fortress, many residents would return home to rest after working for half a year outside. for the rest of the winter, they would be on break.

of course, that was also because winter in the northwest was freezing cold.

a lot of residents were still working in the factories outside the stronghold. by the end of october, the roads outside would be blocked by snow.

at that time, only the soldiers of fortress 178 would be left outside to guard the border outposts. they would be manning their positions throughout the winter without any entertainment and would also have to perform sentry duty. as such, some people would teach themselves a craft, learn the harmonica or accordion, as well as pick up many other strange skills while on duty.

it was not because they were eager to learn new skills; rather, they were bored. this was just their way of coping with the loneliness at those border outposts.

in the evening, six off-road vehicles drove in from the southwest direction. the convoy was like a sharp arrow flying true at fortress 178.

when they were about 170 kilometers away from fortress 178, they were suddenly pulled over by the patrolling troops. the patrol from fortress 178 came through the vehicle intercom, “you are now entering a zone with restricted radio communication. please turn off your radio equipment and pull over for inspection.”

luo lan, who was in one of the off-road vehicles, chuckled and said, “let’s pull over then. fortress 178’s defensive measures have always been really strict, and even our qing consortium can’t compare to them in this area. after all, their mission is to guard against external enemies.”

all six of the off-road vehicles turned off their onboard radios and slowly pulled over. on the side of the road, three platoons stood up in the wilderness and approached them in full combat gear.

luo lan got out of the vehicle first and raised his hands high. wearing a pair of sunglasses on his face, he looked like a crime lord who engaged in smuggling. “friends, i’m luo lan from the qing consortium. i’ve already informed your commander zhang about this trip!”

a fortress 178 soldier calmly said, “please wait a moment. i need to report this to the general staff first.”

as he spoke, the other soldiers’ guns stayed aimed at luo lan. however, he was not flustered at all.

beside him, zhou qi curled his lips and said, "why're they acting like we're bandits? let's quickly deal with the business here. we still have to hurry to the central plains. it's turmoil over there."

"don't get so anxious," luo lan said with a smile as he looked at the black muzzles of the guns pointing at him. "why aren't you behaving like a subordinate at all? as a subordinate, you should understand that any business of the qing consortium's leader has to be handled with the utmost urgency."

zhou qi adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses. "i'm not a subordinate. i'm just working for money."

"haha, we shouldn't be thinking about anything other than our objective," luo lan said with a laugh.

when the soldiers of fortress 178 saw how this fatso kept a straight face, they were somewhat impressed. he was a brave person indeed.

suddenly, the company commander to the rear agreed to let them through after contacting the general staff and confirming the legitimacy of luo lan's visit to fortress 178.

but before the fortress 178 troops allowed them to carry on with their journey, they collected all their weapons and made the group transfer to the patrol vehicles to proceed on.

when the convoy arrived at fortress 178 in the night, xu xianchu came out to receive them instead of zhang jinglin.

luo lan looked at xu xianchu with a smile. he put his arm warmly over xu xianchu's shoulder and praised, "brother xu is such a young and promising man. i'm sorry you had to suffer in the private troops of our qing consortium's stronghold. how about this? why don't you come back to the southwest with us? i guarantee you'll have meat to eat and wine to drink, and you'll also get to enjoy a life of endless riches."

xu xianchu politely rejected his offer. "stop dreaming."

however, luo lan was unfazed. he continued with a laugh, "it gets freezing cold in the northwest every winter, and it isn't as prosperous and interesting in the fortress compared to our south. if you go back to the southwest, i'll find ten concubines for you!"

next to them, zhou qi said with a sigh, "fatty luo, you really sound like the villain of a story right now."

luo lan said unhappily, "although i've committed murder and arson, i'm still a good person overall."

"pfft." zhou qi and xu xianchu spurned him at the same time.

"alright, enough chattering for now. let's get down to business." luo lan said to xu xianchu, "hurry up and find a place to swap documents so we can leave."

when xu xianchu led luo lan and the others to a remote and quiet street, he said, "commander zhang informed only me about today's meeting, so you don't have to worry about your secrets getting

revealed. and while we at fortress 178 don't claim we're better than others in most things, we definitely have the least number of spies from other organizations active here."

"alright, enough with your bragging. i know you all are capable." luo lan chuckled.

then xu xianchu asked, "where's the hostage you brought along? is it this four eyes beside you?"

zhou qi said unhappily, "i have a name, y'know. what do you mean by four eyes?"

however, luo lan gave a hand signal to a soldier behind him. xu xianchu was taken aback for a moment.

"is that the hostage the qing consortium is sending us? y'all better not be sending someone unimportant to us."

the soldier took off the peaked cap, and a head of black, silky hair rolled down behind her back like a waterfall.

luo lan said with a smile, "this is the woman our qing consortium leader is fond of. will she do?"

xu xianchu frowned and looked behind him. then a middle-aged soldier walked out and said, "she'll do."

luo lan was amused. "you must be wang fengyuan, right? i've heard so much about you!"

xu xianchu did not say any more. if wang fengyuan said that she would do, then it was definitely enough.

wang fengyuan did not answer luo lan. "aren't y'all afraid that by sending her to us, we'll use her against your qing consortium in the future?"

"don't worry, our qing consortium does not have any plans of unifying the world. i hope that our two sides will never need to fight each other!" so saying, luo lan turned around and left.

zhou qi chased after him and asked, "we're leaving just like that? why didn't i hear about qing zhen liking a girl?"

luo lan answered in disregard to the question, "that lady was originally an opera performer in stronghold 111. she was even a 'main lead' too. back when the board was trying to get ahold of qing zhen's weakness, they realized he had never been to the same opera theater twice. he just left whichever girl performed to fate.

"even though they did not know which girl qing zhen had his eyes on, what the board did not do wrong was to shutter all the theaters and arrest all the women. then, qing zhen realized it was useless even if he visited a different theater each time. the moment he stepped into the arena, his opponents would all be cruel beyond imagination. moreover, the opponents he would be facing in the future would definitely be much crueler than the last."

zhou qi sighed and said, "so qing zhen decided to send her here as a hostage? that's even more bewildering."

“hehe, zhang jinglin is one of the few honorable people left in the world. sending her here to be a hostage is actually the safest choice.” luo lan said with a grin, “soon, it will no longer be safe at our qing consortium. at that time, qing zhen won’t be able to divert his attention to protect her anymore.”

“but fortress 178 did not exchange hostages with us, so why should we hand over a hostage to them?” zhou qi wondered.

luo lan said firmly, “for the railroad of course.”

the qing consortium had wanted to connect their railroad to fortress 178’s railroad and open up a route to the central plains. however, zhang jinglin rejected them.

after two long months of negotiations, the two sides finally reached a consensus on this point. although the qing consortium paid a heavy price, qing zhen thought it was worthwhile. he even took the initiative to offer a political hostage to fortress 178.

luo lan understood that this girl might appear to be a hostage on the surface, but it was actually so that fortress 178 could protect her. as long as the qing consortium did not declare war on fortress 178, this would be the safest haven for her.

zhou qi clicked his tongue. “she’s no ordinary person either, judging by how calm she was even after being sent here as a hostage.”

“well, any woman my younger brother likes would definitely have to be extraordinary.”

Chapter 494 A new world

when luo lan and the others departed, the fleet of off-road vehicles left a cloud of dust in their wake as they drove all the way eastwards. their destination this time was the central plains.

on the way, luo lan did not even dare to open the windows. he was worried he would end up eating sand if a gust of wind blew in. “only those people from fortress 178 treat this godforsaken place as treasure and guard it so wholeheartedly. we’ll be arriving at the fascinating world in the central plains soon. i’m getting a little excited just thinking about it.”

zhou qi was sitting next to him, but he had been silent for some time, apparently thinking about something. he suddenly said, “i can understand you all want to open up the railroads, but everything is already safe and peaceful in the southwest, so why are you still constantly acting like there’s danger at every corner?”

zhou qi used to be the secretary for the qing consortium board. so even if he looked slovenly right now, he was not stupid.

judging by qing zhen’s move to send that girl to the northwest, the qing consortium was already determined to form an alliance with fortress 178. “and how did you guys manage to persuade fortress 178 to agree to let us build the railroad? y’know, it’ll take less than a day to get from stronghold 111 to fortress 178 if the railroad gets completed.”

in this way, if the qing consortium launched a first strike in the future, the railroad would be a lifeline that could transport soldiers and military supplies continuously as long as a stable forward operating base was established. it would probably be much faster to transport their soldiers there than to deploy their mechanized infantry!

“wait,” zhou qi said to himself, “could it be that you have a common enemy? but where’s this enemy? it’s like you’re all facing a formidable foe.”

“to say that it’s a formidable foe would be an exaggeration.” luo lan chuckled and said, “at worst, you can say that we’re preparing for a rainy day! we’ve also paid a heavy price for this outcome. first, if fortress 178 encounters external enemies again someday, our qing consortium’s troops will have to rush to the battlefield as support.”

“what?” zhou qi was stunned. “did zhang jinglin agree to let you station our troops next to him?”

“of course not.” luo lan shook his head. “from today onwards, the qing consortium will have to open up a corridor in the southwest through the mountain range in the west. that corridor will cut through the hinterlands of the plateau. if someone attacks fortress 178, we’ll have to support and outflank them from behind.”

“it won’t be easy to open up a corridor in the mountain range.” zhou qi sighed.

“it wasn’t easy to get fortress 178 to agree to us connecting railroads either. all i can say is that both sides made their concessions and put in a lot of hard work to reach a deal,” luo lan said calmly.

“alright, even if zhang jinglin believes you’ll support them when the time comes, who’s the qing consortium’s enemy?” zhou qi asked.

“the wang consortium in the central plains.” luo lan said with a smile, “can you imagine that? actually, i also didn’t expect qing zhen to care so much about that wang consortium initially.”

“that’s interesting.” zhou qi’s interest was piqued. “i heard that wang shengzhi is wheelchair-bound and always treats others with kindness. why would you be afraid of a person like him?”

“we aren’t afraid of anyone.” luo lan looked at the loess outside the window. “but not all is as peaceful in the qing consortium as you think. the qing consortium has become the most powerful organization on the surface in the entire alliance of strongholds, with more than 40 strongholds under its control. as our consortium grows more powerful, a lot of people will start paying more attention to the southwest.”

“then what does it have anything to do with the wang consortium?” zhou qi asked this question as he understood very little about the wang consortium.

“wang shengzhi spent ten years uniting the wang consortium and opened the most important resource route in the northwest. he also worked hard to implement a mandatory military service during this time. it might not look like anything at first, and the wang consortium does not have a lot of active troops at the moment, but things will change as time passes. once a war breaks out, almost all of the wang

consortium's adult males under the age of 35 can immediately bear arms and become soldiers," luo lan calmly explained.

"they only implemented military service." zhou qi said in confusion, "you can't solely use that to accuse them of being ever ready to wage war against others, can you?"

"it's not only that. qing zhen also said the wang consortium's been purchasing silk at high prices since years ago. the zhou consortium's territory has some of the most suitable places for silkworm breeding, so many of their refugees fled into the mountains to breed silkworms while the wang consortium quietly purchased their silk at high prices. they even provided the refugees with supplies too. guess what? two years ago, the zhou consortium discovered they had fewer and fewer refugees, and many of their factories had shortages of manpower. they nearly did not have enough food to feed their people!" luo lan chuckled and said, "of course, the wang consortium did many other things too."

"i'd like to know how qing zhen views the wang consortium." zhou qi frowned.

luo lan said calmly, "he said the wang consortium has the ambition of unifying the alliance of strongholds."

"so zhang jinglin agreed to your proposal because he and qing zhen have the same thoughts, and both parties will work together secretly to fend off any future danger?" zhou qi sighed. "can't we all just lead a peaceful life? isn't it quite good to just make some money, chase some skirts, and enjoy a life of luxury? why's there always someone who wants to conquer everything in the world?"

luo lan said with a smile, "you and i have witnessed a great deal of the greed of humans, but wang shengzhi is doing this not for greed... and that's the scariest thing about him. also, the qing consortium still has some old rivals from years ago. for example, the leader of the saboteurs never let go of her prejudice against us. and the pyro company has been unhappy with us for a long time too..."

"if you put it that way, it feels to me that everyone in the world is an enemy..." zhou qi said in a speechless manner. "i'm more curious if the qing consortium really has a nuclear base."

luo lan chuckled and said, "guess."

zhou qi curled his lips. "stop acting so mysteriously."

luo lan lamented, "if only we could've gotten ren xiaosu onto our side. that would've been great. with him stationed at stronghold 111, my brother wouldn't have to sleep in the barracks every day."

"who are you looking down on?" zhou qi said unhappily, "didn't i used to stand guard at his side? what? you don't believe i can protect him? how's ren xiaosu better than me?"

"are you brave enough to attack stronghold 146 all by yourself?" luo lan asked.

zhou qi paused for a moment. "never mind! but who'll protect qing zhen now that i'm going to the central plains?"

“there’s a guy called zheng yuandong who’s returned.” luo lan said with a smile, “he’s even more powerful than i imagined.”

“zheng yuandong?” that name sounds quite familiar.”

“you should be more familiar with his codename, eternal night. he’s now a supernatural being.”

the convoy’s journey to the central plains did not take long at all. luo lan and zhou qi’s mission to head to the central plains seemed to have suddenly become more important. they were looking to use gold to obtain cheap friendship amid the chaos in the central plains. then they would try their best to delay the thing they worried most about for as long as possible until the day it arrived.

this way, qing zhen would have more time to consolidate the resources in the southwest.

of course, it would be even better if they could nip the threat in the bud.

“by the way, what’s up with that qinghe group?” zhou qi asked, “aren’t you guys worried about them too?”

“there’s nothing to worry about.”

Chapter 495 The guy I like has never led a pampered life

The Qinghe Group was located in the heartland of the Central Plains. But unlike other consortiums that often controlled several to over a dozen strongholds, the Qinghe Group had only ever controlled one. Based on its sequence number in the Alliance of Strongholds, that should be Stronghold 66.

But over the years, the people from the Qinghe Group did not care that it was called Stronghold 66 and simply referred to it as Luoyang City.

Over time, other people also began to call that stronghold Luoyang City.

It was unique just like Fortress 178.

Before the Alliance of Strongholds was established, the Qinghe Group had already shown they had a strong side. They had a fixed and stable organizational structure, and many technologies that had been preserved from the Pre-Cataclysm times. Of course, they did not manage to preserve all of them.

At first, the other consortiums were constantly wary of the Qinghe Group. But after time passed, everyone realized they did not seem to be interested in expanding their territory at all.

Moreover, the Qinghe Group had never gotten involved in the competition for resources in the Central Plains all these years. They seemed to only be persistently searching for something.

But there was something even stranger. The person currently in charge of the Qinghe Group was surnamed Xu. The leadership role had been passed down from father to son through Old Xu’s family lineage. It was said that his ancestors used to sell sanitary pads. Later on, a tech expert named Xu Nuo emerged, and he became wildly successful working under the big boss of the Qinghe Group.

However, it seemed that the big boss of the Qinghe Group did not have any offspring, so the Xu clan took over stewardship of the Qinghe Group. However, they always insisted they were only minority shareholders. When they located the heir of the major shareholder, they would step down and make way for that person to take over.

This stand later became a joke that circulated around. Who would step down to make way for others in this age of wastelands?

Up to the present, the Qinghe Group had become a very special existence in the Central Plains. It was located between the Wang Consortium, the Chen Consortium, and the Kong Consortium. The Wang Consortium occupied the northwest section of the Central Plains, which connected to Fortress 178. The Kong Consortium was located in the northeast that connected to the sea and Guandong.[1] Meanwhile, the Zhou Consortium was situated at the intersection of three rivers and spread downwards to the south.

Although there were more than a dozen other consortiums in the Central Plains, these three consortiums were the most powerful here.

However, the Qinghe Group was special not because of its unique geographic location but because of how it conducted itself. Luoyang City possessed the largest institution of higher learning in the entire Alliance of Strongholds, and it had a model of teaching that was closest to the Pre-Cataclysm times.

Meanwhile, the establishment of universities in the other consortiums was done only to serve the research of their own technologies. All of them had a very utilitarian focus. As all the different research subjects were done for the sake of improving the power of the consortium someday, the children of other consortiums were not allowed to study at their universities.

But unlike other universities, anyone could take part in the exams for Qinghe University. They taught a variety of subjects, and they even included the arts in this age of wastelands.

When such courses were set up initially, many consortiums jokingly criticized how there could be any space for the arts to survive in these times.

Furthermore, when the other consortiums acquired the cultural heritage from before The Cataclysm, they focused heavily on laboratory data and some technological research results. Meanwhile, the Qinghe Group collected everything they could get their hands on and even sent their own people to look for such items. They seemed to be particularly interested in calligraphy, paintings, and antiques, claiming they were treasures of mankind.

A consortium like this was like a different existence in these wastelands. There really wasn't another consortium that behaved like them in this world.

At this moment, the students at Qinghe University just finished their classes. On campus, the students walked out of their classrooms happily with their backpacks. Some of them rushed to the next building for their upcoming classes, while others who did not have any more lessons simply went to attend their club activities.

A girl wearing a cap walked out of the school alone with her schoolbag, her back straight.

Someone behind called out to her, “Yang Xiaojin!”

Yang Xiaojin calmly looked back. “What’s the matter?”

There were a lot of people on the other side, and the person who spoke was a very tall college student. He was wearing a white shirt and had a very sunny smile on his face. He smiled at Yang Xiaojin and said, “We have a social this evening, and I’d like to invite you to join us. Since school started, you’ve always been going around on your own. Are you still getting used to the lifestyle in Luoyang City?”

Yang Xiaojin shook her head. “I only came here to gain more knowledge. I’m not interested in any socials.”

The people behind the male student were whispering among themselves. Someone who seemed to be cheering him on said in a low voice, “Don’t be shy! Hurry up and say it.”

The male student hesitated for a moment before suddenly saying, “Yang Xiaojin, I like you. Can you give me a chance? I can—”

“I already have someone I like,” interrupted Yang Xiaojin.

That male student froze. He did not know what else to say and started to back down.

Yang Xiaojin shook her head and said, “See, your feelings for me aren’t even that deep. If I reject you today, you’ll just fall in love with another person tomorrow. Your ‘like’ is just you trying your luck. Once you hit a stumbling block, you immediately back down.”

Off to the side, someone whispered, “She’s going too far.”

The male student struggled and said, “Then who do you like? The president of the Student Council? Or...”

Yang Xiaojin shook her head again. “He’s not in Luoyang City. You think that the president of the Student Council is outstanding because you guys haven’t had a chance to see the outside world yet. The guy I like has never led a pampered life.”

However, Yang Xiaojin was not sure whether Ren Xiaosu was still alive or not. She had witnessed the scarlet red spear penetrate his body right before her very eyes. The Saboteurs had promised to help her get revenge, but the condition was that she had to do ten things for the organization first.

For the past two months, she kept asking her aunt if there was any news of Ren Xiaosu. However, all she received was a negative answer.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of the Qinghe Group, her aunt arranged for her to continue with her studies at Qinghe University. However, Yang Xiaojin was never just a normal student. She had killed people before and had also accompanied someone in building a future filled with hope in the wilderness until that hope was shattered.

But it didn't matter to her. She believed that Ren Xiaosu was still alive, and she would locate him sooner or later.

Yang Xiaojin turned around and left. She walked along Kaiyuan Avenue back to her home in Luoyang City. Then she constantly stripped her sniper rifle and cleaned it.

After repeating the process several times, she personally reloaded gunpowder into all the different types of bullets that she had. If the students at school saw this scene, they would probably be shocked. This was not a toy a girl should have.

It was during this time that Yang Xiaojin slowly calmed down. Actually, under her calm appearance, a warm heart was hidden within.

She went to the kitchen to cook a meal for herself. After she finished, she crushed the remaining onion she had and squeezed out the juice.

Yang Xiaojin took out a thin brush before retrieving a paper crane from her pocket and unfolding it. She dipped the brush into the onion juice and wrote a few lines of words on the paper. After that, she refolded the paper crane.

The paper crane spread its wings as though it had suddenly come to life. Then it flew off into the west.

When the recipient received the paper crane, the handwriting inside would be revealed by slightly heating the paper over an open flame.

Chapter 496 The Riders organization

there were many ways to write a secret letter, such as using a mixture of aminophenazone tablets dissolved in water. through a special process, handwriting written with that mixture could be displayed. another example was to write with a mixture of starch water with rice water. after lightly wiping the paper with an iodine solution, the hidden message would also be revealed.

but yang xiaojin had chosen to use onion juice this time only because this method was relatively simpler. besides, if someone wiped the piece of paper with an iodine solution first, they would not be able to see the handwriting clearly even if they heated it over an open flame afterwards.

when the onion juice was absorbed by the paper, it would start burning at a lower temperature than the paper. therefore, the writing would turn brown when slightly heated.

as yang xiaojin watched the paper crane fly away slowly, it was as though the expectations in her heart were carried off with it. she hoped it would bring good news to her the next time it flew back.

...

ren xiaosu and zhou yingxue were trekking in the wilderness. as the wang consortium had begun arresting suspicious people recently, they thought that traveling in a car would make them too noticeable, so they decided against using one.

the two of them could have gotten their hands on two motorcycles, but they did not know how to ride them...

ren xiaosu's quest of taking in zhou yingxue had been completed. but to his disappointment, he was only rewarded with the basic skill duplication scroll and not the perfect skill duplication scroll. in other words, he still did not have a scroll that could allow him to copy another's superpowers.

however, that was not a big problem. there would be other quests in the future, and a perfect skill duplication scroll would surely appear again.

the black market zhou yingxue had talked about was located at the intersection between the wang consortium, the kong consortium, and the zhou consortium. it was situated in a ravine not too far away from luoyang city.

luoyang city was under the control of the qinghe group. in fact, this was the only stronghold the qinghe group possessed.

the organizer of the black market chose to be located near luoyang city as it was convenient for the criminal underworld in the three consortiums to travel there to make purchases. it was close to everywhere.

on top of that, the qinghe group had never cared about such activities as long as nothing too serious arose in the black market.

ren xiaosu asked, "then can anyone get into the black market as they wish?"

"of course!" zhou yingxue said, "this black market is really big as it occupies the size of an entire county from before the cataclysm. it also gets very lively there. many fugitives who are wanted by the various consortiums usually end up hiding there. the rich can also go and hire them to do their dirty work."

ren xiaosu nodded and said, "alright then, you'll pretend to be my subordinate after we get there."

zhou yingxue refused to accept this. "why have i become a follower all of a sudden? i'm a supernatural being for goodness' sake!"

ren xiaosu turned around and looked at her calmly. zhou yingxue's tone grew meek. "alright, alright, so be it if i have to act as your subordinate... wait, that won't do. a lot of people in the black market have seen me before. when we had to work in groups to complete the a-rank missions, we even had to declare our superpowers to each other. if i get recognized by others and it turns out that i'm your subordinate, how powerful would you have to be?"

ren xiaosu thought that it sounded quite logical. he glanced at zhou yingxue and said, "then i guess you can tell others that i'm your assistant."

with that, zhou yingxue said happily, "in that case, you should behave like an assistant. you can't order me around again."

"whatever!" ren xiaosu waved her off impatiently. "you can rest easy."

when the two of them were about to reach the periphery of the black market, someone from the black market organization came over to ask them something. they did not ask about their identities and only asked what they were here for. they even checked to see if they needed help to book a hotel room.

zhou yingxue said with an arrogant look, "i want to book two hotel rooms."

"then do you want to rent a car or schedule a massage?"

"not for the time being."

"alright."

after saying that, the people from the black market organization left politely. before departing, they even wished them an enjoyable time here.

ren xiaosu smacked his lips. "the service in this black market feels really good."

zhou yingxue said, "i wonder who's controlling the black market behind the scenes. they've not only made this into a place to trade prohibited goods but also created a solid spending economy. if you spend enough money here, they'll even send you an invitation to an organized vacation by the beach come every spring. there's even a massive casino here, and the dealers inside are all dressed..."

ren xiaosu asked, "dressed even more revealing than what you wore in the library back then?"

zhou yingxue's expression darkened immediately. "must you bring that up?"

ever since zhou yingxue left the yang consortium, she seemed to have turned into a different person. in the past, she had to do certain things because of her job. but now, she was living more for herself.

a supernatural being leaving a consortium was like a bird flying out of a cage.

of course, zhou yingxue was still willing to dress sexily. however, she did not need to deliberately show herself to other men now.

as soon as they entered the black market, sure enough, someone immediately recognized zhou yingxue and came forward to greet her cordially.

some things were different from what ren xiaosu had expected. he thought the previous mission carried out in stronghold 61 was a failure, but many people at the black market were saying that zhou yingxue and the others had completed their mission really well by wiping out all the members of the pyro company at stronghold 61.

however, ren xiaosu realized there was some uncertainty in zhou yingxue's eyes. he decided he would get to the bottom of it when he had a chance to clarify.

when someone saw ren xiaosu, they said curiously, "this is..."

zhou yingxue coldly waved it off. "he's just my assistant. you don't have to care about him."

ren xiaosu was speechless.

in an instant, ren xiaosu was completely ignored by the group of snobs in front of him. meanwhile, zhou yingxue was enthusiastically surrounded by a crowd who asked her for details of the battle.

most of these people made a living by trading intel. if they could receive any vital information by saying something nice to zhou yingxue, why not?

however, ren xiaosu found that zhou yingxue was not stupid either. she spoke flawlessly without revealing any useful information at all.

all of a sudden, he saw someone lead a group in from outside the black market. the person at the very front was quite strange, and their faces were even covered with red scarves. some of the followers looked very young, and they might even be students who were still attending school.

when those people who had surrounded zhou yingxue in the black market realized they could not get any useful information out of her, they left. they started crowding around the young man whose face was covered with a red scarf instead. ren xiaosu asked in a low voice, "who is that person?"

"he is a member of the riders." zhou yingxue whispered, "since this place is very close to the qinghe group, we often get to see them around."

"then who're those people behind him? they look really young," ren xiaosu wondered.

"i heard that they're the students of qinghe university. qinghe university has a rule that students must travel the world, but they can only do so under the protection of the riders."

Chapter 497 Social Learning class

The member of the Riders organization with a red scarf on his face passing by with a group of students following him was just a simple interlude. Whenever they passed by a particular building, the Rider member would point out to the others what the place was. He would even explain to the students behind him what people did here.

Actually, this field trip felt more like a fall tour. Or rather, it was a kind of social learning class for the college students to see what the outside world was really like.

Ren Xiaosu believed this Rider must have brought these stronghold students to look at the refugees' living conditions before bringing them here to the black market.

After the group of students passed by, Zhou Yingxue said, "It's getting late, so let's head to the hotel we reserved and rest up. I'll show you around the place tomorrow. There's nothing much to see in the black market at night since no one's selling anything at this time. The rich have all gone to waste their money in the vice establishments. As for the poor, they'll be waiting outside to run errands for the bosses inside."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Let's go."

But as they made their way to the hotel, they suddenly realized the Rider was also taking the students in the same direction as them.

On the way there, Ren Xiaosu saw a brightly lit hotel up front and asked, "Is that the hotel we're staying in?"

"Yes." Zhou Yingxue nodded. "It looks like these people from the Qinghe Group are also staying there."

The hotel appeared quite elegant, and there were parking lots outside and waiters in white uniforms welcoming guests. The white marble flooring at the hotel entrance looked spotlessly clean. Ren Xiaosu found it very difficult to believe that a place like this could be hidden in such a remote area. It was even more luxurious than what could be found in the strongholds.

Zhou Yingxue said softly, "The other black markets have to worry about extremely high commissions and being cracked down on by the consortiums, but the security and stability of this place have gradually become the first choice of many mob bosses. In recent years, many mob bosses have settled down here and are treating this place as their headquarters."

When the two of them stepped into the lobby, the waiter first brought them some warm white towels, then indicated with a smile that they were complimentary. Ren Xiaosu saw the member of the Riders calmly instructing the students from the Qinghe Group as they were checking in, "It's good for you all to come out here to see the world, but don't let this good thing turn into a bad thing. If I find anyone sneaking into the brothels or the casino, they'll be expelled once we return to Luoyang City."

During the conversation, the Rider looked up and saw Ren Xiaosu looking at him. He nodded courteously with a smile. However, there was a certain feeling to that polite smile that would keep people at arm's length.

Zhou Yingxue whispered, "The Riders are extremely proud and have always been quite antisocial."

"I can see that." Ren Xiaosu nodded.

After the Rider led his group away, the pretty receptionist said to Zhou Yingxue with an apologetic face, "Hi, Ms. Zhou. I'm sorry, but only one of the two rooms you reserved is left. It's Room 1005."

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. "This is the first time I've encountered something like this. How can there be a problem when we reserved the rooms in advance?"

The pretty receptionist said guiltily, "I'm really very sorry. The main reason is we suddenly had over 20 guests that arrived from the Qinghe Group. They didn't make a prior reservation, so... You should also know that members of the Qinghe Group are priority customers at our hotel."

Before Zhou Yingxue could argue with her, someone suddenly walked into the lobby. When he saw Zhou Yingxue, he said with a smile, "Well, if it's isn't Zhou Yingxue! I heard the previous mission went very smoothly? But it seems like you were the only A-rank hitman in your team who made it back alive. You're truly a powerful superhuman!"

Ren Xiaosu looked at the person who spoke. His hair was combed back and he was dressed in a tight suit. He was wearing a pair of leather shoes but did not have any socks on. Ren Xiaosu asked, "Who is this? He can't even afford to buy socks?"

The man standing across from him got so angry he laughed. "What's with the lame joke!"

However, Zhou Yingxue frowned and said, "Assistant, don't let him come near me. But don't get into a fight either. Fighting isn't allowed in this hotel. I'm gonna head upstairs to get some rest first."

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue in astonishment. After getting her room key, she turned around and walked into the elevator. Ren Xiaosu just stood quietly outside the elevator while the man attempted several times to get past him to grab ahold of Zhou Yingxue's arm. However, Ren Xiaosu kept standing in front of him like a competent bodyguard...

After Zhou Yingxue went upstairs, the man left angrily. "To think that she's already keeping a gigolo after completing just one A-rank mission."

Ren Xiaosu's eyes twitched as he headed upstairs as well. If Zhou Yingxue had not explicitly said that fighting was not allowed in the hotel, the guy in front of him would probably have been killed on the spot.

After knocking on the door and entering the room, Ren Xiaosu swaggered towards the sofa and sat down. Zhou Yingxue went over meekly and squatted as she began to massage Ren Xiaosu's legs. "I was just trying to act realistically. I didn't really mean to order you around. Besides, he's really annoying...."

Ren Xiaosu grunted in acknowledgement. "Who is he?"

Zhou Yingxue explained as she massaged Ren Xiaosu's legs, "His name is Zhao Haocheng, and he's also an A-rank hitman. I'm not sure if he has any superpowers, though. He was supposed to be part of the group that performed the mission at Stronghold 61, but after I appeared, someone else invited me and kicked him out of their team. I heard he's double-crossed his teammates before."

"Oh, so you mean you took over his spot in the group? No wonder he was so sarcastic." Ren Xiaosu nodded. Actually, he did not mind helping Zhou Yingxue a little. He also understood why she had deliberately told him that this was a gathering place for hitmen to team up to complete missions and even conceded to him that he was stronger. This was actually because Zhou Yingxue knew that her superpower was too weak and that she couldn't complete an A-rank mission on her own.

Therefore, Zhou Yingxue's main purpose in bringing Ren Xiaosu here was to let him form a team with her to perform the missions. To put it bluntly, she wanted to ride on his coattails to complete the missions.

"Alright, you can stop massaging. You're a supernatural being, after all," Ren Xiaosu snapped.

Zhou Yingxue cursed in her head. So what if she was a supernatural being? She had already been knocked out by him a few times, so what dignity of a supernatural being did she still have left! She was close to becoming his maidservant already!

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "What else do you know about the Qinghe Group? Why does this hotel treat them with such esteem? Are they extremely strong in combat?"

"The combat strength of the Qinghe Group has always been a mystery. Many people said the founder of the Qinghe Group was already a supernatural being before The Cataclysm, but that has not been verified." Zhou Yingxue gingerly sat next to him and said, "But what is known is that of the 12 satellites that the Alliance of Strongholds still have, the Qinghe Group controls seven of them. Moreover, the electricity in the black market is actually also provided for by the Qinghe Group."

"So, the Qinghe Group is the big boss behind the black market?"

Chapter 498 A new mission

Ever since arriving in the Central Plains, Ren Xiaosu felt like he had entered a whole new world. It was a world where not only the Qing Consortium and Fortress 178 existed but also many other strange organizations such as the Pyro Company, the Anjing House, the Qinghe Group, etc.

The world was much bigger than he knew. It was no wonder Yang Xiaojin once said she would come here after finishing her business in the Southwest. Thinking about it, when she was willing to stay with Ren Xiaosu in that deserted valley, it showed her attitude about him.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt that the person behind the biggest and most professional black market in the Central Plains was most likely the boss of the Qinghe Group. If he could come to such a conclusion, others would definitely be able to as well.

However, the reason why everyone left this black market unchecked was probably also due to the uncaring attitude displayed by the Qinghe Group. Since an organization like them did not have the ambition to rule over the Central Plains, others would naturally be able to turn a blind eye to some unimportant matters.

"Let's go and check out what the black market is like at night." Ren Xiaosu got up and headed out. Zhou Yingxue followed him, but she curled her lips in silence. Wasn't he just curious to see the sensual temptations of this world? He must have been tempted after hearing what she said about the croupiers and brothels. There were indeed no good men!

However, Zhou Yingxue still obediently followed him. After they left the hotel room, the two of them returned to their roles as an A-rank hitwoman and her assistant respectively. Zhou Yingxue's expression could not get any more arrogant than it was.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt like Zhou Yingxue was a little bit addicted to being in-character for her role...

When they passed by the legendary brothel, a group of beautiful women in uniform were standing at the door and smiling at the passersby. Ren Xiaosu asked, "What uniform is this? I haven't seen any soldiers wearing it before."

"They say it's the uniform of flight attendants from the Pre-Cataclysm times. I'm referring to the cabin crew of a plane," Zhou Yingxue explained.

Ren Xiaosu didn't respond.

The black market was a real eye-opener to him. It was no wonder those mob bosses were willing to stay here. According to Zhou Yingxue, there was even a housing block specially built here in the black market. The villas there were sold to the mob bosses at astronomical prices.

Moreover, the people from the black market organization had been eliminating wild beasts so frequently in the surrounding mountain range that there was not even a snake to be found.

But Zhou Yingxue asked, "Aren't you gonna go into the brothel to have a look? Didn't you come out in the middle of the night because you wanted to see this?"

"I just wanted to have a look from the outside." Ren Xiaosu asked in confusion, "Why would I go in?"

Zhou Yingxue was shocked right then and there. Was he really just here to have a look?!

When they came to the entrance of the casino, Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. He and Zhou Yingxue both saw that Rider from earlier wearing a red scarf hoisting a student out from inside.

Although the student looked like he was around 50 kilograms, the Rider held him in his hand as though he were a featherweight.

They saw the Rider throw the student mercilessly to the ground. "You've violated the order about going out without permission. Head back to Luoyang City yourself. You've been expelled from the school!"

The student got up from the ground in a pathetic manner and said, "What gives you the right to make such a decision when you're just here to protect us?"

The Rider said coldly, "If you can make it back to Luoyang City, you'll understand why I can make a decision like this."

Ren Xiaosu muttered, "It seems that the Riders have a lot of authority within the Qinghe Group."

"Of course." Zhou Yingxue nodded. "They're all devotees to the founder of Qinghe. The current leader of Qinghe, Xu Ke, also reveres them greatly. Apparently, only by completing eight challenges can they become true devotees."

"Then why did the student confront him?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"Probably because the Riders do not have any actual duties within the Qinghe Group." Zhou Yingxue was not too familiar with the internal workings of the Qinghe Group.

"I think he's just young and immature. His family must've already told him, but he still went into the casino out of curiosity. He's only getting angry out of embarrassment at being caught red-handed." Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "Look, he can't bear to face that Rider now. This shows that he still understands the Rider's standing within the Qinghe Group. He was just too pampered and had nothing better to do."

Zhou Yingxue looked strangely at Ren Xiaosu. 'Aren't you also around the same age as that student!'

“Do you know anything about the founder of Qinghe?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“A lot of information was lost after The Cataclysm, and only a few people in the Qinghe Group know about it. It seems that there were some secrets hidden in the history of the founder’s life experience. Everyone’s guessing that if we learn about his life, we’ll know how he became a supernatural being in the times before The Cataclysm.” Zhou Yingxue thought for a moment and said, “Frankly, everyone’s actually quite curious about this secret.”

“What’s the name of the founder?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“He was called Ren He.” Zhou Yingxue said firmly, “But that’s not a secret anymore.”

“Let’s go, we’re heading back to the hotel.” Ren Xiaosu turned around and left.

Zhou Yingxue could only follow and say, “Then what’re we gonna do next?”

“We wait.”

...

When they returned to the hotel at night, Zhou Yingxue quietly placed a pillow on the couch for herself. With just one reserved room left, she was forced to accept that she would have to sleep on the couch.

Ren Xiaosu swaggered to the bed and lay down on it. He did not have any intentions of being gentlemanly. In a huff, Zhou Yingxue covered herself with a thin blanket.

However, Zhou Yingxue had a particularly peaceful sleep this time. It was though she was no longer worried that Ren Xiaosu would do something to her.

She slept all the way until dawn when she suddenly woke up. Then she saw Ren Xiaosu move a chair over and sit down calmly next to her. Zhou Yingxue was immediately jolted awake as she quickly wrapped herself up in the blanket. She carefully probed, “What are you doing?!”

Ren Xiaosu calmly asked, “Had a dream?”

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. “How did you know... No, I didn’t have any dreams!”

“Then what did you mean when you said those words in your sleep?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“What did I say?”

Ren Xiaosu said with a deadpan expression, “You were saying that you wanted to kill me.”

Zhou Yingxue was so scared she almost cried. “I was just talking in my dream. Who takes the things that people say while dreaming seriously?”

Ren Xiaosu did not argue with her. He got up and said, “Go and wash up. We have business to handle.”

Zhou Yingxue quickly got out of her blanket on the couch. “What business?”

“We have a mission.”

A text message had appeared on their cell phones at the same time. "The target in Stronghold 73 is Zhou Xilong. He advocated the development of nuclear weapons and once took his subordinate's wife for himself. He's suspected to be protected by a superhuman. A-rank. Reward: 1 million yuan. Up to five people can work in a group for the mission, and all will receive rights to use the safe house and be protected by us upon being pursued by the enemy."

Ren Xiaosu placed the cell phone into his pocket. He had to carry it around at all times. If he put it away in the palace, he would not receive any texts.

However, he suddenly felt that the Anjing House and the Saboteurs seemed to have a common goal in that they both had a hostile attitude towards nuclear weapons. Could there be any connection between the Anjing House and the Saboteurs? But he had not heard Yang Xiaojin mention it before.

Chapter 499 Ren Xiaosu's problem-solving method

Even among the A-rank hitmen, there were very few superhumans. Therefore, it should be just enough to hire several A-rank hitmen to deal with the big shots of these consortiums.

Dealing with the Pyro Company, though, would prove to be a bit more difficult.

However, Ren Xiaosu was looking forward to any mission that would require him to deal with the Pyro Company, because it would be more challenging for him.

At this moment, the telephone in the room rang. When Zhou Yingxue went to pick up the phone, she heard a pleasant voice say, "The guest in Room 1209 has entrusted the hotel to extend an invitation to those interested in working in groups. If you're interested, you can go straight to Room 1209."

"Alright, got it." After Zhou Yingxue hung up, she looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Shall we go?"

"This hotel is amazing. They can actually be entrusted to assign missions to the hitmen directly? How far is Stronghold 73 from here?" Ren Xiaosu asked, "I think it should be quite far, right? I've never received any missions over there before. Is it possible that the missions are assigned according to different regions?"

"It's around 600 kilometers away from here. Actually, I don't really want to accept this mission," Zhou Yingxue said, "because I've never been to Stronghold 73 before, and I'm not familiar with that place at all. However, the Anjing House does assign missions according to regions. It seems that if you're in the Wang Consortium's territory, you'll only receive missions related to the Wang Consortium. But in this black market, it's a little special. As long as you're here, you can receive missions related to all three consortiums."

Realization dawned on Ren Xiaosu. So this was the reason. It was no wonder Zhou Yingxue said that a lot of hitmen came here to stay in the black market after completing their missions. Not only could they enjoy themselves at the vice establishments, but they could also receive more missions here!

The location of this black market was really unique.

He said to Zhou Yingxue in a serious tone, "Then let's hurry to Stronghold 73 in case someone steals our mission away. Also, I don't think it'll be necessary to work on this mission with others. The two of us should be good enough."

Zhou Yingxue heard something very interesting. "Do you have to compete for D-rank missions with others?"

Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Don't you have to compete for A-rank missions with other people as well?"

"Of course not!" Zhou Yingxue said, "As long as someone forms a party and jointly submits the mission application to the Anjing House, the mission will not be given to other people. And the Anjing House will assess whether your team is qualified enough to accept the mission. If not, it won't be approved. Therefore, they definitely won't approve our application if we apply for it using my status as a single A-rank hitman."

Ren Xiaosu finally understood. So it turned out they would still need to form a party with others after getting promoted to A-rank? Under normal circumstances, when the Anjing House allowed several people to work in a group for a mission, it would be easier to get approval for it if a team applied.

Although it seemed like there was an additional condition, the hitmen had nothing to complain about. Everyone believed in the capability of the Anjing House's intelligence gathering, and it was also for the sake of their safety by having every one form their parties freely for the job.

"Do you think we should accept this mission?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Zhou Yingxue gave it some thought before saying, "I think it's a bit dangerous since we're unfamiliar with the location. So it's better not to accept it."

"Then let's go! We should have a look at what our teammates are like this time," Ren Xiaosu said.

Zhou Yingxue was confused. 'Did you listen to what I said?'

After discussing for about ten minutes, Ren Xiaosu decided on taking on the mission. Zhou Yingxue followed him and rolled her eyes at his back for a long time. 'If you had already intended to accept the mission, you could've just said so. What was the point of asking me for my opinion?'

However, Zhou Yingxue did not dare to speak even though she was angry. A maidservant had no rights to complain.

The two of them took the elevator to the 12th floor and headed to Room 1209. To their surprise, the door was already open when they arrived. They saw five people sitting inside, and one of them was Zhao Haocheng, the man Ren Xiaosu stopped outside the elevator last night.

The Anjing House had only allowed the hitmen to work in a group of five. So even if they had more people, the total reward would still be the same. So now that there were already five people in the room, it meant they might have gotten here too late.

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself: 'So we still have to compete for A-rank missions with other people after all....'

When Zhao Haocheng saw Zhou Yingxue and Ren Xiaosu, he laughed and gloated, "Unfortunately, there's no spot for you this time."

The other person, who was the occupant of Room 1209, apologized to Zhou Yingxue, "I'm sorry, but we already have enough people."

Zhou Yingxue said coldly, "Zhao Haocheng has a record of double-crossing his teammates. Are you still willing to carry out the mission with someone like him?"

Zhao Haocheng's expression darkened. "Zhou Yingxue, I'm warning you! You better not slander people willy-nilly. You were the only one who returned after completing the mission at Stronghold 61. Why?! I doubt you can explain that, right?"

"At the very least, I won't double-cross my own teammates." Zhou Yingxue sneered.

The occupant of Room 1209 remained as polite as before and said apologetically, "Since there aren't many A-rank hitmen around and the social circle isn't that big, I, as the initiator of the mission, am not willing to offend the two of you. As such, I can only say first come, first served."

Zhou Yingxue turned around to leave while Ren Xiaosu followed her and acted obediently like an assistant.

After they left, Zhou Yingxue was planning on returning to their room. However, Ren Xiaosu pressed the first floor button in the elevator. When he got downstairs, he headed straight out of the black market.

Zhou Yingxue asked, "What are you doing? We can just go back to our room and continue waiting for another mission. You don't have to get so angry that you wanna leave this place immediately, right?"

"I'm gonna leave the black market, but it has nothing to do with me being angry." Ren Xiaosu looked strangely at Zhou Yingxue, giving her a look that wondered why she was so peculiar to think like that.

Annoyed, Zhou Yingxue followed Ren Xiaosu and complained, "I wonder what those people are thinking! When that Zhao Haocheng double-crossed his teammates, he had not expected one of them to survive. However, very few people knew about this. The teammate who survived later died due to the serious injuries he suffered. The dead tell no tales, so he's starting to act arrogantly again."

As they walked up a hillside, Zhou Yingxue saw Ren Xiaosu suddenly take out a sniper rifle. He acted like no one was around as he set up the gun and lay down on the ground. Then he looked through the scope. "Don't they have a full team? I'll wait for Zhao Haocheng to come out of the hotel and kill him. That way, we'll have a spot."

Zhou Yingxue was shocked. 'So this is your way of thinking? If their team is full, you'll simply kill one of them so that they'll be short of people? This way, we can go on the mission with them!' What kind of logic is that?! Is this something a human would do?

She still did not know that Ren Xiaosu had stolen more than 20 cell phones from a group of D-rank hitmen in order to carry out his own missions successfully.

Ren Xiaosu's way of solving problems had always been this straightforward!

Ren Xiaosu glanced at her. "Didn't you say that Zhao Haocheng double-crossed his teammates? I consider this getting rid of evil for the people."

Zhou Yingxue did not say anything else. Although she felt this method of killing Zhao Haocheng was a little violent, she still felt a little happy when she saw Ren Xiaosu standing up for her.

"Thank you for standing up for me," Zhou Yingxue said softly.

Ren Xiaosu said in surprise, "Who cares whether you're angry at him. I just want to do the mission, that's all."

Zhou Yingxue suddenly became even angrier.

Chapter 500 Revenge

Ren Xiaosu was very particular about the position of his ambush. He had observed the terrain near the black market and found there were only three exits around it. If the team were to head to Stronghold 73 at the Zhou Consortium's territory to conduct their mission, they would have to take the route Ren Xiaosu was ambushing.

When Zhao Haocheng and the others drove out of the black market, a sniper bullet penetrated the window of the off-road vehicle without any warning and killed Zhao Haocheng in the backseat.

Next to Ren Xiaosu, Zhou Yingxue was watching quietly all this while and was a little puzzled. How did the young man next to her seem to know everything? He could even use a sniper rifle this well?

She could just imagine how terrifying a supernatural being would be after learning how to snipe.

Other snipers had to carefully guard against sneak attacks of supernatural beings in close combat. However, this young man before her did not have to worry about that at all. If normal supernatural beings sneak attacked him, they would only find that they could not beat him in close combat either.

And now, a well-known A-rank hitman had died just like that. Ren Xiaosu really did not hesitate when it came to killing people.

Ren Xiaosu stowed his sniper rifle and went down the hill. Zhou Yingxue followed and murmured, "Will they still let you join their team after you've killed their teammate?"

"Since Zhao Haocheng had to die no matter what, we're just gonna have to take it one step at a time," Ren Xiaosu said slowly. In his opinion, if someone were always plotting against him behind his back or would possibly sabotage him in the future, he might as well just kill that person now.

Ren Xiaosu had already said he was not a good person, and neither was he willing to be one.

However, he asked, "This team is also very strange. Even though they know that Zhao Haocheng is problematic, why did they still accept him as their teammate? Most people wouldn't want someone like him as their teammate. If it were me, I'd rather offend him than work with him."

"Who knows?" Zhou Yingxue said as she followed Ren Xiaosu.

When they got down the hill, Zhou Yingxue reverted to her arrogant expression and walked towards the convoy with her assistant, Ren Xiaosu.

By now, the other four A-rank hitmen in the convoy had already dumped Zhao Haocheng's corpse on the side of the road. They picked up a cloth to wipe down the interior of the vehicle as it was covered in blood.

However, Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue did not expect that when the other A-rank hitmen saw them, they actually laughed happily. "Welcome aboard?"

Zhou Yingxue wondered, "Why does it look like you guys don't mind that your teammate's just been killed?"

The occupant of Room 1209 said with a smile, "Let me introduce myself. My name is Wu Tong. My good friend was among the teammates Zhao Haocheng killed. I wanted to set a trap to kill him this time and thought it'd be quite difficult since he was so alert. However, I didn't expect you to kill him with a sniper rifle. Speaking of, I still have to thank you for taking revenge for my friend."

Ren Xiaosu felt that it made sense if it was like this. Otherwise, he really could not understand why the other party did not kick Zhao Haocheng out of their team. After all, they could choose their team members freely, and it was not like the Anjing House forcefully assigned Zhao Haocheng to them.

So Zhao Haocheng had probably not expected that someone would come after him for revenge.

In such a person's world, he probably felt that no one would have any friends since he did not have any friends himself either.

However, Wu Tong and the others thought of Zhou Yingxue as the sniper who opened fire just now. Wu Tong praised, "I never expected that Ms. Zhou Yingxue is not only a superhuman but a sniper. No wonder you managed to wipe out the Pyro Company's Dusk in Stronghold 61."

Ren Xiaosu learned from Zhou Yingxue that the Pyro Company had actually gained the upper hand when she was fleeing. Not only was she seriously injured, but some of their team members had also been killed by the Pyro Company.

However, everyone was now saying they had done a beautiful job and that the Pyro Company members were completely wiped out.

Something must have happened after Zhou Yingxue fled from Stronghold 61.

On that night, the battle at Stronghold 61 lasted for a very long time. Ren Xiaosu suspected it was the Wang Consortium that had wiped out the Pyro Company but later claimed it was the Anjing House's doing.

In fact, the same thing happened at Stronghold 63. When Vanilla was conducting his mission, he retreated the moment he realized the members of the Pyro Company were fleeing in the direction of the Wang Consortium's troops.

Ren Xiaosu always found that a little strange. Could it be that the Wang Consortium only appeared to be capturing the members of the Anjing House on the surface but were actually siding with them privately? Why was the Anjing House acting like the Wang Consortium's shadow then? Could it be that the two parties were somehow cooperating?

Of course, Ren Xiaosu would probably be even more sure of this point if he knew about Qing Zhen's opinion of the Wang Consortium.

But he could not understand what interests the Wang Consortium and Anjing House had in common.

Perhaps not even Qing Zhen understood.

Wu Tong looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Ms. Zhou, this is..."

"Oh, he's my assistant, my spotter," Zhou Yingxue said coldly.

Ren Xiaosu paused for a moment, then convincingly took out a scope that was specifically used by spotters from his backpack.

This kind of monocular had a professional, scientific name called the spotting scope. Its magnification and field of vision were much higher than that of a sniper rifle's scope. Even under poor visual conditions, the spotting scope would still clearly show the landing point of a bullet in the distance so the sniper could be guided to correct the trajectory deviation.

Under normal circumstances, snipers carrying out decapitation strikes would usually bring along a spotter who was equipped with a spotting scope. This spotting scope was even given to Ren Xiaosu by Yang Xiaojin. She probably did not expect that Ren Xiaosu had also become a sniper now.

When Wu Tong and the others saw that Ren Xiaosu had even brought a spotting scope with him, they thought Zhou Yingxue must be quite the professional...

Since he was her spotter, nobody asked any other questions. After all, it would be quite good to have a sniper in the group.

But they did not know that Zhou Yingxue was already starting to feel uneasy. By using Ren Xiaosu to show off, she would definitely have to return the favor afterwards!

However, she really enjoyed the envious looks of the others.

During the entire day, the convoy only managed to travel 150 kilometers because of Zhao Haocheng's incident. Wu Tong estimated the time and calculated the remaining two days were enough for them to reach the vicinity of Stronghold 73.

They planned to abandon their vehicles and travel on foot when they reached the periphery of Stronghold 73. From there, they would each think of a way to sneak into the stronghold and finally rendezvous at 191 Longyang Avenue, which was Wu Tong's safe house in Stronghold 73. Other than Zhou Yingxue, the other four A-rank hitmen mainly performed missions related to the Zhou Consortium's strongholds.

Wu Tong joked to Zhou Yingxue, "Don't tell me y'all don't have a way to sneak into the stronghold?"

Zhou Yingxue calmly said, "You don't have to worry about that."

After the tents were set up for the night, Zhou Yingxue went straight into Ren Xiaosu's tent. She explained while massaging his legs, "There was really nothing I could do when they assumed I was the sniper. I can't explain to them that I'm not a sniper, right?"