

Chapter 521 An arrogant employer

“Master, are we gonna take this mission?” Zhou Yingxue asked. Now that there was a mission, it was no longer up to her to decide whether to accept it or not. After all, Ren Xiaosu was the one mainly responsible for conducting them.

In the end, Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue. “It’s still very democratic between us. Do you wanna accept it?”

Zhou Yingxue said, “I feel that even though this mission is simple, since it’s only to escort a female singer, the duration of the mission is too long. She’s gonna pass through more than 30 strongholds, and it wasn’t specified how many concerts she would be holding. During that long duration, it’d be enough for us to complete several other missions.”

Ren Xiaosu nodded. “Then let’s accept it!”

All of a sudden, Zhou Yingxue was dumbfounded. ‘Master, do you not understand human language? Isn’t it obvious that I don’t want to accept it!’

Zhou Yingxue said, “Master, I would like to rest for a while longer.”

“It’s easy to fall sick if you rest too much.” Ren Xiaosu patiently explained, “Think about it. Although this mission’s duration is long, the reward she’s giving is also very high. It’s 2 million yuan!”

“Master, since when were you someone who would get enticed by two million yuan?” Zhou Yingxue asked in disbelief.

“See, you still don’t know me well enough! Alright, reply to the text and send them your selfie. In any case, you already revealed yourself to the Anjing House when you became an A-rank hitwoman,” Ren Xiaosu decided.

Zhou Yingxue pursed her lips. She took a selfie and replied to the text to accept the mission.

Ren Xiaosu gave the situation some thought. Zhou Yingxue was previously involved in intelligence work and was even in charge of protecting some of the Yang Consortium’s important personnel. Since the Anjing House knew about Zhou Yingxue’s identity, the probability of her getting chosen for the mission was very high.

The Anjing House’s reply arrived very quickly. “We’ve received your mission application. Please wait patiently as we still require the employer to make a choice. Please do not worry. Your photo was only used to verify your identity, and we will not submit any images to the employer. Given your previous work experience and good mission credibility, we will give priority to your application and recommend you to the employer first.”

Ren Xiaosu raised his eyebrows. The Anjing House’s reply was quite polite. They actually used the honorific form of “you” in their texts.

But from the looks of it, they would have to wait a while longer. This time, the mission acceptance would actually have to be decided by the employer.

It was back to normal again as Zhou Yingxue went out to shop on a daily basis. The prosperity of the black market was something the strongholds could not compare to, with 70% of those who came here carrying large amounts of cash on them.

Moreover, these people were probably unable to go to the normal strongholds for their purchases, so they could only spend their money here.

Hence, the black market specially created an entire range of consumer industries for them like the casino and brothels. They even specially invited some celebrities from the strongholds to perform here. Then there was also Zhou Yingxue's favorite industry... jewelry.

Ren Xiaosu did some calculations based on Zhou Yingxue's pattern of buying a piece of jewelry every three days. If that female singer did not hurry here soon, Zhou Yingxue could very well go bankrupt.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was in his hotel room holding a book in hand and lying on the sofa by the full-length window. Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue was happily showing off a diamond ring on her hand to him. "Master, isn't this nice? I heard that someone dug it out from some Pre-Cataclysm ruins. Who'd've known that after The Cataclysm, diamonds would still be intact? Don't you think it's really miraculous?"

Ren Xiaosu was puzzled. "What's so miraculous about that..."

By the time Zhou Yingxue was showing off her other jewelry, Ren Xiaosu had already turned a deaf ear to her and was focused on reading.

Zhou Yingxue muttered, "You're always reading books every day. Are they really that interesting? Master, why do you like to read so much?"

Ren Xiaosu did not even look at her. "Because I can gain an understanding of this world through reading."

In the past, he did not have the qualifications to attend school, nor did he have the opportunity to learn through the strongholds' education system. Therefore, the more he lacked knowledge, the more he desired it.

Zhou Yingxue said, "Don't we already know enough about this world? People are scheming against each other every day and have so much distrust for each other. Everyone hungers for fame and status so much that it might as well be written on their foreheads."

Ren Xiaosu looked back at her. "The world is much more than that."

Zhou Yingxue was stunned for a moment. She did not expect Ren Xiaosu to answer her in such a manner. This was because Ren Xiaosu should have much stronger feelings about those things she had mentioned and experienced it far more as well.

When Zhou Yingxue saw that Ren Xiaosu had gone back to reading, she suddenly felt that this young man who was clearly approaching the peak of humanity was slightly more charming when he read.

Zhou Yingxue received another text. "You've been chosen by the employer. The other party requests that you head to the black market on the outskirts of Luoyang City within 48 hours. You are to be dressed formally, and the hem of your skirt can not be above your knees. You are not to sleep before the employer, you cannot eat meat in her presence, you cannot mention cats in her presence, you cannot... You'll also have to sign a confidentiality agreement and are not allowed to leak the personal habits of the employer."

All in all, there were 81 terms detailing what Zhou Yingxue could not do!

Zhou Yingxue frowned when she saw these conditions. "Master, I left the Yang Consortium precisely because I couldn't stand such pretentious behavior. Now that I've become an A-rank hitwoman, I can't believe I'm encountering a person like this again."

To be honest, Zhou Yingxue was already starting to feel conflicted when she saw the employer had included so many conditions for the mission. She was a professional hitwoman, so why did she feel like she had ended up as a female bodyguard at the beck and call of her employer?

"It's also possible that this is a more formal job request." Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "Didn't you also have to act this way when you were on an escort assignment at the Yang Consortium?"

"That's different." Zhou Yingxue pursed her lips. "It's not like she's an important figure or something. She's just a singer."

Zhou Yingxue replied to the text to state she was already at the black market and asked where her employer was.

The reply came back and said her employer was still in Stronghold 62.

Zhou Yingxue's temper rose immediately. "She wants us to be here within 48 hours, yet she isn't even on her way yet?"

"Let's wait patiently then," Ren Xiaosu said calmly.

In the end, a week passed.

Zhou Yingxue's fingers were a blur as she typed her reply on the phone, "Is the employer still coming? Hm? She told me to be here within 48 hours, but she hasn't even arrived after a week? Hm? Is an A-rank hitwoman's time any less valuable?"

Over the past few days, Zhou Yingxue had been on the verge of exploding from anger. She was a supernatural being, an A-rank hitwoman, yet she had to wait here without an end in sight for a lousy singer?!

The Anjing House replied with, "You may cancel the mission. The cancellation this time will not affect any of your mission results. Also, the one million yuan the other party has paid as a security deposit will be transferred to you."

The Anjing House's attitude was quite clear. They definitely would think from the perspective of their own members. Moreover, an A-rank hitman's time was indeed worth a lot.

However, the Anjing House followed up with another text, "The employer says that if you can wait, they'll increase the reward by two million yuan as fees for loss of working time."

Zhou Yingxue threw her cell phone onto the bed. "Am I someone who lacks that couple of million yuan?"

But after careful consideration, she realized she did.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue with an ambiguous smile. "Why don't we cancel the mission?"

Zhou Yingxue glared at him. "It's such a waste not to earn a moron's money!"

Chapter 522 Gaudy

It was understandable that the employer was not punctual. After all, they were the ones paying.

However, the problem was that the other party had requested Zhou Yingxue rush to the black market within 48 hours. In the end, they were late by a week.

Zhou Yingxue was most unhappy with this point. She thought the other party would be very punctual, but in the end, they stood her up for an entire week!

Zhou Yingxue looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Master, aren't you angry?"

Ren Xiaosu smiled confidently and said, "There's no need to overthink it. When this singer arrives, I'll just need to say something to her and she'll immediately change her attitude."

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. Looking at Ren Xiaosu's confident smile, she realized Ren Xiaosu might know something that she did not.

But since her master had spoken, she did not have anything else to add.

After waiting for another three days, the female singer's entourage finally arrived. Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue were waiting outside the black market to pick them up.

More than twenty vehicles were approaching in the distance. This lineup was much larger than Luo Xinyu's entourage when she went on her concert tour.

Zhou Yingxue mumbled, "I've long heard about how the celebrities of the Central Plains are spoiled rotten. They command even greater importance than the consortiums' officials, and when they go on tour, they get escorted by such huge entourages and get ferried around wherever they go. I didn't expect it to really be like that."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Are there many celebrities in the Central Plains?"

“There are a considerable number of them.” Zhou Yingxue said, “After all, the residents of the strongholds don’t have any particularly good entertainment outlets. Ever since all the books were collected by the consortiums and stored in the libraries, there’s been a lack of spiritual food for the brain. There’s a lot of people in the strongholds who chase after celebrities like fanatics. It’s like they can’t wait to give away everything they have to the celebrities they idolize.”

Ren Xiaosu nodded. “In an era of spiritual barrenness, it sure is very easy to become obsessed with something. But surely this isn’t enough for her to act with so much self-importance, right?”

“These celebrities all have backers.” Zhou Yingxue said softly, “The backers are all important figures of the consortiums. Some of them might appear like a father figure to the celebrities on the surface, but in reality...”

The entourage came to a stop at the front of Zhou Yingxue. The female singer did not even get out and only asked her assistant to open the door of the minivan for her. She looked at Zhou Yingxue and said, “Are you the bodyguard this time?”

Zhou Yingxue nodded. “Yes, I am.”

The female singer started sizing up Zhou Yingxue. When she saw the ring on her finger, she giggled. “How gaudy.”

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. What kind of upbringing did she have to call other people gaudy to their faces? What! Did celebrities not have parents to teach them manners?!

However, what she did not know was that in show business, when someone started throwing their weight around, it would make any observer feel like their intelligence had been insulted. For example, during a gala, some female celebrities would stay up for several nights in a row just to plot how to get the centermost seat.

That was an industry no one could make sense of.

Zhou Yingxue held back her anger and did not retort. She said calmly, “I’ll be the one in charge of protecting you for the duration of this tour. Along the way, if any security risks arise, please follow my instructions to the letter. Only then will your safety not be compromised.”

These words were very familiar to Zhou Yingxue. After all, she had said the same thing to many of the big shots of the Yang Consortium in the past.

The female singer glanced at Zhou Yingxue before turning her head to Ren Xiaosu. “And who is he?”

“He’s my assistant,” Zhou Yingxue said.

The female singer said in disdain, “How unrefined! His clothes aren’t even ironed, and he looks so unsophisticated like he’s a student.”

Zhou Yingxue was secretly amused. It was fine that this female singer tried to provoke her, but offending her master as well? Who knew if she might get into some sort of trouble in the future?

Even though her master might seem quite amiable now, his fearsomeness was something that was already fucking legendary.

The female singer continued, "Why did you bring an assistant with you? I didn't hear the person who accepted our mission request bring it up."

When Zhou Yingxue heard the other party referring to "the Anjing House" as "the person who accepted the mission request," she realized she did not seem to know what the Anjing House was capable of.

Zhou Yingxue explained, "I'm a sniper. He's my assistant and also my spotter."

The female singer got a little interested. "You're actually a sniper?"

But that was as far as her interest went. Ren Xiaosu took a sudden step forward, like he had something to say.

Zhou Yingxue was cheering in her head. 'Here he comes! Master said he only needed to say something to the other party to make her change her attitude immediately.'

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "Do you know Yang Xiaojin?"

According to Ren Xiaosu's thinking, if this person was from the Saboteurs, she would definitely know about Yang Xiaojin. After all, Yang Xiaojin was one of the most important figures in the Saboteurs.

The female singer frowned. "What nonsense are you talking about?"

Ren Xiaosu looked around. Perhaps it was not convenient for her to speak as there were too many people around. In that case, he would have to wait for her to tell him in private.

He whispered to the female singer, "I'm in Room 1009."

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. How awesome was her master? He actually gave a celebrity his room number on their first meeting? Was this a hint? No! This was as direct as it could get!

The female singer frowned. "Your assistant doesn't look half-bad, but he's too unkempt, and there's something wrong with his brain too!" As she said that, the female singer got her assistant to close the minivan's door. Then the entourage drove towards the hotel in the black market.

Zhou Yingxue looked at her dazed master and nearly laughed out loud. "So what Master meant when you said you had a way to deal with her was to give her an open invitation to your room?"

Ren Xiaosu's face darkened. "No one will think you're mute if you don't speak, y'know."

Ren Xiaosu was not too sure if this female singer was really from the Saboteurs anymore.

He could only wait until nighttime to see if she would come to his room and tell him the truth. If Yang Xiaojin knew he was still alive, she would definitely rush over immediately. Therefore, if this female singer were really from the Saboteurs, she would surely make contact with him as soon as possible.

Zhou Yingxue spun around and whispered to Ren Xiaosu, "Master, she said that I'm gaudy. Do you think I'm gaudy?"

Ren Xiaosu took a look at Zhou Yingxue's hand and saw ten shining rings on her fingers. He sighed and said, "She isn't wrong to say so.... Of course, I'm still on your side in other aspects. That female celebrity really is a little pretentious...."

The pretentiousness was probably referring to how the other party did not even get out of the van and ordered others to do things for her. This sort of behavior was a real turnoff.

Zhou Yingxue quietly removed the rings and carefully stuffed them back into her pocket. "I think all of you just don't know how to appreciate what's nice!"

When the two of them returned to the hotel, the female singer's assistant was already waiting for them in the lobby.

When the assistant saw the two of them, he smiled and said, "Our boss can be a little cranky sometimes. If both of you were offended, please forgive us."

Zhou Yingxue's anger subsided a little. "That's more like it."

Then the middle-aged male assistant smiled and said, "However, there's a confidentiality agreement here that we need both of you to sign. Oh right, Ms. Zhou, while we've hired you as our bodyguard this time, it's actually more for the sake of showcasing our status. Please do not interfere too much with the boss's schedule."

Chapter 523 A knock on the door at night

Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue gave each other a look. Although this middle-aged male assistant spoke politely, what he said was not polite at all.

According to him, the female celebrity had spent four million yuan to hire a supernatural being to make herself look good.

Just how important would a person have to be to employ a supernatural being as a bodyguard?

Zhou Yingxue said, "Showbiz is really fond of such flashy behavior. So what you mean is, I'll only need to stand beside her whenever she attends an event, and she does not really need any protection at all?"

The middle-aged male assistant nodded and said with a smile, "Ms. Zhou truly is smart to understand so easily. Besides, the Central Plains is not that chaotic. Although there are conflicts between the consortiums, they would never do anything to celebrities. So please just stick to our planned schedule. There won't be a need for the two of you to interfere."

Zhou Yingxue glanced at Ren Xiaosu who showed no expression and said nothing. Zhou Yingxue immediately agreed, "Sure thing!"

After that, both parties signed the confidentiality agreement. There was even a special 200,000 yuan payment for the confidentiality fee!

Party A of the confidentiality agreement had to compensate Party B based on the terms before they could take any effect.

When Ren Xiaosu was signing the agreement, he realized the female celebrity's real name was Li Ran, with her stage name being Ranran.

Zhou Yingxue smiled as she took the money from the man. She gave a mental sigh at the thought of how easy it was to earn the money of this celebrity.

"By the way, when are we heading out?" Zhou Yingxue asked.

"That depends on our boss's mood." The assistant smiled and said, "Both of you may return to your rooms to rest. My name is Fang Zhi. If anything crops up, you can leave a message at the front desk. During this period, we'll be responsible for both your expenses incurred at the hotel. Of course, there's a limit of 3,600 yuan per day."

"That's pretty good." Zhou Yingxue raised her eyebrows.

Zhou Yingxue had thought they would set off immediately once the female singer arrived. After all, they mentioned this was a concert tour.

However, to her surprise, the other party remained at the black market for the next seven days.

Every day, the female singer would doll herself up only to go to the casino to gamble. It was as if she had come to the black market specifically for that.

Zhou Yingxue was going on and on about it in their room, "She doesn't take us seriously at all. Master, it's fine that she looks down on me, but how can she look down on you as well!"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled as he read his book. "Don't try to fan the flames. It won't work."

But what left Ren Xiaosu speechless was that the female singer never came to find him at his room throughout the seven days. If she were really from the Saboteurs, then no matter where Yang Xiaojin was in the Central Plains, the seven days would have been enough for her to rush over.

This disappointed Ren Xiaosu a lot. He had only accepted this mission because he wanted to find Yang Xiaojin, but in the end, even Zhou Yingxue was having a laugh at his expense.

So when Ren Xiaosu realized the other party was not a member of the Saboteurs, he immediately began to lose interest in the mission. He even asked Zhou Yingxue, "Can we still cancel the mission now?"

Zhou Yingxue said helplessly, "Master, you didn't allow me to cancel it previously when I wanted to. If I were to cancel it now, I couldn't complete the mission."

“Will that affect you? At worst, we’ll just return the money to her,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“That won’t work.” Zhou Yingxue explained, “Master, you probably don’t know about the rules of the Anjing House, right? An A-rank hitman needs to complete five A-rank missions within the year, and there can’t be any mission failures during that period either. Only then can I participate in the trials to enter the Anjing House when they take place next year.”

“You can’t even fail once?” Ren Xiaosu frowned. “Then when do the Anjing House trials usually start?”

“They normally start notifying the qualified hitmen at the beginning of spring.” Zhou Yingxue said, “It’s fall now, so we still have two more missions to complete before spring arrives. I’ve already completed two missions, and this bodyguard mission is the third, so I still need two more to qualify.”

“But this bodyguard mission will take quite some time,” Ren Xiaosu said with a sigh. Previously, it was Zhou Yingxue who did not want to accept the mission, but now it was the other way around. Ren Xiaosu really wanted to turn down this mission.

After all, if it weren’t for Yang Xiaojin, he would not even want to follow such a pretentious female celebrity on some concert tour.

But on the seventh night, when Ren Xiaosu was alone in his room, he suddenly heard a knock on the door.

He picked up his pistol and walked to the door. “Who is it?”

The female celebrity’s drunken voice came from outside. “Weren’t you the one who gave me your room number?”

Ren Xiaosu immediately opened the door and said excitedly, “Where’s Yang Xiaojin?”

The female celebrity entered the room and locked the door behind her. Ren Xiaosu could only see that her face was flushed red from the alcohol she had. Then, with a look of interest, she lifted the hemline of Ren Xiaosu’s shirt and gently stroked his abs. “Oh, I couldn’t tell that you had such a nice body.”

Although Ren Xiaosu looked quite thin in his clothes, it was only because his Strength and Dexterity had reached a balanced state. His understated figure would not reveal just how strong he really was.

Therefore, when the hemline of his shirt was lifted, his firm muscles could be seen. It looked extremely beautiful, picturesque as a sculpture.

However, Ren Xiaosu felt like he was being molested.

The female celebrity, Li Ran, pushed Ren Xiaosu further into the room as she said, “Since you dared to give me your room number, why’re you still acting so shy?”

Ren Xiaosu said with a dark expression, "You didn't tell Yang Xiaojin that I was here? Are you really from the Saboteurs?"

"Yang Xiaojin? Is that your girlfriend?" Li Ran said with an enchanting smile, "I've already paid you two so much. If you keep me company, I can add more money. Do you know that the amount I lost tonight is enough to last you for a lifetime..."

Seeing that Li Ran was trying to take off his clothes, Ren Xiaosu decisively knocked her out.

'Why the fuck did I give her my room number? Why would I do something so stupid!' He looked out the window and saw no one aiming a sniper rifle at him. It looked like this was not Yang Xiaojin's prank after all.

That girl was very fond of pranking others.

But since there was no sniper outside the window, Ren Xiaosu could ascertain that Li Ran was definitely not a member of the Saboteurs!

Zhou Yingxue's laughter came from outside. Ren Xiaosu opened the door angrily and said, "Help her to your room so that she isn't an eyesore here."

Zhou Yingxue said obediently, "Yes, Master!"

But as soon as she said that, she laughed out loud again. "Master, what a close shave. You almost lost your virginity!"

"Get out!"

"Alright, alright!"

The next morning, Li Ran's assistant, Fang Zhi, came over with 200,000 yuan in cash to look for Ren Xiaosu. He said he was here to sign another confidentiality agreement with him, and that yesterday's incident had to be kept a secret no matter what.

Ren Xiaosu found it ridiculous. Frankly, he really wanted to earn money as well, but not this way!

Chapter 524 Setting off

After the assistant named Fang Zhi left, it was as though nothing had happened between the two parties. Even if they did encounter each other later on, there was a tacit understanding to not mention the matter anymore.

To be honest, Li Ran had a drink too many last night, so she wasn't too sure about what happened either. She could vaguely recall that something had happened, but everyone only told her that she had been knocked unconscious by the other party.

This made Li Ran a little unhappy. She had taken the initiative to go to the other party's room, but he ended up knocking her unconscious? Was it because she lacked charm?

Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu was no longer thinking about this matter. He was thinking about how he could help Zhou Yingxue complete this supposed concert tour mission.

Apart from this escort mission, Zhou Yingxue would have to complete another two missions before next spring in order to qualify for the Anjing House trials.

“Master, this escort mission will probably last until the end of the year. We already missed an A-rank mission while we were waiting for her arrival,” Zhou Yingxue complained. “With time so tight, what if there aren’t enough missions for us to do?”

Ren Xiaosu said helplessly, “Don’t worry, I’ll think of something.”

The mistake of accepting this mission was indeed his fault.

Three days later, Assistant Fang Zhi suddenly came to inform them that the team was preparing to set off. Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue did not have any objections to that. They were just hoping that this group’s concert tour would progress as quickly as possible so they would not get delayed any further.

The concert tour group even arranged a special car for Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue. They had wanted to get a chauffeur for them too, but Zhou Yingxue rejected the offer.

She brought out a professional-looking, small black box that she used to examine the car carefully. Only upon confirming there was no surveillance equipment or GPS trackers on board did she feel at ease.

After all, she often discussed secrets with Ren Xiaosu, so it wouldn’t be too good if someone were to overhear them.

Before getting in the car, Ren Xiaosu and Li Ran bumped into each other again. Ren Xiaosu realized Li Ran deliberately walked past without looking at him. It was as if she had never met him before.

This felt like a silent declaration of war: “I’m not fucking interested in you. I went to your room that night purely because I was bestowing a favor upon you! To put it crudely, I was just patronizing you!”

Although neither of them said a word, Ren Xiaosu instantly understood what the other party meant.

The other staff were looking at Ren Xiaosu curiously. Many of them knew that Li Ran had drunk too much that night before going to look for Ren Xiaosu. Therefore, everyone’s eyes were on Ren Xiaosu, and some of them even wanted to ask him if anything had happened.

In short, Ren Xiaosu had suddenly become the focus of attention in the concert tour group because of this stupid matter.

After Zhou Yingxue got into the car, she leaned against the steering wheel and cackled for more than 10 minutes. It was only when Ren Xiaosu’s face had turned thunderous that she got a hold of herself.

She changed the topic and said, “Ahem, why would this concert tour group need to have over twenty vehicles in their entourage? They even have a semi-truck at the back of the group!”

“That’s carrying their speakers and musical instruments. I already looked at it,” Ren Xiaosu answered normally.

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. She did not even know when Ren Xiaosu had searched the entire concert tour group.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue and said, “You should’ve done that in advance. Don’t let your guard down just because you’re no longer working in intelligence.”

Zhou Yingxue replied weakly, “OK.”

The convoy set off. Their first stop would be the Zhou Consortium. This would require Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue to take extra caution as it could get very awkward if their identities were exposed.

The tour group had come from the Wang Consortium after their event there was completed, so the remaining tour locations were at the Zhou and the Kong Consortiums’ strongholds.

The tour group would kick off the next leg of the tour in the Zhou Consortium first, then move on to the Kong Consortium, and finally wrap it up in the Qinghe Group’s Luoyang City. Afterwards, they would return to the black market.

Fortunately, the tour group had no plans to go to the eight strongholds the Pyro Company controlled. Otherwise, it would get even more dangerous.

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu sometimes felt that the Central Plains was a safer place. As such, it would usually not be a problem even when traveling with so many people on a concert tour. For Li Ran and Fang Zhi to disallow Zhou Yingxue from interfering with their plans, it must also be because they were confident it would be safe.

In this tour group, there was also a ten-member combat squad protecting them. Although these people were dressed in casual clothes, their auras could not be concealed from Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue.

It could be seen that Li Ran did have the backing of someone important in the Wang Consortium. It was definitely not that simple.

And along the way, if the tour group were to encounter any danger, it would most likely be someone who wanted to take revenge on Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue. After all, the two of them were the most unstable elements in the group.

When the convoy passed by Luoyang City, they did not stop at all. Ren Xiaosu looked at Luoyang City from afar and felt that it looked no different from the other strongholds in the Central Plains.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the town outside the stronghold and sighed. “A lot of people in the black market often speak about how good the Qinghe Group is. But from the looks of it, they still differentiate between refugees and stronghold residents. Overall, the essence of being a consortium still remains.”

That wall was like a huge mountain that separated the refugees and stronghold residents.

But Zhou Yingxue explained, "It's not like that at all. The reason so many people like the Qinghe Group is actually similar to why people in the Northwest like Fortress 178. It's because the salary the Qinghe Group pays to refugees is very high and they give them pretty good benefits too. The Qinghe Group does not exploit them as the other consortiums do. After Xu Ke took over the reins at Qinghe Group 12 years ago, he tried to introduce changes to the system by tearing down the discrimination between the stronghold residents and refugees. He completely opened up the gates to everyone."

"Then why did he close them again?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"The motivation was out of goodness, but the reality is that refugees from everywhere rushed over when they heard about the Qinghe Group's policies. As a result, there was no one left in the surrounding strongholds and towns." Zhou Yingxue explained, "This incident caused the Wang Consortium, Zhou Consortium, and Kong Consortium to send their people to the Qinghe Group to negotiate putting an end to the open-door policy. Moreover, the Qinghe Group was unable to accommodate all the refugees that had surged to their territory. So they closed their doors again and only increased the benefits of the refugees. However, they restricted the number of hires available."

"So that's what happened." Ren Xiaosu nodded and said, "It's really all thanks to their peers that they were seen in such good light. As long as one of the consortiums is willing to give the refugees better treatment, they instantly win the hearts of the people."

The convoy continued heading south. But at the same time, unknown to Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue, Xu Zhi was currently headed towards the black market after their reorganization back at the Qinghe Group.

Xu Zhi's father told him that if the mysterious youth and his maidservant were really important figures of the underworld, then they were most likely heading to the black market outside Luoyang City based on the route they took.

Hence, Xu Zhi headed straight for the black market without even bothering to attend his classes. He stayed put in the hotel lobby for over half a month without finding out anything before helplessly returning to Luoyang City.

That gorgeous figure kept reappearing in his mind as he tried forgetting it to no avail.

Chapter 525 A new A-rank mission

The convoy arrived at Stronghold 77 of the Zhou Consortium, which was closest to Luoyang City, on the same afternoon. This was the outermost stronghold in the territory of the Zhou Consortium. Meanwhile, Stronghold 73, which Ren Xiaosu and the others had carried out the mission at, was where the Zhou Consortium was headquartered. After arriving at Stronghold 77, Fang Zhi presented the customs documents to the garrison troops. Ren Xiaosu realized the entourage was very familiar with organizing tours and had already prepared all the necessary paperwork beforehand.

However, before the tour group was allowed to enter the stronghold, they were led inside together and inspected thoroughly before being released.

Zhou Yingxue said softly, "I've never had to go through these steps when I came to the Zhou Consortium in the past."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. It was probably because of Zhou Xilong's death that the entire Zhou Consortium was put on high alert now to prevent anyone from entering their strongholds and causing trouble.

When the security checks were done, some soldiers even asked Li Ran for an autograph. Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked, "Is Li Ran very famous? Even the Zhou Consortium's people know her?"

Zhou Yingxue nearly laughed out loud. "Master, aren't you a little too out of touch? She's one of the most popular female singers these days, and her cassette albums are selling to the farthest southern reaches. Although it's her first time here, a lot of people have heard her songs. Even the music stores in the Yang Consortium's strongholds were selling her cassettes too. A lot of young people like her. Master, aren't you also a young person?"

"So that's how it is." Ren Xiaosu suddenly understood. He explained, "I've never paid much attention to such things in the past."

After all, for people who needed to constantly think about their survival every day, how would they have time to pay attention to these celebrities? From what he remembered, Xiaoyu also seemed to have a female singer she liked some time after they got acquainted. That female singer's cassette album was even at home, but Xiaoyu, at most, listened to her songs.

For people like them, it was difficult to feel any admiration for such illusory idols.

After entering the stronghold, Ren Xiaosu realized a lot of stronghold residents had assembled on the sidewalks. They were holding up custom-made signs as a show of support, and shiny little light bulbs were even flashing on them.

Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, "Why're there so many people? Are there really this many people that like her?"

Zhou Yingxue glanced at Ren Xiaosu. She realized her master was even more annoyed with Li Ran than she was. Zhou Yingxue was very happy to see this.

Zhou Yingxue realized that while the convoy was going down the road, it was deliberately slowing down. Meanwhile, Li Ran rolled down the car window and started waving at the fans warmly. She even took some of the fans' notebooks and autographed them.

Zhou Yingxue said through the walkie-talkie, "Please pass through quickly. There's too many people here and danger could be lurking, so please pass through quickly."

Fang Zhi's voice sounded over the intercom, replying, "This is a good opportunity for Ranran to get close to her fans. It'll be very helpful for her friendly image, so we can't pass through too quickly. Please continue to follow the convoy at this same speed. And, Ms. Zhou, please don't interfere too much."

Zhou Yingxue rolled her eyes in the car. "They have no sense of safety. If someone here were hiding a knife and stabbed her suddenly, not even a god could stop it."

Ren Xiaosu leaned back in the passenger seat and said leisurely, "Why do you care so much?"

"If something happens to her, my mission will be considered a failure," Zhou Yingxue lamented.

Then Ren Xiaosu took a look at his cell phone and said, "I'm heading out for a while. I'll go straight back to the hotel tonight, so I'll leave you to handle things here."

Zhou Yingxue looked at Ren Xiaosu in shock. "Master, you're going off to do another solo mission? Why're you always leaving me by myself? Can't you please spare all those D and C-rank hitmen? I get somewhat flustered whenever I'm alone...."

Ren Xiaosu glanced at her. "You handle things here, and I'll share 20% of the money I get from selling the cell phones."

Zhou Yingxue immediately put on a smile. "All the best for your mission, Master."

After that, Ren Xiaosu opened the door and jumped out of the slow-moving vehicle before blending into the crowd.

However, Li Ran noticed his action from the corners of her eyes. She turned around and frowned at Fang Zhi, saying, "Why is that kid acting on his own? Ask Zhou Yingxue what this is all about!"

Zhou Yingxue's reply was that Ren Xiaosu had gone out to scout around to ensure that Li Ran's safety was not compromised.

Li Ran said Ren Xiaosu would have to come back so he could guard her. However, Zhou Yingxue said she was the one who took the mission, not Ren Xiaosu.

This time, Li Ran was helpless. She realized she did not seem to have any good way of dealing with Ren Xiaosu.

But what Zhou Yingxue had on her mind was that the D and C-rank hitmen were the basis of the Anjing House's mission-based structure, with many of the simpler missions performed by these D and C-rank hitmen.

If their tour group was going to pass through 37 strongholds, of which 90% were made up of the Zhou and Kong consortiums' strongholds, then by the time they made their way around, wouldn't the foundation the Anjing House had been laying over the years in the Zhou and Kong consortiums get wiped out by Ren Xiaosu?

Based on her master's "fishing" methods, this was a very likely scenario. At that time, would she even need to think about joining the Anjing House? If the Anjing House found out about this, they would probably issue a mission to get all the A-rank hitmen to come after them instead.

After all, if someone from the Anjing House were to cross-reference the disappearances of the D and C-rank hitmen with more scrutiny, it would match up perfectly with the stops their tour group went to. It would not be too bad if it were just one or two strongholds, but if it happened across all 37 strongholds, even a fool would know that she, Zhou Yingxue, had a problem.

No, she had to tell Ren Xiaosu about this. They would need to make sure the plan was sustainable.

But this time, there wasn't another firefight like the previous time as Ren Xiaosu took care of both the hitmen and the target silently.

When he returned to the hotel at night, Ren Xiaosu was holding onto another eight cellphones. But before he could feel happy about it, Zhou Yingxue received a text message on her cell phone again. Actually, it was three messages that came in all at once.

Ren Xiaosu had a look at the three missions. Two of them were too far away at a Kong Consortium's stronghold, but the third one made his eyes light up. "The target in Stronghold 77 is Yang Lichen. He was a former core figure of the Yang Consortium and is currently located at 121 Zhengwu Road. The target has followers traveling with him, so it's suggested that three people form a team to undertake the mission. Reward: 800,000 yuan."

There was also a picture of Yang Lichen and some further information about him. The information contained some of the cruel oppression that went on while he was an overseer of a stronghold.

However, there were still some things that were not mentioned. For example, Yang Lichen had previously sent someone to present a defensive deployment map to Qing Zhen that caused the Yang Consortium's troops at the Ziyang front line to be compromised.

In the end, he did not manage to become the head of the Yang Consortium. After all, the Yang Consortium no longer existed. He could only make use of the time when the Qing Consortium redeployed their troops to the south to deal with the Experimentals to quickly escape.

And somehow, he really managed to escape.

Ren Xiaosu said, "Reply to the Anjing House that we're accepting this mission."

Zhou Yingxue did as she was instructed. However, to their surprise, the Anjing House did not accept their mission application and rejected Zhou Yingxue!

Chapter 526 Forcefully stealing a mission

The reason the Anjing House did not allow Zhou Yingxue to take the mission was simple.

On one hand, it was because Zhou Yingxue was already involved in an escort mission. Although the mission target was also located in Stronghold 77, carrying out another mission would definitely affect the current one.

If Zhou Yingxue got injured or died while carrying out the new mission, that would affect the Anjing House's reputation.

On the other hand, it was because Zhou Yingxue was alone and unable to group up with teammates in the black market. At the same time, there was already a team that had set off from the black market. That group was made up of three A-rank hitmen, so the mission would be much safer being carried out by them than Zhou Yingxue.

It was not like a hitman was not allowed to take the mission alone, but since there was a more suitable team for it, the lone wolf would find it very difficult to get assigned the mission.

Zhou Yingxue was a little angry at this. "We're the closest to the mission target, so why aren't we allowed to take this mission? Besides, Li Ran doesn't want us to protect her at all. Unless she's attending an event, she won't even let me get close to her. In such a situation, I totally have time to take other missions."

Actually, she understood the Anjing House's decision was the right one. After all, they did not know she had the terrifying Ren Xiaosu with her. Therefore, based on common sense, Zhou Yingxue indeed couldn't split herself up to take two missions at this moment. Meanwhile, Yang Lichen clearly kept a small fighting force by his side, and he was even given protection by the Zhou Consortium as well.

After Yang Lichen left the Southwest, he came to seek asylum under the Zhou Consortium. As he knew all about the Southwest's geography and politics, he was immediately offered protection by the Zhou Consortium who also provided him with material comforts.

An organization like a consortium would definitely not let slip the chance to gather firsthand information from a well-connected individual.

"Master, what do we do now?" Zhou Yingxue asked. "We can't take the mission this time. Also, if they won't let me take any further missions during the course of this escort mission, I definitely can't complete the two remaining missions required for participating in the trials."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I'm going out for a while."

That night, Li Ran came by Zhou Yingxue's room, seemingly unintentionally, and explained to her what happened during the day. She said a public figure like her could not waste such a good chance to establish a good image, so she hoped Zhou Yingxue would not take it to heart. However, Li Ran still told Zhou Yingxue not to consciously protect her anymore and just ensure that she helped boost her image and standing.

Although what she said was unpleasant, Zhou Yingxue was a little puzzled. Li Ran actually came over personally just to explain this to her?

But after Li Ran finished with that speech, she asked, "Where did Ren Xiaosu go?"

"Oh, he's still scouting around outside," Zhou Yingxue answered.

Zhou Yingxue realized Li Ran had to be here for Ren Xiaosu. Furthermore, she did not look for him directly and seemed to be beating around the bush about something.

After Li Ran left, Ren Xiaosu suddenly carried someone in through the window. The person on his shoulder was unconscious.

Zhou Yingxue said in a daze, "Master, who is that?"

"Yang Lichen," Ren Xiaosu said calmly.

“But we didn’t get assigned the mission, so it’s useless even if we kill him,” Zhou Yingxue said helplessly.

Ren Xiaosu was still as calm as ever. “It’s fine. Even if the Anjing House has given the mission to the other hitmen, the mission will still be a failure if they can’t locate the mission target. Don’t worry, the people who saw me are all dead. The ambush this time was very successful, so no one knows where Yang Lichen’s gone.”

Zhou Yingxue was dumbfounded. Why was her master’s thinking so different from others? Even when stealing missions, he did it so forcefully?

As long as the other hitmen could not find the mission target, Zhou Yingxue could just tell the Anjing House later on that she found him and force them to give her the mission.

This was forcing someone off their own path and leaving them no room to walk!

Furthermore, Ren Xiaosu explained, “If those three A-rank hitmen can’t complete the mission, they definitely won’t be able to participate in the Anjing House trials next year. This way, you’ll also have three fewer opponents without anyone knowing. This is killing two birds with one stone.”

Zhou Yingxue covered her face as she suddenly started to worry about those A-rank hitmen who were going to compete with her for a spot in the Anjing House. It was really unfortunate that these hitmen had to meet an opponent like her master.

She tied Yang Lichen up and stuffed a towel into his mouth before putting him in the wardrobe of the hotel room. She said worriedly, “We can’t just keep a person in the room like that. What if he struggles after he regains consciousness? They have people cleaning the hotel rooms every day.”

“We can hang the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the knob, then make sure he doesn’t regain his consciousness.” Ren Xiaosu said, “Let’s wait and see how things unfold. Stronghold 77 is very near the black market, so I’m guessing the three A-rank hitmen have already arrived outside the stronghold. They might even have already entered the stronghold. We only need to wait for another three days before we approach the Anjing House to ask for the mission to be assigned to us.”

Zhou Yingxue stretched. She suddenly felt it was a wise decision to stay behind and continue working with Ren Xiaosu. Nothing was really unachievable when following such a master.

Other people would have to wait to be assigned the missions, but only Ren Xiaosu could approach the Anjing House directly to ask for a mission.

Of course, if he didn’t have such a weird mind, he wouldn’t be constantly thinking about “fishing” the D and C-rank hitmen either.

She got up and walked towards the bathroom. Ren Xiaosu frowned. “Where are you going?”

“To shower.” Zhou Yingxue smiled and said, “Does Master want to join me?”

“Get out!”

“Alright, alright!”

...

The next day, the three A-rank hitmen went around the stronghold like crazy in search of Yang Lichen’s whereabouts. In the end, they only found the corpses of several guards in the residence the Anjing House had sent to them. However, Yang Lichen was nowhere to be seen.

They asked the Anjing House if there had been a mistake in the intelligence, or if the mission had been assigned to others or was taken by someone else. The Anjing House’s reply was that they were the only ones conducting the mission and that it wasn’t assigned to any other people.

The three A-rank hitmen had no choice but to use their connections in the Zhou Consortium. While secretly questioning the witnesses, they also checked on the surveillance feed of the traffic hubs. However, they still found nothing at all.

The A-rank hitmen were on the verge of breaking down. This was the first time they had encountered something like this where they could not even find the target.

They weren’t the only ones who could not find the target. Even the Anjing House was unable to find him.

Three days later, Zhou Yingxue suddenly sent a photo to the Anjing House. In the photo, Yang Lichen was unconscious and close to death. In those three days, Yang Lichen was only fed a few sips of water before being knocked unconscious. Right now, he looked like he had lost a lot of weight.

Zhou Yingxue sent a text, “Yang Lichen is in my hands. Please assign the mission to me quickly.”

After sending the text, Zhou Yingxue pondered, “Master, why does it feel like we’re kidnappers?”

“It’s not a big problem.” Ren Xiaosu waved it off dismissively. “But do you think the Anjing House will assign us the mission? After all, it was a little too much to forcefully steal the mission from others.”

Zhou Yingxue looked at Ren Xiaosu in shock. ‘Master, you also know that this is too much? Actually, you’ve known that all along, right?!’

The Anjing House replied with, “You can receive the mission reward after killing him.”

Zhou Yingxue beamed. Success!

Chapter 527 An accident in the wilderness

Before getting assigned the mission, Ren Xiaosu was actually very worried the Anjing House would not accept their act of stealing the mission.

After all, even a fool would know that “Zhou Yingxue” had kidnapped Yang Lichen three days ago to prevent others from completing the mission.

This method was clearly somewhat against the rules.

However, it seemed the Anjing House did not really care about who completed the mission or how it was completed. The other party only wanted one outcome—a dead Yang Lichen.

Ren Xiaosu thought about it and felt it made sense. After all, the Anjing House only refused to let Zhou Yingxue take the mission because they were worried it would affect the current escort mission she was doing.

However, since Anjing House did not mind him stealing the mission, there would be more opportunities for him in the future.

Ren Xiaosu asked Zhou Yingxue to kill Yang Lichen and take a photo to send to the Anjing House, but Zhou Yingxue curled her lips and said, “But I’ll see blood, and that’s so gross! Master, why don’t you kill him instead?”

Ren Xiaosu frowned and looked at Zhou Yingxue. “Have you forgotten that you are a hitwoman?!”

Zhou Yingxue smiled cutely and said, “I was just spoiled by you, Master.”

After Ren Xiaosu killed Yang Lichen and let Zhou Yingxue take a picture of the body, he secretly carried Yang Lichen’s body out of the stronghold so no complications would arise.

The Zhou Consortium was probably starting to look for Yang Lichen. If the Zhou Consortium were worried about the Southwest, then Yang Lichen would prove very useful to them.

The next night, Li Ran held a mini-concert to meet her fans. Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue were standing offstage at the venue and wearing earpieces like the other ten plainclothes guards, ready to deal with any danger that might arise.

During the concert, the host even formally introduced Zhou Yingxue’s identity as a superhuman, causing the fans in the audience to gasp and cheer.

The introduction described Zhou Yingxue as a fan of Li Ran, and she had joined the concert tour to protect Li Ran out of love.

Ren Xiaosu was really impressed with how the celebrities created hype.

However, after the concert, Li Ran still ignored Zhou Yingxue’s security advice. Just as they had said earlier, Zhou Yingxue’s presence was just to help boost Li Ran’s image and standing.

The tour group set off again. Zhou Yingxue took stock of the supplies in the vehicles and found the group was not carrying any extra food or gasoline.

She then suggested replenishing these supplies before moving on. However, Fang Zhi said they would be arriving at a new stronghold daily and could just restock those supplies when they were there. The distance between each stronghold was at most 300 kilometers, so a full tank of gas was definitely enough.

Zhou Yingxue frowned and did not say anything more. Indeed, it was not a problem to travel 500 kilometers on a full tank of gas. But what if something unexpected were to happen?

In fact, Fang Zhi patiently explained he had already considered that they might get into an accident in the wilderness. However, there were just enough vehicles in the convoy, and there was no more space to store any additional gas.

But after they set off again, they really got into an accident. No one knew who had deliberately scattered some nails on the road, but several cars at the front of the convoy got flat tires all at the same time. With this, even the spare tires they were carrying were insufficient to fix the problem.

Fang Zhi thought for a moment and decided to send someone to call for a vehicle recovery team at Stronghold 78 to come and change their tires. The fees were negotiable.

Li Ran said angrily in the minivan that was rendered immobile, "Why doesn't the Zhou Consortium ensure the wilderness is taken care of? Someone must've deliberately scattered the nails in the middle of the road."

"It's not easy to manage considering how big the wilderness is." Fang Zhi smiled and said, "But it's alright. We're only about a 100 kilometers away from Stronghold 78. The tow trucks will definitely arrive soon."

But as he finished speaking, Fang Zhi saw that Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue had already started setting up their tents.

Li Ran was stunned for a moment. "Why are you two setting up the tents?"

"Oh." Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "I'm afraid the tow trucks won't be able to make it here by today, so I might as well set up camp in the woods."

"Why won't they make it here by today?" Li Ran said angrily, "Stronghold 78 isn't that far away. Even if the road isn't in a good condition, they'll be here in at most three to four hours!"

Ren Xiaosu smiled but did not say anything, because he understood the work efficiency of those in strongholds. It was not like this was the Wang Consortium's stronghold where it was Li Ran's home territory, so rescue would definitely not arrive that quickly.

It was already evening. The journey here would take three to four hours, and another three to four hours to get back. In addition to the repair time, the entire rescue would last late into the night.

So based on the attitude that the strongholds' vehicle recovery team had, they would definitely be more willing to set off after waking up the next morning.

In any case, Ren Xiaosu was quite familiar with deeds like scattering nails.

In the early years, when the Southwestern and Northwestern wildernesses had not become dangerous yet, some refugees would specifically target caravans using the same method. They would puncture the tires of the merchant vehicles first, then come around to peddle their old tires at night.

This was a scam some groups of people depended on to make their fortunes.

But as it got more dangerous in the wilderness, those groups started to disappear.

Of course, it wasn't to say that the people who were involved in the scam today were those Ren Xiaosu knew back then. Ren Xiaosu guessed that since traders could travel freely in the Central Plains, there would definitely be no shortage of such people here as well.

The people in the tour group did not believe Ren Xiaosu. They felt that as long as they mentioned who they were, the vehicle recovery team would definitely rush over immediately. After all, this had always been the case for them in the Wang Consortium's strongholds.

But six hours later, there was still no sign of the vehicle recovery team.

The people from the tour group sat in their vehicles in a daze. As every stop of their tour was a stronghold, they did not even bring enough supplies for the road. After all, they were always able to get to the strongholds on time. With the food much better in the strongholds, there wasn't even a need to consider what to eat while they traveled there.

Li Ran was gritting her teeth as she looked at Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue. The two of them were sitting at a campfire not far away, eating and drinking. Moreover, they had set up two tents as well, so they could go inside to sleep anytime.

Li Ran asked Fang Zhi, "Do we have tents?"

"No." Fang Zhi shook his head. "Our plan was to arrive at Stronghold 78 by tonight, and there weren't supposed to be any days where we'd have to camp outside in the wilderness. Why don't I approach them to give up a tent for you?"

"No need." Li Ran said coldly, "I'll just sleep in the car."

Her minivan was still quite comfortable, and the soft seats could even be reclined flat into a bed.

It was already late fall, so the nights would get very cold. It could even reach as low as two degrees Celsius, so the heater would have to be turned on in all of the vehicles.

After a while, when Zhou Yingxue saw that everyone in the tour group had fallen asleep in their vehicles, she got up.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Where are you going?"

"You'll know in a bit, Master," Zhou Yingxue said.

Zhou Yingxue walked to the side of the minivan and knocked on Li Ran's window. Li Ran opened her eyes sleepily and heard Zhou Yingxue say, "Do you feel dizzy and a little nauseous?"

Li Ran instantly sobered up a little. "What did you do to me?!"

Zhou Yingxue smiled and said, "I'm not doing anything to you. It's just that you shouldn't keep the heater on when your vehicle is idling. You're being poisoned by carbon monoxide, so hurry up and get out of the car."

Chapter 528 Catfigh

In fact, even Ren Xiaosu did not know that keeping the heater on for an extended period of time in an idling vehicle would cause carbon monoxide poisoning. If the occupants of the vehicle were awake, it might be fine. But if they were not, then it might really be possible they would not regain consciousness ever again.

When Li Ran heard what Zhou Yingxue said, she immediately woke the others up. Everyone started shivering in the cold wind after they got out of their vehicles. Some of them were even showing symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning already.

Carbon monoxide poisoning would cause a person to feel very uncomfortable. Everyone sat in the wilderness wrapped tightly in their clothes, but when a gust of cold wind blew past, the coldness seeped right into their bones.

Curious, Ren Xiaosu asked Zhou Yingxue, "How'd you know something like that?"

"In the past, I often used this method to create scenes of accidental death. It was just that I would also need to resort to other methods of killing back then." Zhou Yingxue smiled and said, "After all, I don't like seeing blood."

Only now did Ren Xiaosu realize she was not just a gluttonous maidservant, but also a very real former intelligence agent who was good at assassination, infiltration, and intelligence gathering.

Li Ran slowly moved to the campfire and sat down. But unexpectedly, she did not question Zhou Yingxue on why she had not warned them earlier. Rather, she whispered a soft "thank you" to her.

Zhou Yingxue smiled and said, "You're welcome." Then she prepared to go into the tent to sleep.

Li Ran asked, "Can I sleep in the same tent as you?"

Zhou Yingxue said, "There's no such agreement in the contract. Plus the tent isn't big enough for the two of us."

This time, Li Ran seemed to be unusually calm. "Then do you remember that in the contract, there's also a term that says you can't sleep earlier than your employer?"

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. Even this tactic was being used?

She thought for a moment, then said, "Fine, I won't sleep then!"

Ren Xiaosu sighed. A catfight between women would only lead to heavy losses. They could clearly have just gone into the tent together to sleep, and it was absolutely spacious enough to fit two people, yet they both ended up sitting by the campfire and whiling their time away.

However, he was fine with this. He just sat by the campfire and read his book. He could not sleep at this time. Since someone had scattered nails on the road, there would definitely be a follow-up. Be it selling tires or other plans, Ren Xiaosu decided this matter would have to be taken care of first.

Li Ran looked Ren Xiaosu up and down. She realized the book he was reading looked very unfamiliar to her. It was titled Golden Age.[1]

“Who wrote that book? Why haven’t I heard of it before?” Li Ran asked.

Ren Xiaosu glanced up at her. “This book is from before The Cataclysm, so it’s normal that you haven’t heard of it.”

Li Ran did not say another word. She looked at Ren Xiaosu and felt a little curious. He was clearly quite well-built and was Zhou Yingxue’s assistant too, yet he actually took the time to read books even though he had a job that constantly engaged in fighting and killing?

Zhou Yingxue noticed Li Ran sneaking peeks at Ren Xiaosu. She said, “Assistant, bring me my water bottle.”

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue speechlessly. He did not know what this gal was up to this time.

But then, the hum of engines came from afar in the wilderness. It even sounded like someone was happily shouting something out there. Ren Xiaosu said, “The people who’re here to change your tires have arrived.”

The ten plainclothes guards of the tour group already had their pistols drawn and were ready to shoot at any moment.

But they were surprised by the fact that there were actually around six vehicles in the convoy dashing over. One of them even had a heavy machine gun mounted on it.

One of the people in the vehicles shouted, “Do y’all wanna change your tires? Only 20,000 yuan each, what a fair deal! Of course, if you don’t need a tire change, we’ll leave immediately! We also provide tire patching services at 8,000 yuan each!”

Fang Zhi wanted to curse at that guy. Usually, a normal tire would cost at most slightly over a 1,000 yuan to change. Moreover, the spare tires these people had on their vehicles looked really worn-out. It was obvious they were used tires taken from somewhere else and were just barely usable.

However, with a heavy machine gun pointing at him, Fang Zhi was somewhat apprehensive about scolding him.

Since when did the Central Plains become so chaotic that even the vehicles providing tire patching services were equipped with heavy machine guns? Was there no one around to enforce the law?!

Being within range of the heavy machine gun, the ten guards suddenly felt a little powerless.

The other party did not get too close to the tour group either. The person in the vehicle only used a loudspeaker to shout their offer to them.

The people in the repair team said, "So do you need a tire change or what? We still have other places to go!"

From the looks of it, they probably scattered the nails in quite a few other areas too.

Li Ran said to Zhou Yingxue, "If you kill them, I'll add another 100,000 yuan to your reward."

Zhou Yingxue blinked and said, "I was told to take a back seat for the escort mission and just look pretty."

Li Ran clenched her teeth. "I didn't say 'look pretty.'"

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment. Why were women always focused on such trivial things?

When Zhou Yingxue heard that, she all the more did not want to care about Li Ran anymore. "I'm only responsible for your safety, and they're not threatening you right now. If you don't wanna change tires, they'll be off anyway. So I can't be considered to have violated the contract. I'm a bodyguard, not a fighter."

But just as she finished speaking, Ren Xiaosu shot to his feet. "Wang Ergou?!"

That person in the vehicle was also stunned. He carefully sized up Ren Xiaosu and said, "Xiaosu?!"

"Hahaha, you guys really came to the Central Plains!" Ren Xiaosu laughed as he walked towards that convoy. Even in the face of that heavy machine gun, it posed no threat to him.

That person in the vehicle cried out, "Everyone, lower your guns! Can't you see? It's Xiaosu!"

Then the person jumped out of the vehicle. He was wearing a dirty fur coat and limping as he walked. Ren Xiaosu asked, "What happened to your leg?"

"Ugh." Wang Ergou said with a laugh, "I got into a conflict with someone while I was working, but the other party did not kill me and just broke my leg."

"Weird. You even managed to get your hands on a heavy machine gun, and you still encountered a troublesome person?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"It was a lone woman." Wang Ergou sighed and said, "You don't know how dangerous the world has become now. That woman wearing a black cap was driving in an off-road vehicle by herself, so I thought it was a definite done deal. But before I could clearly see what was going on, she had already taken care of all of us. That's why we're keeping our distance from our targets now even though we're equipped with a heavy machine gun. When we repair any vehicles, there will also be people keeping watch. Someone has to stay at the vehicle and be ready to fire at a moment's notice."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Is that woman you're talking about dressed in a black combat uniform?"

"Eh? You've seen her before too?" Wang Ergou was surprised. "You offended that bitch as well? I have to warn you: You can't afford to offend her."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Did y'all manage to see what her power is?"

Wang Ergou said, "I think she can control sand. At that time, she straight-up moved the sand and made our vehicle mounted with the machine gun sink into the ground."

Ren Xiaosu didn't expect this answer, because he had suspected the woman was the mastermind controlling the paper cranes!

Chapter 529 Savior

Ren Xiaosu did not suspect the woman in the black cap without reason. It was just that her previous appearances happened too coincidentally. Not long after he had caught the two paper cranes, she started appearing in the town of Stronghold 61. This left Ren Xiaosu with no choice but to link the two matters together.

He had left Stronghold 61's town in a hurry as he felt a little guilty. After all, it was only normal that other people would come and question him if he captured their paper cranes for no apparent reason.

But now, Wang Ergou was saying that her power was controlling sand?

Ren Xiaosu had to ponder this matter.

As Ren Xiaosu and Wang Ergou chatted, everyone in the entire tour group looked at each other in bewilderment. They did not understand what was happening.

He even met someone he knew out here in the wilderness?

Li Ran wanted to get up and go over to listen to what they were saying, but the ten guards stopped her. "You shouldn't go over. Those people are clearly outlaws with blood on their hands. Not even we can do anything about them."

"Aren't you guys elites troops?" Li Ran frowned.

The guards said awkwardly, "But they have a heavy machine gun while we only have pistols."

Zhou Yingxue started laughing from the rear. "At this range, the heavy machine gun can turn all the vehicles into Swiss cheese within ten seconds. But you guys don't have to worry. With us here, everything will be fine."

Zhou Yingxue could already tell that this "repair team" had a very good rapport with Ren Xiaosu. There would definitely not be any conflict happening here, so she took the opportunity to brag.

At this moment, they saw Wang Ergou and Ren Xiaosu come back towards their convoy while they chatted. Wang Ergou said to everyone with a smile, "Since I bumped into Ren Xiaosu here, I'll take back the prices I offered just now. We'll repair your vehicles for free."

Suspicious, Li Ran asked, "Does Ren Xiaosu have such a great reputation?"

"Haha," Wang Ergou laughed. "When we got lost in the wilderness after a heavy snowfall in the mountains, it was Ren Xiaosu who led us back to town while searching for food to fill our stomachs. He's basically our savior."

At that time, Wang Ergou and the others had not hit it big yet. They did not have any heavy machine guns and were not skilled at carrying out their scams, nor were their legs lame.

But later, Ren Xiaosu rarely met Wang Ergou and the others anymore as their group was rumored to have gone to the vicinity of the Yang Consortium's strongholds to be bandits for a while. After that, their whereabouts became unknown.

As such, Ren Xiaosu did not expect they would actually come to the Central Plains and go back to plying their old trade.

Wang Ergou asked, "But, Xiaosu, why have you come to the Central Plains, and what're you doing with them?"

"Oh, I took a mission to provide protection for their concert tour," Ren Xiaosu answered.

Wang Ergou looked at Li Ran. "You people are really lucky to be able to get Ren Xiaosu to protect you. There's nothing in the wilderness that he can't handle. If you're going south, what's the place y'all're heading to?"

"We're heading straight to Stronghold 81." Ren Xiaosu recalled the route.

"It isn't exactly peaceful in the South anymore. Back when the Wang Consortium was dealing with the Zhou Consortium, many refugees moved into the mountains and even received funding from the Wang Consortium. As such, things are pretty chaotic there now. However, if y'all mention my name, that usually proves rather useful." Then Wang Ergou turned around and beckoned, saying, "I need two bros with a car jack to patch up their tires."

In fact, mending tires wasn't a particularly difficult task to handle and neither was it costly at all. So Wang Ergou decided to waive the fee for Ren Xiaosu's sake.

The other men of the "repair team" greeted Ren Xiaosu. It seemed they all had a good impression of him as well. After all, it was Ren Xiaosu who saved them back then.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "When you say that it isn't peaceful, do you mean that the people who moved into the mountains have turned to banditry? It shouldn't be that bad, right?"

“No, no, no.” Wang Ergou smiled and said, “If they did turn to banditry, the Zhou Consortium would have gone and wiped them out already. It’s just that some of them chop down trees and place them in the middle of the roads. If you pay them, they’ll help you shift the trees away. Or sometimes, they’ll lie in front of your vehicles and try to blackmail you. If you don’t pay up, you have to drive over them to get through. Most of those who can drive on the roads are people from the strongholds. Since they’ve never seen blood before, most of them are too afraid to drive over others. So it’s really easy to scare them into paying up.”

While Wang Ergou’s men repaired the vehicles, Wang Ergou kept asking Ren Xiaosu about what happened in the Southwest. The plainclothes guards by the vehicles wanted to seize this opportunity to detain Wang Ergou and show that they were competent to Li Ran. However, they realized the heavy machine gun a distance away was still pointed right at them.

The heavy machine gunner did not care about anyone else and kept his eyes trained on the plainclothes guards. It seemed he recognized they were soldiers and knew they were the biggest threat.

At this moment, Wang Ergou said with a sigh, “I didn’t expect the changes in the Southwest to be so widespread, and that the Li Consortium and the Yang Consortium no longer exist. How does it make sense that I, Wang Ergou, am doing even better than a consortium?”

Zhou Yingxue burst out laughing. Wang Ergou looked at Zhou Yingxue. “Are you Brother Xiaosu’s woman?”

“Knock it off.” Ren Xiaosu stopped Wang Ergou. What the fuck!

Zhou Yingxue said calmly, “He’s my assistant.”

Wang Ergou smiled and said, “That’s definitely not the case. My eyes are really sharp. There’s something between the two of you, and who knows just which one of you is taking orders from the other behind closed doors?”

Zhou Yingxue rolled her eyes, then asked softly, “Then what do you think is the relationship between Brother Xiaosu and that female celebrity?”

Wang Ergou chuckled, “Don’t worry, my bro here isn’t attracted by that kind of woman.”

Zhou Yingxue instantly beamed with joy.

A repairman off to the side shouted, “Ergou, the vehicles are fixed.”

Wang Ergou patted Ren Xiaosu on the shoulder casually. “We’ll be taking our leave now. Take care of yourself. If we meet again, we must have a drink or two.”

Ren Xiaosu smiled and nodded. He did not say he didn’t drink alcohol, as there was no need to reject his friend’s good intentions.

After the repair team drove off, a plainclothes guard said to Li Ran, “Should we get permission from General Wang to wipe them out?”

Li Ran glanced at them. “There were only about 17 of them just now, so why didn’t the ten of you, being regular soldiers, mention wiping them out while they were still around? Also, how’re you gonna wipe them out when this is the Zhou Consortium’s territory?”

“We can just get someone to do it covertly. They’re just your everyday thugs, so it’ll be very easy to deal with them if we want.” Now that they were no longer threatened, the soldier said, “And we also need to be warier of that Ren Xiaosu. After all, there must be something with him if he can address those thugs as bros.”

However, Li Ran did not agree with the points he brought up. Instead, she remarked, “I don’t care as long as he can solve problems.”

Honestly, when Li Ran saw the other party had a heavy machine gun just now, she felt a little scared. After all, they were people who risked their lives in the wilderness every day, and armed with such heavy firepower, how could she not be afraid?

But for some reason, the moment Ren Xiaosu stepped forward, her fear disappeared.

When Li Ran returned to the minivan, she said to Fang Zhi, “Pay 200,000 yuan to Ren Xiaosu and thank him for resolving the situation.”

Fang Zhi was stunned. “Even if we had the tires changed based on the quoted rates, it wouldn’t cost that much, right?”

Li Ran glanced at him. “I’m happy to pay!”

Chapter 530 The disappearing Experimentals

While the tour group traveled south, east of the Qing Consortium’s strongholds where the mountain range that separated the Qing Consortium’s territory and the Central Plains lay, several groups of special forces were pouring southwards into the mountain range.

The mountain range was a towering and steep presence, spanning hundreds of kilometers in length. If a path were cut straight through it, the Qing Consortium could probably reach the Zhou Consortium within two days.

Unfortunately, it did not seem like humans were capable of conquering Mother Nature at their current level. Moreover, Qing Zhen seemed happy to have such a barrier as well.

He was even willing to set his sights farther away at Fortress 178 by joining the railroad in the northern valley than shatter this natural barrier here.

Qing Zhen referred to this as the true “wall” of the Qing Consortium’s strongholds to Luo Lan.

At this moment, a clear voice spoke on the radio.

“Alpha 2, sitrep.”

“Alpha 2 has not discovered any abnormalities nor found any traces of the Experimentals.”

“Alpha 3, sitrep...”

The voice broadcasting on the radio had a static quality to it. These special forces were no longer grouped in a regular 30-man platoon but groups of 12.

At this moment, a full reconnaissance battalion was trekking through the mountain range without rest. Behind them, the supporting infantry were following closely as they marched. Due to the rugged mountain paths, the speed at which the troops were marching was reduced a bit.

The special forces could increase their speed, but the mechanized infantry behind them providing supporting fire would not be able to keep up.

The commander of the frontline troops, Qing Yi, was standing in the command post at the rear. There were many screens at the front of the command post, and they were constantly switching between video feeds from the special forces on the ground. The troops' helmet-mounted cameras were sending back these images in real time.

Qing Yi said calmly, "Enter the perimeter of Mt. Hefeng immediately. You'll likely encounter a large number of Experimentals there, but there's no need to fight them to the death. If you discover you're no match for them, regroup immediately and set up a defensive line and wait for reinforcements from the rear."

"Roger," the commander of the reconnaissance battalion replied as his expression turned even grimmer.

The reconnaissance battalion had always been the strongest fighting force for the various organizations. The residents of the strongholds tended to refer to them as special forces.

Under normal circumstances, these soldiers would always emerge as the top performers of the military's field exercises. But after half a month of infiltration into the mountain range, even they were a little exhausted, and the camouflage paint on their faces was also running.

"Check your weapons and firearms, check your laser sights, check..." The reconnaissance battalion's commander issued multiple orders in an instant, and all of the special forces immediately went on high alert. They knew exactly what these commands meant: They were about to encounter the enemy.

The 12-man platoons were starting to enter into the perimeter of Mt. Hefeng. Suddenly, the sound of scurrying creatures came from the bushes in front of a platoon.

In an instant, nine out of 12 soldiers pointed their guns at the bushes. Two others were covering the group's flanks in case they were ambushed by the enemy, and one of them was holding a grenade launcher, ready to fire at any moment.

The scurrying sounds were getting closer and closer. The platoon commander whispered over the radio, "Unidentified creature approaching Alpha 9. I repeat, an unknown creature is approaching Alpha 9."

As his words trailed off, a wild boar suddenly charged out of the bushes. His deputy beside him instantly unsheathed a dagger from his belt and met the creature head on.

But even stranger, the blood vessels in his face and hands started glowing silver. When the huge boar charged in, the deputy platoon commander grabbed its sharp tusks with one hand and slammed it ruthlessly into the ground. Right after, the dagger in his other hand pierced the boar's neck.

"Danger eradicated. The danger at Alpha 9 has been taken care of. It was a wild boar. Alpha 9 will now continue advancing." The platoon commander then led the way forward.

In the command post, Qing Yi could clearly see what had just happened. He calmly said to a bespectacled middle-aged man next to him, "Calculate the soldiers' speed and strength."

"Understood." Many younger people were standing around the middle-aged man. Qing Zhen had gathered all of the nanomachine researchers that had previously served under the Li and the Yang Consortiums under his command.

Qing Yi smiled and said, "As expected, this gadgetry is only useful in the hands of our Qing Consortium, isn't that so?"

The middle-aged man hurriedly nodded. "Yes, it is."

"Let's continue with the tests. I want to know the most suitable amount of nanomachines that each individual soldier should have, do you understand what I'm saying? I want the most scientific data you can churn out," Qing Yi instructed his adjutant. "We have to quickly complete the tests. Boss Luo is still trying to buy us time, but we can't keep him waiting in a dangerous place like the Central Plains."

However, Qing Yi suddenly felt that something was not right. "Why are there living creatures in a place where a large number of Experimentals have gathered? Why was there a wild boar? Tell the men to gather their troops and quickly charge forward to check the perimeter of Mt. Hefeng!"

The outcome was soon reported back, and the troops did not find any traces of the Experimentals within Mt. Hefeng. However, traces of a campfire were discovered in the mountains. There seemed to be a lot of paper documents that had been burnt in the campfire as well, while the entirety of Mt. Hefeng had been emptied out!

The remnants of the documents found in the campfire must have been burned by the Experimentals. Qing Yi frowned at this. He already knew of the existence of an intelligent being among the Experimentals. But now he realized they could even read documents and knew how to destroy them. This surprised him a little.

"Bring back the ashes in full and see if we can piece together any useful information." Qing Yi said, "We're pulling out of here."

There weren't many ashes left, and the biggest piece was probably only the size of a fingernail. Furthermore, it was already burnt to soot. In fact, Qing Yi did not have much hope for this method either.

Qing Yi looked at the towering Mt. Hefeng on the screen and sighed. "What kind of monsters did the Pyro Company create with their experiments prior to the Cataclysm?"

His adjutant next to him asked, "Where do you think the Experimentals went? Should we inform the other strongholds to be on alert?"

Qing Yi looked at the map carefully. "Set up a call to my brother."

The radio operator passed the handset over, and Qing Zhen's calm voice rang out, "What's the matter?"

"The Experimentals have disappeared. I suspect they might've gone to the Central Plains."

"Tell the Zhou Consortium to be careful," Qing Zhen said.

"Why should we tell the Zhou Consortium?" Qing Yi was puzzled. "Isn't it better if they suffer some losses?"

"It'll be the residents of the strongholds who'll be unfortunate," Qing Zhen said. "Besides, we're already working together with them to guard against the Wang Consortium. You have to understand the principle of interdependence."

"I don't need to know about that." Qing Yi laughed and said, "I just have to know how to fight a war. As for the rest, I'll leave it to you."

"There's no need to hide anything. I'm not a person who's jealous of talent." Qing Zhen chuckled. "Come back and regroup. You've been busy out there for over half a year."

"Sure," Qing Yi agreed. "Brother, send someone dependable here for the transference of authority. I'll hand over command of the troops to him."

"There's no need for a change of command." Qing Zhen said, "You're the one I'm most confident in. However, there isn't a higher rank I can promote you to. I heard you like the female celebrities of the Central Plains, so I asked Luo Lan to bring one back for you."

"Thank you for trusting me, Brother."

After the call ended, Qing Yi did not say anything for a long time. His adjutant who had been listening to the call next to him mumbled to himself, "Mr. Qing Zhen said he requested Boss Luo bring a celebrity back. Why does it sound like he's talking about some local specialties?"