

First Order 551

Chapter 551 Teacher and disciple Honestly, this was the first time Ren Xiaosu encountered someone in the wilderness who was willing to give others a ride. After all, anyone would know the wilderness was not entirely safe. As the saying went, one must be vigilant to not be harmed. If it were Ren Xiaosu, he would never offer others a lift.

Of course, not many people would hitch a ride from him either.

The middle-aged man said with a smile, "It's along the way since we're also heading to Stronghold 74. However, we need to make a stop at a remote place midway, so if you don't mind that, we can offer you a lift to Stronghold 74."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He broke out into a smile and said, "Sure, thanks."

The young man in the front passenger seat also said enthusiastically, "Get in quickly then."

Ren Xiaosu got into the backseat. He then heard some music playing from a cassette in the vehicle and wondered why the singer's voice sounded so familiar.

Ren Xiaosu only managed to react a few seconds later. Wasn't this Li Ran's voice? Although he had never listened to her songs before, her voice was very recognizable.

In that instant, Ren Xiaosu did not know what to say. He had clearly escaped so he could avoid that woman. But now that he was outside, he still had to listen to Li Ran's songs. She really was just like a lingering spirit.

During the journey, Ren Xiaosu realized the middle-aged man and the young man were not father and son. From the way the young man kept addressing him as his teacher, it seemed they were actually a master and disciple.

The two of them did not ask about his identity, nor did they ask why he was heading to Stronghold 74. It seemed like they were simply giving him a lift.

However, the middle-aged man had specifically mentioned they would have to make a stop at a remote place to handle some affairs. This made Ren Xiaosu very wary. What could be in a remote place? Very few people lived in the wilderness, so if they really turned into some remote place, could they be planning to lead Ren Xiaosu into a trap?

However, Ren Xiaosu did not say anything. Instead, he asked calmly, "May I know why the two of you are heading to Stronghold 74?"

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "Actually, we'll only be passing by Stronghold 74. After dropping you off near the stronghold, we'll be heading into the mountain range west of Stronghold 74 to pick some herbs. Now that very few people are living in those mountains, there will be plenty of treasures naturally growing there."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Do you mean the legendary Heavenly Materials and Earthly Treasures?"

The storyteller told stories such as The Investiture of the Gods,[1] and in those stories, the Heavenly Materials and Earthly Treasures were herbs that were extremely helpful for cultivators.

When the middle-aged man heard Ren Xiaosu ask this, he said with a smile, “No, no, I was just referring to mountain products, common herbs that can help strengthen my disciple’s body.”

Ren Xiaosu nodded. From the sound of it, they were martial artists?

There was an old saying that went, “The poor study, while the rich learn martial arts.” That was because studying could change the fate of the poor, while those who were not rich had no way to practice martial arts since they could not afford the herbs and tonics to strengthen their bodies.

But were they really going to pick herbs in those forested mountains? Ren Xiaosu did not believe it.

In the afternoon, the off-road vehicle suddenly deviated from the main road and drove towards a more desolate wilderness. Ren Xiaosu sat quietly in the backseat and did not show any expression.

He thought to himself, ‘They might be making a move soon.’ Be it robbery or revenge, these two had probably been plotting this for a long time.

After the vehicle came to a stop, the middle-aged man placed his fingers in his mouth and whistled. Ren Xiaosu frowned. They actually had partners?

Following, there was a rustle in the woods nearby. Five honest-looking refugees emerged from it, and they said to the middle-aged man in surprise, “Old Li, you haven’t come here in a long time.”

“Enough talk, the medicine’s in the trunk. Hurry up and unload the items from the vehicle.” The middle-aged man named Old Li said with a smile, “We brought antibiotics this time. That’s something you guys lack most in the wilderness.”

Behind them, Ren Xiaosu, who was ready to kill at a moment’s notice, was shocked. He thought the two people had taken him here as a convenient place for them to make a move on him. As it turned out, they were only delivering medicine to refugees?

Ren Xiaosu knew exactly what refugees looked like. He tried looking closer at the woods but could not see what was in that darkness.

When Old Li opened the trunk, Ren Xiaosu saw two cartons simply sealed with adhesive tape.

One of the refugees handed a basket of eggs to Old Li. “We don’t have anything good here, only these eggs. Please accept them.”

Each of the eggs was the size of a fist, and it was clear they were from chickens that had evolved in the wilderness. They were completely different from the domestic eggs found in the stronghold. In the past two years, eating exotic meat had become very popular in the strongholds. Whoever could treat others to a meal of exotic meat would be very popular and well-respected by their friends.

In the past, Ren Xiaosu was able to sell sparrows for a living because the stronghold residents were fond of such exotic fare.

But no matter how expensive wild chicken eggs were, they could not be more expensive than antibiotics. Medicine could save lives!

Old Li did not decline their gift. He took the eggs from the refugee and handed it to his disciple. "I still have to go to Stronghold 74, so I won't be eating with you today. What else do you need? I can bring it for you when I get back from Stronghold 74."

A refugee hesitated for a moment before saying, "It'll be winter soon. Some children in the mountains won't be able to endure the cold. Can you buy a few coats for them? But if it's really inconvenient, then never mind..."

Old Li asked decisively, "How many do you need?"

"12."

"OK, I'll make a trip to the town at Stronghold 74 then. There'll be coats for sale there," Old Li said with a smile.

That refugee rubbed his hands together and said with a smile, "I'm so sorry to keep troubling you."

"It's nothing," Old Li said and smiled.

"I wonder, how much do the coats cost in town now?" the refugee asked. "We still have some savings here."

Old Li pointed at the eggs in his disciple's arms and said with a smile, "These wild chicken eggs are already worth a lot, so that'll be enough."

After the trade was concluded, Old Li and his disciple got back into the vehicle and started the engine. Ren Xiaosu could not help but feel that these two did not seem like drug peddlers either.

"You can at most trade one coat for that basket of wild chicken eggs. I'm quite familiar with the prices in town. You two are purely performing good deeds, aren'tcha?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Old Li said with a smile as he drove, "We have a rule that after we become a Ri—an adult, we must go to the towns to experience how the refugees live. Back then, I was so arrogant I almost couldn't survive in town. It was this group of refugees that fed me and allowed me to live. Later, they escaped when they couldn't stand the consortium's exploitation of them and the stress of living in town."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. So it turned out there were also honest people in town, and some would silently endure where they could. This caused those arrogant people who mistreated them to become even more arrogant. In the end, the honest people could only escape town when they could no longer stand the suffering.

Besides, even if they continued working for the consortiums, they would still have nothing to their names other than a shack when they grew old. Even if they farmed for the consortiums, they would still only be drawing a salary.

Therefore, some people would rather choose to live a hard life in the wilderness. At least the crops they cultivated would belong to them.

Chapter 552 The twelfth Rider

Ren Xiaosu had thought these two guys had abducted him to this remote place so they could attack him. However, it turned out they were just here to perform good deeds.

But what were their identities? They even had to go and experience what it was like to live like a refugee in town at some point? In that case, they would have to be people from the stronghold. Whether they were supernatural beings was yet to be determined. However, Ren Xiaosu noticed the two of them had a very steady gait and did not expose any vulnerabilities while walking. By the looks of it, they were not ordinary people either.

Old Li looked at Ren Xiaosu and said with a smile, "Are you a refugee?"

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "Yes."

However, Ren Xiaosu did not explain anything to avoid slipping up.

Old Li nodded and said, "You don't look like a stronghold resident anyhow. People in the strongholds do not have that look in your eyes."

Ren Xiaosu wondered what kind of look he was referring to.

Their journey had been delayed by half a day because they had to deliver the medicine to the refugees. As a result, they were still more than a 100 kilometers from Stronghold 74 by that evening.

Old Li thought for a moment and said, "Why don't we find a place to set up camp before continuing on our journey to Stronghold 74 tomorrow morning? I'm sorry that your schedule has been delayed because of us."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I'm very grateful that you were willing to give me a lift. If I had to walk to Stronghold 74 by myself, I don't even know when I'd get there."

There was even a pot in the truck of Old Li's off-road vehicle. When Ren Xiaosu was helping to carry out the camping equipment, he realized the two of them would be spending quite a while in the mountains. Just the condiments alone were already a lot. He wondered what they were planning to do in the mountains in the west.

Old Li called to his disciple, "Qin Sheng, start the campfire. I'll go and hunt two rabbits."

With that, Old Li took out a dagger and headed into the forest, leaving Qin Sheng alone to carry out his task diligently. Ren Xiaosu watched from nearby and asked, "Do you two often venture into the wilderness?"

He only asked because he saw Qin Sheng skillfully starting a cookfire. Some people might not even be able to start a fire with the aid of flint, purely due to a lack of experience.

Qin Sheng smiled and said, "I've been to many places with my teacher. It's better to travel thousands of miles than read thousands of books."

Ren Xiaosu did not add on to that. He felt the two of them were a little mysterious. Qin Sheng's complexion was tanned and his figure was very well-proportioned. It made him look like an extremely agile cheetah in the wilderness.

Normal people would not have such an aura.

After Qin Sheng started the campfire, he placed a few branches over the fire for the pot before throwing in all the wild chicken eggs he had gotten from the refugees earlier. He smiled to Ren Xiaosu and said, "It takes ten minutes for a normal hard-boiled egg to be cooked, but wild chicken eggs take 15 minutes to cook. However, the taste of wild chicken eggs is far better than the domesticated chicken eggs found in the strongholds. They're delicious."

At this moment, Old Li returned with two rabbits in hand. He smiled and said, "The chickens in the wilderness have evolved tremendously in just a few decades. However, domesticated chickens in the strongholds have not changed at all. In my opinion, we should tear down all the strongholds and have their residents live outside their comfort zones. That way, humanity will truly understand what they're facing in the future and become more adapted to this world."

"Make the stronghold residents live outside their comfort zones?" Ren Xiaosu recalled that the lives of those who lived in the strongholds were not necessarily better. He said to Old Li, "The stronghold residents aren't exactly living comfortable lives either."

Old Li was speechless.

After two minutes of silence, Old Li still did not know how to continue the conversation!

However, the sound of an approaching convoy suddenly thrummed in the distance while the eggs were cooking. Ren Xiaosu could see the bright headlights of a dozen vehicles bouncing as they traveled on the rocky road.

Ren Xiaosu carefully observed the convoy, then his expression suddenly changed!

He turned around and said to Old Li and Qin Sheng, "Um... I'm not feeling well, so I'll take my leave. Thank you for giving me a lift!"

He was about to run off when Old Li called out to him from behind, "Hey, take two eggs with you to eat along the way."

As he said that, Ren Xiaosu came back and fished out a wild chicken egg straight from the pot before running off.

Old Li and Qin Sheng frowned as they watched him leave. Curious, Qin Sheng asked, "Teacher, who do you think he is?"

"I don't know, but he's no simple person." Old Li said, "It's hard to get a read on him, but he's definitely not a normal refugee. Who knows, he might even be a superhuman!"

"Then why did he run away?" Qin Sheng could not understand.

"Maybe that approaching convoy is coming after him?" Old Li said puzzledly, "Could it be related to that incident at Stronghold 73 some time ago? When we get back, ask your Brother Qingxi about it. He was the one who accompanied the Pyro Company to Stronghold 73, so ask him if he's seen the young man before."

A moment later, the convoy that was speeding over came to a stop in front of them. A woman rolled down the window and asked, "Did you two see a young man passing through here?"

Qin Sheng's jaw slowly dropped. "Y-You're Li Ran?"

When Li Ran realized she had been recognized, she was secretly delighted. "Ahem, yes, that's me."

After she said that, she was pushed aside by someone next to her. That person opened the door and jumped out the vehicle. "Hello, my name is Mu Wan'ge, and I'm a director. Have you seen a young man passing through here? He's heading to Stronghold 74."

Qin Sheng and Old Li were dumbfounded by this question. They had assumed this convoy was chasing after Ren Xiaosu to kill him. But now they realized it was not the case at all.

With a director and a female celebrity chasing after him, just who could that young man be?

Ren Xiaosu was so pissed off he wanted to curse out loud as he made his escape. Didn't they say they would be setting off five days later? So why were they coming after him so quickly when he just left the stronghold? They were really too difficult to shake off. Why couldn't they just leave him alone for a day or two?!

It seemed that men should really not be too good-looking. Otherwise, they would only be inviting trouble. Ren Xiaosu really thought this.

Old Li smiled at Li Ran and Mu Wan'ge. "Sorry, we didn't see anyone."

"Could we have missed him somewhere along the way?" Mu Wan'ge wondered. "He didn't drive either, so he couldn't have gotten far."

"Continue chasing after him! He must've somehow gotten his hands on a vehicle," Li Ran said.

With that, the convoy set off again, leaving Old Li and Qin Sheng absolutely confused.

“Teacher, why are they chasing after that young man? And they’re even a famous celebrity and director too,” Qin Sheng asked in a speechless manner.

Old Li stayed silent for a moment before saying, “I don’t know either. Strange things happen every year, but it’s especially so this year.”

“But, Teacher, was lying to them appropriate?” Qin Sheng asked.

“In this world, how is it possible to not lie to others? I taught you to be honest, but I never said you couldn’t lie to others.” Old Li said with a smile, “These two things aren’t contradictory.”

“Is it really not contradictory?” Qin Sheng began to wonder.

“Alright, don’t think too much.” Old Li added a log of firewood to the campfire. “You should rest and conserve your strength for now. After we get to that cliff in the mountains, you’ll be embarking on your final challenge. When the time comes, you’ll be climbing it with your bare hands without any protective measures. If you die, it’ll all be for naught. But if you manage to survive, you’ll become the twelfth Rider.”

Chapter 553 Key to the world of a new biological order

The Public Order Division at Stronghold 61 was very troubled recently. As the Wang Consortium’s strongholds had always been very safe, their public order divisions only needed to capture criminals based on the recommendations of the artificial intelligence. Therefore, the public order divisions at the various strongholds were usually not that busy.

In the beginning, they did not really trust this so-called artificial intelligence that much. But later on, everyone realized it could even deduce suspects based on footage from surveillance cameras. Just this point alone made it a really powerful technology.

For example, if someone had escaped from the scene of a hit and run, the artificial intelligence could determine the criminal’s height and behavioral traits based on the angle of the vehicle’s turn in the surveillance footage. That was because the view in the car would be different for people of different heights.

Gradually, the public order divisions became used to the artificial intelligence replacing their investigative duties. All they needed to be responsible for was the arrest of the criminals.

After that, the criminals in the Wang Consortium’s strongholds started being arrested and sentenced for their crimes. During the time the artificial intelligence was first introduced, the Wang Consortium’s prison became so full they were unable to hold any more prisoners.

It was initially decided they would expand the size of the prison. However, the Wang Consortium’s higher-ups directly ordered the Law Division to mete out harsher punishments to the criminals. More than 2,000 prisoners were sentenced to death as a result, and over a 1,000 were sent to perform labor at purpose-built factories outside the stronghold overnight.

Once the criminals were sent to those places, they were not going to return. That eased the pressure of overpopulation in the prison.

During that time, everybody was deterred from committing more crimes. After all, those who stole anything over a 1,000 yuan or got involved in street fights would be sentenced to death, so who would still dare to commit crimes?

However, the Public Order Division at Stronghold 61 was starting to get busy again recently. There were a lot of people reporting their guard dogs had suddenly gone missing, and this was not just one or two cases but over a dozen of them. The Public Order Division immediately wondered if a dognapper had entered the stronghold?

The Wang Consortium had set a target of a 100% rate of solved crimes for the Public Order Division. As long as someone reported a case, they would have to solve it. Otherwise, there would be no year-end bonus for the Public Order Division staff.

The Public Order Division immediately dispatched some people to several dog meat shops in the stronghold to investigate the crimes and even checked the footage from the surveillance cameras outside the dog meat shops. However, they found nothing suspicious.

Moreover, it was extremely unusual as the artificial intelligence did not even provide them with any information this time.

As such, the Public Order Division activated their K9 unit. But when they were going down a street, a police dog suddenly broke free from its leash for some reason and ran away. Then that police dog went missing as well.

This irritated the Public Order Division a lot as the police chief slammed tables in the office and roared angrily at officers. The Public Order Division immediately sent more manpower to carry out a blanket search at the place where the police dog had broken free from its leash. They even went down into the sewers to search.

A Public Order Division squad was walking in the dirty and smelly water down in the sewers. Someone complained, "Why should we be the ones sent into the sewers? They should've just deployed the auxiliary police to check it out."

Someone nearby said, "Quit complaining. You were the one who lost the K9, so consider this your punishment. It won't be so bad if you can find the criminal, or else be prepared to lose your job."

Suddenly, the person speaking noticed the person at the front of the squad had stopped in his tracks, and his body was even trembling.

Someone asked, "What's the matter?"

The person at the front trembled and said, "Everyone... look!"

Everyone turned on their flashlights and looked ahead. They were surprised to see that the sewer in front of them was piled full of skeletal remains of animals. There were bones everywhere!

Those skeletal remains were piled into a small hill. While most of them were rat bones, there were also some cat and dog bones.

“No wonder we didn’t see a single rat while we were down here!” someone said with a tingling sensation in his scalp.

At this moment, they heard the sound of the dirty water rippling behind them. With chills running up their spines, they looked back and saw nothing at all.

“There aren’t any monsters in the sewers, right?”

When those words were uttered, everyone in this Public Order Division squad fled outside.

Without encountering any monsters that threatened to devour them like they had imagined, this group of people got back safely aboveground.

That afternoon, the Public Order Division deployed even more men to carry out an investigation of the entire sewage system. As a result, they discovered nine areas where white bones were piled up in the sewers. They even found the missing police dog in one of the spots, although it had not turned to bone yet. However, it had been strangled to death.

Immediately, a rumor started spreading throughout the stronghold: A monster might have entered the stronghold and could be hiding in the sewers.

This incident caused everyone in the stronghold to feel really worried. Whenever the stronghold residents were out on the streets, they would deliberately avoid walking near manhole covers, afraid that something would pull them down into the sewers.

This was a serious matter. As such, even the Wang Consortium’s higher-ups were alarmed. Wang Shengzhi even specially sent a supernatural being over to the stronghold, but nothing came of the investigation.

At this moment, the Public Order Division was holding an internal meeting to discuss this matter. Without getting into a discussion of whether there would be any arrests, they would first have to determine what could possibly be responsible for this.

“After the skeletal remains were examined, we found no human skeletons among them. This means that whatever was responsible for this does not eat humans.” A man wearing a pair of gold-rimmed glasses said, “I think it might be some mutated creature that lives in the sewers. However, we don’t really need to be afraid since it doesn’t eat humans. It could be that it’s smaller than humans, so it fears us instead.”

But at this moment, someone barged in from outside and said, “Bad news! Someone from the Public Order Division has gone missing after the search in the sewers!”

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At the bottom of East Lake, a school of fish had gathered near the collapsed tunnel in the dark waters and were greedily feeding on the blood seeping out of the caved-in rocks.

No one had expected that the hundreds of people who died in the tunnel would end up as nutrients for the fish in East Lake. This was especially true for the blood of supernatural beings whose scent sent the fish into a frenzy.

At the bottom of the ruined lake, dense shoals of fish, turtles, water snakes, frogs, crabs, and freshwater shrimp were swimming among the rocks.

A human tragedy had become a feast for the creatures at the bottom of the lake. However, it was still very difficult for them to reach the human corpses that were buried under the ruins.

All of a sudden, swarms of fish scattered in panic. A huge creature was approaching in the darkness. When it opened its mouth, a great number of fish were sucked into its mouth. The fish in East Lake were so frightened by this new arrival of an overlord that they did not dare to get near it, yet they were also reluctant to leave.

The huge creature swam to the bottom of the lake where it shoved aside a part of the tunnel's ruins with its body and revealed the human corpses underneath.

The bottom of the lake turned turbid as a tremendous amount of silt got stirred up inside the lake.

However, the swarms of fish started swimming forward in a frenzy. Meanwhile, that huge creature calmly started picking its food without a hurry. It was as though it only chose supernatural beings to eat.

On the shore of East Lake, the staff from Stronghold 73's Public Order Division had already set up a blockade to prohibit stronghold residents from approaching. So no one noticed undercurrents were crazily surging up from the bottom of the lake.

After that huge creature had its fill, it quietly remained at the bottom of the lake and waited for its next meal.

In this moment of silence, no one knew the flesh and blood of superhumans had become the key that opened the door to the world of a new biological order.

It was a much more dangerous and mysterious world.

Chapter 554 Through thick and thin

Ren Xiaosu was strolling through the streets of Stronghold 74, the farthest west of the Zhou Consortium's strongholds.

This place was obviously not as prosperous as Stronghold 73. And for some reason, Stronghold 74 was already in lockdown, with military vehicles constantly traversing the streets.

Based on the news he had read in the papers, the Zhou Consortium had already mobilized two brigades to garrison Stronghold 74. So the number of troops here had already exceeded 10,000 in strength. However, no one knew what was really happening here and why the Zhou Consortium would make such a move.

Based on the analysis by Hope Media's commentators, the Qing Consortium was the closest organization to Stronghold 74, with the distance, as the crow flew, between the Zhou Consortium and the Qing Consortium measuring only 500 kilometers. However, as the two organizations were separated by a mountain range, they did not have any dealings in the past.

Now that the Zhou Consortium's troops were garrisoned here, they were likely guarding against the Qing Consortium. After all, the Qing Consortium had already unified the entire Southwest and became the most powerful organization in the entire Alliance of Strongholds.

At the very least, the Qing Consortium controlled the largest land area based on the territory it occupied.

At this moment, the atmosphere in Stronghold 74 was very tense, and the stronghold residents were extremely nervous. Ren Xiaosu even saw the patrolling soldiers conducting a search on the provisions stores one by one and requisitioning food from them.

However, the owners of the provisions stores did not protest against this. Shops like the provisions stores were all owned by the Zhou Consortium, while the shopkeepers were only employees working under them. Now that all the food was being requisitioned, they couldn't feel happier.

While Ren Xiaosu was walking the streets, a patrol squad suddenly came across him. When they walked past Ren Xiaosu, the patrol squad stopped him. One of the soldiers wondered, "Are you of age? Lemme check your resident ID. All adult males have to join the temporary conscription to do labor."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned on the spot. "I'm not of age. I'm still young."

"Then show me your ID card," the soldier said.

Ren Xiaosu had really not expected to encounter a situation like this when he sneaked into the stronghold. Nothing had happened to him before even though he infiltrated into a place with surveillance cameras like the Wang Consortium's stronghold.

"Sir, I'm really not of age," Ren Xiaosu said.

As he spoke, he looked around to see if there was a chance to run away.

But as soon as he finished speaking, the patrol squad was already starting to surround him. There were another seven or eight patrol squads on the entire street. If a fight broke out here, he would probably be wanted throughout the stronghold.

The patrol squad did not even want to check his ID card anymore. The squad leader sneered, "Since you're too afraid to show your ID, you must be an adult and are trying to avoid the temporary conscription. Men, take him away to the construction site!"

With that, a group of soldiers came over and started getting rough with Ren Xiaosu. One of them even took out a pair of handcuffs.

Suddenly, a convoy of vehicles drove over from afar. It looked like they had just driven into the stronghold.

When Ren Xiaosu saw the convoy, he immediately felt uncomfortable. Weren't these the tour group's vehicles? Why would Stronghold 74 let them in when it was still in lockdown?

He realized this tour group must be his jinx. No matter where he went, they were always able to catch up to him.

Of course, he did not know they were only able to get in because of Mu Wan'ge's reputation.

In the Central Plains, well-known figures like Mu Wan'ge and Li Ran had a decent reputation wherever they went. Furthermore, the concert promoter in the stronghold had also stepped in to help. If Li Ran could not get in, wouldn't that mean the concert would have to be canceled?

After getting into the stronghold, the concert promoter even specifically instructed them to stay in the hotel and avoid going out for the next few days. He was also unsure of what had gotten into the Zhou Consortium as they busily started conscripting adult males in the stronghold. If it weren't for the fact that the concert promoter had bought himself an official position in the stronghold, he would have had to go to work at the construction site as well.

What the concert promoter meant was that they could only hold the concert after this period had passed.

However, Ren Xiaosu could not understand why they would still think about the concert when war was descending upon Stronghold 74. Were they going to perform for the troops? As if the soldiers would pay for the tickets!

The people in the vehicles obviously saw Ren Xiaosu, but the convoy had no intention of stopping at all.

When the convoy passed by, Ren Xiaosu saw Li Ran gloating at him through the window as though she had already guessed why he was being arrested.

Li Ran was absolutely delighted to see this. Even though she was a famous celebrity, Ren Xiaosu actually knocked her unconscious when she presented herself in his room in the middle of the night one time. On yet another occasion, he simply refused to open the door for her when she went to look for him. How could she possibly tolerate those things?

As such, Li Ran felt so happy she could die when she saw that Ren Xiaosu had been temporarily conscripted to work at the construction site!

As Ren Xiaosu watched the convoy pass by, Li Ran even made a face at him from inside the car. Ren Xiaosu said to the patrol squad detaining him, "Were y'all ordered to carry out the conscription? Do y'all have to fulfill a quota set by your higher-ups?"

"Cut the shit." The leader of the patrol squad said, "It's useless to say anything now."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly pointed at the convoy and shouted, "I can see many adult males in those cars through the windows."

Fang Zhi was confused.

The patrol squad turned their heads and looked at the vehicles. Someone asked the other soldiers, "Do you guys recognize those cars? Do they belong to anyone important in the stronghold?"

"No, I know the cars of all the important figures. I can even recite their license plates by heart," someone said.

In the end, ten minutes later, Fang Zhi and the others were escorted to the construction site alongside Ren Xiaosu.

Of those in the concert tour group, Mu Wan'ge was the only male who did not get taken away. The rest were forcefully detained by the patrol squads.

If it were any other troops in the stronghold, they probably wouldn't have done that. However, the brigade commander in charge of the patrols in the stronghold was a family member of the Zhou Consortium, so he didn't care if there were directors or actors in the group. Besides, it was not like the patrols had laid a finger on the director or actors. All they did was conscript a few crew members of the tour group; that was all.

Coincidentally, this Zhou Consortium's brigade commander had previously tried to set up a dinner with an actress through Mu Wan'ge. However, Mu Wan'ge did not even bother with him at that time.

In the eyes of this commander, he considered it very polite of him to not have laid a finger on Mu Wan'ge this time. More importantly, he was worried he would end up in the headlines of the entertainment section of Hope Media's newspaper tomorrow.

As Ren Xiaosu walked, he was thinking the Zhou Consortium must have encountered some terrifying enemies this time. Otherwise, they would not be acting like this.

He noticed that even the soldiers were acting a little nervous.

But what kinds of enemies could the Zhou Consortium be facing?

Li Ran was dumbfounded to see Fang Zhi taken away for hard labor. Zhou Yingxue was chuckling next to her. She knew full well that her master would not tolerate others laughing at him while he was down on his luck.

Fang Zhi was nearly in tears as he walked alongside Ren Xiaosu. "It was Li Ran who laughed at you just now. I didn't even make a sound. What did I do to deserve this!"

Before leaving, Ren Xiaosu had instructed Zhou Yingxue to find the best hotel in the stronghold to stay at. This was so that he could locate the landmark easily after he escaped from the construction site. As it would probably get chaotic in Stronghold 74, it would be best for them not to get involved in the mess here. Furthermore, he wanted her to find out what exactly was going to happen in Stronghold 74.

Chapter 555 Investigative reporter

The patrol squad escorted Ren Xiaosu, Fang Zhi, and the others to the edge of the stronghold. The nonessential residences had already been cleared out and demolished, and new defensive fortifications were currently being built.

This area used to be a clean and tidy street, and there were small shops and old residential buildings around six stories high that stood on the road. But now the residential buildings and shops had all disappeared. In their place was ground covered in dust and dirt with half-built bunkers and some simple machine gun nests.

Such defensive fortifications were for defending against enemies in a battle once the stronghold walls got breached. But looking at the state of things, how were they supposed to fight this way?

Furthermore, the stronghold gate was sealed shut as well.

“Why’d they seal the gate?” Fang Zhi asked in surprise, “We came in through the east gate this morning. It wasn’t shut over there.”

They were north of the stronghold, which had four city gates in total. Right now, the north gate had already been completely sealed shut with some concrete analogue. Ren Xiaosu had a look at it and saw the material was not fully dry yet. It looked to him like the gate had just been sealed in the past two days.

No one from the patrol squad next to them answered. Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu was thinking that war might really be breaking out soon. Why else would they seal the gate for no reason?

The east gate was perhaps the only city gate that was not sealed off in the entire stronghold. Could it be that the enemy was going to attack from the west? And that was why the Zhou Consortium only left the east gate untouched?

When they arrived at the construction site, Ren Xiaosu and the others were made to carry bricks and assist the Engineering Corps in building the defensive fortifications.

While carrying bricks, Ren Xiaosu also kept an eye on what the Zhou Consortium’s troops were up to.

First of all, they collected the transported supplies and consolidated them under the troops’ supervision. Usually, this signaled that a very tough war was impending.

Second, they planted naval mines in the river that ran through the stronghold. These mines even seemed to have been specially transported here from the other strongholds.

There were many lakes and rivers in the Zhou Consortium’s territory, while the Wang Consortium’s regions were dominated by plains. As for the Kong Consortium, they were connected to the sea. These were the geographies of the three consortiums. As such, the Zhou Consortium was more versed in the research and development of underwater weapons.

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu could not understand what was going on even after watching for a long time. What on earth were they guarding against? They actually had to plant mines in the water? Normal troops would not be getting into the stronghold through the canal, right?

While they were working, Ren Xiaosu did not feel tired at all. With his physical fitness, this little bit of work was nothing to him.

But Fang Zhi and the others were so tired they nearly died. When they went to collect their lunches, Fang Zhi's hands were trembling as he held the plastic meal tray given out by the Zhou Consortium.

Fang Zhi grumbled, "Ren Xiaosu, we were just having a laugh in the car. Why did you have to stoop this low? Wait a minute, weren't you working too? Why don't you look tired?"

Ren Xiaosu glanced at him. "You people don't usually do any physical labor at all. When danger really comes, y'all will never be able to run away. It's for your own good that you can get some training now."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Fang Zhi was speechless. "The Central Plains is such a safe place, and we don't even see any wild animals around anymore, so where's the danger that you're talking about?"

Ren Xiaosu pointed to the ground. "Isn't Stronghold 74 already facing imminent danger?"

Fang Zhi had a look at the massive defensive fortifications around him. It seemed like that was really that case. He asked, "What on earth is going on here? Is the Qing Consortium coming to attack soon?"

"I dunno." Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I don't have enough info to judge."

A moment later, someone in the crowd was suddenly singled out and pulled aside by a site supervisor. Then he snatched away a small camera that was hidden in that person's pocket and said, "What are you doing?"

The person who was pulled aside declared proudly, "I'm an investigative reporter, and I'm documenting everything all of you are doing. You've been pressing the stronghold residents into work as laborers, yet you don't intend to pay them their wages—"

But before he could finish speaking, the site supervisor stopped the reporter and invited him into the shade before changing his meal to a better one. However, that reporter's camera was confiscated.

As Ren Xiaosu, Fang Zhi, and the others watched from afar, they saw the supervisor sending a subordinate to get a red packet, which he then handed to the reporter. That reporter accepted it and did not mention the investigation anymore.

Fang Zhi adjusted his glasses. "That is definitely not an investigative reporter from Hope Media. He has no principles."

"They resolved the matter with just a red packet?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

“That reporter probably came here intending to extort money. There’s many reporters like him in the Central Plains, and they always claim to be investigating some of the troublesome issues around. However, they’re really just aiming to collect some bribes,” Fang Zhi explained.

“Oh, I see. What about Hope Media? From what you’ve just said, it sounds like Hope Media is different?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“The chief editor of Hope Media used to be an investigative reporter.” Fang Zhi said with admiration, “He hid in the coal mines of the Kong Consortium to document the mistreatment of coal miners. Because of this incident, he was beaten up several times. After he escaped, all he wanted was to report the things he heard and saw there, but no newspaper firms dared to run his story. It was only at this point that he approached Xu Ke of the Qinghe Group. At that time, Xu Ke had just taken over the organization. Allegedly, Xu Ke and the chief editor hit it off right from the start. Xu Ke said that since no newspaper firms dared to run the story, they could set up their own newspaper firm to report about it, and that was how Hope Media came into existence.”

Ren Xiaosu listened with keen interest. Across from him, Fang Zhi continued with a sigh, “Of course, that’s just an urban myth that’s been circulating, but Hope Media has always been unyielding in whatever they do.... Eh, I have a reporter’s pass as well!”

Fang Zhi came back to his senses at this moment. He had also applied for a reporter’s pass. Of course, he was not looking to become a reporter, but it was useful to him as Li Ran’s assistant since it made matters easier to handle. A lot of celebrities’ assistants also held many titles that were purchased with money.

Fang Zhi rummaged through his wallet for the pass. If he could show his identification to the troops, he would not have to do any more labor.

Other things aside, not having to work in the construction site was the most important.

Fang Zhi took out a card with his photo on it from his wallet and shouted to the site supervisor, “I’m also—”

But before he could finish speaking, Ren Xiaosu took his reporter’s pass away and tore it up. “No, you’re not.”

Fang Zhi was confused.

Ren Xiaosu explained in a low voice, “I’ll take y’all to find Li Ran and the others tonight. If you get taken away now, you’ll be left alone at the construction site after we leave. Are you willing to risk that?”

Fang Zhi said skeptically, “You want to help us escape?”

“Do you think I want to work here? Don’t worry, the stronghold is really big. Even if we run away, the Zhou Consortium won’t have the resources to search the entire stronghold for us.” Ren Xiaosu glanced at him. “But before we leave, there’s still something we need to do.”

Ren Xiaosu remembered the tour group was only carrying enough food to last everyone for at most two days. However, it was apparent that a war would be breaking out soon in Stronghold 74. All of the food was consolidated in the hands of the troops now. If they did not get some provisions for themselves, the entire tour group would go hungry in two days.

Chapter 556 Only faith, the sun, and the moon are eternal

In the prodigious mountains in the west, the traces of human civilization had been completely erased by the vegetation. In the morning, Old Li and Qin Sheng set off and entered the mountains. They scurried across the uneven ground in the forested mountains as though they were traveling on flat ground.

When they speedily arrived at a canyon that was six to seven meters wide, they swiftly leaped across it like cats without batting an eyelid.

It seemed they did not regard this canyon to be dangerous at all.

Every time this happened, Qin Sheng would feel a sense of pride like he had conquered nature.

But his teacher always reminded him that it was not possible for a human to conquer nature. What a Rider should seek to do was become a unique living creature that was a part of nature.

Just as Old Li had said to Ren Xiaosu, he always believed that human beings should leave the strongholds so they could adapt to this world. If not, they would only get eliminated.

That was how he lived as well.

Slowly, as the two of them got closer to their destination, Qin Sheng's stamina was gradually depleting. Old Li stopped in his tracks and said with a smile, "Since you aren't a true Rider yet, you should conserve your energy a little. You'll be required to scale a 600-meter-tall vertical cliff this time. It won't be easy to get to the top."

"Teacher, must I really climb that high?" Qin Sheng said with a wry smile, "Without any protective measures, I'll die if I fall from that height."

But Old Li didn't seem to care. "As disciples of the Riders, how can you be afraid of death? This is about faith. Moreover, the height of 600 meters was determined by the Riders that came before. Why did they not set it at 500 or 700 meters? Because you can unlock your body's shackles at 600 meters, so it isn't necessary to climb higher than that. You should know that back then, that Rider had climbed to a height of 900 meters. You and I can't match his brilliance. However, 600 meters is the minimum height that has to be climbed, not one meter less."

The Rider Old Li was referring to was the founder of the Qinghe Group. Currently, in the Riders organization, everyone was a believer in the philosophy of the Riders. Besides putting their faith in the original Rider, they also sought to conquer nature by becoming a part of it. All these years, they had been searching for the original Rider's descendant.

The so-called secret to unlocking the genetic code in a Rider's body lay in the eight mysterious challenges that pushed the challenger to conquer nature and become a part of it.

Among them was the Surge of Strength: Mountain biking.

Birth of Sky: Skydiving.

Life of Water: Extreme surfing.

Life of Wind: Wingsuit flying.

Currently, Qin Sheng was only left with the last challenge. Law of Attraction: Without any protective measures, he had to scale a 600-meter-tall cliff with only his bare hands.

In fact, the Riders did not mind letting the outside world know about this secret. They just never publicized it before. However, these eight challenges had to be completed by normal people in order to fully unlock the shackles in their bodies.

If they did not have an extreme passion and faith during the process, it would be impossible to complete the eight challenges. If someone succeeded in completing them, they would become a member of the Riders as well, because they would understand there was something more to life after experiencing the original Rider's glory.

Each of these eight challenges was a matter of life and death. They would have to go through near-death experiences before they could clear these thresholds.

When Old Li looked at Qin Sheng's youthful face brimming with vigor, he was reminded of himself from 15 years ago.

Now that he was 38 years old, he was no longer considered young. Although his body had become stronger after his genetic code was unlocked, his mindset was destined to be different.

The other members of the Riders probably had the same mindset as him. Their current wish was to find the original Rider's descendant. Although they did not have a chance to meet that Rider, they wanted to see if his descendant was cut from the same cloth.

Looking at the 600-meter-tall cliff in front of him, Old Li said with a sigh, "In recent years, we feel that there might not be any new Riders coming through in the future. Some people who attempted the wingsuit flying challenge after you were attacked by flying beasts while midair. As the various consortiums have stopped operating aircraft, skydiving has become impossible. The most difficult challenge is still surfing. They say a huge creature is often sighted devouring ships off the coast of the Kong Consortium's territory in recent times. Even going out to sea will be difficult, so don't mention surfing."

Not mentioning the difficulty of the challenge itself, just the conditions to complete them had become even harsher than before. If you could not even get into the sky, how could you skydive? In the process of parachuting down, there was even the possibility of being attacked by flying beasts. This was no longer a near-death experience but a sure-death experience.

When Qin Sheng started the challenges, some people in their organization had already foreseen that these situations might happen. Therefore, they trained Qin Sheng to complete the other challenges first.

As they passed through the forest, a smooth cliff suddenly appeared in front of them. Old Li was lost in thought as he looked at the cliff. In the past, he had also climbed up from here.

Old Li said with a smile, "When my uncle brought me here, I had the same thought as you. How could a human being climb this cliff? It was impossible to do, right? But as it turned out, I managed to do it. Qin Sheng, go on and climb it. Complete your last challenge and become the final Rider."

Qin Sheng took off his heavy fall clothing and changed into his rock climbing shoes, vest, and shorts they had specially brought with them. He also attached a chalk bag to his belt. The chalk would prevent his palms from getting sweaty and increase the friction between his hands and the cliff wall.

Old Li said with a smile, "Do you still remember what I told you?"

Qin Sheng glanced at Old Li. "I remember.... Only faith, the sun, and the moon are eternal."

With that, Qin Sheng turned around and walked towards the mountain. Even at noon, the autumn sun did not feel scorching. Instead, it gave people a sense of warmth in the cold wind.

Under normal circumstances, climbers would have to familiarize themselves with the route in advance for a free solo. It was necessary for the climber to be lowered down from the top with a rope bit by bit, not only to get familiarized with the route, but also to clear debris off the cliff walls.

However, a lot of Riders had already climbed this cliff before. Qin Sheng could even see the subtle traces left on the cliff wall to deduce the route those Riders took back then. It was as though he had the guidance of his predecessors.

At this moment, Qin Sheng turned around and looked at Old Li. It was as though the brilliant Riders from before were all standing behind and smiling at him.

As he climbed the cliff, Qin Sheng's movements were like an agile ape. But when he reached the height of a 100 meters, Qin Sheng started to feel his stamina depleting quickly.

As he stood there, he lodged his arm in a crevice on the stone wall and took a break while panting heavily. Looking up above him, it was as if there was no end to the cliff.

Then Qin Sheng saw some words carved into the cliff beside him: Zhang Qingxi was here.

Thinking about it, this should be where Brother Qingxi had rested when he scaled the wall. Qin Sheng smiled. Then he adjusted his breathing and continued to climb up.

At this moment, it felt like the other Riders were climbing to the top of the cliff with him.

Old Li started stretching at the bottom of the cliff. He began climbing up the cliff with a bundle of ropes on his back. But to a Rider like Old Li, it was no longer challenging to climb up a cliff like this. Rather, it felt more like a reminder of his youth.

Chapter 557 Isolated city

Free soloing is one of the most exhausting activities in extreme sports. In his climb, Qin Sheng took seven breaks, and he could even see the words left behind by his predecessors at every resting spot. As he made his way to the top, the names were like warm greetings that silently supported him.

Old Li was following Qin Sheng at a speed that was neither fast nor slow. Old Li enjoyed not the joy of reaching the top but the pleasure of looking for the names of his old friends.

After he went back and met up with his old friends, he would have a new conversation topic. "Buddy, you rested eight times when you scaled the cliff back then. You really suck!"

Old Li was not the only person with a sarcastic sense of humor. All Riders would develop this bad habit after being a part of this organization for some time.

When Qin Sheng was at the last ten meters of his ascent, his arms were shaking. However, Old Li called out from below, "Keep climbing. If you fall down now, there will be no more new Riders in the future!"

Just as he finished speaking, Qin Sheng let out a fierce grunt and continued climbing upward.

Several hours had already passed, and the afternoon sun was gradually setting behind the cliff.

The wind in the mountains was starting to pick up, and their clothes were flapping loudly in the wind. Qin Sheng climbed up as though he were chasing the fading afterglow of the sunset.

Old Li did not help him because every Rider had to take their own path.

He remembered when the original Rider first established the organization, he once said to a senior member of the Riders, "This is where we part ways. From here on out, I will no longer interfere with what you do."

At this moment, Qin Sheng's right hand grabbed the edge of the cliff. Using the last bit of his strength, he pulled his entire body up with his right hand as support. As he laid at the top of the cliff and gasped violently for breath, he suddenly noticed a dense inscription on the ground.

There were names at the end of every sentence. Zhang Qingxi, Li Yingyun, Huang Xiaoyu, Wen Meng, Wu Dingyuan, Luo Yunxian, Xu Ke...

There were a total of 32 familiar names.

Old Li's real name was Li Yingyun, while Xu Ke's name surprised Qin Sheng. Honestly, probably no one in the rest of the world knew that Xu Ke was also a member of the Riders. Only those who had made it to the top of this cliff could see the names that were clearly engraved here.

Everyone wrote the same thing: "Only faith, the sun, and the moon are eternal."

Qin Sheng was stunned. He realized someone had etched two large words before any of those other inscriptions. However, no name was signed.

"Forever young."

These words stood out.

Qin Sheng immediately turned to look at Old Li, who had just arrived at the top. "Did that Rider really die when The Cataclysm occurred?"

Old Li shook his head and said with a smile, "I don't know either, I really don't know."

Qin Sheng turned around and looked at the words "forever young." This cliff was the most suitable place for the Riders to face their challenge and had only been discovered by his predecessors after The Cataclysm. But why would these words appear here?

All generations of the Riders had signed their names after writing here, except for the one that said "forever young." So there were not just 32 Riders in the organization. Including that unknown person, there should be a total of 33.

Old Li said next to him, "Your vision should not be limited to what's in front of you."

The young Qin Sheng jerked his head up to face the western horizon. The setting sun's rays were shining through the clouds in the distance. When the magnificent clouds suddenly parted, the golden rays shone down like a sea of light.

Then a cracking sound suddenly came from the young Qin Sheng's body. Old Li started laughing in a pleased manner.

It seemed that some kind of shackle had been unlocked as a huge and powerful force swept through Qin Sheng's body like a torrent.

Old Li smiled and said, "Qin Sheng, you're the last Rider."

But suddenly, the sound of gunfire rang out from the mountains in the distance. Old Li and Qin Sheng turned around to look. The anguished wails of humans followed after the gunshots. Who could be fighting in the mountains? Could it be that the Qing Consortium and the Zhou Consortium have started engaging in war?

A moment later, a gray figure climbed to the peak of a nearby mountain. Old Li frowned when he saw that figure had climbed up at a shockingly fast speed. The physical strength of the other party was probably even comparable to that of a Rider!

The gray figure standing at the top of the mountain across from them did not have any hair or even eyebrows. The other party looked quietly at Old Li and Qin Sheng with a gaze like that of a normal, callous human being.

The description might not be accurate, because in Old Li's opinion, the other party was almost the same as a human being except for its telltale skin color.

It was an Experimental!

This word immediately flashed across Old Li's mind. They had heard of the Experimentals before. After all, they were known to be wreaking havoc in the Southwest for a long time now.

But Old Li could not understand why the Experimentals would suddenly come to the Central Plains.

Besides, didn't they say Experimentals moved in a reptilian-like crawl? Why was this Experimental in front of them so special then? It even had an expressive gaze in its eyes like that of human beings?

Old Li stood upright in confrontation with the other party. However, the Experimental actually smiled at Old Li before heading back down the mountain. It seemed like it had climbed to the summit just to take a look at them.

After the Experimental left, Old Li immediately secured the rope he had brought up with him to the summit. "Let's leave here quickly. We have to inform the Zhou Consortium about the arrival of the Experimentals. If Stronghold 74 is caught unprepared, I'm afraid that everyone in the stronghold will be in trouble!"

In that instant, a scene of the stronghold residents wailing in anguish appeared in Old Li's mind. It was a sight no humans wanted to see.

Just before they headed back down the mountain, Old Li even purposely turned around and took a look. He saw in the distance a dense group of Experimentals crazily surging forward in the valley. The number of Experimentals covering the entire wilderness was probably close to 10,000 strong.

Even someone as experienced and knowledgeable as Old Li could feel his scalp going numb at the sight of this. How did the number of Experimentals grow so rapidly?!

They could only pray the garrison troops of Stronghold 74 were sufficient!

As Old Li and Qin Sheng sprinted towards Stronghold 74, Qin Sheng's joy at becoming a Rider vanished.

When they arrived at the stronghold gate, Old Li did not hide his identity and directly produced his Riders' identification. Then he told the Zhou Consortium troops that there was a large number of Experimentals right behind them. Even by their most conservative estimate, there were still around 6,000 of them!

But before they could explain further, the Zhou Consortium troops suddenly received news that the brigade sent from Stronghold 73 to reinforce their defenses had been ambushed by the Experimentals. More than half of the reinforcements had been injured or killed and were retreating back to Stronghold 73!

As it was already dark, that brigade did not even manage to figure out how many Experimentals they were ambushed by. Before they received more precise intelligence about the Experimentals, the troops from Stronghold 73 could only wait until they were joined by more soldiers before coming over to reinforce Stronghold 74's defenses.

In other words, Stronghold 74 would be an isolated city for at least the next seven days!

Old Li said in a solemn voice, “The Experimentals behind us can’t run faster than us, so that must be another group of Experimentals that ambushed your troops. They’re attacking the stronghold from both the east and the west. If that’s really the case, then we must be prepared that their numbers exceed 10,000!”

Chapter 558 To leave or not to leave

When Old Li and Qin Sheng finished the free solo challenge, it was already evening. By the time they got back to Stronghold 74 to relay the news, it was already very late at night.

When the news was relayed back that the reinforcements from Stronghold 73 had been ambushed, the Zhou Consortium’s troops fell silent. Old Li asked, “Since the Qing Consortium had informed you all beforehand, why didn’t you deploy more troops over here?”

The commander of the Zhou Consortium troops at Stronghold 74 replied, “Originally, we wanted to mobilize more troops here, but didn’t something happen at Stronghold 73 a while ago too? Who would’ve expected something like this to happen? If not for the cave-in at East Lake in Stronghold 73, the reinforcements would’ve already arrived.”

Old Li fell silent because the Riders were also involved in the incident at Stronghold 73. Although it was only one of their members who went there, they were involved nonetheless. So strictly speaking, everyone with an ulterior motive at Stronghold 73 that day were accomplices to the Experimentals.

But while Old Li thought like this, others did not. For example, Ren Xiaosu simply felt that the incident was caused by the Pyro Company and the Anjing House and had nothing to do with him at all.

In the middle of the night, the Zhou Consortium troops in the stronghold deployed all their soldiers to the defensive fortifications even though it was already bedtime, leaving only a small number of soldiers with rotational breaks.

Based on the Qing Consortium’s intelligence reports, a few thousand Experimentals were already enough to cause a headache for them in their previous encounters. Their skin and muscles were so tough that not even bullets could penetrate, so they had to resort to using heavy machine guns.

But the Experimentals were also capable of moving very quickly. They could easily dodge their fire and get into the shooters’ blind spots while normal soldiers could not react fast enough to keep up with their movements.

When the speed and strength of the enemy were more than twice that of ordinary soldiers, they would have a feeling of being overwhelmed on the battlefield.

It would feel like the normal soldiers were moving in “slow motion” while the Experimentals were moving at a normal speed. Even if they possessed firearms, they would still suffer heavy casualties while fighting in that situation.

Although the soldiers could kill a lot of Experimentals, the Experimentals did not care about casualties at all. They could just turn the stronghold residents into Experimentals to make up for their losses after taking over the stronghold!

Old Li glanced at Qin Sheng and said, "By rights, you should go to a town immediately and live there for a year once you become a Rider. You can't use your power or even use the skills I've taught you to survive in the wilderness. But at a critical moment like this, you and I should help the Zhou Consortium defend against external enemies first."

Qin Sheng nodded at that. He understood the seriousness of the situation.

There wasn't really anyone around the town outside the stronghold anymore. Even the refugees had already been shifted into the stronghold to help build the defensive fortifications. This was probably the first time the refugees had stepped foot in the stronghold, but they were made to wear an anklet tracker.

After all, the refugees would still have to leave the stronghold after the war was over.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was leading Fang Zhi and the others quietly towards the perimeter of the construction site. He whispered, "Do y'all have any other valuables on you?"

Fang Zhi nodded and said, "We managed to gather 30,000 yuan in cash and five watches." Fang Zhi was visibly feeling the pinch. His own watch was very expensive and cost him more than 200,000 yuan.

Ren Xiaosu first used his watch to trade for some food. The officer in charge of watching over the grain supplies grinned from ear to ear. These supplies were not his own but the Zhou Consortium's rations, after all. Since he could get a branded watch in exchange for some of these grains, he could not be happier to oblige.

Ren Xiaosu traded for around a dozen bags of grains, which would be enough to sustain them for at least half a month. However, Ren Xiaosu did not put it away into his storage space. Instead, he made Fang Zhi and the others carry them.

Immediately after, Ren Xiaosu used the remaining 30,000 yuan and five watches to bribe the supervisor of the construction site to allow them to leave.

The officer in charge of supervising the construction site even specifically instructed them not to head out after returning home. If they were caught and made to come back here again, not even the gods could help them.

There were more than 2,000 people at the construction site where Ren Xiaosu and the others were working. It had so many conscripted workers there was not even a place to house them all, so they could only sleep on the ground.

Therefore, no one would realize it even if a dozen-odd people disappeared.

When Fang Zhi walked out of the construction site, he felt extremely puzzled. "We got out so easily? They let us go just like that?"

Ren Xiaosu glanced at him. "They only brought you here to work, not line you up to be executed. There's already so many people working there, so it's not like they miss the few of us. It's the private troops who're supervising the construction site, and you know how they are, don't you?"

In recent years, the various consortiums had been gradually downsizing the number of private troops. In another few years, they might not even be around anymore.

According to Zhang Jinglin, stronghold overseers used to be elected at the beginning. As the consortiums were still not strong at that time, some stronghold overseers could even rival the consortiums with the private troops under their control.

But gradually, as the consortiums grew more and more powerful, the status of the overseers became weaker and weaker. Even though they controlled the private troops, that only served as a proverbial loincloth for the overseers. In the end, their power was even further corroded by the highly addictive cigarettes the consortiums supplied.

In the current day, the consortiums had started replacing the overseers. For example, Luo Lan was secretly in charge of an entire stronghold even though he did not hold an official post in Stronghold 113 in the past.

And now, the consortiums openly took over all the strongholds. So, there was no reason for the private troops to exist.

Many officers in the private troops had also realized this point. They knew very well that the consortiums would not want to keep good-for-nothings like them under their payroll. In that case, they might as well earn whatever money they could so they would have nothing to worry about for the rest of their lives.

The group walked stealthily in the streets. From time to time, they even had to follow Ren Xiaosu's lead to avoid any military vehicles that passed by. It took them two hours to get to the hotel where Li Ran and the others were staying. Along the way, Ren Xiaosu kept feeling that something was not quite right tonight. The stronghold was especially "active," and it felt as if a war would be breaking out immediately.

Ever since Li Ran and the others got to the hotel, they had been waiting in the hotel lobby. Li Ran had wanted to go back to her own room, but Zhou Yingxue insisted they sit in the lobby to wait. She said it was impossible that Ren Xiaosu would stay at the construction site for too long and that he might escape as soon as it turned dark.

As expected, Zhou Yingxue rushed over happily to Ren Xiaosu when she saw him. However, she was turned off by the sweaty stench of this group of people.

Li Ran pinched her nose. "Hurry up and go take a shower."

"How can we still be in the mood to take a shower?" Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, "Pack up your belongings immediately. We have to leave the stronghold tonight."

“Why do we have to leave the stronghold?” Li Ran exclaimed. “We just arrived, and the concert hasn’t even been held yet.”

Ren Xiaosu cast an eye at her. She was really oblivious about the seriousness of the situation. Why would she still be thinking of the concert at such a time!

He said to Zhou Yingxue, “Use your power to make a tunnel leading outside the walls or something. We’ll leave through that.”

“A tunnel?” Fang Zhi asked doubtfully, “How wide is the tunnel?”

“Wide enough for a person to pass through.” Ren Xiaosu looked at Fang Zhi.

“What about our loudspeakers and instruments?” Fang Zhi exclaimed, “Even a single trumpet of ours is worth more than a 100,000 yuan!”

Ren Xiaosu was dumbfounded by what he said. He had not expected instruments to be so expensive.

Next to them, one of the ten plainclothes guards from the Wang Consortium said, “I don’t think it’s necessary for us to leave. Even if the Qing Consortium attacks this place, they won’t do anything to the stronghold residents, so we can just stay in the hotel without worries. There’s nothing to be afraid of. When the time comes, I can liaise with them as an officer of the Wang Consortium, and they’ll definitely let us go. After all, the Qing Consortium will not want to offend the Wang Consortium after just declaring war on the Zhou Consortium.”

Chapter 559 Attack of the Experimentals

The plainclothes guard spoke with logic and reason. What he was trying to say was that they did not have to listen to Ren Xiaosu. Moreover, he really convinced the others as well. Fang Zhi pulled Zhou Yingxue over and said, “I think they’re right. We don’t actually have to leave at all. If the Qing Consortium attacks, the Wang Consortium’s officer can handle them. Everything will be fine since there’s absolutely no reason for the Qing Consortium to declare war on the entire Central Plains.”

Fang Zhi did not say this to Ren Xiaosu. Instead, he spoke to Zhou Yingxue because Ren Xiaosu was her assistant, so he would definitely have to listen to her.

But when Ren Xiaosu heard that, he could not help but get angry.

If it were really the Qing Consortium coming to attack, it would be fine. He was just afraid that the enemy was not the Qing Consortium!

If it were the Qing Consortium invading Stronghold 74, why would Ren Xiaosu run away? He could walk brazenly in the stronghold at that time, alright? When the time came, there wouldn’t even be a need for the Wang Consortium officers to liaise with them. After all, he was still an active officer in the Qing Consortium’s army!

Back at Position 313, Ren Xiaosu gave the defensive deployment map to Qing Zhen and helped Luo Lan on many occasions. Luo Lan even said he could make Ren Xiaosu a general, but Ren Xiaosu turned down his offer. He did not want any official positions; just money would do.

Luo Lan said he would keep the post for him anyway, and he could take the position as and when he felt like it.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the few plainclothes officers who were speaking so confidently as if they had the authority to negotiate with the Qing Consortium. Right now, Ren Xiaosu was most afraid the enemy was not the Qing Consortium.

After all, Luo Lan had only recently become friends with the Zhou Consortium. He also understood that Qing Zhen was not someone who liked starting wars. Since the Zhou Consortium did not declare war on the Qing Consortium, why would Qing Zhen have his soldiers travel 500 kilometers over mountain paths to the Central Plains for no reason? Did he think it would be fun?

All of a sudden, a bell rang out in Stronghold 74. Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He asked Zhou Yingxue, "Do the bells in the Central Plains have the same meaning as the ones in the Southwest and Northwest?"

Zhou Yingxue whispered, "Yes, they mean the same thing. It's signaling that the stronghold is in danger."

A patrol squad drove past outside with a loudspeaker blaring, "All stronghold residents are to stay at home. You will not be allowed to come outside without permission. If you encounter any unknown creatures, please inform the Zhou Consortium's troops by telephone as soon as possible. The landline number is 077."

All residents of the stronghold had a landline telephone in their homes. Ren Xiaosu and the others had also used one when they were running the clinic.

When Ren Xiaosu heard that, his expression immediately sank. He looked at Li Ran and the plainclothes guards and said, "There's no need to leave. We can't escape anymore."

Ren Xiaosu could roughly guess who was coming to attack Stronghold 74. Other than terrifying creatures like the Experimentals, there was probably nothing else that could make a consortium fear they were facing a formidable foe.

If there were really Experimentals outside the stronghold, the wilderness would be the most dangerous place to be right now.

As for what the plainclothes guard had said about no stronghold residents coming to harm no matter who attacked the stronghold, that was even more ridiculous. The Experimentals were absolutely the kind that would massacre everyone.

When Zhou Yingxue noticed Ren Xiaosu's serious expression, she quickly asked, "Just what on earth is coming to attack?"

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue. "Since you're also from the Southwest, you must've heard of the Experimentals..."

Zhou Yingxue also blanched. After all, the Experimentals had already destroyed several strongholds in the Southwest.

Immediately, Zhou Yingxue said to Li Ran, "The mission only requires us to protect you, so you have to leave with us now. If you want to live, don't worry about the others."

Li Ran turned a little panicky and looked at Ren Xiaosu, who was standing off to the side. However, Ren Xiaosu did not say anything. He was frowning while thinking about something.

Next to them, one of the plainclothes guards said unhappily when he heard Zhou Yingxue's words, "You were only hired to boost the image of our client. Do you really think Ms. Ranran needs your protection? She'll stay with us and no one will be able to hurt her, because we're active military personnel!"

Zhou Yingxue gave that plainclothes guard a cold stare. "How're you going to protect Li Ran when your guns have been confiscated by the Zhou Consortium? Besides, it's still a question whether you've been on a real battlefield before!"

Then Li Ran asked Zhou Yingxue, "Is the situation really that terrible? I can pay you more, so please just protect all of us?"

The plainclothes guard stopped her and said, "Why do you want to pay them more? She's only a superhuman! Besides, we haven't even seen her use her power, so who knows if her reputation precedes her?"

Li Ran did not listen to him and continued asking Zhou Yingxue, "I can pay more. Will you agree?"

To Li Ran's surprise, Zhou Yingxue turned her head and looked at Ren Xiaosu. It was as if she were asking for his opinion.

Li Ran suddenly realized Ren Xiaosu was not her assistant at all. Why else would Zhou Yingxue need to consult her assistant on what to do next?

But thinking of this, Li Ran felt that everything made sense now. Even Zhou Yingxue could not stop Ren Xiaosu from acting on his own throughout the tour. If he were just a lowly assistant, how could he possibly act so recklessly?

As he spoke, Mu Wan'ge stepped out of the hotel elevator. He only ran down from his hotel room when he heard the commotion outside. As such, he wanted to meet up with the rest of the group to decide on what to do next.

Sensing the tense atmosphere in the hotel lobby, Mu Wan'ge asked what was going on. In the end, a crew member told him the stronghold might get attacked by some unknown creatures that were extremely strong. And right now, Li Ran was requesting that Zhou Yingxue and Ren Xiaosu protect everyone, but the plainclothes guards did not allow it.

When Mu Wan'ge heard this, he immediately turned to Ren Xiaosu and nearly grabbed his hands. He said sincerely, "I have money, please protect me. My life is dedicated to art, not to be sacrificed to monsters."

Everyone in the lobby was stunned. When Li Ran saw Mu Wan'ge approaching Ren Xiaosu directly instead of Zhou Yingxue, she was not surprised at all. This made more sense now.

If not, why would Mu Wan'ge keep insisting on having Ren Xiaosu appear in his movie? And even chased him all the way to Stronghold 74?

Only this could explain everything!

This time, Mu Wan'ge had only brought two crew members along with him, with most of those in the group being Li Ran's people. All in all, there were 30 of them.

Ren Xiaosu was not interested in saving so many people. Furthermore, if the Experimentals were to invade into the stronghold, 90% of the people in this city would die. Why would he care about others at a time like this? With such a large group of people, shouldn't they be more afraid the Experimentals would find them more easily?

In actual fact, Ren Xiaosu had also realized the Experimentals were not so thorough in their search of a stronghold. So, even though the strongholds in the Southwest had been invaded by the Experimentals before, a few survivors still managed to escape. Ren Xiaosu thought that if the Experimentals were to really breach the stronghold, he could make use of Zhou Yingxue's power to create a small underground refuge to take shelter in. The Zhou Consortium could not possibly give up Stronghold 74 entirely. Once the Zhou Consortium's troops drove the Experimentals away, they could come out of the underground refuge.

But was it really that simple?

Chapter 560 Predicamen

There was barely any staff left in the hotel, with only one or two people staying behind to look after the place while the rest of their colleagues went home to their families.

While Li Ran and the others were sitting in the hotel lobby in a daze, gunshots suddenly rang out outside the stronghold. To be precise, it came from the top of the stronghold walls.

The plainclothes guards from the Wang Consortium were standing at the hotel's entrance and had been discussing how to get their hands on some weapons. They wondered if they could contact the Wang Consortium to get them to liaise with the Zhou Consortium to return the weapons to them.

But after talking on the satellite phone for a long time, the Wang Consortium only promised them that they would speak with the Zhou Consortium about the matter. However, there was no further update.

Ren Xiaosu glanced at those soldiers standing at the entrance, then pulled Zhou Yingxue aside and said, "You stay here. I'll go outside to take a look."

Zhou Yingxue turned anxious. She lowered her voice and said, "Master, please don't go running around. I'm scared."

"What's the use of being scared?" Ren Xiaosu retrieved two pistols and six magazines from his storage space and handed them to Zhou Yingxue. "This hotel is located in the center of the stronghold. If anything happens here, it means that the entire stronghold is doomed. When the time comes, you can

just find a random spot to open up an underground refuge with your seeds. After that, wait for me to come and rescue you, understand?”

“Then should we still save Li Ran at that time?” Zhou Yingxue asked.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment. “It’s already good enough if you can survive, so why would you still think about saving others at that time? At worst, we don’t get to participate in the Anjing House trials, but we won’t die either.”

Zhou Yingxue broke out into a smile and was no longer scared. “Yes, Master.”

She was most worried that Ren Xiaosu was only using her to join the Anjing House and would abandon her after that. But right now, it seemed she was more important than his objective of joining the Anjing House.

Ren Xiaosu found this a little baffling. How could this woman change so quickly? Just a moment ago, she was looking quite scared. But now, she could even start smiling.

After that, he walked out of the hotel. When Li Ran and Mu Wan’ge saw this, they immediately panicked. Li Ran got up and asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going outside to take a look,” Ren Xiaosu replied.

“If you’re leaving, who’s going to protect us?” Mu Wan’ge said anxiously.

“What if you don’t come back?” Li Ran said, sounding a little lost.

Ren Xiaosu gestured with his chin at Zhou Yingxue and said, “You still have her around.”

Everyone looked at Zhou Yingxue. When they saw Zhou Yingxue inspecting the pistols, everyone wondered how she managed to sneak them into the stronghold.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the plainclothes guards and said with a grin, “And there’s still them, right? They can protect y’all.”

When those guards saw the two guns Zhou Yingxue was holding, their eyes lit up. “We’re active military personnel. Since you want us to protect everyone, we should be the ones handling those guns. Also, we’re more adept at using them.”

Ren Xiaosu sneered, “Zhou Yingxue, if anyone tries to seize the guns from you after I leave, you can shoot them dead.”

Zhou Yingxue also said calmly, “You’re saying that you guys are more adept at using firearms? You couldn’t even safeguard your own guns, so why are you still talking about using them?”

With that, Ren Xiaosu left. As a matter of fact, Zhou Yingxue was not a weak-willed woman at all. She was a lady who could blatantly lie without batting an eyelid. If these plainclothes guards dared to plot against Zhou Yingxue to get her guns, they would probably be killed by her tonight.

After Ren Xiaosu left the hotel, he headed to the west side of the stronghold. That should be the main battlefield where the Zhou Consortium's troops were going to face the Experimentals. But on the way there, he suddenly saw more than a dozen supernatural beings dressed in black hopping across the roofs at almost the same speed as him. They only took a glance at him and did not say anything.

But something felt strange. Where did these supernatural beings come from? A moment later, Ren Xiaosu noticed the sabers they were carrying on their belts. Weren't those the Pyro Company's ceramic sabers?

Wait a minute, were all these people the Pyro Company's members? All of them must have been hiding in Stronghold 74 before the Experimentals arrived.

But since they were members of the Pyro Company, why didn't they make a move when they encountered a supernatural being like him?

Ren Xiaosu quietly ran off in another direction. Then he switched to using his shadow clone to follow the Pyro Company members to see what they were up to.

The garrison troops had already ceased firing from the top of the stronghold walls, and Ren Xiaosu wondered what the situation outside was like.

Eventually, the Pyro Company members and Ren Xiaosu arrived at the stronghold's western walls. The Pyro Company members immediately announced their identities to the Zhou Consortium's troops and started ascending the walls.

Ren Xiaosu watched through his spotting scope. He also saw the Zhou Consortium's troops distributing guns to the Pyro Company members. It seemed like the Pyro Company members would be joining forces with the Zhou Consortium's troops to guard the city this time.

The Pyro Company was going to help defend the city and protect the stronghold residents? So it turned out the Pyro Company members did not try to capture a supernatural being like him when they encountered him earlier because they had an even more important task to handle?

This was subverting Ren Xiaosu's understanding. So when humans were faced with a common threat, even an organization like the Pyro Company would become part of the defense forces?

Actually, Ren Xiaosu understood that if the Zhou Consortium's troops were to be defeated, hundreds of thousands of people across the entire stronghold would end up suffering. But to be honest, he was really not expecting the Pyro Company to automatically step forward to give their assistance.

Old Li and Qin Sheng had already collected their firearms distributed by the Zhou Consortium troops. However, the Zhou Consortium did not assign them any specific tasks. But if the Experimentals started charging up the walls, it would be up to these supernatural beings to fend them off.

After all, it would be very difficult to kill the Experimentals with just pistols and automatic rifles if that happened. Furthermore, the Experimentals were extremely mobile. So if an Experimental managed to climb the walls, it would become a huge threat to the stronghold's entire defense system. Even more

Experimentals could manage to get up on the walls and cause the entire defensive line to collapse. At that time, they could only rely on the newly built defensive fortifications within the city, although that would surely be their last resort.

At this moment, the Experimentals had just started attacking, but they were forced to retreat into the forest when the Zhou Consortium killed several dozen of them with heavy machine guns.

When the Experimentals emerged from the forest again, everyone on the stronghold walls was stunned. That was because there were several hundred live hostages being herded towards the stronghold by the Experimentals. Old Li thought he might even know some of them as they seemed to be the refugees who had escaped into the wilderness to avoid the organizations.

The Experimentals would usually kill anyone they encountered. But it was different this time. They had actually learned how to take humans as hostages!

The humans had heavy machine guns, didn't they? Then let's see if they were willing to kill their own kind first.

The garrison force stationed on the stronghold walls in the east was facing a similar predicament. It was not only the refugees that were being herded forward by the Experimentals, but a large number of the Zhou Consortium soldiers in their blue military uniforms were also among the crowd. It seemed that these were the reinforcements from Stronghold 73 that had been recently captured by the Experimentals.

To open fire or not to open fire?

Old Li, Qin Sheng, and the Pyro Company members did not say anything because they were only here to provide support, so it was not up to them to make the decisions.

The commander of the Zhou Consortium's garrison troops stood on the stronghold walls and looked silently at the crowd of people approaching the city. Those people cried until their throats turned hoarse. Some of the adults were hugging their children in their arms while their faces were covered in tears.

Among the crowd, a few sporadic Experimentals were responsible for herding them forward. Meanwhile, the main Experimental forces were closely following about six meters behind them. If the soldiers on the walls did not make a move, the Experimentals would destroy the seemingly impenetrable stronghold in less than a minute once they got close enough to the walls.

The Zhou Consortium commander said calmly, "Open fire."