

First Order 571

571 The person who can't be found

The garrison troops of Stronghold 74 all stood quietly on the stronghold walls as they waited for Old Li to return.

Everyone wanted to know what the Experimentals had talked about since it was a little bizarre for such fearsome creatures to want to negotiate.

When they saw Old Li appear on the horizon, the garrison troops on the walls were all relieved. At least, Old Li had returned safely.

Some of them even started cheering like they were welcoming a lone hero home. They were not stingy with their praises and ardor at all. It sounded like these garrison troops on the stronghold walls had won the battle with everyone conveniently forgetting that they were still surrounded by the Experimentals at this moment.

However, the hero, Old Li, did not look happy at all. Instead, he felt torn and puzzled by what he had just found out. His mood turned a little heavy.

The soldiers on the walls were about to lower the gondola car to pick up Old Li. However, he climbed up from below with his bare hands.

From a distance, the stronghold walls looked very smooth. But upon closer inspection, there were still some fine cracks in it. When everyone saw Old Li skillfully climbing the walls, it was apparent that this was not the first time he had scaled a stronghold.

Zhou Xingwen went up to Old Li. "What did the Experimentals want? How did you communicate with them?"

"One of them can speak our language." Old Li looked at the Pyro Company members next to him and said to the others truthfully, "The Experimentals all came from the Pyro Company's Lab 39 that was originally used to treat cancer patients. However, an accident happened and caused them to become like that. They wanted to negotiate with us to help them find a person who escaped from that lab. They said the person holds a secret that can help them recover fully and turn them back into normal humans again."

Everyone was shocked. A lot of information was contained in those short few sentences.

Looking at everyone's dumbfounded expression, Old Li recalled that he probably wore the same look as well earlier.

Everyone looked at the Pyro Company members subconsciously and thought to themselves, 'So they were the ones who created these creatures.' This confirmed the Pyro Company had created the monsters.

But since they were helping to defend the city now, the officers of the Zhou Consortium troops did not say anything more. They could only go back and discuss it in private later.

Meanwhile, the Pyro Company members remained expressionless throughout. In fact, it was no secret the Experimentals were created by the Pyro Company.

At least the Qing Consortium knew all about this. However, they did not deliberately try to stir up public opinion to spite the Pyro Company.

At this moment, Old Li sighed and said, "If we can't find that person, the Experimentals will come and destroy the city in seven days."

Zhou Xingwen suddenly said, "We definitely can't hand that person over to the Experimentals. First of all, we can't fully believe what they said as we still need to verify the authenticity of the story. Second, we don't know whether this person can cure the Experimentals or not. These Experimentals are so cunning and vicious, so even if they recover, are we certain we can get along with them?"

Nearby, some people echoed agreement that the person must not be handed over to the Experimentals.

Only Qin Sheng wondered from next to them, "You're putting it as though we've already found that person. Why do I feel that we might not even be able to find him?"

Zhou Xingwen was speechless.

Old Li said, "Indeed, there aren't really any clues for us to start from. We don't even know what he looks like and can't be sure of how old he is. The only information we have is that he came out of Lab 39."

Qin Sheng's words hit the mark. They would have to find that person first before discussing whether to hand him over to the Experimentals.

Everyone split up and got down to business. The Pyro Company contacted their headquarters to relay the information. However, the Pyro Company clearly expressed that Laboratory 39 had been completely destroyed. After the earthquake in the Jing Mountains, the volcanic magma had entirely covered the area. Furthermore, there was an extremely powerful unidentified creature there.

Even if that creature remained motionless in the volcano, the laboratory data would have been burned away by the magma. There was absolutely no chance of finding any clues.

There might have been some relevant data left in the research laboratory at Stronghold 73. After all, based on some previously discovered information, the research direction of that research laboratory and Laboratory 39 was generally the same, so both laboratories should have had contact with each other. There might just have been some information left behind.

But that data had already been stolen by Wang Congyang!

Suddenly, the Pyro Company issued an order to raise the wanted level of Wang Congyang.

The Zhou Consortium's troops immediately contacted the Qing Consortium. Even the head of the Zhou Consortium, Zhou Shiji, called Qing Zhen directly in the hope that the Qing Consortium could provide them with some information about this matter.

However, the Qing Consortium expressed they also knew nothing of this. They had only deduced that the Experimentals must have mutated from cancer patients, which was now confirmed by the Zhou Consortium.

As for the person the Experimentals were looking for, they were not sure of that either. It could be very possible that he had died along with the destruction of Stronghold 113 and Stronghold 112.

The earthquake utterly destroyed the two strongholds. Even if there were any clues, they would probably have been buried together with the strongholds.

Zhou Xingwen was at a loss. They also discussed whether they should hand over the person, but how were they supposed to hand him over when they could not even find him?!

At this moment, they were guessing the patient who had been successfully cured of cancer was walking among normal people by now. Unless that person's cells were tested, it would be impossible to find him.

Even the Experimentals had mentioned he probably looked like an average person now.

This matter eventually made it to Hope Media's newspapers. The Zhou Consortium troops had made the issue public and accepted the media's interview as they were hoping to appeal to the Experimental who was walking among normal human beings to voluntarily step forward. He would not have to face the Experimentals and only needed to tell them the information he knew.

When Ren Xiaosu read the newspaper, he was bewildered. "Lab 39?"

This matched the research data he had transported away in his train. One of the documents also stated that a patient in Laboratory 39 had successfully made a full recovery from cancer. However, the treatment conditions were extremely particular and difficult to replicate.

So the Experimentals were the guinea pigs of that replicated treatment that had failed.

When he saw the date reported in the newspaper, Ren Xiaosu was stunned. The image of a little boy who was lying unconscious in the snow appeared in his mind. After he carried the boy out of the snow, he ended up with a younger brother from that day onwards.

Based on the date and location, Yan Liuyuan seemed to fit the descriptions very well.

Although the reported date and location were extremely vague, and it was difficult to calculate the time scale as the Experimentals claimed to have been imprisoned in the dark laboratory, it was really possible that Yan Liuyuan could be the person they were looking for based on simple deduction.

But Yan Liuyuan did not have a strong physique. Instead, he was really weak and frail due to his Curse Manipulation superpower.

“It’s probably not the case,” Ren Xiaosu muttered to himself.

But regardless of whether Yan Liuyuan was Experimental 001 or not, Ren Xiaosu would definitely not tell anyone about it. He had seen too much evil and knew full well the kind of things a unique person like that would encounter in society.

No matter how kind you were, you would still be ostracized if you were not one of them.

Even heroes were treated like this, let alone others.

Chapter 572 There’s a bomb

The people at Stronghold 74 had never thought that seven days would feel this long. Usually, a week would fly by, but these seven days felt like seven years.

Old Li seemed full of worries these days. He contacted the other Riders to ask if they knew anything else and whether there was any information they might have neglected.

Actually, Old Li and Qin Sheng did not care so much about the battle between Stronghold 74 and the Experimentals anymore. To them, they were simply defending Stronghold 74 out of a sense of justice.

Just as a hero would step in to help when there was injustice, Old Li and Qin Sheng did not intend to sacrifice themselves to save Stronghold 74.

It was not that they were not resolute in facing a common enemy with the entire human race, but if they could not protect the city even after trying their best, they would rather not die in combat here.

Even though everyone said the Riders were kind and good people, it was only because they had helped a lot of people and were remembered fondly.

But the Riders had something more important they needed to do.

That was why they had carved “only faith, the sun, and the moon are eternal” at the top of the mountain instead of protecting world peace.

In the Riders’ opinion, world peace might be important, but it was not as important as what they believed in.

As part of the Riders, they would have to put finding that Rider’s descendant as their main priority.

Old Li and Qin Sheng kept contacting the rest of the Riders as they wanted to verify whether the Experimentals were really looking for the same person as them.

But after asking around for a long time, everyone expressed that due to severe loss of information, they only knew the person they were looking for was called Ren Xiaobei and that he was rather handsome. He was known to be in the Pyro Company’s research laboratory and was definitely still alive.

This information might seem like a lot, but it was actually very vague.

Old Li and Qin Sheng were sitting on a rooftop in the stronghold with no one around. Old Li suddenly said, "Why would the descendant of that Rider be in the Pyro Company's research lab? Before this, I didn't quite understand why that Rider would send his son to the Pyro Company as a guinea pig for research, so it didn't feel to me like that Rider was someone who could be counted on. But now, combined with what that Experimental told me, I figured that Rider's descendant must've also contracted a terminal disease. Hence, as his last hope, he was forced to send his own son to the Pyro Company."

Qin Sheng nodded in seriousness. "That makes sense, Teacher."

Old Li continued to deduce, "That Rider said his son must still be alive, so does it mean his son's fully recovered? So could the Experimentals be looking for the same person as us?"

Qin Sheng nodded again. "That makes sense, teacher."

Old Li tugged at his own hair. "But what's the use even if we know all this? Where are we going to look for him now that the Qing Consortium's Stronghold 113 and Stronghold 112 have been buried? It's useless even if we know that he's quite handsome. Why don't we put out a notice in the newspapers that we're looking for Ren Xiaobei? If he sees it, he might just come looking for us. If you say that I made sense again, I'm going to beat you up."

Qin Sheng said awkwardly, "But wouldn't he be put in danger if other forces with ulterior motives also start looking for him after we put out a notice in the papers? Besides, the Pyro Company has already deviated from their path, so who knows if they might have other ideas about Ren Xiaobei."

"That's true." Old Li looked at the sky and sighed, "This is so difficult!"

The Pyro Company had been pushed into the spotlight again because of the Experimentals. It seemed that everyone had already forgotten the Pyro Company was also involved in guarding the city and started turning their attention to attack them for creating those monsters.

They even speculated that the Pyro Company had ulterior motives for guarding the city. The garrison in Stronghold 74 gradually began ostracizing the Pyro Company members and no longer told them about any important details regarding the protection of the city.

It was both sad and laughable that humans started fighting among themselves before the final battle had even begun.

The residents in Stronghold 74 had run out of food again. In a large pot of porridge, there were probably only several dozen grains of rice. After eating the porridge, the residents would at most feel bloated with water before starting to feel hungry again in less than an hour.

Fortunately, there was still water available in the stronghold. If not, a lot of people would have died.

The greenway and trees by the roadside had already been stripped clean, leaving only bare branches behind.

Some stronghold residents even hoped the Experimentals would attack earlier so that their suffering could end as quickly as possible. No matter which side won, at least there would be an outcome.

Li Ran and the others had also run out of food, but they were in an even more miserable state than the other residents in the stronghold. Not only were they hungry, but they still had to bear with the smell of meat every day. What a terrible feeling this was! They could smell the food, but they could not eat it!

During the past two days, Li Ran harassed Ren Xiaosu both nights. As a result, he did not even go back to the hotel anymore. After that, Li Ran proceeded to harass Zhou Yingxue. This time, she finally managed to get some food from her. After all, Zhou Yingxue was not a heartless person.

When Fang Zhi, who was standing guard at the door, asked her what she was eating, Li Ran wiped off the oil on her lips and replied, "I was only given some potatoes to eat."

Then Li Ran stuffed about six potatoes into Fang Zhi's hands. "Distribute these to everyone so they can fill their stomachs a little."

As Ren Xiaosu walked down the street, he saw some people sitting on the curb. There were some signs placed in front of them: "Will work for food."

This was a relatively civilized approach. Some people even turned to stealing or robbing.

In fact, there was not much of a difference between the stronghold residents and refugees anymore. When they were driven to desperation, they would resort to any means necessary just to obtain some food.

Most of the time, Ren Xiaosu would just be keeping guard at the top of some high-rise buildings. He was not doing this for anything other than to ensure that the Experimentals would not suddenly crawl out of some hole in the ground again.

He felt this could also be considered as doing his part to defend the stronghold. At this moment, no one in the city would be spared if the stronghold were invaded.

And Ren Xiaosu was thinking about a problem. In reality, it had to be really difficult to find Experimental 001. The Experimentals should also know this since they had already destroyed so many strongholds in the Southwest. Even if they could find him, it would be impossible for Experimental 001 to get to Stronghold 74 within seven days.

Then why did the Experimentals make such a request? They even gave them a seven-day deadline?

Ren Xiaosu was already used to assuming the worst with the Experimentals. After all, their wisdom was already on par with that of normal people or might even have far surpassed that of normal human beings.

Could that negotiation also have been one of the Experimentals' tactics?

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At this moment, several refugee workers were slacking behind the defensive fortifications next to the stronghold walls. They had it slightly better than the stronghold residents. At the very least, they still had some porridge to eat while they were locked up in the barracks. After all, the Zhou Consortium troops still needed them to work.

While several refugee workers were chatting and bragging, the area one of them was sitting on suddenly caved in.

The refugee who fell into the pit was shocked. He thought he was done for. There had to be some Experimentals hiding inside of this pit. This had to be an attack by the Experimentals!

After falling in, he realized the tunnel was really leading towards the outside of the stronghold. However, he did not see any Experimentals inside.

He hurriedly got out of the pit and reported it to the Zhou Consortium troops.

A soldier of the Zhou Consortium used a powerful military flashlight and went down into the pit to investigate. But after just walking a few dozen meters forward, he saw something before him covered with a tarp.

When he lifted the tarp to have a look, he saw some military ammunition boxes underneath that were labeled... "TNT"!

The Zhou Consortium soldier started panicking. He yelled at the people behind him, "There's a bomb!"

This bomb was planted right below the foundations of the stronghold walls.

Chapter 573 There's really a bomb

Knowing that the Experimentals were capable of using simple explosives, it was extremely frightening to find a bomb in the tunnel.

During this period, the Zhou Consortium had deployed special instruments to check on the decibel levels in the vicinity of the stronghold walls, because they were afraid they could not detect the sound of the Experimentals digging tunnels underneath the stronghold.

But looking at this underground tunnel in front of them, the Experimentals must have dug it a long time ago. How else could they have avoided detection by the Zhou Consortium troops?

The soldier who discovered the bomb was panicking as he tried to run back frantically. But before he could get out of the pit, the bomb behind him suddenly exploded.

The ground around the stronghold walls looked like it had suddenly been plowed as large clods of earth started breaking apart. Like the water surface, a dirt "wave" swept across the ground.

The people surrounding the pit were immediately blown into the air, and their organs were ruptured. In the blink of an eye, they died from excessive internal bleeding.

But this was only the beginning. Similar explosions like this went off at three other places.

The loud explosions left the entire stronghold in shock. The residents all stopped whatever they were doing and stared dumbfoundedly at the stronghold walls on the west side that were starting to crumble.

With the loss of the foundation, cracks started to spread from the bottom of the wall to the top from the power of the blast. Finally, three huge gaps appeared!

These three fracture points eventually caused part of the wall to collapse, bringing the garrison troops who were still standing on it to the ground. Any heavy machine guns and artillery they had also became useless. With a breach created in the walls, the Experimentals waiting outside would be getting restless to attack.

When Old Li and Qin Sheng heard the explosions, they immediately rushed off towards the stronghold walls at high speed. But before they could get there, they could already see the stronghold walls collapsing.

It was a sight they had never witnessed with their own eyes. It was as though human civilization were collapsing right before them.

The structure that human beings had relied upon to protect themselves for hundreds of years had crumbled in front of them.

The huge circular stronghold was just like a cake, and a part of it had been cut with a knife by the Experimentals.

This sight also sent a clear message to the humans that their strongholds were not as sturdy as they had thought. All they were good for was defending against wild animals.

Immediately after, a dense pack of Experimentals climbed over the ruins of the fallen wall. Old Li stared blankly at the gray Experimentals crawling towards them like a cluster of spiders.

This proved the negotiation and seven-day deadline mentioned by the Experimentals were a lie. The Experimentals were only trying to make the humans in the stronghold let their guard down and focus on searching for the so-called Experimental 001.

The Experimentals had already planned to launch an attack to destroy the stronghold the day after the negotiations.

The Experimentals wanted the humans in the stronghold for the sake of expanding their race!

Old Li remembered the attitude of the Experimentals' "king." Actually, that monster was already prepared to turn the entire Central Plains into its own territory. The other party probably never had any intention of turning back into a normal person ever again.

"Let's go," Old Li said in a startled manner.

Qin Sheng said anxiously, "Are we leaving just like that?"

Old Li glanced at Qin Sheng and said in seriousness, "You and I have no obligation to sacrifice ourselves to save Stronghold 74. We should preserve our strength and rescue as many people as we can from this place. Stronghold 74 has already fallen!"

It was not that Old Li did not want to defend the stronghold, but that most of the garrison troops on the stronghold walls had already been killed. War was cruel to begin with, and the Zhou Consortium troops were no longer capable of resisting the Experimentals!

Old Li looked back at Qin Sheng. "Only the east gate has not been sealed off yet. Lead the escapees over there!"

"You want me to lead them?" Qin Sheng was taken aback. "Then what about you, Teacher?"

"I'm gonna hold the Experimentals back for a while. Pray that I can hold on for a bit longer. Those Experimentals won't be able to outrun me, so don't worry," Old Li said.

What Old Li did not say was that if no one went to stop the Experimentals, probably nobody would make it out of here. Since the escapees could not outrun the Experimentals, a lot of escapees would eventually be devoured.

But at this moment, a group of soldiers rushed over from the streets at the rear. Zhou Xingwen was sitting in the car and looked calmly at Old Li and Qin Sheng. "You two, take the residents and flee east. I've already told the garrison to open the east gate. The Zhou Consortium will defend the stronghold by ourselves. There's no reason for you two to die together with us."

As he spoke, Zhou Xingwen was exuding a certain kind of gallantry that showed he was not afraid of death. Before the explosions happened, he was deploying troops from the command center. But after hearing the explosions, he immediately rushed over.

He knew full well this stronghold no longer had a chance of surviving as he got surrounded by screaming and despairing residents. As the highest-ranking officer in the stronghold, he should not be escaping first. He needed to do one last thing: kill as many Experimentals as he could.

Zhou Xingwen also knew that if he ran away in cowardice, he could never escape from the massive feelings of guilt and remorse.

While they were talking, a reddish-gray mushroom cloud suddenly rose up in the middle of a dense group of Experimentals. And under that mushroom cloud, a transparent shockwave started spreading outwards. The Experimentals that were caught in the explosion's range were involuntarily swept up and disintegrated.

The mushroom cloud had a radius of 100 meters, and the Experimentals within that range were vaporized. The power of the explosion was really terrifying.

The Experimentals crawling in from the breach in the stronghold never expected a bomb to suddenly go off around them.

As the mushroom cloud dissipated, several other explosions went off in the vicinity. But they did not sound as intense as the first explosion.

Ren Xiaosu was extremely excited as he ran off after throwing the Explosive Poker cards.

The Experimentals that had just swarmed into the stronghold were dazed by the explosions he set off. This time, approximately a quarter of the Experimentals' strength had been lost after he threw out the bombs in batches.

The mushroom cloud from earlier was made by Ren Xiaosu's four "sevens" he had just gotten. To be honest, even Ren Xiaosu himself was shocked by the power of the four "sevens"!

At the rear, the Experimentals that had not entered the stronghold yet were also stunned. They hesitated outside the stronghold and did not dare to advance. It wasn't until they received a new command that they started storming the stronghold again.

Old Li looked at the mushroom cloud dumbfoundedly. "Was that bomb dropped by your Zhou Consortium?"

"No." Zhou Xingwen shook his head in denial. Then he ordered the Zhou Consortium's troops to carry on marching. Although someone had helped them clear out some of the Experimentals, there were still more of them up ahead.

Qin Sheng gulped. "Teacher, could a superhuman have caused those explosions? Could it be that superhuman wearing the white mask?"

"I don't know." Old Li shook his head. "Let's go!"

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was making a mad dash for the hotel. When he got to the hotel's entrance, he shouted at Zhou Yingxue, "Let's go, come on! It'll be too late if we don't leave now!"

Zhou Yingxue had heard the explosions. When she saw Ren Xiaosu, she followed right behind him without hesitation. Ren Xiaosu looked back at Li Ran and the others and said, "The Experimentals are already here. Follow me if you want to live. Those who can't keep up, I won't turn around to save you."

Chapter 574 Blasting a way ou

As the dense group of Experimentals swarmed into the stronghold from the west, the stronghold residents only felt panic and despair. And what was even worse was that the stronghold residents had already been starving for so long that they did not even have the energy to run anymore.

Some people had just run a step or two when they fell to the ground helplessly.

Some people watched as the Experimentals got closer and started cursing the Experimentals' mothers in fear and the incompetence of the Zhou Consortium's troops. Then they were either easily killed by the Experimentals or knocked unconscious and captured alive.

A middle-aged man yelled at his parents inside a house, "Dad, Mom, let's hurry up and leave. Don't wait! The stronghold is already done for!"

But the old couple looked at each other and said to their son, "We can't move anymore, so don't let us drag you down. Just take your wife and child with you."

The middle-aged man was in tears. He knelt on the ground and kowtowed several times to his parents, but he could not say anything to them.

The old couple said, "We don't have any regrets after living for so long. Go now."

After that, they started pushing their son out the door.

In this world, it would be hard to find someone like them who would treat you so purely. They were willing to sacrifice themselves to ensure their son's survival.

However, as soon as the middle-aged man went out with his wife and child, they saw the Experimentals approaching. The Experimentals were so fast that the family was caught before they could even start running.

The world was this unpredictable.

On another street, a man carrying a child in his arms was running and knocking on windows of vehicles passing by. "Please, take my child with you. He's very smart, not a picky eater, and easy to raise!"

The people in the car looked at him, but the man inside did not say anything. Just as he was about to step on the accelerator, the woman in the passenger seat opened the window and took the child from the man.

The man cried and thanked her. But at this moment, several people rushed out of nowhere. They put their hands through the open window to unlock the door from the inside and pulled the woman and child out of the car.

The man cried out as he picked his child up, but the child was already bleeding profusely from the fall after being pulled out of the car.

The good, the bad, the old, the young, the men, the women.

Suddenly, the stronghold descended into carnage gone completely out of control.

Ren Xiaosu made a mad dash through the streets with Zhou Yingxue. They had planned to steal a vehicle but realized it would only allow them to travel a little faster at the beginning. Once it got crowded on the streets, the car would not be any faster than the running pace of a person. Furthermore, by driving a car, they might just end up as a target.

Li Ran and the others were following close behind. A plainclothes guard suddenly roared, "Let's head east! The east gate's the only one that hasn't been sealed. We can't get out if we go anywhere else!"

Fang Zhi, who was following him, added, "That's right, we saw it with our own eyes. Only the east gate hasn't been sealed. Ren Xiaosu, head towards the east gate!"

In fact, Ren Xiaosu had the same thought initially. But when the plainclothes guard and Fang Zhi shouted this behind him, he suddenly felt that something might be wrong.

Almost everyone in the stronghold knew the east gate was the only one that had not been sealed yet. But the problem was that the Experimentals should know this too!

This time, it could be said the Experimentals were fully prepared for the siege. Would such a smart enemy miss out on an important detail like this?

Ren Xiaosu suddenly changed his mind. "We'll head north!"

There were Experimentals to the west, and there might be Experimentals to the east as well. Meanwhile, the heart of the Central Plains lay to the north. If reinforcements were arriving, they would definitely come from the north. So Ren Xiaosu chose to head north!

But when the plainclothes guard behind him heard that, he started panicking. "How can we possibly head north? Are you stupid? The north gate has already been sealed with concrete. It's a dead end if we go there, so I don't agree!" Then the plainclothes guard noticed that Ren Xiaosu ignored him as he continued running straight north.

Ren Xiaosu couldn't care less if they agreed. They could just fucking go wherever they liked since he was only leading the way. Whoever followed him would live while those who did not would die, and it was as simple as that.

The plainclothes guard watched Ren Xiaosu run. To his surprise, he realized both Director Mu Wan'ge and Li Ran kept up with Ren Xiaosu's pace. With that, everyone followed Ren Xiaosu and ran north. In the end, that plainclothes guard could only follow them.

During the escape, Ren Xiaosu had been leading everyone the entire way. All the obstacles blocking their path were pushed aside by Ren Xiaosu while any crowds of people were also mercilessly broken up by him.

This made the flight extremely easy for those who were following him. Furthermore, this group of people had been eating potatoes every day. Although it was not a lot, their stamina was still in much better shape than the other residents in the stronghold.

Before they could reach the stronghold walls in the north, everyone saw the residents in the east starting to run west. They happened to bump into the residents who were fleeing from the west, and the streets got jammed as a result.

Even Li Ran could understand the Experimentals must have appeared in the east as well. Otherwise, the stronghold residents in the east would not be running here. However, they should still be quite far away from the Experimentals in the east. Therefore, they could not see those terrifying gray figures yet.

The plainclothes guard who disagreed with Ren Xiaosu did not say anything. He knew Ren Xiaosu's choice to head north was definitely not a coincidence, and he must have thought of this scenario in advance.

This was probably something the Zhou Consortium troops did not expect.

On the congested streets, Ren Xiaosu was still breaking up crowds as he ran northwards. When the residents who were at a loss saw Ren Xiaosu and his group running north, they also followed after him.

The flow of people in the stronghold acted like a wave, and Ren Xiaosu, who was farthest ahead, was the crest of this wave.

Ren Xiaosu looked back and saw many escapees following him. At some point, he even thought about using his steam locomotive to take these people to safety. But what about the aftermath? Would he have to face the endless pursuit of the Pyro Company after using that power?

Ren Xiaosu was not a saint. All he cared about was leading the group of people towards a path of survival. As for whether they could keep up or not, that was not something he had to consider!

When they were about to arrive at the northern walls, Zhou Yingxue felt a tinge of despair as she looked at the gate in front of her that was sealed with concrete. The measures used to guard against the Experimentals were actually blocking their way to survival at this moment?

When she was about to turn her head and ask her master what they should do, she saw Ren Xiaosu take four poker cards out of nowhere. As the cards swayed in his hands, she could even see that they were four "sixes."

"Master, how are we supposed to get out of here?" Zhou Yingxue asked.

Ren Xiaosu answered, "I'll blow it up with a bomb!"

Zhou Yingxue thought to herself, 'Master, you can't be fucking thinking of using those four "sixes" in your hands as a bomb, can you?!'

After Ren Xiaosu, who was in the lead, slapped the four "sixes" onto the wall, he turned around and ran away from it.

With a loud boom, a huge hole was forcefully blasted out of the wall sealing the stronghold gate!

Zhou Yingxue was stunned. That was really a bomb?! What kind of strange powers did her master possess?!

Honestly speaking, up until now, Zhou Yingxue only knew her master could conjure up strange seeds that could produce potatoes and that he was very proficient in using a sniper rifle. And this was yet another eye-opener for her.

Ren Xiaosu took the lead to squeeze through the hole in the wall. Due to the existence of the foundation and rebar acting as load-bearing structures in the wall, this small explosion was not enough to cause the collapse of the entire wall.

Chapter 575 Today is not a day to be happy

The Experimentals had come attacking from the east and the west. This opening in the northern walls had now become the only way out of the stronghold.

Ren Xiaosu ran out first while Zhou Yingxue followed closely.

But when it was Li Ran and the others' turn to escape, it did not seem to go so smoothly anymore. As a large number of escapees crowded the hole in the wall, Li Ran and the others were stuck there for a while.

Someone started cursing after the crowd started squeezing together at the hole, "Can't you all give way to others and pass through in an orderly manner?"

But actually, he was also trying his best to squeeze to the front. At this moment, it was useless to say anything. Would being polite and orderly be more important than their own survival?

Because of this stupidity, hardly anyone managed to get out of the hole in the wall after Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue, with all of them stuck at the exit.

There were still a large number of escapees waiting to get out of the stronghold through the hole. But since it was blocked, no one could get out!

Ren Xiaosu did not have time to worry about them. If these people died over such a stupid thing, he felt they deserved it.

Fortunately, the people behind those at the front had a very strong desire to live. They forcefully kicked the people who were stuck in the exit to the other side before the crowd started streaming out like water again.

Ren Xiaosu looked behind him. He had thought the exit would get blocked again, but he realized the people were suddenly moving in a much more orderly manner.

He took another look in disbelief and was surprised to see Old Li and Qin Sheng standing guard at the exit. They were organizing the escapees as they evacuated the stronghold.

The two of them had only caught up by following the crowd and heading to the north of the stronghold. Even so, they did not prioritize their own escape. Instead, they stood next to the exit to provide cover for the fleeing crowd.

Following that, they even faced the pursuing Experimentals head on. Fortunately, not too many Experimentals had come in pursuit of the escapees, so Old Li and Qin Sheng were more than enough to handle them.

The Experimentals that invaded the stronghold probably numbered in the 5,000s, but they were scattered all across the huge stronghold. If a smaller group of Experimentals were to encounter the two Riders, they would surely be doomed.

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. He had already done what he was supposed to do. As for the rest, it was every man for himself. Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu started fleeing into the wilderness. As they ran crazily for their lives, Li Ran fell down due to the uneven path and cried out in pain.

Fang Zhi and the plainclothes guards all stopped in their steps. They were going to carry Li Ran and continue making their escape.

Ren Xiaosu felt that this group of people were not that heartless after all. It was not in vain for Li Ran to have them as acquaintances since they were still willing to help her at a time like this.

However, even soldiers would find it quite unbearable to have a load of 50 kilograms on their backs while running in the wilderness.

Everyone had good intentions, but they just couldn't help wanting to abandon Li Ran as they ran.

It was just like how a lot of people were really filial to their parents. At the beginning, they might be able to take care of their sickly parents and clean up after them. But after a prolonged period, they would start feeling that old people were a burden.

That was because the suffering accumulated over time was capable of bringing down a person.

After they got out of the stronghold, Fang Zhi counted the number of people from the tour group that had escaped. It saddened him that only half of the staff who had traveled with them were left. As for the other half, no one knew whether they had made it out of the stronghold alive.

The plainclothes guards who were taking turns to carry Li Ran were totally exhausted after running for two hours. By the time they started taking the mountain path, their knees could barely stand the heavy load anymore.

The mountain path was treacherous to travel on.

Ren Xiaosu took a break when they reached a small hill, while the people following him also stopped.

Ren Xiaosu crested the hill and looked back at Stronghold 74 in the distance. He could still see the outline of the stronghold from this position, but he was no longer sure of what was going on in the stronghold.

Old Li and Qin Sheng had caught up to them and were injured all over. Ren Xiaosu handed them a vial of black medicine. "This is very effective. Just apply it onto your wounds, and they'll heal very quickly."

The two Riders expressed their thanks. They had lost a lot of stamina due to fighting the Experimentals.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "How many escapees made it out of the stronghold in the end?"

"Quite a few." Old Li panted and said, "But I'm afraid those who didn't manage to escape are doomed."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly looked up as though he sensed something. He turned and looked in the direction of the stronghold.

When the others saw him do that, they also looked at the stronghold.

In an instant, it felt as though something had dropped onto the stronghold in the distance. Immediately after, a strange, massive circle of light started radiating outwards. A huge cloud of dust and smoke was swept across the entire stronghold by this sudden attack.

In the blink of an eye, a mighty explosion began to spread from the inside. Crimson flames shot up into the sky and enveloped the entire stronghold in a mushroom cloud.

As the unstoppable shockwave spread outward, it instantly obliterated every building in the stronghold and turned them into dust. The devastating scene of destruction was like a divine punishment brought upon the stronghold by the gods above!

The buildings in areas that were unaffected by the blast retained their original dusty gray color, while those that were within the range of the shockwave were already burning in bright orange flames.

The distant flames were burning so strongly that the escapees' faces were illuminated red even though they had already escaped far away from the stronghold and onto the hills. Even at this distance, the shockwave still managed to make a mess of their hair and clothes. Some even stumbled back from the force of the blast.

"This..." Ren Xiaosu asked in a startled manner.

"Is a nuclear bomb." With much difficulty, Old Li said, "A weapon created by humans that even gods are afraid of."

All the escapees were dumbfounded. Even though they knew there were probably no survivors left in the stronghold other than the Experimentals, they still felt shocked and saddened by this scene of destruction.

It was where they had lived for decades. That was their home.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered that Yang Xiaojin had told him that nuclear weapons were extremely difficult for humans to control.

...

In the Qing Consortium's stronghold, Qing Yi was already back at the barracks. He stood behind Qing Zhen and confirmed, "We accurately hit our target, and all the Experimentals should be dead. The highest altitude the missile's trajectory reached was 47 kilometers, and it traveled at a top speed of 7.5 kilometers per second, while the precision error was less than 30 meters. Those are the real-time measurement data we have from the launch."

Qing Zhen, who was standing in front of him, had both his hands behind his back. He stood there in the barracks and gazed up at the sky. No one knew what he was thinking.

Qing Yi said with a smile, "Bro, you're right. Only children would be afraid of something like the Experimentals. Now that the Experimentals have been wiped out, we won't have any more trouble in the future."

Qing Zhen slowly turned around to look at Qing Yi and said, "Ah Yi, today is not a day to be happy."

Qing Yi slowly fell silent. He knew what Qing Zhen was thinking about. Some time ago, the Qing Consortium had informed the Zhou Consortium and hoped they could stop the Experimentals so the stronghold residents would not have to suffer. However, no one expected the Zhou Consortium would be unable to do anything about them.

The Qing Consortium's sleeper agent at Stronghold 74 had also been sacrificed in the destruction of the stronghold. The spy had immediately called for the Qing Consortium to launch the missile after confirming that Stronghold 74 was beyond saving.

Therefore, the missile not only wiped out the Experimentals, it also killed their Qing Consortium's people.

Qing Yi understood that Qing Zhen would not have made such a move unless it was absolutely necessary.

As a matter of fact, even during their war with the Yang Consortium and the Li Consortium, Qing Zhen did not resort to using these weapons.

Qing Zhen patted Qing Yi on the shoulder. "Let's get prepared for war."

"But who will dare to attack us when we possess weapons like that?" Qing Yi could not understand.

Qing Zhen sighed and said, "It's precisely because we possess such weapons."

After he said that, Qing Zhen suddenly felt a little tired.

...

After that shocking explosion, no one had noticed a gray figure retreating and disappearing into the forest.

Chapter 576 Wang Fugui!

After the total destruction of Stronghold 74, the escapees could not help but feel sad when they saw their homes had been destroyed. But at least there would be no more Experimentals chasing after them and threatening them, so everyone could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

However, Old Li and Qin Sheng kept urging the escapees to continue on with their journey. Although they were very far away from Stronghold 74 and the explosive power of that nuclear bomb did not seem that great, the fallout would eventually spread to their location.

As such, they could afford to stop fleeing. They had to go and look for the Zhou Consortium's reinforcements.

The members of the Pyro Company had already vanished. No one knew if they had died in the stronghold or if they had taken another escape route, but that was not of concern to Old Li and Qin Sheng.

Old Li did a headcount of the escapees and found there were approximately 3,000 of them.

Yet there were hundreds of thousands of people in the stronghold at the beginning. With only 3,000 managing to escape, the losses were immeasurable.

As they fled, Ren Xiaosu took charge of leading the way. Meanwhile, Old Li and Qin Sheng volunteered to look for food. The two of them were familiar with the wilderness since they often ventured out to such places in the past.

They found some wild vegetables and even managed to hunt quite a bit of prey. However, Ren Xiaosu shook his head when he saw this. For a group of 3,000, the amount of food two people could find would simply be a drop in the bucket.

And what worried Ren Xiaosu the most was not the lack of food but the fact that it could not be distributed evenly.

If they could not distribute it equally, they might as well let all of the escapees starve.

After Old Li and Qin Sheng returned with the food, they gave out the wild vegetables to the women first. Then they cut and distributed the roast meat to the children among the escapees.

Just as Ren Xiaosu had worried, someone immediately rushed out and asked, "Where's our share?"

Old Li patiently explained, "We could only get this much with the two of us. How about this? I'll tell you what wild vegetables are edible, and you all can go pick them by yourselves in the wilderness. Would that be better?"

When the people saw that Old Li and Qin Sheng were easy to approach, they started pushing their luck. "We don't know anything about wild vegetables, so if we pick something poisonous, will you take responsibility for it?"

Then Old Li and Qin Sheng beat them up.

By the time they were lying on the ground and begging for mercy, Old Li dusted off his hands and said, "If you want to eat, pick food by yourselves, understand?!"

Ren Xiaosu was amused watching this from the sidelines. He was really worried Old Li and Qin Sheng would turn out to be goody two shoes. He already knew they were members of the Riders, but this still updated Ren Xiaosu's opinion of their organization.

But something unexpected happened at the campsite that night. Ren Xiaosu was lying next to the campfire and preparing to go to sleep when Li Ran suddenly limped towards him. She leaned against his back and hugged him from behind.

Li Ran asked softly, "Can you protect me?"

When the plainclothes guards got exhausted from taking turns to carry her today, they started grumbling a little. This made Li Ran very uncomfortable. In such times of helplessness, even Fang Zhi could only remain silent at her side. As such, she thought of Ren Xiaosu.

At the most critical moment, it was Ren Xiaosu who led them out of the stronghold safely. Ren Xiaosu running in front of the group and blowing up the stronghold gate was something Li Ran would never forget in her life.

But just as Li Ran finished speaking, Zhou Yingxue, who was keeping watch beside them, lifted Li Ran up and took her away. When Li Ran was so easily lifted by Zhou Yingxue, she wore a dumbfounded look as she watched herself getting farther and farther away from Ren Xiaosu.

Zhou Yingxue placed Li Ran down next to her and said earnestly, "Ms. Li Ran, I should be the one protecting you based on the contract. My master isn't obliged to do so. He already has someone that he likes, so please don't behave like this anymore."

Li Ran said dumbfoundedly, "M-Master?"

Although she knew Ren Xiaosu was definitely not Zhou Yingxue's assistant, she did not expect such a stark contrast in his actual status.

Wasn't Zhou Yingxue a superhuman? How could a mighty figure like a superhuman be willing to submit to someone as a maid?

Ren Xiaosu was still lying awake next to the campfire as he had something on his mind. He was so lost in thought that he did not get distracted even when Li Ran hugged him from behind. Ren Xiaosu was recalling that sight of the nuclear bomb explosion. The world was getting more and more dangerous with every passing moment. In just an instant, that god-killing weapon utterly destroyed the Experimentals.

Would more of such weapons appear in other strongholds in the future? And would his friends and family he had been separated from get dragged in by the chaos of the world?

He wondered how Old Wang, Yan Liuyuan, Xiaoyu, Wang Yuchi, Jiang Wu, and the others were doing. Without him around, could they protect themselves?

When Ren Xiaosu thought of this, he got even more anxious to find them. He would only feel at ease if he were there to protect them.

Then Ren Xiaosu saw a young man sit at the campfire with a notebook and pen in hand. He was scribbling furiously on it.

Ren Xiaosu recognized him as the reporter from Hope Media who had witnessed "Old Xu" killing the Experimentals in the stronghold. He was also the one who took the photograph of "Old Xu" that was published in the newspaper of Hope Media.

Ren Xiaosu sat up and asked, "What are you writing?"

The young reporter said, "I'm recording a draft of today's happenings. All my colleagues died doing their duty, and I'm the only one left who's witnessed the scenes. The rest of the world still doesn't know what happened here, so I'll record all of it in an article and hand it over to the chief editor when I return. This is a day of suffering for humans. The death toll of the stronghold residents exceeded 200,000 in just one day. This is a day all humans should remember."

Nearby, Old Li and Qin Sheng listened in silence. During the escape, they became more acquainted with Ren Xiaosu after finding out he was the one who opened up a path for them to escape.

Meanwhile, Ren Xiaosu looked at the Hope Media reporter and suddenly thought of a way he could find Yan Liuyuan and the others with the help of Hope Media.

If he could find them with this method, he would not have to put in so much effort trying to make use of the Anjing House.

...

Outside of Stronghold 144 in the Northwest, four trucks were driving towards the stronghold gate.

When the four trucks came to a stop, a group of people jumped out of the vehicles. A young man shouted to a middle-aged man, "Uncle Fugui, are you really sure of this? Why didn't I see any caravans passing by here?"

Wang Fugui wiped his face with a towel from the truck and said with a smile, "Don't you believe in your Uncle Fugui's ability? We bought these four used trucks with our savings, and they're now carrying all the good stuff from the Central Plains that you won't find here in the Southwest and Northwest. This place might look a little run-down, but take another look at it in half a year. Fortress 178 will be opening a trade route to the Central Plains soon, and with Stronghold 144 the closest stronghold to the Central Plains, it'll surely flourish into the largest distribution center of goods in the entire Northwest by then!"

Chapter 577 Have you heard of someone called Ren Xiaosu?

The young man who posed the question was Wang Yuchi, and he was originally one of Jiang Wu's students. But having gone through several huge disasters and wandered around the Central Plains with Wang Fugui for a few months, his appearance had become more mature.

Along the way, everyone had suffered a lot. When they finally arrived at Stronghold 144, everyone was worn out from the journey.

During this period, Wang Yuchi also showed potential in his abilities. After learning a lot from Wang Fugui, he was now his right-hand man.

Wang Fugui said proudly, "We came here first to build a working relationship with the people of Fortress 178; this is what we call seizing the initiative. Other people might wait for the trade route to open up in half a year's time, but we can't afford to do so. The savings Xiaosu left for us are drying up. If we see him again and he asks how much money we have left, we can't embarrass ourselves."

Wang Yuchi fell silent. "Will we still get to see Brother Xiaosu?"

Wang Fugui was taken aback before replying with a smile, "Definitely! I heard that a jinx can live for a millennium, so he definitely won't die."

"Then will anyone buy the goods we've transported here?" Wang Yuchi changed the subject.

"Of course," Wang Fugui chuckled and said, "Look, we're already at an advantage when it comes to traveling to the Northwest to conduct our business. Since y'all have nanomachines in your bodies, and we also have a supernatural being in Ms. Wu with us, normal bandits won't have any way to rob us. Also, your female classmates are skilled with their hands; the ornaments they designed are all beautiful. While wearing ornaments was already a very popular trend in the Central Plains, the women in the Northwest have never seen them before. I'm sure that they'll take a liking to it immediately."

As he spoke, Wang Fugui ran to the back of the box truck and unlocked the trailer. He called out to the people inside, "Ladies, get out of the vehicle and take a breather. Uncle Fugui will bring y'all to town for a hot meal."

Inside the trailer, Jiang Wu and five female students were diligently braiding some bracelets. Some time ago, Wang Fugui thought of purchasing the bracelets directly from a supplier. However, they felt that the prices in the Central Plains were a ripoff. When the sellers saw that they were refugees, they even deliberately jacked up the price.

Later, Jiang Wu realized the materials needed to make these bracelets were not expensive, so she stepped forward and said they could just buy the raw materials to make it themselves. On the way to the Northwest, the girls could work on braiding the bracelets, and this saved them a lot of money.

Actually, Jiang Wu's intention was to find something for the female students to do. After all, everyone was in the same boat now. Even Wang Yuchi and the other male students had been forced to grow quickly, so no one should be idle in the group.

Over time, the female students who could not contribute as much started to feel a little embarrassed.

Currently, Jiang Wu was also considered one of the core members of the group. On one hand, she was there to ensure the students would continue studying by themselves. On the other hand, she was responsible for feeding and dressing the group. On top of that, she also used her superpower to protect the group.

In the past, Jiang Wu's superpower did not have much of a presence in their group.

This was because Ren Xiaosu was too powerful, and there wasn't a need for Jiang Wu to use her superpower. Since Ren Xiaosu could handle all kinds of situations by himself, Jiang Wu did not have to do anything at all.

But it was different now. Although Wang Yuchi and the other male students had nanomachines, those things were limited by their power source and did not have enough lethality either.

They still came across a few sporadic bandits while traveling to the Northwest from the Central Plains. But when the bandits encountered Jiang Wu, they got scared away by just a few petals she conjured up before even understanding what was going on.

Furthermore, if it were not for Jiang Wu's plum blossom branches she had materialized to keep everyone together back then, they might have gotten separated and ended up getting washed away by the flood.

Therefore, Wang Fugui would always discuss everything with Jiang Wu when something cropped up these days.

There were not only bracelets in this batch of goods they were transporting, but also cosmetics and other daily necessities that were relatively popular in the Central Plains. Basically, they were all mainly feminine products.

According to Wang Fugui, while women were fussy customers and most people disliked doing business with women, selling to women was a surefire way to make money.

As such, he bought these four used trucks to transport the goods, of which three-quarters were lipstick, skincare products, and various hair conditioners with different scents.

Lipstick was somewhat of a necessity for women, just like how cigarettes were for men. Moreover, the variety of lipstick colors available in the Central Plains was much greater than that in the Southwest and Northwest. The women here would definitely look more trendy if they used them.

Wang Fugui had requested Jiang Wu and a few of the prettier students to use their lipstick products daily once they arrived in the Northwest. This was so they could entice other women to buy their products when they saw how trendy the colors were.

As a matter of fact, many people in the Southwest and Northwest were still at the stage of using rouge paper to color their lips. It was not that they could not afford lipstick but that the Northwest and Southwest were focused on the development of heavy industry. As such, daily necessities like these were very scarce.

Old Wang immediately felt that he had discovered a business opportunity and thought of how to promote it. When he arrived in the Northwest, he would approach some newspaper firms to advocate the use of lipstick. It would go something like this: "Whether a man loves a woman or not, he can prove it by buying our Central Plains' lipstick for his dearly beloved."

Wang Fugui used to be the owner of a grocery store in the Southwest. His business had been doing better and better over the years because he was so good at seeking out business opportunities and understanding the customer's needs.

Back then, the important figures of Stronghold 113 in the Southwest had suddenly taken to eating exotic meat as an expression of their identities and status. That was also partly credited to Wang Fugui's advocacy of how rare exotic meat was to come by.

“But will Fortress 178 agree to let us sell our things here like this?” Wang Yuchi wondered.

“What’re you afraid of? I’m on good terms with their Commander Zhang Jinglin!” Wang Fugui said proudly.

With that, Wang Fugui took everyone out to eat first. There was also a reason why he dared to bring everyone to the Northwest.

Everyone in the world knew Zhang Jinglin had regained control of Fortress 178, and the entire Northwest was now Fortress 178’s territory. Wang Fugui used to be an acquaintance of Zhang Jinglin in town and enjoyed a friendly relationship with him.

Now that he had arrived in the Northwest, wouldn’t his opportunities abound?

After lunch, Wang Fugui and Wang Yuchi immediately went to look for the people guarding the stronghold. The moment they approached them, Wang Fugui’s first words were, “I’m a friend of Commander Zhang and would like to meet him to do some catching up.”

Of course, the more impressive the introductions, the better! These days, people who did not know how to brag would not be destined for big things!

An officer who was supposedly the new regimental commander of Stronghold 144’s garrison walked up to them. He said with a kind smile, “Bro, even if you’re not a friend of the commander, you can still do business here in the Northwest. All you need to do is pay your taxes accordingly. Our taxes have been lowered recently, so there’s definitely profit to be made.”

Wang Fugui did not give up. “I’m really a friend of your Commander Zhang.”

The regimental commander laughed. “There was someone who said that two days ago. But in the end, we found out the other party was only trying to meet Commander Zhang. They were not actually acquainted at all.”

Wang Fugui was left speechless. Although there were also other merchants like him who came to the Northwest in advance to do business, he did not expect that someone would have already been exposed for trying to pretend to be an acquaintance of the commander.

Off to the side, Wang Yuchi chuckled. “Uncle Fugui, why don’t we just stick to selling our goods? As if we can get to meet their commander so easily. Also, didn’t he say that anyone can come and do business here? There’s no need for us to cotton up to others.”

“Like you’d understand!” Wang Fugui said with a dark expression, “In business, how could it be the same if we had someone at the top looking out for us?”

Suddenly, the regimental commander asked, “Did y’all come from the Central Plains?”

Wang Fugui was stunned. “Of course we came from the Central Plains.”

The regimental commander suddenly asked again, "Then have you heard of someone called Ren Xiaosu in the Central Plains? Oh, by the way, my name is Zhang Xiaoman."

Chapter 578 The excited Wang Fugui

When Wang Fugui heard the name Zhang Xiaoman mentioned, he was dumbfounded. "Come again?"

"Ren Xiaosu." Zhang Xiaoman asked again, "You haven't heard of this name before?"

Zhang Xiaoman was previously the commander of the Razor Sharp Company. After the war with the Zong Consortium, he was promoted three ranks and appointed the commander of Stronghold 144's infantry regiment due to his outstanding combat achievements and the fact that Fortress 178 was in urgent need of manpower after occupying more territory.

Zhang Xiaoman had thought of boasting about his promotion to his ex-battalion commander, Zhou Yinglong. However, Zhou Yinglong had been promoted to a brigade commander.

Now that he was stationed at Stronghold 144, he did not have much to do every day. He was only responsible for protecting the stronghold and ensuring its safety. At the same time, he also had to work with the stronghold administration team from Fortress 178 to reorganize the governance system of Stronghold 144 as they carried out new post assignments.

In the end, Fortress 178 was really trying to turn Stronghold 144 into the largest distribution center of goods in the entire Northwest just as Wang Fugui had anticipated. With Zhang Xiaoman put in charge of overseeing the place, the rear lines could finally rest easy.

However, Zhang Xiaoman recently kept having the feeling that something was missing in life. Although he had been promoted to the position of regimental commander, the most exemplary soldier in the war was no longer with them.

Based on a discussion that Zhang Xiaoman, Jiao Xiaochen, and the others had, they felt that Ren Xiaosu must have definitely headed to the Central Plains. So when Zhang Xiaoman encountered Wang Fugui, who was a businessman from the Central Plains, he casually asked to see if he could get some information from him and find out how Ren Xiaosu was doing recently.

However, Wang Fugui was shocked when he heard Ren Xiaosu's name being mentioned. There weren't that many people that went by this name, so he probed, "Why are you looking for this Ren Xiaosu?"

Wang Fugui was afraid Ren Xiaosu might have gotten himself into some trouble over here that caused him to be wanted by Fortress 178.

But on second thought, Wang Fugui felt that something was not right. Since Ren Xiaosu had a great relationship with Zhang Jinglin, Zhang Jinglin would never arrest Ren Xiaosu over some trivial matter.

Due to the confidentiality law that Fortress 178 had passed, the rest of the world had no idea of how much Ren Xiaosu had contributed in the war with the Zong Consortium. They only knew that a supernatural being had rendered great service and defeated an entire brigade from Stronghold 146 all by himself. However, no one knew who that supernatural being was.

Zhang Xiaoman looked at Wang Fugui and said with a smile, "Bro, don't ask why I'm looking for him. Never mind, there's no point in telling you too much."

Zhang Xiaoman suddenly remembered there was a confidentiality law in place. He could not reveal too much information about Ren Xiaosu in case the outside world's suspicions were aroused. As such, he got ready to head back inside the military base.

However, Wang Fugui looked at Zhang Xiaoman and said, "I know Ren Xiaosu!"

Wang Fugui felt that with Zhang Jinglin and Xu Xianchu at Fortress 178, there was a high chance they would not make things difficult for Ren Xiaosu. He decided to take a gamble!

By observing Zhang Xiaoman's expression, he felt he made the right bet this time!

Zhang Xiaoman was getting very excited. He asked, "You said that you know Ren Xiaosu? Where's he now then?"

Wang Fugui shook his head. "I don't know where he is either, but he was the one who had been taking care of us. We were separated later on because the Zong Consortium attacked us, and he got ambushed by them. We saw him get pierced by a spear through his stomach with our own eyes!"

With that, Zhang Xiaoman got even more excited since this account of events matched precisely with what Ren Xiaosu had shared with him before.

Back when Ren Xiaosu first arrived at Fortress 178, wasn't he nursing an injury after being saved by Wang Shengzhi and Wang Shengyin? Ren Xiaosu said he had become enemies with the Zong Consortium because he wanted revenge.

Ren Xiaosu also told them that after the war was over, he would have to go and look for his friends and family who had been separated from him.

However, Zhang Xiaoman did not expect to encounter Wang Fugui here.

However, Zhang Xiaoman was also very cautious. He immediately called the intelligence director, Wang Fengyuan, to confirm some things. After all, everything concerning Ren Xiaosu was classified as top secret in Fortress 178. What if this person were here to pry for information from them? Zhang Xiaoman had to be extra cautious about this.

As soon as the call went through, Zhang Xiaoman mentioned the names of Wang Fugui, Wang Yuchi, Jiang Wu, and the others to Wang Fengyuan. As Jiang Wu was a supernatural being with a unique superpower, Wang Fengyuan immediately replied, "There's no need to investigate further. They're the ones that Ren Xiaosu is looking for."

Zhang Xiaoman excitedly pulled Wang Fugui and the others into the base. "Bro, I finally got to meet Ren Xiaosu's kin! Did you know that Ren Xiaosu and I were comrades when we were fighting the Zong Consortium? He was part of my Razor Sharp Company and I was his company commander..."

Zhang Xiaoman was rambling incoherently due to excitement. But as he spoke, he realized that Wang Fugui's and the others' eyes had reddened.

For a while now, Wang Fugui had been comforting everyone by telling them that Ren Xiaosu was definitely still alive.

But even he did not quite believe his own words sometimes. After all, they had seen a spear pierce Ren Xiaosu with their own eyes. Would a normal person survive after getting hit by something like that? Moreover, Ren Xiaosu was caught in the flood after he got injured, so there was no reason he could survive that. Therefore, he had been saying that Ren Xiaosu was still alive so he and everyone else would have a pillar of support for them to continue living.

But now, they suddenly learned that Ren Xiaosu was really still alive, and he had even personally avenged everyone by destroying the Zong Consortium.

This swirl of emotions everyone was feeling could be compared to eating a whole onion—it left them both agitated and wanting to cry.

Furthermore, when Zhang Xiaoman said Ren Xiaosu had fought really hard in the war, Wang Fugui and the others immediately understood it was because Ren Xiaosu thought they had been killed by the Zong Consortium. Therefore, he wanted to take revenge to nurse his hatred.

The harder Ren Xiaosu fought in the war, the more it represented how much he hated the Zong Consortium. The more he hated the Zong Consortium, the more it showed how important Wang Fugui and the others were to Ren Xiaosu.

“Then do y'all know where he is right now?” Wang Fugui asked, “We'll go look for him right away.”

“No.” Zhang Xiaoman shook his head. “He disappeared immediately after the war, so I guessed he must have gone to the Central Plains to look for y'all.”

When he said that, Wang Fugui turned around and walked out of the base. He muttered to Jiang Wu as they made their way out, “Let's head back to the Central Plains.... Let's head back to the Central Plains right now. He must already be in the Central Plains. Let's go look for him immediately!”

Jiang Wu nodded. “Mhm, let's go.”

But before they could even take two steps, Zhang Xiaoman stopped Wang Fugui. He did not know whether to laugh or cry as he said, “We haven't even found him yet, so how will you find him? Don't worry, since you've come to the Northwest, you'll be treated as distinguished guests of Fortress 178. We'll also help to look for him. At least, y'all will feel at ease if you know that he's fine, right? Oh yes, what're y'all doing here in the Northwest?”

“Oh, erm...” Wang Fugui wiped the corners of his eyes. “We came here to do business. After all, I have to take care of our big family while Ren Xiaosu is not around.”

Zhang Xiaoman thumped his own chest. “Just tell me what kind of business you wish to conduct here in Stronghold 144 in the future. You can bring your goods from the Central Plains to sell over here, then

haul our Fortress 178's minerals back to the Central Plains. As long as it's a business dealing with Stronghold 144, there's nothing you can't do. If anyone asks about it, you can just mention my name, Zhang Xiaoman!"

Wang Fugui was stunned for quite a while before saying, "Those minerals are too expensive. We can't afford them at all."

Zhang Xiaoman thumped his chest again. "You can buy them on credit. You have my word!"

Wang Fugui stood in the base on this afternoon as the sun shone down from above. He thought it felt exceptionally pleasant today.

Chapter 579 Relying on mysticism to search for Ren Xiaosu

Wang Fugui's original intention was to return to the Central Plains as soon as possible. After all, Ren Xiaosu was in the Central Plains, so what was the point of them being here in the Northwest? Moreover, Old Wang was very sure that Ren Xiaosu had gone to the Central Plains to look for them. Therefore, he definitely had to go back! However, Zhang Xiaoman refused to let him leave. He even insisted on arranging for them to stay at the military base and prepared food and hot water for them, saying that it would not be too late to leave in another few days.

The reason Zhang Xiaoman gave to convince Wang Fugui was very simple: "The Central Plains are so big, and our people from Fortress 178 are also looking for Ren Xiaosu there, so wouldn't it be much better for us to look for him than you trying your luck to find him? You don't even know where Ren Xiaosu might pop up anyway."

Zhang Xiaoman said, "Don't worry, we still have a great chance of finding him."

"Why do you say that?" Wang Fugui was stunned. "Why are y'all so sure that you can find him?"

"Since you and Ren Xiaosu are old friends, do you know Xu Xianchu as well?" Zhang Xiaoman asked.

"I don't really know him, but I know that he's a good friend of Xiaosu's." Wang Fugui wondered, "Can Xu Xianchu find Ren Xiaosu?"

However, Wang Fugui did not believe that. After all, they were the ones who were closest to Ren Xiaosu. If even they did not know where to find him, how would Xu Xianchu know?

Zhang Xiaoman lowered his voice and said, "Old Xu told us that wherever Ren Xiaosu goes, a stronghold will collapse. Just look, isn't Stronghold 74 in the south of the Central Plains currently under siege? It might just collapse someday. Xu Xianchu suspects that Ren Xiaosu could be there, so Wang Fengyuan has already sent someone to Stronghold 74 to investigate. For all we know, he might be found in another few days!"

Wang Fugui was dumbfounded. 'So you all are relying on mysticism to search for Ren Xiaosu?!' What the fuck did he mean by strongholds would collapse whenever Ren Xiaosu went?

Wang Fugui thought back. Eh, it did seem like that was really the case!

After thinking for a long time, Wang Fugui did not even know how to refute Zhang Xiaoman's words!

But upon further thinking, it was indeed more reliable to have Fortress 178 look for someone than them. As such, Wang Fugui decided to wait here for news.

At this moment, news of Stronghold 74 collapsing had not yet spread to the Northwest. Even the majority of those in the Alliance of Strongholds still did not know what had happened to Stronghold 74. They only knew that contact had been lost with the people there.

Zhang Xiaoman dragged Wang Fugui with him to get lunch. Immediately after that, he enthusiastically arranged some goods for Wang Fugui to bring back to the Central Plains. "We initially thought that trade with the Central Plains wouldn't start until half a year later, but we've underestimated the enthusiasm of the merchants out there. You can't be returning with your trucks empty, or you would have wasted a trip! I've already arranged everything for you over here. Of course, we can't let you take too much on our first deal, so we just prepared several dozen tons of potassium chloride for you to haul back."

Wang Fugui was dumbfounded. He knew what potassium chloride was and the many uses it had. If he brought it back, it would definitely sell for a lot.

In fact, most of the minerals from the Northwest could be sold directly to the Wang Consortium when they were brought back to the Central Plains. The Wang Consortium's purpose in opening the trade route was precisely for the Northwest's mineral resources, after all.

Zhang Xiaoman offered him several dozen tons of the mineral as soon as he opened his mouth, but Wang Fugui could not even comprehend the amount that this unit of measurement represented.

He hesitated for a moment before saying, "We only brought four used trucks..."

Zhang Xiaoman said nonchalantly, "Don't worry, I'll get you some more trucks."

He then got his orderly to summon the more well-to-do families in the stronghold and owners of various businesses over.

These people used to be under the Zong Consortium's protection. After Fortress 178 had taken over at the stronghold, Zhang Jinglin ordered not to make things too difficult for them.

Zhang Xiaoman and the others tacitly understood what this meant. What the fortress commander meant was that they could make things difficult for them but not to the extent of forcing them to their deaths.

Therefore, Zhang Xiaoman, who had been looking for a chance to deal with these well-to-do families, was now presented with a good opportunity to make them contribute to Wang Fugui's business.

When these families arrived, Zhang Xiaoman asked to borrow a convoy of vehicles from them. If there were any extra vehicles left after loading up the potassium chloride, they would add some nickel ore for Wang Fugui to bring back.

Although those well-to-do families felt pained, they did not dare to say anything. Seeing that Zhang Xiaoman had garrisoned his troops next to Stronghold 144 and had a say over their lives, he was their daddy.

But that was not all. Zhang Xiaoman felt it would take too much effort for Wang Fugui to personally sell his stock of lipstick, so he had these people purchase the goods Wang Fugui had brought over from the Central Plains. In the future, Wang Fugui could sell his goods directly to them when he brought more from the Central Plains.

Those well-to-do families were grumbling incessantly in their hearts, but the smart ones suddenly realized something. Could this be Zhang Xiaoman's way of diverting the money into his own pocket? Could it be that Zhang Xiaoman did not want to directly ask them for money, so he used the excuse of doing business to take their money instead?

At this moment, any smart person would surely know not to turn down his requests. In fact, they would even respond positively on the surface!

After these well-to-do families left, Wang Fugui was left stunned as he sat down in the base. Having been in business for most of his life, this was the first time he felt that doing business was not difficult at all!

The four truckloads of goods they brought here had been sold out even before they started selling them.

However, Old Wang did not go too far with this opportunity. Although he quoted a price higher than the cost to these well-to-do families, it was not absurdly high. After all, if he wanted them to be his distributors in the long run, it would have to be a win-win situation for everyone, right?

Old Wang was not blinded by what was placed in front of him. Instead, he was thinking about the future rather than a one-off deal.

Old Wang was already starting to contemplate his plans. Now that there was a relationship with Fortress 178, he might just become the most indomitable and successful businessman on the northwestern trade route. This way, their whole family would be able to lead a comfortable life.

And it would be a great life!

And he understood that Zhang Xiaoman was doing all this because of Ren Xiaosu.

Old Wang was given preferential treatment in Fortress 178's territory as he was one of the people Ren Xiaosu had been searching so desperately for. Old Wang had mentioned to Wang Yuchi that they should always have a backer when it came to doing business. However, he did not expect their backer would be this powerful.

But there was something that Old Wang could not understand. Even if Ren Xiaosu had really helped Fortress 178 fight in the war, that should not cause Zhang Xiaoman to behave in such a way, right? A few dozen tons of potassium chloride was placed on credit just like that. How could Zhang Xiaoman have so much authority? These goods were worth millions, after all!

While Wang Fugui was trying to figure this out, Jiao Xiaochen also asked Zhang Xiaoman in private, "Regimental Commander, aren't you being a little too bold? You really giving him the goods on credit? We don't have to go that far, do we?"

"What do you know?" Zhang Xiaoman said proudly, "Why else am I the regimental commander and you're just my deputy?"

Jiao Xiaochen's face immediately darkened. He was even tempted to kick Zhang Xiaoman. "Then tell me why you're doing this?"

Zhang Xiaoman whispered, "Didn't you hear Old Wang? He's actually Ren Xiaosu's shopkeeper, so all their assets and money will eventually be returned to Ren Xiaosu. That is to say, all this money will be earned by Ren Xiaosu. If Ren Xiaosu comes to you and says that he wants to buy several dozen tons of potassium chloride on credit, can you say no? After Ren Xiaosu is reunited with Old Wang and realizes that he has so many assets in the Northwest, won't he want to come back here? We can use these assets to tie down Old Wang and the others first. If they can remain here, Ren Xiaosu will naturally stay here too."

Jiao Xiaochen pondered things for a moment. "That makes sense, go on."

"And if Ren Xiaosu returns, who knows? He might end up as our Fortress 178's commander in another few years." Zhang Xiaoman muttered mysteriously, "I heard from Old Zhou several days ago that Wang Fengyuan suggested we increase our efforts in searching for Ren Xiaosu during their executive meeting. He hopes to bring him back so that he can systematically learn about military warfare and leadership before getting familiarized with the various fighting forces. Since silence is compliance, the other commanders agreed by not objecting."

Jiao Xiaochen gasped when he heard that Ren Xiaosu would have to systematically learn military warfare and leadership and become familiar with the various fighting forces. What kinds of officers were required to learn such things? Wasn't that the job of a fucking commander?!

Zhang Xiaoman chuckled and said, "Actually, the most important thing is that all the generals have already acknowledged Ren Xiaosu. It's not as though everyone feels that Ren Xiaosu can be the commander right away, but they've already accepted that he has the potential and acknowledged his strength, courage, and character! It's really not easy to achieve that. So, through that war with the Zong Consortium, Ren Xiaosu has already cleared some of the obstacles that he might encounter when he takes over as the fortress commander in another few years or decades. Just think about it, we're actually making money for the next commander. Don't you think it's worth it?!"

"But what if the commander questions us about this batch of potassium chloride..."

"Don't worry, if we can make Ren Xiaosu come back, the commander might even be willing to give this batch of potassium chloride to Old Wang for free instead of putting it on credit..."

Chapter 580 Me too

By this time, Ren Xiaosu and the others had set off again. They were advancing in the direction of Stronghold 73. Without the threat of the Experimentals behind them, their escape this time was not that tense.

At night, Zhou Yingxue took Li Ran aside, and they spent half the night chatting away. It seemed that Li Ran had a lot to say to Zhou Yingxue due to the setback she had suffered and was in a bit of a vulnerable state.

She told her about her past, from her kindergarten days to her high school graduation, why she became a singer, and the difficulties she faced as a singer. She seemed to be regarding Zhou Yingxue as a confidante now.

Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue was listening with gusto and even asked Li Ran if she had a chance of making her debut.

In the morning, Ren Xiaosu realized that the plainclothes guards had become unwilling to carry Li Ran anymore. Instead, it was Zhou Yingxue who carried her.

After this disaster, Li Ran decided to cancel her concert tour. Therefore, this meant Zhou Yingxue's mission was completed.

When Li Ran informed the Anjing House about the completion of the mission, Zhou Yingxue received her reward shortly after.

However, after the Anjing House paid the reward, they hoped to get some detailed information from Zhou Yingxue in regards to Stronghold 74. They wanted to know what exactly happened there.

Zhou Yingxue looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Can we tell them about it, Master?"

Li Ran listened quietly but did not say anything. Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "If we can earn some money from this, why not? It wasn't us who blew Stronghold 74 up, anyway!"

So Zhou Yingxue conveyed the details of Stronghold 74 being destroyed by a nuclear bomb to the Anjing House and received another million yuan in return.

Ren Xiaosu thought the Anjing House must be really rich since they were actually willing to pay a million yuan for just some intel.

As a matter of fact, Hope Media would publish the entire story of everything that happened at Stronghold 74 very soon. This money was totally theirs for the taking.

While they were escaping, the reporter from Hope Media kept running back and forth within the group. After getting the consent of an escapee, he took a picture of them as they were fleeing to use as a featured image for his articles in the future.

At a time like this, Ren Xiaosu avoided all contact with the reporter. He initially felt it would surely be easier for him to find his family and friends if he appeared in the newspapers, but it would probably also put him in danger.

Old Li ran over to ask Ren Xiaosu if he was the one who caused that small mushroom cloud to appear inside the stronghold. He had seen Ren Xiaosu casually blow up the stronghold walls. Although he did not know how that happened, he got a rather strong impression of it.

Moreover, that mushroom cloud was obviously the doing of a supernatural being. Hence, Old Li linked it to Ren Xiaosu.

Having met once before, the two Riders and Ren Xiaosu chatted for quite a bit along the way. They got to know each other.

But when Old Li asked him about that mushroom cloud, Ren Xiaosu simply feigned ignorance. How could he let others learn about his trump card so easily?

Although he had become more familiar with the Riders, there was no need to reveal everything to them.

On the same afternoon, the escapees were finally able to meet up with the Zhou Consortium's reinforcements.

When everyone saw the Zhou Consortium troops, they felt like they had reunited with their family members. The Zhou Consortium troops did not disappoint the escapees either, and they immediately transported them away in their military trucks.

The rest of the Zhou Consortium troops continued to advance towards Stronghold 74. After being informed that a nuclear bomb had been dropped on Stronghold 74, they did not head directly to the battlefield. Instead, they slowed their pace and waited for troops from the rear to transport the CBRN[1] suits over.

The escapees rushed for the combat rations the Zhou Consortium troops were giving out from the vehicles. As they had been starving for so long, they were really unable to bear it anymore.

Suddenly, Li Ran looked at Fang Zhi in the truck and asked, "Where are Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue? Li Yingyun and Qin Sheng have disappeared as well."

Fang Zhi also wondered, "I remember they got into the truck with us just now. Why have they disappeared all of a sudden?"

When Li Ran turned her head and looked out the back of the truck, she could only see the scenery that was getting further and further away.

After experiencing all the mind-boggling incidents along the way, the concert was far in the back of her mind. She only remembered the figure of that young man who led the crowd out of the stronghold.

When she thought about how Zhou Yingxue would follow her master to wander the world again, she even felt a little envious and somewhat disappointed.

If anyone perhaps encountered these two again, Ren Xiaosu would likely become Zhou Yingxue's assistant once more. He was both mysterious and restrained.

Li Ran wondered if she would have a chance to come into contact with that mysterious world again. At this moment, she was somewhat able to understand Mu Wan'ge.

Li Ran looked at Mu Wan'ge, who was sitting beside her, before saying with a sigh, "At some point, I also started hoping I could be his maid and wander the world with him."

Mu Wan'ge said, "Me too."

Li Ran was surprised.

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After arriving at Stronghold 73, the escapees had to undergo a series of radiation tests first before being accepted into the stronghold.

Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue and the others went into town and bought a new car. Then they headed straight for the Wang Consortium's stronghold where they did not have to undergo those radiation tests.

As for the Hope Media reporter, he got a lift in their car to Luoyang City.

Three days later, Hope Media's newspaper caused a great stir across the Alliance of Strongholds.

On this day, Hope Media's newspapers got sold out in all the various strongholds. As such, Hope Media had no choice but to add another print run of a 100,000 copies of newspapers. However, even that was not enough.

The news of Stronghold 74 being destroyed by a nuclear bomb even overshadowed the Experimentals' attack. Since the Experimentals were already dead, everyone did not find it necessary to talk about them anymore. Nuclear bombs were the real threat now.

Moreover, civilization and an era had been destroyed in the past because of such weapons. Now that it had appeared again, it was really difficult for people not to think of the worst-case scenario.

As the saying went, a burnt child dreaded the fire.

And to be clear, this was a real fire!

In just a single day, everyone was fervently discussing this matter. Some people claimed that since the nuclear bomb was targeted at the Experimentals and not humans, it was considered as ridding evil for the good of humanity.

But more people believed that something like that should not even be deployed as a military weapon anymore. Besides, what if there had still been survivors inside of Stronghold 74? Then wouldn't the strike have killed them together with the Experimentals?

Furthermore, with the nuclear strike, no humans could live in Stronghold 74 for the next 50 years. This was something that would still have a very significant impact.

As a result of the nuclear strike, everyone even neglected the Pyro Company issue. Before this, everyone had been denouncing the Pyro Company for creating those monsters.

Humans were simply too forgetful. They tended to forget past pains once the wounds were healed.

At this moment, everyone was curious to know how the various consortiums would react. After all, something so threatening would surely be a great cause of concern for them.

While the other consortiums remained silent, the Wang Consortium suddenly held a press conference.

At this press conference, the Wang Consortium pinned the blame on the Qing Consortium. On one hand, they protested against the Qing Consortium for the nuclear strike. On the other hand, they hoped the other consortiums would unite and hold discussions on this matter with the Qing Consortium. They hoped the Qing Consortium would willingly give up on the further research and development of nuclear weapons. Otherwise, sanctions would be imposed upon them.

Human beings needed to work together to protect the future of mankind, and the Qing Consortium should not turn themselves into a potential threat to humanity. The current Alliance of Strongholds that humanity had was already too fragile.