

Chapter 591 Qin Sheng the trespasser

Many days later, Ren Xiaosu was finally back at Stronghold 61. He was unaware of what was happening in the Northern Plains. In that savage wilderness, a new force was rising quietly. After returning to Stronghold 61, the first thing Ren Xiaosu did was to return to his house to clear up the burglars that had been killed by the Potato Shooters. However, he discovered the yard to be totally empty. There was nothing there at all.

It looked like the refugees in town had finally wised up. When they knew no one could come out alive from this yard, they did not dare to come here anymore.

This was a situation Ren Xiaosu was a little unaccustomed to.

When Ren Xiaosu saw a bunch of wildflowers in the backyard, he immediately understood this was likely the sign Xiaolu had left for him. They had agreed that if the woman wearing the black cap left town, Xiaolu would let him know about it.

Ren Xiaosu was relieved when he found out the woman had finally left. For some reason, he always felt a sense of oppression whenever that woman was at the tavern.

After Zhou Yingxue entered the yard, she quickly wet a cloth and started cleaning off the dust on the furniture. Ren Xiaosu raised his eyebrows and said, "When did you become so hard-working?"

"Master, how long have you been away from here? It's so dirty! I'll itch all over when I sleep here at night," Zhou Yingxue said with a frown.

"Who says that you can stay here?" Ren Xiaosu said in surprise, "Since the houses in town are not expensive, you should get your own place to live. How can we live together when there's only one bedroom in my house?"

Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue had stayed in the same hotel room due to the limited availability of rooms. But now that Zhou Yingxue was so rich, Ren Xiaosu would definitely not be willing to share a room with her anymore. It wouldn't be nice if word of this got out later since it would easily cause a misunderstanding.

Zhou Yingxue asked, "Then how much does a house cost in town, Master?"

"You can buy an identical brick house like mine for just 30,000 yuan," Ren Xiaosu said.

When Zhou Yingxue heard that she would have to spend 30,000 yuan, her miserly character kicked in again. "Master, I can sleep on the floor at your place! I can wash your clothes and massage your legs!"

Ren Xiaosu's face darkened. "Didn't I give you a share of the money already? You have at least ten million yuan by now, yet you're still trying to save this bit of money? Go and get your own house. I also don't know how long we'll be staying here."

“Oh.” Zhou Yingxue reluctantly left.

Very soon, Ren Xiaosu heard Zhou Yingxue’s voice in the yard next door. “What? 60,000 yuan? Have the prices of the houses gone up so quickly? This is highway robbery!”

The homeowner next door said, “This is my ancestral home where all my childhood memories are.... So how much are you willing to offer? Why don’t you make a counteroffer? I might just agree to it.”

Since the yard next door was only five or six meters away from Ren Xiaosu’s house, he could hear them very clearly. Actually, the homeowner was very eager to sell the place as the recent haunting had affected him badly. But when he saw Zhou Yingxue fully accessorized with jewels, he thought he might as well fleece as much out of her as he could. Moreover, Zhou Yingxue had to have some other motives for buying his house even though she was dressed in such an expensive outfit. Who knew if his house might suddenly rise in value in another few days?

Zhou Yingxue thought for a moment and said, “Since you want me to make a counteroffer, I’ll say 3,000 yuan!”

The homeowner said impatiently, “3,000 yuan?! Are you trolling me? You should be offering at least 30,000 yuan!”

Zhou Yingxue’s eyes widened. “Then wouldn’t I have to troll you ten times at least? No, I’m only willing to troll you three times at most!”

Ren Xiaosu shook his head and continued with his housekeeping. The chatter of the haggling next door lasted from morning until evening. In the end, the homeowner got so frustrated his scalp went numb. Thus, he sold off the house to Zhou Yingxue for the price of 19,000 yuan.

When Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue went to the tavern to have lamb stew in the evening, the storyteller was relating the cave-in at East Lake to the audience. When he heard Ren Xiaosu’s footsteps, his expression changed greatly as though he were welcoming a formidable foe.

The storyteller could already recognize Ren Xiaosu by his footsteps!

When Xiaolu saw that Ren Xiaosu had come, she ran over excitedly. But when she saw Zhou Yingxue standing behind him, she turned glum before heading back to the kitchen.

Ren Xiaosu said to Zhou Yingxue, “The lamb stew here is really good. You should try it.”

With that, he waved at the waiter and placed his order. While waiting for the lamb stew to be served, he listened to the storyteller talking about the cave-in at East Lake. As expected, Ren Xiaosu was involved in the story again.

Or to be precise, the protagonist of this story was actually “Old Xu.”

After the two bowls of lamb stew were served, Zhou Yingxue looked at her bowl and realized there wasn’t any meat in it. Then she looked at Ren Xiaosu’s bowl that was full of meat. “Master, did you bring me here just so that you could eat two portions of meat?”

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. This was definitely Xiaolu's doing. When he looked up, he saw her sitting next to the storyteller and seething with anger.

When Zhou Yingxue followed Ren Xiaosu's gaze towards Xiaolu, she realized what was going on. Then she glanced nonchalantly at her master and wondered why he was so popular with the women. He had only just shaken off Li Ran, but here came another girl throwing herself at him!

After the tavern closed, Xiaolu, who was feeling down, followed the storyteller back home. When she entered the house, she began to tear up the paper cranes that she had folded. The storyteller was elated when he heard the tearing. "Yes, tear them all up! There are indeed no good men in the world!"

But before the storyteller could be happy for long, Xiaolu started folding paper cranes again. The storyteller wondered, "Didn't you just tear up a pile of paper cranes? Why are you folding them again?"

Xiaolu stubbornly said, "I like him! It's not his fault!"

The storyteller started to feel an ache in his heart. "Where did you learn that from?"

Ren Xiaosu returned to his courtyard house alone. But to his surprise, there were potatoes smashed and scattered everywhere next to the Potato Shooters in the backyard.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned by what he saw. It was obvious someone had been attacked by the Potato Shooters after leaping into the backyard. But where did that person go? Did they run away after getting battered?

Ren Xiaosu pondered it for a moment. "The intruder's probably a supernatural being." Only a supernatural being could escape unscathed after such a heavy beating. But didn't the woman wearing the black cap leave? Could it be that there were other supernatural beings at Stronghold 61?

This made Ren Xiaosu even warier. Someone was spying on him, and for something like this to happen on the very first day of his return, it could not be uncomplicated.

Could it be Wang Fugui and the others? No, Ren Xiaosu felt that even if Wang Fugui had read the newspaper, they couldn't get here so quickly. Moreover, they definitely couldn't take the Potato Shooters' attack. Besides, there was no need for them to leap into the backyard either.

Two days later, Ren Xiaosu met Qin Sheng at the tavern. His face was all bruised and swollen...

Ren Xiaosu sized Qin Sheng up before asking, "Were you the one who went into my backyard two days ago?"

The bruised and bloodied Qin Sheng smiled in embarrassment and said, "Hahahahaha, what are you talking about? I only just arrived."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Normally, people use laughter to cover up for something when they're embarrassed. The more embarrassed they are, the more 'hahas' there will be..."

Chapter 592 The arrival of Luo Lan

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry as he looked at Qin Sheng whose face was all bruised and swollen. He knew the person who had jumped into his yard two days ago must have been the young Rider the same age as him standing in front of him regardless of how much he denied it.

However, Ren Xiaosu wondered, "What're you doing at Stronghold 61?"

"Oh." Qin Sheng explained seriously, "Our group has a rule that we must live in a town for a year after we become Riders. Because we normally live in the stronghold, the previous leader of the Riders felt new Riders might not be able to empathize with the sufferings of humanity. So this rule was implemented."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "There's really a need to do that. How great it would be if all the stronghold residents had the same mindset as you all."

The Riders were virtuous but not pedantic. Ren Xiaosu felt this was a very rare trait in this current era. That was because outstanding people tended to either be inclined towards extreme good or evil. However, Ren Xiaosu did not agree with being on either of the extremes. Sometimes, he would even feel pained whenever he thought of a person who had been too good.

The pain in his heart was like an undercurrent in the deep sea. It was strong and yet not easily detected.

Of course, he especially disliked those who tried to persuade people to be good but had evil intentions themselves.

Qin Sheng's arrival added some entertainment to Ren Xiaosu's life. Every day, Qin Sheng did nothing other than helping some refugees in town fetch water. He even helped repair their shacks.

This winter was exceptionally cold. Many of the refugees' shacks were exposed to the cold wind due to the holes in them, but they could not find any suitable materials to patch them up with.

Ren Xiaosu had experienced hardship like this before. It was a good thing that a richer person like Qin Sheng could experience such a life as well.

However, it was different from what Ren Xiaosu had imagined. At first, he thought Qin Sheng might get flustered or even make the situation messier. But actually, Qin Sheng was very capable at being hands-on with things and had a lot of experience living in the wilderness.

Qin Sheng spent two days hunting for gophers in the wilderness. Then he used the gophers' hide to mend the shacks while the meat was distributed to the refugees as food.

In fact, he was really skilled at mending the shacks, much more skillful than Ren Xiaosu was.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Did you do a lot of sewing in the past?"

"No," Qin Sheng said with a smile, "when I trained under my teacher, we would usually venture out into the wilderness for two to three months straight. At that time, my teacher made me do everything hands-on to train me. He said that it's an honor to be a Rider and they'd never train a bum to become one."

Ren Xiaosu wondered if this was just an excuse for Old Li to laze around. He watched Qin Sheng and thought that while he had an abundant amount of experiences in his life, he looked like a good-hearted young man who was very easy to fool.

Qin Sheng also bought a house next to Ren Xiaosu, so both Zhou Yingxue and he were now Ren Xiaosu's neighbors.

However, Qin Sheng did not jump into Ren Xiaosu's backyard anymore after he was exposed the last time. More importantly, Qin Sheng knew it would not be easy to sneak in quietly with those strange plants in the backyard.

Every day, Qin Sheng would go to the tavern to look for Ren Xiaosu after helping the refugees. Somehow, Zhou Yingxue, Ren Xiaosu, and Qin Sheng would always start playing Fight the Landlord whenever they got together.

When Xiaolu saw this, she joined the game as well. In the end, it became a four-player game of Fight the Landlord, with two sets of decks and eight trump cards in play.

For the past two days, Ren Xiaosu had been searching high and low in town for a copy of Hope Media's newspaper.

But the grocery store owner here was not as enterprising as Wang Fugui. He did not read any newspapers and was content with watching over his tiny shop to pass the time.

Ren Xiaosu wondered if he would have to resort to sneaking into the stronghold every day just to get his hands on the paper.

There was no doubt about the importance of newspapers in this era, especially a newspaper firm like Hope Media that particularly respected factual reporting. Ren Xiaosu could learn a lot of news from them.

As he did not have access to a large intelligence network like others, he could only rely on himself.

Ren Xiaosu went to look for the storyteller in the evening. After entering the house, he bluntly asked, "Do you know where I can get a copy of Hope Media's newspaper?"

The storyteller glanced at him. "Why? You've started paying attention to current affairs?"

"Since I'm all by myself, I don't have access to any reliable sources of information. So I thought I could learn some pretty useful info in the papers," Ren Xiaosu explained.

Off to the side, Xiaolu sneered. "You're not alone."

Ren Xiaosu did not know whether to laugh or cry. The storyteller looked like he did not welcome him and took a few copies of newspapers out from under his bed to pass to Ren Xiaosu. "Here!"

Ren Xiaosu was slightly taken aback. He noticed that one of the newspapers was even from today, yet he had never seen anyone going to deliver newspapers to the storyteller. The storyteller was really not

an ordinary person. He was even the one who shared with him the information about the Anjing House. And when the woman in the black cap came to town, he was also the one who had Xiaolu alert him about it.

“Thank you.” Ren Xiaosu sat down in a chair and started reading the newspapers. Xiaolu propped her chin up on her hands while looking at him from the side.

But just as Ren Xiaosu started reading, the storyteller raged, “If you want to read the papers, go read them at your own place! What’re you trying to prove by reading them here? Get out of my house!”

Ren Xiaosu was confused. What was wrong with the storyteller today?

Didn’t they get along just fine in the past?!

However, Ren Xiaosu hurriedly left and did not make a fuss about it. The contents of the newspaper had already caught his attention, so he wanted to go back to read it in depth.

Today’s Hope Media newspaper had reported that Luo Lan would be arriving at the Wang Consortium’s stronghold as a guest shortly, and it commented this was an extremely bold and dangerous move by Luo Lan.

Moreover, it also reported many radical youth groups had gathered at the Wang Consortium’s stronghold to protest against Luo Lan once he arrived. They hoped the Qing Consortium would automatically give up on their nuclear weapons.

Ren Xiaosu pondered this for a moment. Fatty Luo was way too bold. Even though Fatty Luo knew the Wang Consortium was purposely targeting the Qing Consortium right now, he still bucked up and decided to go there anyway.

Luo Lan’s itinerary was even listed in the paper. He would be passing through Stronghold 65, 63, 62, and finally to 61.

Luo Lan had provided the itinerary to Hope Media himself. He wanted to make a trip to the Wang Consortium with everyone watching so they could judge for themselves whether he had a clear conscience and if he were a resolute man.

After reading this, Ren Xiaosu thought that if Luo Lan encountered any danger when he arrived at Stronghold 61, he could offer him some protection.

He flipped through the pages and started reading other news. There was an article that reported about some seemingly unusual movements in the Northern Plains. Stronghold 176 had discovered the presence of the nomadic tribes’ scouts on many occasions and even captured some of them too. According to the captives, the various tribes in the Northern Plains were starting to assemble in preparation for an attack on the south. They were planning to plunder food from the south due to many of their livestock dying in the blizzard that hit during winter.

There was another piece of somewhat inconspicuous news that Ren Xiaosu had brushed off: “A spectacular sight of creeper vines growing in Stronghold 61 has turned the place into a tourist attraction.”

When Ren Xiaosu saw this news, he just muttered to himself in boredom and flipped to the next page.

A creeper vine could even become news in this era? Couldn't they focus on something more newsworthy?

Chapter 593 The Great Hoodwinker

In the town outside Stronghold 61, in a dimly lit house, the young Qin Sheng was writing an entry in a notebook with a fountain pen by candlelight: “On December 7th, Ren Xiaosu headed out to the tavern as usual at 10 in the morning and stayed until 7 in the evening before leaving.

“I observed nothing out of the ordinary nor heard any useful information during surveillance. After the target returned home, I only heard the sound of him flipping through some books in his house.

“Even though Ren Xiaosu lives in town, he was somehow able to get his hands on newspapers. I suspect the newspapers were given to him by the storyteller. However, there is no conclusive evidence of this.”

This was Ren Xiaosu's daily routine that Qin Sheng recorded. He even had surveillance equipment placed next to him.

With it, he did not have to plant any bugs in Ren Xiaosu's house. He only had to point the audio surveillance device at Ren Xiaosu's yard from his own house. This was the reason Qin Sheng had to be Ren Xiaosu's neighbor.

The surveillance equipment was portable and battery operated. When the batteries were almost dead, the Qinghe Group's intelligence personnel would automatically come and replace them.

Qin Sheng had come to this town on a mission. Those who became Riders were required to live in a town for an entire year. However, they would usually just move to the town outside Luoyang City, not go to such a faraway place.

After all, if a Rider were to go live in someone else's territory for an extended period, that could easily be misunderstood by the other consortiums as something else. But right now, they couldn't care less about that.

After Qin Sheng finished the entry, he took out another journal from the side and started recording his daily life. He thought for a while before seriously writing a few words: “December 7th: Played cards.”

That was it.

It was not that Qin Sheng did not want to write more, but all he did the entire day was play cards and nothing else!

Before Qin Sheng came to the town at Stronghold 61, his diary entries revealed the enriching life he led. He would describe the training he underwent and talk about the scenery and wilderness he had been to. For example, if he wrote down he had fish for dinner, he would describe how his teacher had taught him to set a trap on the riverbank and wait for the fish to get caught in it.

But he did not detail the challenges he had completed. Qin Sheng was a little regretful as he thought it would sound more glorious if his achievements could be described in words.

When Qin Sheng recalled the times he attempted the wingsuit and skydiving challenges, he could feel his blood pulsing through his veins.

Unfortunately, he could not attempt them anymore as the flying beasts had grown too fearsome. The Qinghe Group's airport had already been abandoned for some time, and even the last small turboprop airplane had been stored in the warehouse.

Qin Sheng looked at his diary. Ever since he arrived in Stronghold 61's town, he went from leading an enriching life to playing cards every day now.

December 5th: Played cards.

December 6th: Played cards.

December 7th: Played cards.

Qin Sheng felt like he couldn't degenerate any further and would have to make some changes to his life.

"December 8th: Played cards."

Next door, Ren Xiaosu was reading Hope Media's newspaper from December 8th in his own house. He was mainly concerned about Luo Lan's schedule.

In the end, Ren Xiaosu realized Luo Lan had nothing serious lined up in his agenda after he arrived at the Wang Consortium's strongholds. It felt more like he was going on vacation.

Ren Xiaosu put the newspaper down on the table next to him, then sat back in the recliner in the yard and looked up into the sky. He had read from a book in Stronghold 88's library that it was very rare for humans to be able to see the view of the blue sky and stars before The Cataclysm. But now, he could see the stars shining brightly above him.

Therefore, what humanity had destroyed in that disaster was itself, not the entire world.

Humans were only an extremely minute presence when compared to the entire world.

The next day, Ren Xiaosu went to the tavern to play cards as usual. Everything in life seemed to have suddenly calmed down again. But on his way back, Ren Xiaosu got a surprise.

He saw a haggard-looking old man walking towards him. The old man was holding a white banner with two words written on it: "Divine Foresight."

The moment “Divine Foresight” saw Ren Xiaosu, his eyes lit up. He quickened his pace and trotted towards Ren Xiaosu. “Young man, I noticed that there’s a unique aura exuding from you. I see great fortune in your future.”

Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow. This fellow had said he would face a bloody calamity the previous time.... No, he meant he would bring a bloody calamity upon others instead.

And now, he was actually saying he had great fortune?!

The fortune teller stroked his beard and said with a smile, “Young man, I can predict that the Northwest is where you will prosper in life. Don’t stay here any longer and hurry back to the Northwest!”

The fortune teller looked like a profound sage when he stroked his beard while smiling mysteriously. However, it would be better if he would wash his face and change into some clean clothes.

Ren Xiaosu snapped, “Why would I prosper in the Northwest?”

“Because I can predict that a lot of people there are waiting for you to go back!” the fortune teller remarked.

Ren Xiaosu retorted, “I already know that you’re from Fortress 178, alright? Zhang Xiaoman already told me. Aren’t you just trying to make me return to Fortress 178? I’m not done with my business here yet, so I won’t go back there!”

“Hahahahaha, how embarrassing.” The fortune teller wanted to dash his banner to the ground. ‘Zhang Xiaoman, you snitch!’

On his journey, the fortune teller had first rushed to Stronghold 74 when he heard it was about to fall. But before he could get there, Stronghold 74 had already been destroyed.

Afterwards, the fortune teller managed to locate a group of escapees from the stronghold. But when he found them, Ren Xiaosu had already departed with others from the main group.

The fortune teller had to ask a lot of people before he finally identified someone he suspected to be Ren Xiaosu. He truly lived up to his name as an experienced intelligence agent. He was actually able to trace his route to Stronghold 61 just based on some clues like that.

As a matter of fact, the fortune teller did not have a car he could drive. He had to make his way here on foot and had lost lots of weight from all the walking he did.

His dry rations had run out and his satellite phone was also dead. Where was he supposed to recharge his phone out in the wilderness? To Fortress 178 right now, he might as well be missing!

But even though he was in such a pathetic state, he was still thinking about swaying Ren Xiaosu into returning to the Northwest.

But!

Just as he had started trying to hoodwink Ren Xiaosu, he got exposed instead. The fortune teller harbored some resentment. If he did not give Zhang Xiaoman a good beating after he returned to the Northwest, he would have traveled all that distance for nothing!

As Ren Xiaosu walked back to his residence, the fortune teller followed him and nagged, "It's gonna get chaotic here in the Central Plains. Look at how dangerous it is for them when you're here!"

Ren Xiaosu looked at the Great Hoodwinker puzzledly. Was he even seriously trying to persuade him?

"You are just a wanderer in the Central Plains. No matter where you go, everyone will regard you as a dangerous person, right?" The Great Hoodwinker chased after Ren Xiaosu and muttered, "But it'll be different if you return to Fortress 178, because Fortress 178 is your home. Everyone can't wait for you to be stronger so that people will be afraid of you!"

As he was speaking, Ren Xiaosu reached home. He tried to slam the door in the Great Hoodwinker's face. However, the Great Hoodwinker blocked the front gate with half his body.

As such, Ren Xiaosu had no choice but to let him in. Just as the Great Hoodwinker had described, he had a good relationship with people from Fortress 178, such as Zhang Xiaoman, Jiao Xiaochen, Fu Rao, and Lin Ping'an. They were all family to him.

So even if he did not want to listen to the Great Hoodwinker's nagging, he still should not make things too embarrassing for him.

Chapter 594 Future Commander

Next door, Qin Sheng had also returned home after the card game at the tavern. On his way back, he saw someone seemingly walking with Ren Xiaosu from afar. That person even followed Ren Xiaosu back into his house.

Qin Sheng got excited. Who knew if this could end up as an important clue?

Qin Sheng quickly went home to set up the surveillance equipment. In the end, he was stunned after hearing just a few words.

Right at this moment, the Great Hoodwinker was sitting in a chair in Ren Xiaosu's house where he continued, "Everyone has already acknowledged you. As long as you go back to Fortress 178, you'll be the future commander. Do you know what that means? The people in the Central Plains will not tolerate your presence here. But if you return to Fortress 178, with our vast territory in the Northwest in the coming years, wouldn't you get the final say over this place?"

When Qin Sheng heard this, he was absolutely stunned!

Old Li, he, and even all the other Riders had suspected Ren Xiaosu might be a supernatural being, but he also seemed like an independent force without any organization backing him.

Only now did he realize their hypotheses were totally wrong. Ren Xiaosu's true identity was way beyond what they had imagined!

What kind of place was Fortress 178? They were famous even here in the Central Plains.

Moreover, Fortress 178 had unified the Northwest. They could be called one of the major powers in the Alliance of Strongholds. The number of strongholds controlled by Fortress 178 was second only to the Wang Consortium. Not even the Zhou Consortium, the Kong Consortium, or the Pyro Company controlled as many strongholds as Fortress 178 did.

However, Fortress 178 had never been judged by the number of strongholds they controlled. Fortress 178 could only be said to have become even more powerful.

After Zhang Jinglin returned to Fortress 178, he made quite a lot of big moves. He unified the Northwest and opened the trade routes. In the early years, a senior member of the Riders even held Zhang Jinglin in high esteem after meeting him only once.

It suddenly dawned on Qin Sheng that Ren Xiaosu was actually going to be the future commander of Fortress 178!

What the hell?! Why hadn't the rest of the world heard anything about this before? Could it be that they knew he was listening in on them and were just putting on an act for him? This was fucking Fortress 178, after all!

An ambitious young man like Qin Sheng was still very impressed with that group of warriors from Fortress 178. Therefore, he decided to continue listening to the rest of the conversation patiently.

Ren Xiaosu poured himself a cup of water and stayed silent for a long time while the Great Hoodwinker looked at him with anticipation. Then Ren Xiaosu suddenly burped. "Sorry, had too much to eat tonight."

The Great Hoodwinker did not know whether to laugh or cry. What the hell was this?

Then Ren Xiaosu muttered to himself, "I've won quite a bit of money from Qin Sheng today. That kid looks pretty smart, but he's not so good at playing cards."

The Great Hoodwinker roared, "Were you seriously listening to me at all? Don't think that you can conveniently change the subject by talking to yourself!"

On the other side, Qin Sheng's face darkened. He swore to himself he would definitely win back the money he had lost today!

Ren Xiaosu said to the Great Hoodwinker, "I feel very tempted by what you've told me. I'm not someone who can turn a blind eye to such great temptations, but are you really sure that I'm suitable to be a commander? I'm just a poor kid from a refugee background."

"Our commander was also a refugee." The Great Hoodwinker said in an extremely sincere tone, "We don't care about your origins, and it doesn't matter if you don't have any military skill for now. What's important is that we acknowledge you and hope that you can return to Fortress 178."

Just how good was Ren Xiaosu's military skill? In actual fact, he could not at all compare to the experienced commanders. Having military skill was not just about leading a company of soldiers and winning a battle or two.

But after reading Zhang Xiaoman's battle report, what impressed everyone was Ren Xiaosu's ability to adapt to the circumstances in the course of the war and how he prioritized his fellow soldiers' lives.

Wasn't this the same reason everyone was convinced by Zhang Jinglin back then?

Furthermore, he led a company to constantly keep the enemy at the rear on their toes and also wiped out most of the Zong Consortium's higher-ups. In the end, he even brought down an entire stronghold by himself. So could it really be said that he did not have any military skill?

Although a lot of what he did was actually handled very badly, and it could even be said that he had achieved everything through his immense individual strength. But could you really say he did not display any military potential in the course of the war?

Therefore, many of the commanders at Fortress 178 recognized one thing. As long as Ren Xiaosu returned to receive systematic military training, he would probably not turn out to be a bad commander even if he might not compare to Zhang Jinglin.

Moreover, the Great Hoodwinker and Wang Fengyuan had also discussed this matter in private. It would be an absolutely good idea to have a "successor" for Fortress 178 as soon as possible. On one hand, it would stop others from laying eyes on Fortress 178. On the other hand, Ren Xiaosu could get familiarized with the military situation as soon as possible. In this way, Fortress 178 would still have a leader should anything happen to the current fortress commander.

It was not that they were hoping something would happen to Zhang Jinglin, but hadn't they been without a leader for over a decade previously?

Who could know what was going to happen in the future!

Moreover, everyone would feel more at ease if a powerful supernatural being like Ren Xiaosu was stationed at Fortress 178. A lot of troublesome matters would also become much easier to handle as a result.

But in the end, Ren Xiaosu still shook his head. "I still haven't figured out a lot of things yet. Perhaps I'll go back there someday, but I can't promise that. First of all, I have to find my family and friends who I've been separated from."

The Great Hoodwinker became a little happier at the words. At least, Ren Xiaosu did not reject him, right?

He said with a smile, "I'll think of a way to contact Fortress 178's intelligence personnel in the Central Plains right away so that they can send over batteries for the satphone. It shouldn't take too long! Some time ago, Commander Zhang ordered us to help you find your friends in the Central Plains. Who knows,

we might already have received news of them! How about this? If we find your friends, you go back with me to the Northwest!”

The Great Hoodwinker had stealthily changed the point of view of his argument. Ren Xiaosu did not promise he would go back with him after finding his family and friends. However, Ren Xiaosu did not bother to refute him either. Otherwise, he would have to waste a long time here bantering with him.

“Go do whatever you were busy with.” Ren Xiaosu chased the Great Hoodwinker out of his house.

Qin Sheng listened to their entire conversation from next door. The more he listened, the more surprised he felt. He suddenly thought of something. Even if Ren Xiaosu were really the heir of the Qinghe Group, was it a more powerful organization when compared to Fortress 178? Although the Qinghe Group’s reputation was comparable to that of Fortress 178’s, the Qinghe Group was known more for its business reputation. Hence, an ambitious person would usually be more inclined towards Fortress 178, right?

If anyone else were to find out they were the heir of the Qinghe Group, they would probably be so happy they could die. Therefore, based on Old Li and the others’ assumptions, Ren Xiaosu would be no exception either. However, they had to be extremely, extremely cautious about this. They would have to verify Ren Xiaosu’s identity before telling him about it.

They only thought about having to be cautious themselves, but they didn’t consider if Ren Xiaosu would even be willing to inherit the Qinghe Group and lead the Riders if they told him.

If he rejected them, that would be extremely embarrassing.

But of course, Ren Xiaosu might not necessarily be that person either.

What should he do? Qin Sheng felt he had to relay this information to his teacher as quickly as possible. The Riders would all have to reevaluate their attitude towards Ren Xiaosu.

Chapter 595 Luo Lan arrives

As Qin Sheng was letting his mind run wild, someone suddenly knocked on the front door. He went to open the door and was surprised to see the Great Hoodwinker standing there. “Is something the matter?” Qin Sheng asked politely.

“I observed that the feng shui of your place is awful. If you stay here for a long time, bad mojo will enter your body. You’re still young and strong, so you might not feel it. But after a prolonged period, you’ll get plagued by illnesses and misfortunes.” The Great Hoodwinker said, “But don’t worry, I have a solution for that. You can sell this house to me, and I will help you resolve the clash of auras here...”

“You’re crazy.” Qin Sheng closed the door. He wondered if this person was really from Fortress 178. How could he be bullshitting with a straight face?!

The Great Hoodwinker left awkwardly and proceeded to knock on Zhou Yingxue’s door. He intended to relocate here to keep watch over Ren Xiaosu.

Although there were more than 20 brick houses in town that came attached with a yard, Ren Xiaosu only had two neighbors. One of them was Qin Sheng, and the other was Zhou Yingxue.

When the Great Hoodwinker realized that he could not fool Qin Sheng, he turned his attention to Zhou Yingxue.

Ren Xiaosu was tickled when he heard the sound of knocking next door. As if Zhou Yingxue would sell her house to the Great Hoodwinker! How would that even be possible?

In the end, Zhou Yingxue agreed to deal with the Great Hoodwinker for 60,000 yuan, and the ownership of the house was transferred overnight.

Zhou Yingxue then bought another house a little further down the road from Ren Xiaosu's place. And the Great Hoodwinker became Ren Xiaosu's new neighbor.

Ren Xiaosu was dumbfounded when he found out. That woman actually sold him out for a profit of just some tens of thousands of yuan!

Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue was happily counting her profits as she said to Ren Xiaosu, "Master, I made these from my real estate investment, so I won't be sharing it with you."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. What the fuck?!

Zhou Yingxue did not care about Ren Xiaosu's reaction. She just continued, "Master, I think there's still a lot of room for the property prices in this town to appreciate. See, I've already made some tens of thousands of yuan in half a month. This won't do! I have to purchase a few more houses. Who knows? I could make more money in some time!"

With that, Zhou Yingxue rushed out and bought six houses in one shot. She was even willing to purchase them at the price of more than 30,000 yuan each.

After that, she laid in the bed of one of her newly purchased properties and started fantasizing about the future. Now that she was considered wealthy, she could easily switch careers to being a real estate investor. Just based on her foresight of selecting properties, she could easily become the richest person in the Alliance of Strongholds and overtake the Wang Consortium!

With this wonderful dream in mind, Zhou Yingxue nodded off. In her dream, she was standing on stronghold walls and generously telling Ren Xiaosu, "Master, I bought this stronghold for you!"

At this moment, the storyteller was sighing in his own house, "My dear, ever since that Ren Xiaosu came to Stronghold 61, that woman from the Anjing House, the Riders, and even the people from Fortress 178 have descended on this town. I heard that he's also on very good terms with the Qing Consortium. Before this, I thought that he was going to get sucked into the center of that storm. However, I realized that I was wrong. He's actually the one who's causing the storm..."

The storyteller was saying these things because he wanted to tell Xiaolu that it would be best not to get involved with someone like Ren Xiaosu. There was no future for them and something bad could easily happen to her.

But he did not hear Xiaolu respond even after speaking for a long time.

The storyteller said curiously, "My dear?"

Only then did Xiaolu come back to her senses. "Huh? Grandpa, are you calling for me? Grandpa, what kind of girl do you think Ren Xiaosu likes?"

The storyteller was speechless.

...

At this moment, Luo Lan's convoy was on its way to Stronghold 61. Inside the car, Zhou Qi said with a forlorn expression, "If you were trying to die, you could've just gone by yourself. Why do you always have to drag me along? You already know it is really dangerous at the Wang Consortium, yet you still insist on coming here."

"It's only through this that I can show I'm not guilty at all." Luo Lan chuckled and said, "How does the Wang Consortium count as a dangerous place? Do you think they'll really try to lay a finger on me? What right do they have?"

"They can just place you under house arrest in secret." Zhou Qi said, "Oh no, that won't work since you purposely found a reporter from Hope Media to travel with you. They can't confine you unless they also confine the reporter. Otherwise, Hope Media will just report the facts as is."

"Hope Media wishes to investigate what's going on while I need the outside world to be aware of my whereabouts every day. Both of us will just take what we need from each other," Luo Lan said with a smile. The reporter from Hope Media was sitting in one of the vehicles behind them. As long as Hope Media was still providing the latest updates, the Wang Consortium could not lay a finger on Luo Lan.

After all, what legitimate reasons did the Wang Consortium have for placing Luo Lan under house arrest? This was also the reason Luo Lan and the Qing Consortium's official stance was that they did not possess any nuclear weapons. "Don't ask whether we have them or not. Either way, we just won't admit to it. We might admit to it someday, but that will be in the future. However, we will never admit to it now."

Zhou Qi muttered, "If they manage to find any evidence in the future, your reputation in the Central Plains will be ruined. You've put on this whole show and even made those tearful denials until so many people fell for it. When they find out you were lying to everyone, I'm afraid no one in the Central Plains will like you anymore."

Luo Lan frowned. Actually, he also knew such a day would come. Evidence pointing to the Qing Consortium's possession of nuclear weapons would definitely surface someday. As long as they really did launch it, it would be impossible to cover up everything.

At that time, Luo Lan would probably be known as the biggest liar and become a laughingstock in this era of strongholds.

Eventually, Luo Lan said firmly, "This is nothing compared to the future of our Qing Consortium."

Luo Lan felt it was well worth it to buy some time for the Qing Consortium in exchange for his own sacrifice.

“That’s enough.” Zhou Qi curled his lips. “I heard there’s a lot of radicals gathering at Stronghold 61 to protest against you. You should think about what to do later.”

“Hehe, they’re just a group of students, aren’t they? What’s there to be afraid of?” Luo Lan’s words showed he did not really care about this group of students at all.

The convoy did not encounter any obstacles when entering Stronghold 61, with just a symbolic inspection carried out on the vehicles before letting them through.

These actions seemed more like they were done to avoid suspicion. Everyone knew the Wang Consortium had taken the lead to point fingers at the Qing Consortium for the nuclear strike. To show a fair and just attitude, they wanted to prove they would not pettily pick on the Qing Consortium over trivial matters.

The greater the conflict was at the top level, the less they cared about the small details.

Along the way, Luo Lan looked at the creeper vines growing by the roadside. He said, “Say, these creeper vines in the stronghold are really strange. They haven’t withered even though it’s winter already, and there’s so many growing too.”

The creeper vines had originally been growing on the outer walls of several houses. But now that it was winter, not only did they not wither, they even started growing further onto several streets.

If someone took a bird’s eye view, they would discover the vines were spreading out in parallel with the stronghold walls. It was like the vines were trying to surround the entire stronghold. Meanwhile, there were not many vines at the center of the stronghold.

The lush scenery covered about 10% of the entire stronghold, giving it a rather pleasant look.

However, Luo Lan did not have time to think about the creeper vines. He could already see some people up front trying to block the convoy from advancing. Those people were even holding up banners with the words, “Qing Zhen is a dictator! Give up nuclear weapons!”

Luo Lan’s eyes narrowed.

Chapter 596 Missing persons

A group of people were standing on both sides of the road, and some of them even deliberately raised the banners they were holding higher into a more conspicuous position. Luo Lan thought they were protesting him, so he wasn’t really bothered. But when he saw they were targeting Qing Zhen, it made him very unhappy. “Just drive past them, don’t stop.” Luo Lan sneered, “The Wang Consortium must have stationed these people here to stir up trouble. How else could they have known the time we were slated to arrive? The Hope Media newspaper did not report our exact itinerary for today.”

Actually, everyone was well aware the Wang Consortium was controlling everything from behind the scenes. Zhou Qi was thinking about how to resolve the situation they were in now. If such a group of people charged over and beat up Luo Lan, that would be terrible.

Luo Lan and the others could not possibly open fire inside the Wang Consortium's stronghold. If they did, that would give the Wang Consortium a reason to detain Luo Lan.

However, Zhou Qi realized Luo Lan was still comfortably sitting in the car and did not seem to be panicking at all.

The convoy was driving forward slowly, and they were still about 2.2 kilometers away from the hotel in the center of the stronghold. The hotel they were going to stay at could be considered the most luxurious hotel.

The Qing Consortium soldiers in charge of protecting Luo Lan were getting tense in the vehicles. They were afraid someone in the crowd would suddenly shoot Luo Lan.

The Qing Consortium soldiers were eagle-eyed. When they scanned the crowd, some people got so scared they took a few steps back in fear.

The security personnel Qing Zhen picked out for Luo Lan were elite soldiers. Qing Zhen did not even deploy these elite trump cards for his own protection.

After the convoy drove past them, the dense crowd holding the banners on either side of the road followed close behind them on foot. They walked all the way to the hotel where Luo Lan and his entourage were staying.

"These people won't follow us to the hotel, right?" Zhou Qi frowned.

But Zhou Qi guessed wrong. After they got to the hotel, the group of protesters sat quietly outside the hotel entrance with their banners that had all sorts of things written on them. Some of the banners were chastising Qing Zhen, some were requesting that the Qing Consortium give up their nuclear weapons, while others were calling for Luo Lan to leave the Central Plains. Several people were not holding up any banners and were quietly watching from within the crowd. These were the ones giving instructions to the rest of the protesters.

Before Luo Lan and his subordinates entered the room, the Qing Consortium soldiers did a sweep of the room first. Besides checking for bugs and surveillance cameras, they also had to ensure there were no double walls or secret compartments in the walls.

The entire process took fifteen minutes. The Qing Consortium soldiers were extremely rigorous in their duties, and Luo Lan did not rush them and waited quietly outside the door with five soldiers protecting him.

Although Luo Lan claimed there was nothing to be afraid of, it wouldn't hurt to be a little more cautious.

After entering the room, Luo Lan ordered one of the soldiers behind him, "Have the hotel's restaurant make dinner and have them serve their most luxurious and expensive food to me. Price is not an issue for the Qing Consortium."

Zhou Qi was stunned. "It's only noon. Why are you asking them to prepare for dinner?"

Luo Lan strolled to the window and opened a tiny gap in the curtains. He said with a smile, "I'm preparing it for them. They'll definitely be sitting there until evening. Who knows? They might even sit there for several days. So how can we allow them to go hungry?"

Just as Luo Lan predicted, the group of protesters downstairs were determined to force Luo Lan to confront them. They sat there without moving an inch.

At past 6 PM, Luo Lan pushed the service cart out of the hotel personally. The cart was adorned with a white cloth and filled with food.

One of the protesters spoke, "Don't think you can send us away with just some food, we—"

"Well, aren't you presumptuous? Who said this food was for you people? This is for my personal consumption," Luo Lan said with a smile.

After that, one of the Qing Consortium soldiers carried a chair over for Luo Lan to sit down on. Luo Lan then started gorging himself at the entrance of the hotel, eating until his lips were glistening with oil.

While Luo Lan was eating, he even heard someone among the protesters sitting across from him swallow hard. After all, these people had not eaten anything since morning. Besides, it would make them look really uncommitted if they ate during such a serious protest!

Luo Lan continued munching on his food like no one was around. Actually, he had not fully told Zhou Qi what he wanted to say. After these people had criticized Qing Zhen, it would not be enough for them to just go hungry. They would have to suffer his spite!

After he finished eating, Luo Lan even burped in satisfaction. "Wow, I don't think I can finish it all. There's still more than half left. Why don't you guys have some? You should be quite hungry by now."

After that, Luo Lan pushed the service cart with the leftovers to the front of the protesters before heading back to the hotel laughing.

Not only did he want to savor the food in front of these people, but he also intentionally left behind some leftovers for them to look at.

The group of protesters looked at Luo Lan's back and gritted their teeth in hatred. But they could not make a move on him yet. If they initiated a fight, they would be the ones in the wrong!

...

While the group of protesters were staging a sit-in at the hotel's entrance, someone suddenly came to the Public Order Division to report a case.

The staff in the Public Order Division's office lobby were very unhappy as the majority of their manpower had to be reassigned due to Luo Lan's visit. Their hands were already tied, and they were busy up to their ears, so why was someone still coming to trouble them?

Furthermore, the artificial intelligence had proven to be really useful over the years as it directly informed the Public Order Division's staff whenever there was a case. Most of the cases reported by the stronghold residents were often just trivial matters.

However, the Wang Consortium had set a target of 100% solved cases rate for the Public Order Division, so as long as a case were reported, they would have to investigate and solve it.

An employee of the Public Order Division asked, "What case are you reporting?"

"Several of our workers in the garment factory have gone missing. We tried calling their home phones, but they didn't pick up. So we went to their apartments to look for them, but they were not there either. They seemed to have just vanished into thin air!" A middle-aged man said, "Those are our factory's workers. We can't just let them disappear like that without a reason, right?"

The Public Order Division employee was stunned when he heard this. Why hadn't they received an alert from the artificial intelligence regarding such a conclusive missing persons case?

"Could they have been spies?" Another employee said, "There were cases like this in the past where several people suddenly disappeared entirely. But actually, it was just that they had escaped the stronghold."

"That doesn't seem right. Why would spies go to a garment factory? They can't find any secrets there." The Public Order Division employee said helplessly, "Why don't you register your case and provide us with the information you have? I'll go with you later to visit their apartments and investigate if there were any traces of a fight. I wonder what's been up with the AI. We still haven't been able to solve the case of the missing cats and dogs from some time ago."

The manager of the garment factory gave a placating smile. "This is definitely more serious than the case of the missing cats and dogs."

The Public Order Division employee glanced at him and said, "In our department, there are no cases that are less important than the others. As long as you report a case to us, we'll have to solve it. By the way, where do your workers live?"

The manager of the garment factory said anxiously, "Have you read the news of the creeper vine?! Their homes are in the vicinity of where that creeper vine is growing!"

Chapter 597 Eaten

The Public Order Division employee left the office with the person who had lodged the case and drove to the location where the missing persons were reported to be staying. Before leaving, the employee even asked, "Do all the missing people live in the same area? Did they rent a house together?"

“No, we have hundreds of workers in our garment factory, and they’re all staying at different places. The few workers who went missing also had their own places in the stronghold. They weren’t renting or living together,” the garment factory’s manager explained.

“That’s a little strange then.” The Public Order Division employee named Wang Zhongrui wondered, “Don’t you find it odd? They weren’t living together, yet they all went missing at the same time. What was their work performance at the factory like? Did any valuable items go missing at your factory recently?”

Wang Zhongrui thought of a possibility. Could the workers at the factory have run away after stealing some valuable items?

Such things had happened before. However, the criminal was unlucky that time and got discovered by the artificial intelligence even before they could escape the stronghold.

“The most valuable things in our factory are the mechanical equipment and raw materials. However, they can’t steal those. Even if they could, there’s no avenues for them to fence them.” The manager rejected this hypothesis.

“In that case, we can only go to the place they lived to take a look,” Wang Zhongrui said.

The creeper vine had grown to cover a very large area by now. The location mentioned by the garment factory’s manager was where the creeper vine was initially reported by Hope Media’s newspaper to have originated.

Many families in the stronghold who could afford a camera even specially went to this place to take pictures with the creeper vine in the winter.

However, the creeper vine had grown much more since that time. When Wang Zhongrui drove to the area where the creeper vine was growing, he asked the garment factory’s manager next to him in the passenger seat, “There’s creeper vines growing everywhere here. Where are their homes?”

The garment factory’s manager said, “Turn left, then turn right, and we should be there. Eh, this is strange! Why has the creeper vine grown so much? Sir, do you see that apartment on the left? From what I remember, the vines had not spread there yet as of yesterday, but it looks like it’s already covered the entire apartment today. To be honest, if I weren’t incredibly familiar with this area, I might’ve lost my way.”

The lush creeper vines had grown so dense that even the address number on the apartment got covered.

At first, the residents thought it looked really beautiful. But now, the creeper vines were starting to affect everyone’s daily lives. The pedestrians walking down the street were also mostly unhappy about the creeper vines’ overgrowth.

As Wang Zhongrui looked at the creeper vine, he got a niggling feeling that something was not right. However, he could not pinpoint what the problem was.

“We’ve arrived. It’s here.” The garment factory’s manager said, “One of the workers’ homes is on the first floor of this complex.”

After parking the car, Wang Zhongrui walked into the hallway of the building and asked, “Eh, do creeper vines usually grow into the hallways? Don’t they grow in places where sunlight can reach?”

Wang Zhongrui saw that the hallway in front of him had been invaded by the creeper vines, and the originally white walls were no longer visible. However, Wang Zhongrui did not feel that these creeper vines were beautiful. Instead, he felt a chill running up his spine.

But how could a Public Order Division employee get so easily frightened by some creeper vines? As such, he braced himself and walked in.

But strangely, they found the door of the worker’s residence had been left open. Wang Zhongrui asked, “Were you the one who opened the door?”

“No,” The garment factory’s manager replied, “it was already open when I came here yesterday. I was also wondering why they would leave their doors wide open when they left their home.”

Wang Zhongrui stepped into the apartment. There were no traces of fighting in the room as he had imagined, nothing at all.

However, Wang Zhongrui was much more experienced than the manager of the garment factory. Although their Public Order Division had mostly stopped following up on reported cases manually and mainly relied on the artificial intelligence to crack them, the Public Order Division’s employees were still professionally trained.

Right as they entered the house, Wang Zhongrui sensed something was amiss. There was a sweaty handprint on the door frame that was not particularly noticeable, but it looked very strange indeed.

The handprint that was left behind seemed to suggest someone had just opened the door when they were suddenly pulled out of the house by something. The person probably tried to grab ahold of the door frame immediately but failed to do so.

Thinking of all this, Wang Zhongrui turned to look behind him as a chill ran up his spine. However, he saw nothing behind him.

Wang Zhongrui looked around the apartment and suddenly did not want to stay here any longer. He said to the garment factory’s manager, “Let’s step outside and go interview the other residents upstairs.”

After that, they headed upstairs. Then Wang Zhongrui realized the creeper vines had already grown all over the building, both on the inside and on the outside.

When they came to the second floor, Wang Zhongrui was surprised to find the doors of two households were also open. He asked, “Did you come upstairs yesterday?”

“No.” The garment factory’s manager said, “Why would I come upstairs for no reason?”

What Wang Zhongrui was trying to ask was, “When you came here yesterday, did you open the doors on the second floor?! And were the residents still around?!”

Suddenly, Wang Zhongrui shouted loudly, “Is there anyone in there?”

He did not even dare to step into the apartments now as he felt a huge sense of danger threatening him. Wang Zhongrui’s back was drenched in sweat.

A moment later, Wang Zhongrui saw some traces of blood mixed into the dust on the ground. Other people might not recognize that as blood, but how could someone like him not recognize it?!

“Run!” Wang Zhongrui roared.

With that, he pulled the garment factory’s manager by the arm and tried to run downstairs. But it was already too late. Wang Zhongrui saw the creeper vines on the hallway walls moving towards them as though they had come alive.

Wang Zhongrui did not hesitate and rushed into an apartment instead. He seemed to remember there were no creeper vines growing inside the apartment on the first floor.

Both he and the garment factory’s manager rushed into the apartment before the creeper vines could grab ahold of them. The garment factory’s manager was still in a state of shock. “What the hell is going on here? What kind of monster is that? Why are the creeper vines moving?!”

However, Wang Zhongrui did not have time to explain. After entering the apartment, he ran straight for the window as quickly as he could.

With a crash, Wang Zhongrui smashed through the window with his shoulder and escaped from the second floor. Due to the large inertia of his sprint, some of those creeper vines outside the window got snapped by Wang Zhongrui when they tried to grab him.

With a loud thud, Wang Zhongrui landed on the street. The pedestrians on the street looked at him in surprise, but he started shouting at the second floor without a care, “Quick, jump out! Or else it’ll be too late!”

But...

No one responded to him, and it became all quiet on the second floor of the building as though nothing had happened.

The pedestrians on the street stared at Wang Zhongrui like he was a fool. Nobody knew who he was talking to.

Wang Zhongrui felt a tingling sensation in his scalp. He took out his identification and shouted at the pedestrians, “I’m from the Public Order Division. Everyone, stay away from those creeper vines. Quickly make your way to a place where no creeper vines are growing!”

When they saw his Public Order Division ID, they turned nervous. Someone asked, "Sir, what's wrong with the creeper vines? Is there a problem with them?"

Wang Zhongrui said in a low voice, "These creeper vines can eat people!"

He stood in the middle of the street as he looked at the dense mass of creeper vines surrounding him and the apartment complexes covered in it. He wondered how many people had already been "eaten" by the creeper vines.

But it was still not entirely safe yet even though he had escaped from the clutches of the creeper vines. Wang Zhongrui knew the creeper vines would actively try to grab its prey. But for some reason, it immediately stopped attacking when he landed on the street.

Chapter 598 A shattered dream

Wang Zhongrui was quickly evacuating the residents on the streets away from where the creeper vines were growing. However, he was only able to vacate a single street by himself. What about the residents in other areas?

Furthermore, the creeper vines were so sinister Wang Zhongrui did not dare to stay around any longer. He was just a normal person, after all!

After he left the area where the creeper vines were growing, he immediately found a public telephone and called the Public Order Division. "There's something weird going on with that creeper vine. It can even eat people! For now, quickly try to contact the residents where the creeper vines are growing and see if there's any survivors in the apartments overgrown with the vines. If there are, tell them to leave quickly! Also, tell the Wang Consortium's higher-ups to send troops over. We'll need flamethrowers to deal with this problem!"

Wang Zhongrui was still thinking logically. He was a very rational and decisive person. Otherwise, he would not have escaped from the apartment complex earlier.

He passed on that message to the Public Order Division so they could verify if there were any survivors left and tell them how to deal with the creeper vines. The creeper vines were not afraid of bullets and grew extremely aggressive, so Wang Zhongrui thought it would be more appropriate to use flamethrowers to deal with them.

However, Wang Zhongrui was still a little hesitant. The creeper vines had already covered one-fifth of the stronghold. In other words, the death toll of the residents in the stronghold would have already reached an unimaginable level.

Wang Zhongrui assumed the creeper vines had only started devouring humans during the past couple days. If not, there would already be loads of people lodging reports about people who had gone missing in the stronghold.

Furthermore, the creeper vines had probably become more ferocious after getting a taste of human flesh. He recalled that the garment factory's manager had said that one of the apartment blocks was not yet overgrown with green vines as of yesterday. However, that building was fully covered by the vines today.

The creeper vines had not been spreading so quickly!

The Public Order Division did not feel that Wang Zhongrui was trying to frighten them, because Wang Zhongrui was a senior employee and was usually very reliable in his day-to-day work.

As such, everyone in the Public Order Division immediately got down to work. A large number of the Public Order Division's staff rushed to where Wang Zhongrui was, while the staff at the headquarters began calling up residents living in the apartment complexes overgrown with the creeper vines.

However, the more calls they made, the heavier their moods became, because no one was answering their calls. They always ended up getting greeted by an answering machine on the other end of the line.

It might be a coincidence if it were just one or two calls, but for a few hundred calls to all be the same, it could only mean that something bad must have happened!

The stronghold's garrison's advance guard had already arrived on the scene with their flamethrowers.

The company commander of the advance guard found Wang Zhongrui to learn about the situation, but Wang Zhongrui looked at the two sets of flamethrowers that they were holding and asked, "How many flamethrowers do we have in our stronghold?"

"We only have these two. Usually, there's no need for this kind of weapon. So our stronghold has never really equipped the troops with such things," the company commander replied. "Also, these two flamethrowers have not been used in a very long time, so I don't know if they're still working or not."

At that, Wang Zhongrui turned around and looked at the creeper vines again. The creeper vines looked like a boundless green sea in front of them, so how could two sets of flamethrowers possibly be enough to kill it?

The company commander said, "Let's just try it out first. Our men are still transporting fuel over from the rear. If this doesn't work, we can set fire to the plant bit by bit."

"Alright, let's give it a try first!" Wang Zhongrui replied.

A soldier carried a flamethrower and fuel pack on his back and walked towards the apartment building. When he was about five meters away, he fired a tongue of flame right at the creeper vines. The creeper vines on the wall immediately writhed in pain, moving like how a human would thrash their limbs in pain from fire.

Initially, the advance guard was skeptical of what Wang Zhongrui had told them. But they were shocked when they saw this sight.

Normal creeper vines would definitely not react like this when burned by flame!

But before they could give it any further thought, a manhole cover behind the soldier was suddenly pushed up and out by countless vines. Then those vines shot out at the soldier and stabbed him with their sharp spikes before harshly dragging him into the sewers.

The soldier did not even have time to cry out in pain. Although the other troops wanted to charge forward and try to rescue him, there were no signs of him in the sewers anymore. All they could see was a dark manhole that looked horrifying and frightening.

The company commander of the advance guard yelled at the radioman, "Keep your guard up! Tell headquarters ASAP and call for reinforcements. We'll need a huge amount of fuel!"

But he did not know it was already a little too late to deal with the creeper vines. After that soldier was pulled down into the sewers, the creeper vines that had been angered by the flames started spreading further at an incredible speed.

That flame was like a prelude to the calamity in Stronghold 61. Previously, the creeper vine would "eat" its food secretly. But now, it had gone totally crazy!

Before the reinforcements could arrive, Wang Zhongrui and the others could already see the vines spreading towards them at a very fast speed. Before this, the surface of the streets was at least clear of vines. But just a minute later, even the roads in the area got covered by the creeper vines and turned green!

Wang Zhongrui could feel his scalp going numb when he saw the leaves on the creeper vines swaying like multiple pairs of hands.

The advance guard was still thinking of using the other flamethrower to stop the creeper vines from advancing. However, Wang Zhongrui took a look at the side and realized they were about to get surrounded by the creeper vines!

He pulled the company commander away with him and started to run. "Run! It'll be too late if we don't leave now!"

"We can't leave!" The company commander shouted angrily, "As soldiers, if we run away, what're the civilians going to do?!"

Wang Zhongrui was helpless. He did not want to stand around and wait for death here. Even if the troops did not want to leave, he would still leave nonetheless. Even if he might lose his job at the Public Order Division, he did not want to die here.

Wang Zhongrui ignored the advance guard. He turned and ran off. He had just made it a few hundred meters away when he turned around and saw the creeper vines swallow up the entire advance company. He paled with fright!

At this moment, Luo Lan was standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows and wondering, "What's going on? The people from the Public Order Division have all been pulled back and the military vehicles have driven off as well. What's happening? We didn't do anything!"

It was already afternoon, and the protesters sitting outside the hotel had been there for an entire day and night. Luo Lan really did not have any idea of what was going on. At this moment, the creeper vines

were spreading out along the walls of the stronghold at an alarming rate. If anyone took a bird's eye view, the stronghold would look like it was getting surrounded by a strange, unknown green layer.

Ren Xiaosu could hear cries from the inside of the stronghold while he was standing outside of it. He muttered in a daze, "It's not me, I didn't do anything this time...."

The stronghold gate flew open, and several soldiers ran out in a pathetic state. Someone went forward and asked, "What's going on?"

Those soldiers had no time for niceties and bluntly shouted, "The stronghold has been taken over by man eater vines! Stronghold 61 is in grave danger!"

These few soldiers had escaped from the stronghold in the final moments and were feeling fortunate to have survived the disaster. Ren Xiaosu looked towards the gate that used to be wide open and saw it had been completely sealed by a dense growth of green vines.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly heard the sound of crying next to him. He turned around and looked at Zhou Yingxue. "What are you crying for?"

Aggrieved, Zhou Yingxue sobbed out, "I can't sell my houses anymore!"

Her dream of becoming a real estate mogul was shattered before it even began.

Ren Xiaosu's face darkened. Was this the fucking time to be thinking about that? They had to escape!

But wait! Luo Lan was still in there!

Chapter 599 The creeper vine calamity!

At this moment, Luo Lan and the Qing Consortium soldiers were packing their stuff. In fact, Luo Lan had quite a lot of luggage with him, even having brought a complete tea set with him for the trip. He was quite particular about life.

Reportedly, the tea set was an item that came from before The Cataclysm and was rather expensive. If the Alliance of Strongholds were to really settle down one day and turn peaceful, this antique set could get auctioned off for an astronomical price for sure.

Therefore, when Luo Lan gave the order to pack up, the Qing Consortium soldiers prioritized retrieving the tea set and some other valuable items.

Although they did not know why their boss seemed to be in such a hurry, they could only follow his orders as they were just soldiers.

But while they were packing up the items, they heard Luo Lan say anxiously, "Why are you all putting that crap away? Do you not want to live anymore? Just take whatever food we have. There's no need to get water since Zhou Qi can conjure that up with his power!"

Zhou Qi raised his eyebrows. Since when did he become a provider of drinking water for others?

One of the Qing Consortium soldiers looked at Luo Lan. "Boss, this is the tea set you like a bunch."

"Is the tea set more important than our lives?" Luo Lan handed his belongings to a soldier. "Come with me. Don't bring any unnecessary things. We have to travel light. Quickly get the Hope Media reporter and bring him with us as well!"

With that, Luo Lan rushed out of the room and headed straight for the stairwell. He did not even take the elevator for safety's sake as he was afraid something would happen.

In the end, Luo Lan really did the right thing. When they got down to the third floor from the seventh floor, a blackout hit the entire hotel!

"Don't mind me saying this, but why are you running?" Zhou Qi wondered. "If the Wang Consortium really wants to kill you, you can't escape."

Zhou Qi thought Luo Lan was trying to avoid the Wang Consortium, but he heard Luo Lan say, "What do you know? It might not be the Wang Consortium coming to attack us. For all we know, it might not even be human!"

Honestly speaking, Luo Lan had been through much in life. When the Experimentals attacked so many of the strongholds, he was always there at the scene. When he saw the reaction of the Wang Consortium troops, he initially could not figure out what they were doing. But he quickly realized their reactions were more or less the same as the Li Consortium garrison troops back then.

Before this, Luo Lan was standing at the window and observing the situation. The more he watched, the more it felt familiar. This strong sense of danger impelled him to hurry downstairs. No matter what might be happening, he had to find a safer place to be!

First of all, it would be best if they could escape from the stronghold. If they could not get away, they would have to choose the safest place to hide and wait for the Wang Consortium troops to rescue them.

This stronghold was at a critical geographical position for the Wang Consortium. Even if it were the Experimentals attacking the stronghold, the Wang Consortium could definitely take back the stronghold, so all they needed to do was stay low for between ten days and a fortnight.

But this was not right! Didn't the Experimentals get blown up already? What else could cause the Wang Consortium troops to panic like this?

When they got downstairs, some chaos had already broken out in the stronghold even though the creeper vines had not spread to the hotel yet. Vehicles were driving by frantically from time to time, but the pedestrians on the streets were clueless about what was going on.

When the group of protesters seated downstairs saw Luo Lan come out, they started to surround him.

Luo Lan said impatiently, "Step the fuck aside. I don't have time to waste with you people."

Then the Qing Consortium soldiers formed a wedge formation in front of Luo Lan and forcefully broke up the protester group. They quickly led Luo Lan away and evacuated from the place.

Some of them wanted to take the vehicles to get away, but one of the soldiers discovered that some terrible person had punctured the tires. That group of sit-in protesters were probably the culprits. Since they could not lay a finger on Luo Lan, they could only resort to this kind of petty trick like a child throwing a tantrum. It was hilarious.

When Luo Lan saw the condition of the tires, he turned around decisively and ran off in the opposite direction of where the Wang Consortium troops were moving.

If it were anyone else, they would probably take some time to grumble and complain from next to the damaged vehicles. However, Luo Lan felt there was no need to waste any time here since what was done was already done. If they tarried for another minute, their fate could be disastrous.

When the group of protesters saw Luo Lan running away, they got even more excited. "He's getting scared now, let's chase after him!"

"Yeah, don't let up on him!"

The Qing Consortium soldiers could not take it lying down after hearing those words. They wanted to turn around and take the opportunity to teach these people a lesson. However, Luo Lan immediately shouted at them, "Why are you getting angry at them at a time like this? Just keep running!"

Zhou Tao, the reporter from Hope Media, wondered, "Luo Lan, why are you running away in such a hurry? Are you really scared as they said?"

"I can't be bothered to explain everything to you right now, so shut up! You can get cramps easily if you keep talking while running!" Luo Lan said, then shut his mouth and ran madly without saying another word.

Although they didn't encounter any danger so far, Luo Lan firmly believed his own judgment of what was going on. If he did not even have this bit of judgment, he could not have survived all those past dangers!

The Hope Media reporter, Zhou Tao, was a little puzzled. It did not look like Luo Lan was trying to avoid the protesters either.

A moment later, an alarm suddenly rang out in the stronghold. The ear-piercing sound was so pressing and loud it made everyone panic.

Only then did everyone realize something bad had happened in the stronghold!

Zhou Tao suddenly looked at Luo Lan, who was in front of him. He could not comprehend how Luo Lan had predicted this.

As they continued running, Luo Lan felt he should be able to escape with his life intact since he was trying really hard to flee. But as he ran, he was surprised to see someone running towards them.

If someone were fleeing in the opposite direction, that meant there was also danger ahead of Luo Lan and the others!

Luo Lan changed directions without saying a word and started running south. But before he could get far, he realized people were running away from the south as well.

“What the hell is going on!” Luo Lan despaired a little. “Why is everyone running towards the center of the stronghold? What on earth could possibly cause the stronghold residents to be so afraid?!”

Luo Lan pulled one of those people aside and asked, “Why are you all fleeing?!”

The person who was fleeing for his life wanted to curse out loud, but when he saw about a dozen or so tough-looking Qing Consortium soldiers standing around Luo Lan, he immediately took retracted his swearing and said, “I heard the creeper vines in the stronghold are crazily trying to catch people. It’s already blocked the stronghold gate and is spreading towards the center of the stronghold. Someone said the creeper vines have already surrounded the entire stronghold!”

Luo Lan was stunned on the spot. To be honest, there were quite a few plants that had mutated since The Cataclysm occurred. However, those plants did not actively seek to attack humans. Luo Lan had really never heard of something like that happening before!

It was not only him, but most people had not heard of something like that either. No one had ever thought the plants would attack humans!

99.99% of the people in the world would think this way other than the few who had come across Brambles and Potato Shooters. That was why Wang Zhongrui only found it a little weird when he first saw the creeper vines and did not think a plant could pose any threat to him.

Meanwhile, those who encountered the Brambles and Potato Shooters before were basically all dead, so no one could have warned about such things beforehand.

It was precisely this mismatch in mindset that led to the tragedy of Stronghold 61 today!

Luo Lan shouted at the Qing Consortium soldiers around him, “Since we can’t escape from this enclosed environment, we have to find a place to hide!”

Chapter 600 Leave them for later

They could hide, but where?

Luo Lan was thinking hard. “Creeper vines love the sun, don’t they? So does that mean that we can resort to our usual trick of hiding in the sewers?”

Then a manhole cover got sent flying into the air by an unknown entity from below. Countless vines emerged from the sewers in front of them and started pulling people standing around the manhole into the sewers.

“Pretend I didn’t say that.” Luo Lan gulped hard as he turned around and ran off.

The suggestion was rebuked so quickly Luo Lan got caught off guard. Meanwhile, the creeper vines had started spreading towards them.

A third of the entire stronghold had already fallen to the vines!

Zhou Qi said angrily as he followed Luo Lan, "You and your useless ideas. Didn't you say we could take shelter in the sewers? Fortunately, we didn't listen to you. If we followed you down, the creeper vines would've caught and killed all of us!"

Luo Lan said with a dark expression, "Then why don't you think of something? I don't mind if you can come up with a solution!"

Zhou Qi gave it some thought and said, "The creeper vines aren't afraid of bullets and water. Although it's afraid of fire, it's grown so large we'll have to burn down the entire stronghold to get rid of it. There doesn't seem like there's anything we can do about it."

"Thanks, Captain Obvious!" Luo Lan started chastising, "I already know what you said! Everyone here knows as well!"

But as he spoke, Luo Lan got a cramp.

Zhou Qi was a supernatural being while the others in the group were either a young reporter or the Qing Consortium soldiers. It did not take much effort for them to run, but the flight took a toll on Luo Lan physically.

Earlier, it was the instinct to run for his life that made him forget about his fatigue. But now his body could no longer bear it.

Luo Lan clutched his chest and said, "You guys keep running. Don't worry about me." He panted heavily, standing still.

However, the Qing Consortium soldiers suddenly lifted him. "We have a duty to protect you, so it's either we leave together, or we die protecting you."

Luo Lan said anxiously, "I'm not done talking. It's not like I haven't considered that you guys are just normal people. Can you lift someone like me who weighs over 120 kilos? Zhou Qi, get over here and carry me instead!"

Luo Lan wanted to call out to Zhou Qi just now, but he wasn't able to catch his breath. As such, the Qing Consortium soldiers misunderstood him and thought Luo Lan did not want to slow them down.

Zhou Qi, who was running at the front, wanted to ignore Luo Lan. But since Luo Lan had spoken such, he could only run back and say with a dark look, "You'll have to pay me more for this!"

With that, Zhou Qi ran back and piggybacked Luo Lan. However, it did not seem to slow him down at all.

Very few people knew Zhou Qi had awoken his power a long time ago. He was probably one of the first few supernatural beings to do so. As a result, his physical fitness was also better than most other supernatural beings.

As everyone was fleeing, Luo Lan came up with a plan while on Zhou Qi's back. "Let me think about the safest place we can go to. Oh, the safest place has to be where money is stored! Hurry and find a bank. The bank vaults are definitely the most secure place to hide in. Some vaults do not even have air vents. If we hide in there, those vines won't be able to creep in! And there'll definitely be some gaps in the vault, so we won't suffocate to death in there!"

As he said that, they passed by a Wang Consortium bank and saw the bank's entrance clogged up with people. As it turned out, everyone had thought of the same idea to hide in the safest place. However, there were so many people here they could not squeeze inside anymore!

Luo Lan smacked his lips. "Alright, pretend I didn't say anything. I'll think about it again...."

Zhou Qi said anxiously, "Think quickly! If you can't think of any ideas, we'll probably end up dead here!"

The vines behind them were closing in. From a third of the entire stronghold, the creeper vines now covered half.

As they ran, the manhole cover in front of them was suddenly pushed aside by the vines. But before the vines could attack Luo Lan, Zhou Qi frowned. In the blink of an eye, Zhou Qi drew the water content in those vines out.

The terrifying vines started to visibly wither and were no longer capable of grabbing people.

Luo Lan exclaimed excitedly, "Oh, right! Zhou Qi can control the water content in those vines! Why don't we deal with it immediately then? When I become the person to save the Wang Consortium's stronghold from destruction, let's see if they'll still dare to go against me. If they do, the public will surely criticize them roundly!"

Zhou Qi clenched his teeth and said, "Enough nonsense. Can't you see how many vines there are? Do you think I'm a god? Even if I am one, I can't draw out all the water from the vines!"

So Zhou Qi could only run away in the face of this vast number of creeper vines.

"Your superpower really sucks." Luo Lan curled his lips and said, "Didn't you say you were one of the earliest to awaken your power? Why're you so weak then?"

"Am I the one who's weak here? It's the opponent that's too powerful, alright?!" Zhou Qiqi was so angry he wanted to throw Fatty Luo to the ground!

The group of protesters were still chasing Luo Lan closely. At first, these people had wanted to pursue Luo Lan to beat him up when they saw him fleeing. But it was a different situation now. They were thinking they might be able to escape from the danger by following Luo Lan.

They did not even have time to consider their actions amid the panic. All they felt was that if Luo Lan was able to sense the danger beforehand, he might just have a way to escape from the danger.

At this moment, survival was more important than the beliefs they stood firmly for.

Luo Lan turned around and took a look at these people, but he did not bother engaging them. There was no reason for him to take it up with them at the risk of his life. It was entirely up to them as to whether they would survive.

“Wait a minute, the vines don’t look like they’re spreading anymore!” Luo Lan inadvertently realized the creeper vines that had been growing rapidly had stopped. After it drove all the humans in the stronghold to the remaining half at the city center, it suddenly stopped moving.

Everyone looked at the lush, green creeper vines from afar and suddenly felt like they had been saved.

One of the protesters wondered, “Why isn’t it moving anymore? Are we safe now?”

A bespectacled protester calmed down and said, “Everyone thinks that plants can grow without limit, but in fact, only woody plants^[1] seem to be able to achieve that. Of course, I’m just assuming that since I’m not a professional in the field. Just like how the trees can’t grow taller indefinitely, maybe the creeper vines have reached the limit of their growth?”

After he said that, Luo Lan’s faint voice drifted over, “Did you guys stop to think about it? It might not be eating us now because it wants to leave us for later....”

The protesters were speechless.

But whatever the reason, the creeper vines had finally stopped moving. This gave the humans in the stronghold some respite.

“The people from the Wang Consortium must’ve already requested reinforcements. Who knows, we might get saved during this time!” a protester said.

However, Luo Lan was having none of it. He whispered softly to Zhou Qi and the others, “I made a purposeful observation while we were making our way to this stronghold. While we do not have any clear information about the Wang Consortium’s garrison troops across their various strongholds, we know there’s no military bases in the vicinity of Stronghold 61. So the Wang Consortium’s reinforcements could take up to three days to arrive. Besides, can their troops deal with the creeper vines? They can’t gather a large number of flamethrowers on such short notice. It’ll just scratch the surface.”