

First Order 611

## Chapter 611 Everything is One

Ren Xiaosu was only able to go head-to-head against the terrifying creeper vine by relying on the armor. Without it, Ren Xiaosu would have found it very difficult to handle the inescapable spikes on the feelers. But the armor always had a flaw—limited power.

It was way too slow to solely depend on the bioenergy of the human body to recharge its energy. Moreover, the nanomachines were too small in size, so the amount of energy they could store was also extremely limited.

Therefore, Ren Xiaosu's armor was unable to sustain much longer after a lengthy and intense battle. Thus, he told Zhou Yingxue that she only had one chance.

If they failed this time, they could only continue fleeing for their lives and try their best to get out of this place quickly.

Although he still had the steam locomotive as his trump card, it was not an omnipotent solution. Ren Xiaosu was worried the massive steam locomotive would get entangled in the vines and end up stuck.

"We're probably still about a 100 meters away from its roots." Ren Xiaosu turned around and said, "Zhou Qi, can you still continue fighting? I need you to protect the others here while I send Zhou Yingxue in."

Zhou Qi laughed and spat blood on the ground. "It's rare that I can get to be the hero, so how can I turn you down? Don't worry about me and go on. I won't let anyone die before I die! I'm still waiting to go back so that Boss Luo can bestow Qing Zhen's female secretary to me!"

Luo Lan ribbed, "That's all you're good for!"

Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Qi had never met each other before. But after today's adversity, they could be considered comrades. As such, he developed a great impression of Zhou Qi.

"Let's go!" Ren Xiaosu continued rushing forward. Zhou Yingxue let go of Li Ran and Luo Lan's hands and followed Ren Xiaosu closely.

The moment Zhou Yingxue released her hand, the dense mass of vines swept towards Luo Lan and the others like they had detected new enemies. Meanwhile, Zhou Qi remained seated where he was and closed his eyes. Then a cerulean glow appeared over Zhou Qi's body and the vines that went near them instantly withered!

Within a radius of 10 meters, none of the vines were able to approach them for a while!

However, Luo Lan realized that Zhou Qi's face was paling. He sat down beside Zhou Qi and started feeling a little melancholic. Ever since he learned of the existence of supernatural beings, he had been extremely envious of them.

Luo Lan's willpower was by no means inferior to others, but why was he unable to awaken his power and become a supernatural being?

At this moment, Luo Lan could only bemoan himself for being useless and watch helplessly as Zhou Qi started to overexert his mental strength to protect everyone around him.

If Luo Lan were also a supernatural being, and they really died this time, he could at least proudly tell Zhou Qi that he had died with dignity when they both met in the Underworld.

But unfortunately, he was not a supernatural being.

When Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue were still about 50 meters away from the roots, Zhou Qi finally could not bear it anymore. Within the radius of 10 meters, some of the vines managed to slip through his defenses, and a spiked feeler stabbed at his heart without mercy.

Zhou Qi could sense everything that was happening and knew he was probably on his way to meet his maker. To be honest, he himself was unsure if he had led a worthwhile life.

'Qing Zhen, I've fulfilled my promise to you.' After saying this in his head, Zhou Qi was prepared to die.

However, a surprising turn of events took place. A Qing Consortium soldier stepped in front of Zhou Qi and let the spike pierce his body. Then he grabbed ahold of the vine with his arm so the spike would not be able to hurt Zhou Qi behind him!

When the Qing Consortium soldier got pierced through by the spike, his ruptured organs started bleeding. Blood was flowing out of his wounds and mouth.

Luo Lan was stunned. "You..."

The Qing Consortium soldier smiled at Luo Lan and said, "Take care, boss."

His head drooped limply.

Zhou Qi protected everyone by overexerting his willpower while the Qing Consortium soldiers abided by their duties and guarded Zhou Qi and Luo Lan with their lives.

It might be easy for one to say they were not afraid of death, but how many people in the world could really put those words into action?

In the hot and blazing afternoon sun, Luo Lan felt like something was stuck in his throat. This choking feeling was making him a little uncomfortable.

And then another Qing Consortium soldier died in front of Zhou Qi as he blocked a vine attack for him. It was the platoon commander this time.

He smiled at Luo Lan and said with his dying breath, "As the platoon commander, I couldn't even match the conscientiousness of my subordinates. I'm really ashamed that he had to die before me...."

The platoon commander fell silent.

Luo Lan knelt on the ground with tears streaming down his face. However, he could not even let out a whimper.

Suddenly, Luo Lan fainted. When the Qing Consortium soldiers rushed forward to check on him, one of them was bewildered by what he saw. "Boss's body seems to be covered in a mild golden glow, or am I seeing things?"

...

Ren Xiaosu did not know anything about what was happening behind him. He just kept mechanically slashing at the creeper vines around him.

When the nanomachines on his body started "dying" and falling off, Ren Xiaosu immediately recalled them back into his body to prevent them from becoming completely "dead."

For the remaining 30 meters, he would have to use his own body to resist those vines.

As Zhou Yingxue silently followed Ren Xiaosu, she looked at the raging vines in front of her. However, none of the vines could threaten her because all of them were intercepted by Ren Xiaosu.

She looked at the young man's back. Due to the strong wind stirred up by the moving vines, her hair and clothes were a little messy.

Zhou Yingxue suddenly said behind Ren Xiaosu, "Master, I really am a little jealous of Yang Xiaojin."

As Ren Xiaosu could not hear her clearly, he shouted back without even looking, "What did you say?"

"It's nothing." Zhou Yingxue said with a smile, "I said you're very handsome."

Ren Xiaosu laughed heartily. "You've got good taste!"

Now, they were just five meters away from the roots. Ren Xiaosu kept slashing at the vines in front of him, then forced open a temporary passageway for Zhou Yingxue with four "fours."

He turned around and roared at Zhou Yingxue, "You only have one chance!"

With that, he dragged Zhou Yingxue and tried his best to throw her into the passageway where the creeper vine's roots were located.

Then Ren Xiaosu got overwhelmed by the vines.

The creeper vine's roots started emitting a green, fluorescent light before bursting with light in an instant!

The stronghold fell silent. This was a long-awaited peace for Stronghold 61. As the creeper vines stopped moving and eating humans, the wind also seemed to have fallen silent for a moment.

Then the vines in the stronghold started withering. Ren Xiaosu fought his way out of the vines that had ensnared him and quietly watched all this. None of the vines were attacking him anymore!

But it was different from what Ren Xiaosu had expected. He had thought there would not be much change to the vines after Zhou Yingxue gained control.

But he could see with his naked eye countless beads of green light particles converging here from all directions. The light particles were traveling along the vines to where the roots were!

It looked as though... countless energy particles were converging on a single point, with the vines that had lost this source of "energy" shriveling into firewood.

And it turned out that Zhou Yingxue was the one gathering all the energy.

### **Chapter 612 Luo Lan awakens**

A large convoy of trucks suddenly arrived at the town outside Stronghold 61. Wang Fugui was sitting in one of the trucks and looking anxiously at the stronghold in front of him. He saw the stronghold was really covered in countless vines just like the rumors had said. Furthermore, anyone that tried to approach it would immediately get attacked by the creeper vines' feelers.

The Wang Consortium's troops that had arrived together with Wang Fugui were discussing how to solve the problem before them. But they did not really have any good ideas.

In the end, someone said, "Since there's unlikely to be any survivors left inside the stronghold, why don't we just burn the stronghold down? No matter how powerful this creeper vine might be, it should still be afraid of fire."

This time, it was all thanks to Wang Fugui that the Wang Consortium troops arrived ahead of time.

Before this, the troops had assembled and made a spontaneous decision to set off. However, some of their military vehicles were still outside and unable to return. As such, Wang Fugui volunteered his trucks to transport the soldiers after the goods were unloaded at the military base. This way, the Wang Consortium troops would not have to keep waiting around.

Hence, the officer of Stronghold 62's garrison troops who were the first to arrive at Stronghold 61 was very grateful to Wang Fugui. He even started addressing Wang Fugui as "bro," praising him repeatedly for being so understanding and calling him a good man.

Wang Fugui could only laugh wryly. It was not that he was understanding, but that he had a family member who was probably inside Stronghold 61 right now. Therefore, he also hoped the troops could get here as soon as possible so they might be able to save his family.

When Wang Fugui heard the commanding officer of the Wang Consortium troops say they should burn down Stronghold 61, he immediately turned anxious. "Sir, my family's still inside. Y'all must not set fire to the place."

The officer, Wang Linlan, said with a wry smile, "Bro, even if your kin is really inside, they couldn't possibly have survived. I've just received new orders from our higher-ups. The satellite photo shows the entire stronghold has already been covered in vines. No one will have survived this disaster."

“That can’t be!” Wang Fugui could feel his ears ringing. Then he shouted, “He’s different! He definitely survived! He managed to survive even in such difficult situations, so he’s definitely...” Wang Fugui wanted to rush into the stronghold. However, Jiang Wu suddenly pulled him back.

Wang Fugui turned around and asked blankly, “Ms. Jiang, you think that Xiaosu died too?”

“No,” Jiang Wu shook her head. “You stay here. I’ll go and look for him.”

While they were arguing, someone shouted, “Look! Why are the creeper vines at the stronghold gate starting to wither?”

Everyone turned their gaze to the stronghold gate and was surprised to see that it was really the case. The originally lush green creeper vines had really started withering!

“What’s happening?”

“Did someone on the inside manage to kill it?”

Wang Linlan frowned as he watched all this. No one could tell what was exactly going on in there. They were unable to verify if something had happened to the creeper vine itself or if someone inside the stronghold had killed it.

However, he suspected that no one in the world could possibly kill such a terrifying lifeform.

...

One would experience many springs, summers, falls, and winters throughout their lives. All living things blossomed in spring, grew lush in summer, yellowed in fall, and frosted over with snow in winter.

But at this moment, the dense and sinister-looking green vines in Stronghold 61 were withering rapidly and turning into brown twigs.

It was as though time had sped up, going from spring to winter in the blink of an eye. It was like someone had wiped off this oil painting with their hand as the colors started fading away bit by bit.

Ren Xiaosu was shocked when he saw what was happening around him.

As the area covered by the vines was humongous, this huge change was taking place throughout the vast stronghold. This made people feel like it was more the power of nature that was causing it.

This creeper vine was growing normally at the beginning. So it was until the battle that broke out between the Pyro Company and the Anjing House inside the stronghold that resulted in superhuman blood getting spilled onto its branches.

Afterwards, it began consuming the rats that scuttled in the sewers. After that, it started eating domesticated cats and dogs before finally devouring humans.

At first, it would only stealthily catch and eat people. Perhaps it was also worried about being discovered by humans. Although it was a low intelligence lifeform, that did not mean it had no wisdom. Actually, this creeper vine's behavior was more like that of a child. Since there was no one to teach it how to live in this world, it developed in its own selfish way.

Were humans born good or evil? Ren Xiaosu felt that these two definitions were not in line with his thinking. He felt that humans were born selfish, and there was no right or wrong about this.

And even later, when people from the stronghold realized there was something fishy about the creeper vine, they had tried to use flamethrowers to end its life. Naturally, the creeper vine was unwilling to get destroyed by humans just like that. Moreover, it was clearly much stronger than them. So it decided to bury the entire stronghold in its rage.

But none of that was important. What mattered more was that it had absorbed the life force of several hundred thousand people that lived in the stronghold. There were even supernatural beings among those killed!

Actually, it would take an extremely large amount of energy for the creeper vine to cover the entire stronghold. The reason it was able to grow so large so quickly was that the several hundred thousand lives in the stronghold had provided it with enough nutrients to do so.

It could be said that it had sacrificed an entire stronghold to complete its own growth.

But now, all the energy gained from that sacrifice was converging on Zhou Yingxue!

After the vines withered and broke off, Ren Xiaosu watched Zhou Yingxue stand quietly on top of the creeper vine's roots with her eyes closed.

Her hand was placed over the creeper vine's main branch next to her. After she controlled its roots, the creeper vine was at Zhou Yingxue's mercy.

Countless green energy particles were drawn out through the vines and flowed into Zhou Yingxue's body through her fingers.

Ren Xiaosu wondered if Zhou Yingxue was drawing out all the energy from the creeper vine and causing it to die?

But what kind of a supernatural being would she become considering this power came at the cost of a stronghold?

Zhou Yingxue was probably the first person to experience something like this in human history.

Although his maid used to play a very good supporting role, she really lacked combat power. But what would happen after this?

That maidservant who especially enjoyed munching on melon seeds and did not have much of an image to speak of in front of Ren Xiaosu had now seemingly become a goddess in the stronghold who could control the fate of everyone in it.

A moment later, when all of the vines finally withered away, Zhou Yingxue fell unconscious.

Ren Xiaosu went to check on Zhou Yingxue and discovered her breathing and pulse were still normal. Perhaps she had absorbed so much energy she couldn't handle it.

Ren Xiaosu did not have any prior experience of such things, so he did not know what to do in this situation either.

Then Zhou Yingxue's body suddenly turned hot and cold while her expression kept changing. Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment before finally picking her up from the ground.

But in that instant, Ren Xiaosu noticed that everything around him had been enveloped by a golden glow. He snapped his head around and saw Luo Lan get off the ground while manifesting a golden glow around him.

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "You've awakened?"

### **Chapter 613 Savior**

Luo Lan falling unconscious earlier and the faint glow emanating from his body had proven a fact to Ren Xiaosu: Luo Lan had really awakened his power. Before this, Ren Xiaosu had gotten used to the fact that the fatty was just a normal person. But now, his power was awakened.

However, Luo Lan did not answer Ren Xiaosu's question. Instead, he looked at the Qing Consortium soldiers around Zhou Qi.

They were still standing, to the end guarding Zhou Qi.

Ren Xiaosu saw countless withered vines pierced through these Qing Consortium soldiers, but none managed to hurt Zhou Qi.

These Qing Consortium soldiers had formed the world's strongest wall for Zhou Qi with their mortal bodies.

Luo Lan stood in front of them and said, "Actually, I'm just a fat man with a blessed life to have you all sacrifice your lives for me. If I weren't born in the Qing Consortium and had a powerful younger brother, I would probably be much worse off than you guys. Even though I'm randy, gluttonous, not really able to endure hardships, and scared out of my mind, I still chose to do what's most dangerous in the world."

No one interrupted Luo Lan; everyone listened quietly as he spoke.

Luo Lan continued, "Before we set off, I even joked with you guys that I would find you the most beautiful wives in the Central Plains and let you bring them back home. I'm sorry I couldn't do it. At that time, I was just bragging. All of you should know that I'm fond of bragging and don't know when to stop...."

"But I digress. What I wanted to say is that I'll still have to face a lot of danger in the future. Will you still continue to protect me?" Luo Lan stared hard at the dead Qing Consortium soldiers. As the stronghold went quiet, all everyone could hear was their own breathing.

The moment Luo Lan finished speaking, golden figures walked out of the bodies of the Qing Consortium soldiers. The golden silhouettes even retained the appearances of the soldiers. The platoon commander looked at Luo Lan with a smile and said, "Boss, it's been a while."

Before this, the Qing Consortium soldiers experienced endless darkness and loneliness without knowing how long had passed. It wasn't until they heard a call summoning them in the darkness that they came to keep the appointment.

Tears started to fall from Luo Lan's eyes again. He wiped his tears away while smiling. "Fuck!"

Other than cursing like that, Luo Lan did not know what to say.

Ren Xiaosu watched silently from the sidelines for a long time. He could not tell what kind of power Luo Lan had. He could actually bring back the dead in another form so that they could continue existing in this world.

Ren Xiaosu got very excited. If only he had a Perfect Skill Duplication Scroll right now! He would copy Luo Lan's skill straight away!

However, it seemed that the prerequisite of this power was that the other party must be willing to be summoned. These golden figures were spirits guarding Luo Lan. After they talked for a while, the golden silhouettes of the twelve Qing Consortium soldiers walked into Luo Lan's body one by one.

"This is the power you've awoken?" Ren Xiaosu inquired.

"Yes," Luo Lan nodded and sighed. "I've finally become a supernatural being too."

No one else said anything else. It was not appropriate to say too much with outsiders like Li Ran and Zhou Tao around. It would be better to talk in private later when they got a chance to do so.

Luo Lan turned his head to the Hope Media reporter, Zhou Tao, and said, "If I pay you ten million yuan, can you keep today's events a secret?"

Zhou Tao shook his head. "I'm sorry. Everything that happened today is of great importance, so I have to record it."

Ren Xiaosu was a little surprised. Zhou Tao actually remained unmoved even though Luo Lan offered him ten million yuan. This Hope Media reporter was too stubborn.

However, Luo Lan's concerns were necessary. On one hand, Luo Lan did not want others to know that he awakened his power. Sometimes, it would be much more effective to keep an ace up the sleeve.

On the other hand, Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue had revealed many things about themselves in this battle, especially Zhou Yingxue, who had absorbed the life force of the creeper vine that had taken over the entire stronghold. If anyone with bad intentions learned about this, it might spell big trouble for her.



Luo Lan looked at Zhou Tao and said with a frown, “You can pretend that you were seeking refuge today and did not see anything. Just by doing so, you will earn yourself ten million yuan. There’s probably no better deal than this in the world, right?”

Zhou Tao said stubbornly, “You can silence me if you want, but you can’t force me to lie.”

Ren Xiaosu sighed. He did not know how to feel about this reporter’s undaunting spirit anymore. Sometimes, having such a principled intellectual like him around was a very frustrating experience. They could not kill him even if they felt like doing so.

Luo Lan said, “Actually, what you want to record are the events of the disaster that took place today, right? In other words, you only want to detail how it ended.”

“Yes,” Zhou Tao nodded. “This matter is very important to mankind.”

“But my power has nothing to do with this matter. Can you keep it a secret by not recording it or telling others about it?” Luo Lan asked.

Zhou Tao thought for a moment before nodding. “I can do that.”

Luo Lan pointed to Ren Xiaosu and Zhou Yingxue and said, “The two of them came into this terrifying place to save us. How many people in this world do you think are willing to risk their lives for their friends? They’re our saviors! After saving you, is it appropriate that you turn around and sell them out by telling everyone about their powers?”

This time, Zhou Tao started feeling conflicted.

Luo Lan felt that he had to resort to moral coercion to deal with a principled person like Zhou Tao. He told him, “I don’t mind you recording this incident nor object to Hope Media publishing the report about them in the newspapers. But I have a suggestion for you. Can you keep your saviors’ identities anonymous in your article and just report that ‘someone’ saved the entire stronghold? There shouldn’t be any conflicts like that, right?”

Zhou Tao looked at Ren Xiaosu and was about to say something. “You—”

“Watch your tone!” Luo Lan interrupted. “You should address him as ‘savior’!”

Zhou Tao was speechless. So was Ren Xiaosu.

Luo Lan knew he convinced Zhou Tao. He said with a smile, “I know that Hope Media also keeps some of their files confidential, and a lot of the information will only be released after 50 years. So about this matter, can you place it into the confidential files?”

Finally, Zhou Tao said with a sigh, “I’ll do as you say.”

After getting this reply from Zhou Tao, Luo Lan finally felt at ease. Zhou Tao had been following them all the while, so Luo Lan eventually figured out what kind of person Zhou Tao was.

There wasn't a need to measure others by his own standards when making an agreement with someone like Zhou Tao. That was because Zhou Tao would definitely keep his word as long as he promised so.

After the matter was settled, Luo Lan heaved a sigh of relief and felt a little more at ease. Suddenly, Zhou Qi's voice rang out beside them, "Fatty, I wanna wait and see when you plan to help me up..."

Zhou Qi was even coughing up blood as he spoke. Only then did everyone suddenly remember that Zhou Qi was still alive.

## **614 Reunion**

Luo Lan looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Shall we leave then? The Wang Consortium's troops will definitely arrive soon. We need to get out of here quickly."

However, Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I'm afraid that the Wang Consortium's troops might already be outside the stronghold by now. No matter what, you'll still bump into them if you go out now. Besides, if you sneak away, the Wang Consortium will probably assume you died in the stronghold. But if you show up again in the future, the Wang Consortium will surely wonder whether you had anything to do with this creeper vine."

"That's true." Luo Lan was worried. He wanted to distance himself entirely from the matter, but he really did not know how to.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "Follow me."

In order to prevent any clues from being left behind, Ren Xiaosu even used his storage space to help Luo Lan take away the corpses of the Qing Consortium soldiers. These admirable people would have to receive an elaborate burial later.

However, Luo Lan was a little puzzled. Where was Ren Xiaosu planning to bring them?

In the end, Ren Xiaosu wanted to lead them to destroy all the surveillance footage in the stronghold. But when they arrived at the Wang Consortium's control room, they realized the surveillance footage had already been deleted!

Luo Lan and Ren Xiaosu were stunned on the spot. Ren Xiaosu did not really understand these things, so he confirmed with Luo Lan again, "Has it really been deleted?"

"Yes." Luo Lan nodded and said, "It might have been during the time there was a power failure in the stronghold. By the time the power was restored when the backup circuit kicked in, the problem might have already occurred."

Ren Xiaosu felt that things were not that simple. However, he did not understand anything about it since this was also his first time seeing a computer. So he could only take Luo Lan's word for it.

When they located the largest bank in the vicinity, they took the vault key from the corpse of the bank president lying on the ground, and everyone hid inside the vault. Meanwhile, the Hope Media reporter, Zhou Tao, remained outside.

Everyone had already agreed to collude that Luo Lan had abandoned Zhou Tao while escaping. In the end, it was the mysterious superhuman who saved Zhou Tao and destroyed the short-lived creeper vine.

Immediately after, the mysterious superhuman left this place, leaving Zhou Tao behind and alone at the site of the battle.

Right now, the only problem Ren Xiaosu had was that he did not know whether the so-called artificial intelligence overseeing the Wang Consortium's stronghold would store any backup copies of the surveillance footage after they had been destroyed.

This area was overgrown with the creeper vines from very early on. So when the residents of Stronghold 61 started fleeing, no one was able to get into this area. As such, the bank vault here was not occupied by anyone.

After entering the vault, they waited patiently without worries. Ren Xiaosu, Luo Lan, and the others even started playing Fight the Landlord inside the vault.

As Zhou Yingxue was still unconscious, Ren Xiaosu was a little worried. He was worried that his maid might have damaged her brain from the huge amount of energy she had absorbed.

There would always be a price to pay. To earn money, one had to put in time and effort by working, and the same went for acquiring knowledge. There was no such thing as free lunch in this world.

Since Zhou Yingxue had acquired too much this time, Ren Xiaosu was a little worried for her.

After Ren Xiaosu and the others hid in the vault, they waited for two long hours before they finally heard a flurry of footsteps coming from the outside.

Someone shouted outside the vault, "Is anyone in there? We're the Wang Consortium's rescue team!"

Ren Xiaosu immediately put away the poker cards while Luo Lan opened the vault door and said in a choked up voice, "You're finally here! I've missed all of you so much. Why are you so late!"

Zhou Tao was already with the rescue team. When Luo Lan saw them, he looked like he had finally been reunited with his family members. Zhou Tao could feel his scalp going numb at the sight of this. This was because when Luo Lan had denied that the Qing Consortium was in possession of nuclear weapons, he also fucking looked like that!

Zhou Tao had also thought about it before. Could it be that the Qing Consortium really did not have any nuclear weapons? Otherwise, Luo Lan's tearful denial would have really been too convincing!

But now, Zhou Tao could only chuckle at that.

When the Wang Consortium troops entered the stronghold, they immediately searched for all survivors. In the end, they realized there were only a few survivors found in the vaults and several other enclosed environments in the city. For example, some of them had hidden in the water tanks of high-rise buildings, their own cellars, and even inside the wells.

But how many people could hide in these places? This disaster had brought devastating destruction to the residents of Stronghold 61.

Luo Lan revealed his identity to the Wang Consortium troops. First of all, he had to affirm the fact that he had been waiting for rescue to arrive throughout the disaster. As for other matters, they had nothing to do with him.

Along the way, the soldier who was responsible for getting Luo Lan and the others to safety asked, "Do you guys know how the creeper vine wilted?"

Luo Lan said in an extremely flustered manner, "Weren't you the ones that killed it? We've been hiding in the vault all this while and have no idea of what happened outside at all."

Then the soldier looked at Luo Lan and Ren Xiaosu and suddenly called Ren Xiaosu's identity into question. "Eh, is he with your group? The information I have here states that there are Qing Consortium soldiers traveling with you. Why haven't I seen them?"

Luo Lan glanced at Ren Xiaosu. Luo Lan's group had informed the Wang Consortium about their entourage, and the Wang Consortium even saved a copy of their photos. Therefore, he could not admit that Ren Xiaosu was with him. Otherwise, it might just arouse the Wang Consortium's suspicions.

Luo Lan said in grief, "My comrades died while trying to save me. These people aren't with us. I think he might be a stronghold resident."

"Oh," The soldier nodded and asked Ren Xiaosu, "What's your ID number? I need to verify it."

Under normal circumstances, who would immediately verify the identity of escapees? As if they weren't miserable enough yet! Ren Xiaosu knew the other party must already be suspicious of him. After all, Luo Lan was originally the focus of everyone's attention.

While Ren Xiaosu was thinking of how to handle the situation, he suddenly heard a hopeful shout behind him. "Boss?!"

Ren Xiaosu spun around. He suddenly felt the disaster he had gone through vanish into thin air when he saw Wang Fugui, Jiang Wu, Wang Yuchi, Li Qingzheng, and the others on the long street full of dead vines.

All the unhappiness vanished in this instant.

Wang Fugui trotted his way over to Ren Xiaosu and circled him to check if he had taken any injuries or if he had become thinner. However, he was totally fine. The only strange thing was that he was carrying a girl.

Wang Fugui did not know whether it would be appropriate to call Ren Xiaosu by name here, so he simply addressed him as "boss." After all, he considered himself Ren Xiaosu's shopkeeper now. No matter how much money he made from those businesses, it was all earned for Ren Xiaosu.

Jiang Wu, who was behind Wang Fugui, also wanted to rush up. However, she stopped in her tracks after just a few steps.

Off to the side, the commanding officer of the Wang Consortium's rescue teams, Wang Linlan, said with a smile, "Bro, I never expected that the person you were looking for would really survive. Congratulations! But why did you address him as boss just now?"

Wang Fugui explained with a smile, "I might've brought in a lot of goods from the Northwest, but I'm actually just a shopkeeper. That guy is our actual boss."

Wang Linlan looked at Ren Xiaosu in surprise. So this young man turned out to be the real owner of the mercantile company? In that case, he would probably have to deal with this young man very often in the future.

Who didn't like making friends with rich people? Although Wang Linlan controlled an army, there were still times when he needed money.

Therefore, Wang Linlan's attitude towards Ren Xiaosu became exceptionally pleasant.

When the soldier who wanted to check Ren Xiaosu's ID card saw his superior come over and seemingly had a very close relationship with him, he gave up on wanting to check his identity and went off to continue searching for other survivors.

Wang Linlan said to Wang Fugui with a smile, "You guys can rest here for now. I have a more important search and rescue mission to take care of."

"Do what you have to do." Wang Fugui said with a smile, "Now that we've picked up our boss, we have to return to Stronghold 62 to tally the goods. There'll be more opportunities for us to interact in the future, so we won't hold you up any more here."

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Wang Linlan left with a smile. Ren Xiaosu also said goodbye to Luo Lan. Although Ren Xiaosu wanted to keep Luo Lan at his side to copy his power, it was really not appropriate for him to interact too much with Luo Lan right now. Moreover, Luo Lan was still not allowed to leave the Wang Consortium's stronghold. He would have to wait for the dust to settle so he could show he had a clear conscience.

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything else. At this moment, he had too many things he wanted to tell Old Wang and the others and also too many questions he wanted to ask.

As he looked back at the stronghold, a question popped up in his mind. Who could have deleted all the surveillance footage?

### **Chapter 615 Catching up.**

A catastrophe had ended with the arrival of the Wang Consortium's troops. The people who were still alive could only count themselves fortunate, while the dead would soon be forgotten.

The entire stronghold was filled with wilted creeper vines. The gray vines and withered leaves scattered all over the ground made Stronghold 61 look bleak and desolate, like the stronghold were a newly formed ruin.

Ren Xiaosu felt that it would take a lot of time just to clean up the dead vines. To the Wang Consortium, their most significant loss was actually not the facilities in the stronghold but the people.

In this day and age, the consortiums were well aware that there would only be productivity with manpower.

When the creeper vine attacked the stronghold, it did not really damage the facilities at all. Even the power supply was untouched and communications were not cut off. Although there was a slight malfunction in the power grid during the period due to a lack of maintenance, the backup power supply was immediately activated.

Under such circumstances, the stronghold did not seem to have suffered any major losses in terms of structural damage.

However, it was undeniable that several hundred thousand people in Stronghold 61 had died. The people who supported the light industries, service industries, and commerce of the stronghold were all gone now.

Without heavy industries, there would be no core competitiveness. Without light industries, life would become uncomfortable and business would also decline.

Ren Xiaosu quickly led Wang Fugui and the others out of the stronghold. He brought everyone back to his own house and laid down the unconscious Zhou Yingxue.

Wang Fugui looked at the little courtyard house and said, "Xiaosu, have you been living here all this time?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while before saying, "Well, not really. I've been to many places, such as Luoyang City, Stronghold 73, 74, 63, and 62..."

Wang Fugui thought to himself, 'Why do these strongholds sound so familiar?' He remembered he had read the bad news of these strongholds in the newspapers. For example, the cave-in at East Lake in Stronghold 73, the nuclear strike on Stronghold 74, and the battle between the Anjing House and the Pyro Company in Stronghold 63...

"Xiaosu, other than Luoyang City, those places that you mentioned all seem quite dangerous." Wang Fugui asked with concern, "Nothing happened to you, right?"

Ren Xiaosu comforted, "Don't worry, I'm fine. I can't say the same for others though."

Wang Fugui and Jiang Wu were speechless.

Although he sounded really relaxed, Wang Fugui somehow felt that Ren Xiaosu must have gone through a lot of danger. He asked, "Xiaosu, how did you survive back then? Can you tell us about it?"

With a chuckle, Ren Xiaosu said, "After that spear pierced me through the abdomen, I was saved by some big shots of the Wang Consortium who happened to pass by. They were the ones who went to the Northwest to discuss the opening of the trade routes. At that time, they told me the spear had coincidentally pierced my appendix... and my other organs were not seriously injured...."

"App-Appendix?" Wang Fugui and the others were all dumbfounded. How could it be such a coincidence?

Actually, Ren Xiaosu thought of something after the incident. Perhaps the spear had only pierced his appendix because of Yan Liuyuan's wish? But if it were really because of him, what kind of backlash would Yan Liuyuan have suffered?

He looked at Wang Fugui. "By the way, where's Liuyuan?"

Ren Xiaosu swept his gaze over everyone. But after looking at all of them, he did not see Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu. "Old Wang, where are Liuyuan and Big Sister Xiaoyu?"

Wang Fugui fell silent while Wang Yuchi and the others looked away. Ren Xiaosu asked again, "Old Wang, please answer me. Where are Liuyuan and Big Sister Xiaoyu?"

"It's like this." Jiang Wu explained, "When we got swept away by the flood, we were not together with Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu. I only had time to keep these people together with the plum branches I conjured. The currents were very rapid and we were washed away in the blink of an eye. We were unable to save the two of them...." Jiang Wu still felt a little bad about it.

Ren Xiaosu stayed silent for a while before saying, "Ms. Jiang, you've already done great. There's no need to feel guilty."

To be honest, Ren Xiaosu felt a little fortunate that so many people had managed to survive. He calmed himself down and said with a smile, "I believe that they must still be alive, but it's just that we don't know where they are right now. I've published something in Hope Media's newspaper. If Liuyuan sees it, he'll definitely rush to Stronghold 61."

Wang Fugui hurriedly said with a smile, "Yes, that's right! A kid like Liuyuan is very smart, so he definitely survived. At that time, I vaguely saw them on the shore, and it did not seem like they were threatened by the flood. However, I didn't get a clear look, so I can't be sure either."

"What about Yang Xiaojin?" Ren Xiaosu asked, "I know she was definitely fine at the time because she was quite far away from the floodwaters. Did y'all see her again after that?"

Old Wang said awkwardly, "We haven't seen her either. But since she's fine, you'll definitely get to meet her again someday."

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was still unaware that Yang Xiaojin had headed downstream of the river to look for him like crazy after he got speared. When she realized the chances of finding him were too slim, she hunted down the enemy next. That enemy was Han Yang, and he was Zong Consortium's superhuman who pierced Ren Xiaosu's abdomen with the spear.

She chased after Han Yang all the way to the foot of Mt. Guan, putting him through despair before sniping him dead.

“Oh yeah.” Ren Xiaosu changed the subject and asked, “How have y’all been doing during this period? Old Wang, it looked like you and that Wang officer are close?”

At this moment, someone knocked on the front door. Ren Xiaosu frowned. Who could be knocking on the door at this time?

When he opened the door, he was surprised to see that the Great Hoodwinker had come to visit.

The man rudely stepped into Ren Xiaosu’s house. When he saw Wang Fugui, he said happily, “You’re Wang Fugui, aren’t you? I just restored comms with Fortress 178 and found out you’re still alive. Congrats!”

Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow. “Great Hoodwinker, what’re you doing here?”

“I’m just here to have a look. Can’t I come by since I’m free?” The Great Hoodwinker sat down on a chair and made up his mind to impose himself here.

Ren Xiaosu had no choice but to introduce him to Wang Fugui. “This is an intelligence agent from Fortress 178. He was previously in charge of the intelligence gathering in the Zong Consortium’s territory. After the Zong Consortium was destroyed, he came to the Central Plains.”

“Xiaosu”—Wang Fugui suddenly thought of something when he heard this—“I heard from Zhang Xiaoman that you had participated in that war and personally avenged all of us? It must have been very dangerous, right?”

“It was not dangerous,” Ren Xiaosu said with a smile. Of course he would just mention the positives and not bring up the negatives at all. Since it was all in the past, he should not let Old Wang and the others worry about him. Simultaneously, Ren Xiaosu even shot a warning look at the Great Hoodwinker to stop him from babbling nonsense.

However, the Great Hoodwinker ignored him. He piped in, “You guys might not know this, but the war was tragic and earth-shattering! Ren Xiaosu won over the vast majority of our officers and soldiers of Fortress 178!”

Next door, Qin Sheng, who was eavesdropping on the conversation, had a glint in his eyes. These people had finally mentioned something that he wanted to hear. Previously, the relationship between Ren Xiaosu and Fortress 178 was a mystery that puzzled this young Rider. It sounded like it was finally time to confirm his suspicions.

### **616 Are you that sort of person?**

Qin Sheng thought that since there were so many of them, it should be impossible that they still were putting on an act, right? Qin Sheng had been watching from town when Old Wang arrived at Stronghold 61 with the troops. As he listened to their conversation from next door, he could roughly guess that Wang Fugui had just returned from Fortress 178 and even hauled a lot of goods with him from there.



Those goods couldn't be faked. If they had to cover up a lie by using that amount of goods, the cost of this lie would be absurdly high.

At this moment, the Great Hoodwinker asked Ren Xiaosu, "I heard you went into the stronghold to save someone? Do you know how the creeper vine died? Can you reveal anything about it?"

Ren Xiaosu calmly said, "I don't know either. Just after I went in, a vine coiled around Zhou Yingxue's head. She fell unconscious after that, and I had to quickly take her with me to go into hiding."

When Ren Xiaosu said he did not know what had happened in the stronghold, the Great Hoodwinker started cursing on the inside. Like hell he would believe that! With Ren Xiaosu's temper, it was good enough that he didn't uproot the entire creeper vine, so how could he possibly have left it alone?

The Great Hoodwinker ridiculed, "You went into hiding? Do you think you're that sort of person?"

Ren Xiaosu turned his head to Wang Fugui. "Ignore him, Old Wang. Continue your story."

Old Wang said, "After we were washed away by the flood, Ms. Jiang found an opportunity midway through and brought us back onto shore. Later on, we lived with refugees in the mountains for a while, but we really couldn't get through those days of being isolated from the world. After that, we thought of starting a business with the money and medicine that you left behind. At least, we would still have some money when we saw you again in the future."

Old Wang continued, "We went to the Wang Consortium's stronghold and purchased some goods that weren't available in the Northwest. Then we transported them to the Northwest and met Zhang Xiaoman on the first day of our arrival. When I learned that you were still alive, I immediately wanted to return to the Central Plains. However, he said that he had a method to find you...."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "What method?"

"Uh..." Old Wang glanced at Ren Xiaosu and hesitated for a moment before saying, "He said that they would send their people to look for you at whichever strongholds were in trouble. However, it seemed that they were unable to find you even after sending someone to Stronghold 74. Zhang Xiaoman even claimed that it was Xu Xianchu who taught him this method...."

The Great Hoodwinker said from off to the side, "I was the person Wang Fengyuan sent to Stronghold 74. Xu Xianchu's guess was right. By the time I found out about his whereabouts, he was at Stronghold 74. Moreover, look at how Stronghold 61 ended up...."

Ren Xiaosu was immediately left speechless. What the hell! He interrupted the Great Hoodwinker, "Don't say any more for now!"

The Great Hoodwinker fell silent.

Wang Fugui said with a sigh, "When we didn't hear any news of you, I led everyone back to the Central Plains and even hauled a lot of goods back. It was all thanks to Zhang Xiaoman that we could complete the deal successfully this time. But he took the liberty to give us several million yuan's worth of goods on credit. Will that affect him?"

The Great Hoodwinker was amused. "No, you don't have to worry. Zhang Xiaoman did the right thing this time! Old Wang, do you know who the young man in front of you is?"

Huh? Wang Fugui was taken aback by that question. How could he not know who Ren Xiaosu was?

The Great Hoodwinker said conspiratorially, "This is our Fortress 178's future commander. Do you know what that means? After Commander Zhang retires, Ren Xiaosu will take over as the commander. In that case, what's the matter with putting the goods on credit when it involves our future commander's own business? Don't you think?"

Wang Fugui and the others were stunned. Although they had stayed for a while in the Northwest, no one would tell them such things.

"Are you serious?" Wang Fugui asked the Great Hoodwinker, "He's the future commander of Fortress 178?"

"How could it not be true?" The Great Hoodwinker replied, "Do you really think anyone can buy several million yuan's worth of goods on credit from our Fortress 178 just by giving a name?"

Wang Fugui finally understood why everyone in the Northwest behaved so enthusiastically towards him. It also explained Zhang Xiaoman's cordiality and generosity.

When the goods were transported out of the warehouse, even the warehouse officer was exceptionally friendly with him. He kept addressing him as Brother Wang and said he hoped Wang Fugui would come frequently to the Northwest to grow his business and achieve glorious heights.

He was wondering why Zhang Xiaoman had such great authority.

Only now did he realize Ren Xiaosu's status had changed!

Old Wang stared dumbfoundedly at Ren Xiaosu. "No wonder Zhang Jinglin stayed in our town for so many years! So you're his..."

Ren Xiaosu's face darkened. "What the hell are you talking about? I'm not related to him by blood. The Great Hoodwinker is just bluffing y'all, so don't take him seriously."

However, the Great Hoodwinker wasn't going to care about that. All he wanted was to get this matter confirmed no matter what it took! If he could influence Ren Xiaosu through Wang Fugui and the others, who were like family to him, it would even be better in the future!

Qin Sheng, who was eavesdropping next door, was finally able to confirm that Ren Xiaosu was really the next designated commander of Fortress 178. He was even the type to refuse the role despite everyone wanting him to be the one.

What should he do now? He picked up the satellite phone next to him and called his teacher, Old Li. When the call connected, he bluntly said, "Teacher, I've confirmed Ren Xiaosu's identity. It is not as simple as we thought...."

“What do you mean?” Old Li could not understand what he was trying to say.

Qin Sheng explained, “He’s definitely not a superhuman who operates by himself. He is different from those other lone wolves.”

“Yes, I know he has a maid.” Old Li said impatiently, “Can you say everything without pausing in between each sentence?”

Qin Sheng said helplessly, “He is the heir of Fortress 178. It looks like the entire Fortress 178 has tacitly acknowledged this, but it sounds like he doesn’t want to go back to the Northwest. So, Teacher, you should be mentally prepared. Even if he’s really the one we’re looking for, he might not accept it.”

Before this, the consideration Old Li had was what if Zhang Qingxi and the others did not accept Ren Xiaosu when it turned out he was the one they were looking for.

But now, that condition had suddenly shifted. Instead, they should be worrying about what to do if Ren Xiaosu did not accept them!

Old Li asked blankly, “Are you really sure?”

“Yes, and I don’t think there’s a need for him to put on an act for us.” Qin Sheng said, “But, Teacher, I think this might also be a good thing. After interacting more with Ren Xiaosu recently, I realize his combat strength is probably beyond our imagination. In the past, we thought he would not be as strong as us. Or rather, all the Riders feel that most of the superhumans who have awoken their powers naturally in this world are weaker than us, save for a few individuals. However, Ren Xiaosu is very likely to be one of those few. Teacher, you should also have heard about the creeper vine at Stronghold 61. He managed to emerge unscathed after he went inside. Also, I suspect he’s definitely involved with how the creeper vine wilted away.”

Old Li said with a sigh, “Alright, I understand. I’ll need to inform the rest of the Riders about this.”

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu turned his head and looked at Jiang Wu, who was standing off to one side. Over the past few months, Jiang Wu’s demeanor had become even more reserved. Right now, as everyone was conversing, she just listened quietly with a smile and did not interrupt them. However, she kept looking at Ren Xiaosu.

But when Ren Xiaosu looked back at her, she would avoid eye contact.

### **Chapter 617 All grown up**

Ren Xiaosu took another look at Wang Yuchi and the others. They did seem a lot more mature than they were a few months ago. Their faces alone revealed this, as they looked a little more tanned and slightly more rugged than before. When they smiled, they appeared much more confident, unlike the frail demeanor they portrayed from the time they were students.

After all, these children used to be students who only knew how to study, and they were all single-mindedly focused on getting into university back then.

Even Wang Dalong, who was not sensible previously, had also become much more mature.

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "It looks like y'all've changed a lot."

At the side, Old Wang said with a smile, "Yeah. We encountered bandits early in our travels, but it was all thanks to Ms. Jiang, Wang Yuchi, the other male students, as well as the nanomachines you gave them that we managed to send those bandits running away in fear. That was also the reason why I dared to start the mercantile business to haul goods to the Northwest."

"That's great!" Ren Xiaosu patted Wang Yuchi on the shoulder and said with a smile, "You can even fight bandits now! What's the delay like when you're using the nanomachines now?"

Wang Yuchi smiled and said, "I don't really feel a delay anymore, and the response time is still within acceptable range for me. Two of our classmates can still feel a delay when operating them, but we think they can raise their sync rates very soon to achieve a negligible level of delay."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. It seemed like it was really as he had guessed. The reason why the Li Consortium dared to send those refugees with a high synchronization rate to their deaths was that the synchronization rate could be improved through training afterwards.

This also explained something. It proved the Li Consortium had indeed treated those refugee nanosoldiers as cannon fodder back then. They were nothing but test subjects for the nanomachines.

Ren Xiaosu smiled and asked, "Were y'all scared when you were fighting the bandits?"

"Yes, I was rather scared at the time." A male student smiled and said, "But when I thought about it, I realized it was what you had done for us in the past. Since you were not afraid, we shouldn't be afraid either. Besides, we still have a duty to protect everyone here."

Ren Xiaosu glanced at him, then looked at a female student who constantly had her eyes on him. He chuckled and said, "Protect everyone? Or do you mean protect someone?"

The group burst into laughter. It seemed that this couple's relationship was no longer a secret. This was quite normal. As the saying went, true love was found in adversity. After this group of teenagers had been through so much difficulty and desperate situations, they would naturally develop feelings for each other over time.

Ren Xiaosu asked again, "Are y'all still keeping up with your studies?"

"Yes," Wang Yuchi replied. "When we were still living in the mountains, it wasn't like we couldn't bear the hardship of being isolated from the world but that Uncle Fugui felt it would be a pity if we didn't have a chance to study anymore. That was why he took us away from the mountains to see if we could make more money. He also wanted to see if there were any universities in the Northwest that we could further our studies at."

Realization dawned upon Ren Xiaosu. So it turned out Old Wang was still just as thoughtful. He felt that Old Wang had done the right thing regarding this.

While Ren Xiaosu was chatting with the students, the Great Hoodwinker took the opportunity to do some palm reading for Old Wang. He asked Old Wang, "How old are you this year?"

Wang Fugui answered with a smile, "I'm 46."

"Then you're a little younger than me. I'm 52. Why don't I address you as bro? That sounds closer!" the Great Hoodwinker said with a smile while holding Wang Fugui's hand.

Wang Fugui did not reject him. The Great Hoodwinker continued, "Based on your palm, I think you had a son when you were still in your early thirties. You were only 32 years old when your son was born, am I right?"

Wang Fugui was shocked. "How'd you know?"

"Haha." The Great Hoodwinker pointed at his white banner that had the words "Divine Foresight" written on it. "I'm a fortune teller, so of course I know things like that. Everything's written on your palm."

"Oh, so you're a master! Sorry for the disrespect." Wang Fugui was a little confused, so he asked, "But aren't you an intelligence agent?"

"Ahem, intelligence gathering is just my side job," the Great Hoodwinker explained. "Fortune telling is my main job."

"Then, big bro, can you read my fortune and tell me how the latter part of my life will go?" Wang Fugui asked. When the Great Hoodwinker was able to state his son's age accurately, Wang Fugui was a little convinced.

The Great Hoodwinker stroked his beard and said with a smile, "Your future isn't too good. The Central Plains is a dangerous place for you. If you want to be successful, you have to head north. But north is still not the best choice you have. You have to head northwest because that's where the Prosperous Northwest is!"

Wang Fugui pondered this. Of course it had to be the Prosperous Northwest! How could he not get rich when Ren Xiaosu was already the commander designated to take over the Northwest?

The Great Hoodwinker continued, "The character 'Wang' is also quite peculiar in geomancy. Although 'Wang' was originally meant to portray a king's demeanor, there are too many people who have it as their surnames. This in turn weakens its disposition. But if you add a stroke to it and change the character to 'Yu,'<sup>[1]</sup> it will complement your given name of Fugui. Otherwise, your surname doesn't match your given name at all! Do you know where there's an abundance of jade? The Northwest..."

The Great Hoodwinker was already starting to talk nonsense. Anyway, the core of his idea was just to get Wang Fugui to head northwest.

If Wang Fugui and his family decided to head northwest, would Ren Xiaosu still want to stay in the Central Plains by himself? That was impossible!

Since he could not convince Ren Xiaosu, he would just have to persuade Wang Fugui first.

Once Wang Fugui made another trip to the Northwest, a large quantity of goods would already be prepared for him to tie him down to this trade. He would not have to pay for the goods in advance and could just reckon with the cost after selling it all.

Honestly, Fortress 178 was absolutely stinking rich with minerals and ores. This was not something that they lacked in the slightest.

Eventually, they started sharing anecdotes of fortune telling as they talked. The Great Hoodwinker bragged, "When I was younger, I was adored by countless young ladies due to this fortune telling skill of mine. I'm really good at it!"

Wang Fugui said with a smile, "Then you must have a lot of luck with women. You must've been a playboy when you were younger, right?"

"No," The Great Hoodwinker shook his head and said, "people in our line of work aren't allowed to get into relationships with our clients."

Nearby, Ren Xiaosu, who had been listening for a long time, sneered, "Why not? Are you in the funeral business?"

The Great Hoodwinker was speechless.

Ren Xiaosu said to Wang Fugui, "Don't listen to his BS. His side job is intelligence gathering? That's his main job! That's how he knew Wang Dalong's age. Wait, no, he could've just found that out from Zhang Jinglin. When he asked your age, it was so he could determine when you had Wang Dalong after subtracting his age from your age."

Wang Fugui was enlightened. Meanwhile, the Great Hoodwinker said exasperatedly from nearby, "Even though you're the future commander, you can't just leak my trade secrets as you wish!"

"That's enough." Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "I know why you're trying to dupe him. You just want me to return to the Northwest, don't you? But I'll still say the same thing as before. Actually, I'm very grateful that y'all think so highly of me. If you really feel that I'm suitable, I might go back there someday when I feel ready. But it definitely won't be now."

The Great Hoodwinker broke into a smile. "That's all I needed to hear!"

### **Chapter 618 The Wang Consortium's strategy**

Zhou Yingxue was still not awake even after a long time had passed. Furthermore, for most of the time she was unconscious, her body would intermittently flip between hot and cold. It was not that Ren Xiaosu went near her to feel her temperature, but that when Zhou Yingxue's body started turning hot, it was as though a furnace had been fired up in the house. It was sweltering and scorching.

Ren Xiaosu was really worried her brain would be damaged at that temperature.

He lodged Wang Fugui and the others in the houses Zhou Yingxue purchased. Since Zhou Yingxue had purchased a lot of houses, it would be a waste if no one was living in them. Ren Xiaosu felt that Zhou Yingxue's dream of becoming a real estate investor should have been shattered when that creeper vine attacked the stronghold.

After lodging Old Wang and the others, Ren Xiaosu went back to keeping watch over Zhou Yingxue. He was afraid something would happen to her.

If this maidservant could successfully control the energy the creeper vine had received from sacrificing an entire stronghold, Zhou Yingxue would probably be a great help to him in the future.

However, he had already been waiting for three days. After three days, Ren Xiaosu still did not see any signs of Zhou Yingxue recovering.

However, Ren Xiaosu was not in a rush. After three days had passed, Zhou Yingxue still had a healthy glow on her face and did not show any signs of getting weaker.

He would have to stay in Stronghold 61's town for some time anyway. According to Old Wang and the others, Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu's whereabouts were still unknown. However, Ren Xiaosu felt that if Yan Liuyuan had not sustained any fatal wounds, the floodwaters would probably not kill him since he was capable of manipulating luck and curses.

So he would have to wait a little longer by Stronghold 61. As long as Yan Liuyuan saw those words in the Hope Media newspaper, he would definitely come to Stronghold 61 to look for him.

As for Yang Xiaojin, he could only think of a different way to find her after reuniting with Yan Liuyuan. After all, Yang Xiaojin did not spend enough time with Yan Liuyuan, Xiaoyu, and the others, so she couldn't have heard that phrase before.

Ren Xiaosu already knew she was the one for him. As long as she were still alive, they would definitely meet again.

But what surprised Ren Xiaosu was actually the Wang Consortium's reaction after the disaster at Stronghold 61.

The calamity had brought immeasurable losses to the Wang Consortium, but they suddenly announced that Stronghold 61 had already overcome the crisis during an interview with Hope Media. They were now recruiting new residents for the stronghold, and anyone from the Alliance of Strongholds could come here to live and settle down for the long term.

Although the details were fully summed up in one sentence, this piece of news occupied the entire front page of Hope Media's newspaper that day!

The Wang Consortium did not state any requirements or mention what kind of people could come here to settle down. They even said they would provide a sum of money to help the people live and arrange suitable jobs for them based on their abilities!

Ren Xiaosu was stunned when he saw this news. He immediately thought of the dirty trick the Wang Consortium had used against the Zhou Consortium. At that time, many of the Zhou Consortium's refugees fled into the mountains to breed silkworms after the Wang Consortium deliberately started purchasing silk at high prices. This caused a shortage of manpower for the Zhou Consortium's factories and affected their productivity.

And now?

Who would feel most tempted after reading this piece of news? The stronghold residents of the Zhou and Kong consortiums? Definitely not!

On one hand, the residents of the Zhou and Kong consortiums were not allowed to enter and leave the strongholds freely. On the other hand, they were also leading a good life with their family and friends in their own strongholds. So who would want to leave a place they were familiar with?

However, this piece of news had a different meaning to the refugees!

Ren Xiaosu knew exactly how much those people longed to become stronghold residents since he used to be like that as well!

Right now, the opportunity to become a stronghold resident was presented in front of them and within their reach!

Even if the creeper vine tragedy took place here not too long ago, wasn't the creeper vine dead? A threat that was dead was no longer a threat.

How many refugees would it take to fill a stronghold that used to have a few hundred thousand residents living in it? Moreover, the Wang Consortium even purposely announced this plan in Hope Media's newspaper, which had the highest circulation. It would only take a few days to see the effects.

Immediately, the refugees from the factories around the Zhou Consortium strongholds started fleeing northwards. It was no exception in the Kong Consortium either!

Within a week, a lot of the Zhou and Kong Consortiums' factories came to a standstill. Their strongholds even faced a shortage of vegetables and processed food as a result, while the butchers also rushed to the Wang Consortium's stronghold with their families. They were afraid they would miss out on the opportunity to become stronghold residents if they were late!

Ren Xiaosu watched this from town silently. In just one week, nearly 20,000 people came to Stronghold 61 and were converted to stronghold residents after going through background checks.

What left Ren Xiaosu a little speechless was that all the waiters in the tavern in town had also moved into the stronghold. Right now, customers had to head into the kitchen to get their own lamb stew as there were no more waiters to serve them. Fortunately, the chef did not leave. Otherwise, the regulars at the tavern would even have ended up cooking their own meals.



Moreover, people from the Wang Consortium's stronghold approached Ren Xiaosu and the others. They thought they were the local refugees here, so they asked them affably if they wanted to move into the stronghold.

Ren Xiaosu politely rejected them by saying he could not adapt to the lifestyle in the stronghold after having grown up in town.

Since he did not want to move into the stronghold, the people in his group also rejected the offer. There was nothing to feel regretful about. After all, they were different from the real refugees now. They did not feel they would be better off living in the stronghold.

But even though Ren Xiaosu did not want to move into the stronghold, the other refugees in town had already left. This time, Ren Xiaosu purchased the remaining dozen-odd brick courtyard houses in town in one fell swoop.

As the esquires were in a hurry to move into the stronghold, they naturally had no reason to keep the courtyard houses in town. Furthermore, they had to move into the stronghold as quickly as possible. Otherwise, they might not be able to get a spot in the stronghold. Thus, the courtyard houses were all sold for cheap.

When Zhou Yingxue bought the houses, she paid an average of 30,000 yuan each. But when Ren Xiaosu bought them, it only cost him 5,000 yuan a pop!

As the deals were being made, Wang Fugui wondered, "Xiaosu, why are you buying so many courtyard houses near a stronghold that's just suffered a disaster? Nobody will come here to live."

"Oh, don't worry, there will be." Ren Xiaosu said with a smile, "There'll be countless people coming here to live. Old Wang, we're refugees as well, so don't underestimate the refugees' enthusiasm when they get the chance to move into a stronghold."

99% of the people in the world would not pass up on an opportunity to move higher in the hierarchy. If they could become a stronghold resident, that would mean a chance to make money and lead a better life!

Wang Fugui asked again, "Then why not pay with the money I'm holding for us? The Wang Consortium has already paid me for this batch of goods. This is the first time I've earned over a million yuan in a single transaction!"

"It's fine." Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said with a smile, "I still have money here. By the way, jot down this account number. You can use the money in it to fund the business. No matter what, you have to continue running the business. After all, we have such a large family to support. In the future, if Wang Yuchi and the others continue with their studies, they'll also need to spend money."

Wang Fugui wrote down the account number and asked, "Xiaosu, how much do you have in there? Do you have enough to spend?"

Old Wang thought that since he had made some money through the business, and the money also belonged to Ren Xiaosu, he absolutely must not let Ren Xiaosu suffer anymore.

In the end, Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment. "I think there should still be around 10 million yuan inside."

### **Chapter 619 The troubled Zhou and Kong Consortiums**

Wang Fugui nearly vomited blood. How could his hard-earned money not even match up to what Ren Xiaosu had?

Ren Xiaosu felt they should continue plying the northwestern trade route business. Once Old Wang and the others had rested enough, they could set off for the Northwest again.

After much thinking, Ren Xiaosu still felt that the Wang Consortium, Zhou Consortium, and Kong Consortium were not suitable for Wang Yuchi and the other students to further their studies at. The most suitable place for them would be Qinghe University in Luoyang City.

With this action from the Wang Consortium, the Zhou Consortium, Kong Consortium, and even the Pyro Company and other smaller consortiums were going to be affected. Only the refugees living outside Luoyang City were the least affected.

The refugees in Luoyang City were not even interested in becoming a so-called stronghold resident.

Ren Xiaosu would have to approach Qin Sheng to arrange for Wang Yuchi and the others to enroll in Qinghe University. He asked Qin Sheng, "Is it true that anyone can get into Qinghe University?"

"Of course," Qin Sheng nodded and said, "Why? Wang Yuchi and the others wish to attend uni? But I can't make the decision, though I can ask my teacher to apply for the necessary passes for them. But if they want to attend Qinghe University, they'll have to take the entrance exam. Spring enrollment will start soon. It might be difficult for them to pass the exam since they didn't attend the supplementary classes held outside town."

Ren Xiaosu looked at Wang Yuchi and the others. "Time is very tight. Do y'all think you can pass the exam?"

Wang Yuchi smiled confidently and said, "We've never fallen behind in our studies, so there's no need to attend any supplementary classes. But, Brother Xiaosu, we don't want to attend university anymore. We just want to stay here and help. Even if we don't attend uni, we can still study by ourselves. Also, Uncle Fugui needs help. He can't handle the bandits alone."

Ren Xiaosu advised him with a smile, "Since y'all're capable of passing the exam, you should continue your studies. Don't worry about the bandits. We can have Zhang Xiaoman send some people to escort him. Institutional education is still better than having to learn everything slowly by yourselves."

Ren Xiaosu had always been serious when it came to learning. Although he did not have the chance to go to university and further his studies, Wang Yuchi and the others were all fine young prospects who should not waste their talents.

Next to them, the Great Hoodwinker hurriedly said with a smile, “That’s right, Zhang Xiaoman can send people to escort Bro Fugui. If those bandits were not based in the Wang Consortium’s territory, we could even send in troops to eliminate them.”

If Wang Fugui’s convoy were escorted by Fortress 178’s troops, wouldn’t they become recognized as the official merchant for Fortress 178? In that case, who would be so foolish as to offend Wang Fugui in the future?

With Wang Fugui’s ability, it would even be possible for him to monopolize the entire northwestern trade route.

By this time, more and more refugees had moved into Stronghold 61. Some small media outlets began to follow up closely on the matter to report about it. For example, they interviewed the new stronghold residents and asked them how they felt and whether the Wang Consortium had made things difficult for them.

These refugees unanimously expressed that the Wang Consortium was really wonderful. They didn’t expect they would get the opportunity to become stronghold residents one day. Moreover, the jobs the Wang Consortium had arranged for them were much easier than working in the mines like they did before. They had already decided to settle down here for the rest of their lives.

The Wang Consortium not only gave them jobs but also paid them well.

It was like buying a carcass with a thousand taels of silver.[1] These 20,000 refugees who were the first to move into the stronghold were the “carcasses” bought by the Wang Consortium with a large sum of money!

The Zhou and Kong Consortiums were also trying their best to keep the refugees in their territories. But how could they possibly do better than offering the refugees a chance to be stronghold residents?

Surely they could not have their troops guard the refugees daily like they were prisoners, right? Besides, they could not enforce something like that either!

The Wang Consortium’s move instantly reversed their losses, turning a disaster into a good outcome!

Half a month later, Stronghold 61’s town started getting lively again. Ren Xiaosu thought the current population in the vicinity of Stronghold 61 must have exceeded the original number of people that used to live here!

Of course, the Wang Consortium’s factories had also been affected by the disaster. However, they were prepared for this. In fact, the first people to arrive at Stronghold 61 were the refugees in their own territory. At that time, the Wang Consortium’s factories had come to a standstill, but they did not reject those refugees from moving into the stronghold.

Following that, a large number of troops and military vehicles started assembling at Stronghold 61 due to the ongoing rescue efforts. When the refugees in the stronghold reached a certain number,

Stronghold 61 stopped accepting the refugees who had just arrived. Then they transported the newly arrived refugees to the various factories in their military vehicles.

The refugees who came late were sad to learn they would not get to be stronghold residents.

However, the Wang Consortium immediately promised they would still be treated very well. Although it was not much better, it was still slightly better than how the Zhou and Kong Consortiums treated them.

As such, the refugees thought that since they were already here and it would take them at least another 10 days to a fortnight to return to their former homes, wouldn't it be the same working for any consortium? Besides, the salary given by the Wang Consortium was also higher.

As a result, the Wang Consortium's factories were the first to restore their operations, while the Zhou and Kong Consortiums' factories remained at a standstill. Although these two consortiums also thought of improving the refugees' benefits, the refugees had already left their territories. Even if they improved the benefits at this moment, the refugees would not want to make the long journey back.

The consortiums could not go to the Wang Consortium's territory to steal back their former refugees, right? That was as good as declaring war!

At this moment, they would probably have to increase their previous wages by 40% to 50% if they wanted to get the refugees to go back.

Ren Xiaosu did not pay attention to the consortiums' subsequent actions as he was not really interested in it.

However, the Wang Consortium seemed to have planned all of this way beforehand. The more Ren Xiaosu thought about it, the more afraid he felt.

When Luo Lan said they would have to form alliances with the other forces to deal with the Wang Consortium, he felt that Luo Lan and Qing Zhen were being too cautious. But now it seemed like the Wang Consortium's intention was clear. Qing Zhen had thought ahead of everyone else again.

Ren Xiaosu initially thought that the Wang Consortium would start a war very soon. But after this, they fell silent again and focused all of their energy on opening the trade route and getting their productivity restarted. They completely ignored the talk in the rest of the world.

During this period, the Hope Media reporter, Zhou Tao, remained at Stronghold 61 as he reported on the latest updates to the situation after the refugees were let into the stronghold.

At first, he thought the entire stronghold would descend into chaos. After all, the people in Stronghold 61 were now made up of refugees. Those people did not have any manners, nor would they obey any laws, so there should be a lot of theft and robbery.

But the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence started displaying its usefulness at this moment. Some of the people who had just committed robberies were caught by the Wang Consortium's newly appointed Public Order Division staff right after turning the corner on a street.

Others were handcuffed immediately after they stole something.

The artificial intelligence was like an omniscient god that regulated everyone's actions.

Before this, Zhou Tao could not really grasp the concept of the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence. It was not until he experienced the transition from chaos to order in Stronghold 61 that he gained a deeper understanding of the role the artificial intelligence played in maintaining the peace of the stronghold.

He suddenly felt that Stronghold 61 was more like a pilot project for the Wang Consortium and a demonstration piece. They were using a practical example to tell the world how powerful the artificial intelligence was in governing a stronghold and the stability it brought to people's lives.

[1] To show that one is sincere about doing something

### **Chapter 620 Warfare in the Northern Plains**

In the grasslands in the North, Yan Liuyuan was sitting at the campfire in his tent with a calm expression. The flickering glow of the flames illuminated his face red. Next to him, the tribal chief, Hassan, placed some lamb meat into the metal pot hanging over the firepit. The lamb meat was already cooked, so he was just reheating it in the pot.

He said respectfully to Yan Liuyuan, "Master, the people from that large tribe who want to go to the Central Plains to plunder for food are doing so to establish their dominance. The khan will definitely not let it rest after you summoned that eagle from the sky to blind his envoy."

Yan Liuyuan laughed. "Hassan, you don't have to worry about that. I'm just worried that he won't dare to come."

"I understand." Hassan did not say anything more. After a while, he fished out the mutton from the pot and took out his small knife to cut it into slices.

As his master did not like eating big chunks of meat, he had to carefully cut it into smaller pieces.

If he submitted to Yan Liuyuan due to fear at the beginning, he was now truly worshipping Yan Liuyuan as a god.

The people in the Northern Plains believed in gods. This had always been the case since ancient times. The feats displayed by Yan Liuyuan so far were making him look like a true god to these people.

Even if he weren't a god, he was definitely close to being one.

Hassan believed the gods would protect the tribe. Some livestock had gotten lost due to the blizzard, but his master told him the livestock would return by themselves. In the end, it started gusting strongly that afternoon and all the livestock started coming back.

All of these events left Hassan deeply in awe and admiration.

Yan Liuyuan picked up a piece of mutton and placed it into his mouth. After swallowing it with great difficulty, he said to Hassan, "Don't y'all have vegetables here in the plains?"

Back when they were at Stronghold 88, Yan Liuyuan often enjoyed listening to Ren Xiaosu share some stories he read in books.

Ren Xiaosu told him that before The Cataclysm, not everyone living in the North was nomadic. Many of those who lived there also lived in cities, and their diet was not much different from that of Southerners, with it consisting of vegetables and fruits as well.

It was just that most of it was either harvested through agriculture or imported in.

Now that the Northern Plains no longer imported food from the Central Plains, it would have to depend on luck if they could even get any fruits to eat. Only wild fruits could be found in the grasslands.

Hassan replied, "Master, it's mainly because it's winter now. It isn't easy to find those things. When spring comes, I can take our tribespeople out to look for other kinds of food."

"It looks like it really will be necessary to make a trip to the Central Plains." Yan Liuyuan sighed.

"Master, are you from the Central Plains?" Hassan asked.

"No." Yan Liuyuan shook his head. "But the place I used to live is similar to the Central Plains. We ate rice and wore coats too. There aren't many herdsmen there since most people practice farming."

"Does Master also want to build those magnificent city walls here in the plains?" Hassan gestured animatedly as he said, "I've seen them from a distance before and they're towering. The people living inside must not be afraid of wild animals. They can even drive those beasts here to the Northern Plains."

Yan Liuyuan walked out of the tent and rubbed his cheeks with a handful of snow from the outside.

"Hassan, we can't build strongholds in the North. Also, I don't like that kinda thing either."

Hassan wondered, "Master doesn't like strongholds?"

"Of course not," Yan Liuyuan said. "Those Central Plains people who are hiding in the strongholds have already lost their sense of the outside world. The world is ever-changing, but they're the only ones not making any progress. And they even divide their own people into different classes."

Hassan understood that his master disliked strongholds.

Yan Liuyuan continued, "Furthermore, if the nomadic tribes are set on being against the Central Plains people, they mustn't live in a fixed location. When the Central Plains people start getting wary of us and decide to conquer the grasslands, their artillery can easily destroy any stronghold. The nomads' advantage is the terrain of the grasslands. When the Central Plains people come attacking, they'll have

to build forward operating bases as they advance along the rivers. But we can move freely. Once they advance deep enough, we'll have a chance to fight back against them."

Hassan smiled and said, "Master is so knowledgeable."

"I'm just throwing it out there." Yan Liuyuan said with a smile, "I just don't like stronghold residents."

At this moment, Xiaoyu, who was wearing a pelt cloak like the herdsmen, walked out of the tent. She was holding a bowl of milk in her hand. "Liuyuan, come and have some goat milk. You can't keep eating so little."

But as soon as she finished speaking, the howling of wolves sounded in the distance on the grasslands. Yan Liuyuan laughed. "They're finally here. Let's go, Hassan, I'll take you to see something interesting."

After that, Hassan had the tribesmen bring over the horses. He knelt on one knee and used his thigh as a pedestal for Yan Liuyuan to mount the horse.

The group of several dozen rode off in the direction of the wolves' howls. Even now, the tribesmen still had a lingering fear of the wolves. However, Yan Liuyuan had reassured them many times the wolves would not hurt their own people or eat their livestock indiscriminately.

After riding for a while, Hassan stared blankly at the grassland in front of him. It looked like blood had been spilled here.

He recognized one of the men the wolves had surrounded as the Commander-in-Chief of the Right,[1] a warrior of that large tribe who was skilled in warfare.

It looked like these were the troops sent by the large tribe to encircle Hassan's tribe. However, the several thousand-strong army was ambushed by the wolves in the grassland before they could even lay eyes on Yan Liuyuan.

These people thought firearms could scare away the wolves, but the wolves were much more ferocious than they had ever seen.

In just half an hour, the several thousand-strong army was wiped out, leaving the Commander-in-Chief of the Right, whose name was Golmud, and his associates still battling the wolf pack.

However, the reason he could survive until now was not that he could fight well, but because Yan Liuyuan had told the Wolf King to keep the person in charge alive.

When the Wolf King saw Yan Liuyuan coming, it stopped attacking them. Then it led the wolves and surrounded the enemy, leaving them to shout angrily inside the circle all they wanted.

Golmud was panting heavily within the wolf pack. He looked at Yan Liuyuan through the wolf pack and said fiercely, "You're this tribe's new chief?"

Yan Liuyuan, who was sitting on the back of a large, powerful horse, looked at him with great interest. "Did your khan receive the message that I asked your envoy to send him?"

“How dare you make such big claims when you’re just a brat who’s wet behind the ears?” Golmud said with a sneer, “You want control of the entire plains? You’re not capable yet.”

“It seems like this is the attitude of your khan.” Yan Liuyuan said nonchalantly, “In that case, I can only resort to more radical methods.”

With that, the wolves ended their encirclement and pounced forward to bite all of the remaining enemies to death. After that, they were even going to start gnawing on the corpses of these people.

This was an exceptionally bloody and brutal sight to behold. It was just like a tyrant punishing his enemies.

But Xiaoyu suddenly looked at Yan Liuyuan from next to him and said, “Liuyuan, you can have the wolves kill them, but you can’t let the wolves eat them. If your brother were here, he wouldn’t allow you to do this.”

Yan Liuyuan sat on his horse and remained silent for a long while. Then he gave a wave of his hand to disperse the wolves. “Go onto the plains to look for your own food. You aren’t allowed to eat these people.”

The Wolf King obeyed his order and promptly left.

[1] Commander-in-Chief of the Right, a rank at the level of the 24 imperial leaders called the Ten Thousand Horsemen. Nomadic leaders formed a dualistic system of political organization with the left and right wings divided on a regional basis, with left being east and right being west.