

First Order 661

Chapter 661: Statue

Just as the consortiums had feared, not only did the Riders retaliate against them, but they also did it with precision.

Some of the secret research bases of the three consortiums suffered varying degrees of damage. The Riders did not charge in recklessly like they had imagined. Instead, they destroyed them remotely with artillery fire.

Although the underground fortifications of those bases were still intact, the Riders did not continue with the further destruction of the targets.

As the Qinghe Group had been controlling the satellites for many years, they knew a lot of secrets. The consortiums had also decided to stir up trouble in Luoyang City precisely because they were concerned about this. They did not want an eye in the sky flying over their heads and spying on them.

However, they did not manage to seize Luoyang City, and the plan to eliminate the Riders was also unsuccessful, so all they could do now was take the beating.

Of course, the Riders were not just relentlessly seeking revenge. They just thought that it would be good to cause the consortiums some pain and let them know the Riders were out and roaming the wilderness, so they had better not dare to get any ideas about Luoyang City again.

If they really forced the consortiums into a corner, Luoyang City would still be the one at a disadvantage.

Amid the bustle, Xu Zhi was walking alone on a small street. The holly trees on the sidewalk had grown very tall. He was here this time because he had found out about Zhou Yingxue's new address, so he wanted to come over and have a look.

Xu Zhi had been searching for Zhou Yingxue for a long time. Now that he knew she was in Luoyang City and was aware of her address, there was no reason why he should not drop by.

Xu Zhi walked to the entrance of the villa and looked at it silently. But before two minutes could pass, the door of the villa opened.

He looked a little flustered as Zhou Yingxue came walking out with two bags of trash in her hands.

Zhou Yingxue immediately recognized Xu Zhi. However, she frowned and asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I..." Xu Zhi was at a loss for words. "I just wanted to thank you again. After all, you saved me before—"

"C'mon," Zhou Yingxue interrupted, "I know what you're thinking. You should just go back. You're nothing compared to my master." Then Zhou Yingxue handed the two trash bags to Xu Zhi. "Turn left and walk a short distance. You'll see a dumpster there. Throw these away for me."

Then Zhou Yingxue went back into the house just like that!

Xu Zhi stood outside the entrance in a daze for a while. He cut a sorry and pathetic figure holding two bags of trash in his hands.

Then he smiled bitterly and walked off towards the Qinghe Building.

This time, there was no one standing in his way. The security guard at the entrance even greeted him warmly.

Xu Zhi rarely went to school these days. As he was already in his fourth year of university, he did not have any classes to attend. And now, Xu Ke had even made him the assistant to the Qinghe Group's president. Instantly, he became a rising star in the whole of Luoyang City, as well as a legend in school.

As a matter of fact, the entire Luoyang City was dependent on the Qinghe Group and only existed because of it. As the assistant to the Qinghe Group's president, he held a lot of power.

Although a position like that did not seem to have any real power, it was still a very prestigious one.

However, Xu Zhi did not feel excited at all. He suddenly felt that his current achievements were totally not worth mentioning in front of Zhou Yingxue. All she had in her heart was her master.

Even if her master had already run off with someone else....

He took the elevator up. He had taken the documents from his desk to report to Xu Ke, "The reconstruction work is already underway, and Director Yang Ruilin has given us an update of the time frame for the rebuilding project. The specific task breakdown will be delivered to us in the afternoon, and I will follow up on this matter personally..."

Xu Ke stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window and listened. When Xu Zhi finished reporting, he asked, "Do you know why I suddenly appointed you as my assistant?"

Xu Zhi shook his head. "I don't know."

"Guess."

Xu Zhi gave it some thought and said, "Was it because I made the correct choice right near the end?"

"No." Xu Ke shook his head with a smile. "Your choice was not important. It was your courage that mattered."

Xu Zhi was a little puzzled. Xu Ke patted him on the shoulder and walked off towards the elevator. "In this era, one needs to possess both drive and courage, and you have both of these qualities. Come, follow me outside for a while. The two custom-made statues should be fabricated after we rushed for it to be completed."

It was Xu Zhi's character that Xu Ke valued.

Their vehicle drove all the way to Wangchunmen Boulevard, where it was already packed with countless people. It was as though everyone was gathered here for some exciting event.

Xu Zhi had just taken the job and was still unsure of what was going on here.

Xu Ke was the first to step out of the car. When the crowd saw Xu Ke arrive, they immediately made way for him. Regardless of whether others acknowledged Xu Ke, at least the residents of Luoyang City felt he was a good person who treated everyone well.

Two statues covered by a red cloth stood in the middle of the boulevard. The garrison troops were standing guard next to them and waiting for Xu Ke to come and unveil the sculpture.

Rumors of these two statues had been flying around from very early on. It was first spread from the sculptor who said these statues were of the two people who had saved Luoyang City during Qinghe's moment of crisis.

During this period, stories of the crisis in Luoyang City were being spread around in the stronghold's bars until they became nearly legendary.

After all, residents lived on both sides of Wangchunmen Boulevard. Most of the residents just hid at home and did not even dare to look out their windows during the chaos. But as it turned out, there were those who were bolder who managed to witness the entire thing.

As a result, the events of how Xu Ke faced the enemies alone and killed seven or eight of them, how Ren Xiaosu came alone to Xu Ke's aid, and how the appearance of a mysterious sniper helped them dominate the battlefield, all of those stories immediately became the stuff of legend!

Xu Ke walked up to the statues and pulled away the red cloth.

One of the statues was of a girl wearing a cap with short hair that reached her shoulders. She was carrying a sniper rifle on her shoulder, making her look extremely domineering.

The onlookers immediately realized this must be the legendary sniper who dominated the battlefield.

It was a little stranger on the other side of the sculpture. Half of the young man's body was visible outside steel armor, while the other half was enclosed within. It was like the armor had been damaged after a brutal battle.

The scene the sculpture depicted had an extraordinarily tragic feel to it.

However, what the two statues had in common was that Yang Xiaojin was wearing a cap while Ren Xiaosu was wearing a hood. Their faces were hidden in shadow and could not be seen clearly at all.

Some people lamented, "That girl must be very beautiful, right? Why did the sculptor sculpt her with a cap on for?"

In the crowd of onlookers, a group of students were stunned. Others might not be able to see their faces clearly, but Ren Xiaosu's steel armor and Yang Xiaojin's cap were way too unique. It was so unique they could immediately tell this was their classmate, Yang Xiaojin!

As for the other statue, wasn't that the young man who stood in for Zheng Hang in class? Zheng Hang was still crying now as he could no longer skip any of Jiang Xu's classes in the future. Furthermore, when Jiang Xu asked any questions in class these days, he would always pick Zheng Hang to answer them.

Earlier, everyone was still speculating if Yang Xiaojin was also a supernatural being since that young man was one.

And these speculations were finally confirmed today. A student sighed and said, "To them, we truly do lead a very pampered life. It's said they killed more than a hundred enemies that day. People like them... are not from the same world as us."

Xu Zhi looked at the sculpture and suddenly felt Ren Xiaosu was at a level he would probably never reach in his lifetime.

Chapter 662: Business deals in the grasslands

At the border between the Northern Plains and the Central Plains, a group of refugees were sitting by the Shenmu River with a campfire burning next to them.

This place was located at the northern edge of the Wang Consortium and bordered the grasslands. However, there were barely any signs of human activity here since the Wang Consortium's troops rarely patrolled the area.

A group of people had gathered around the campfire to keep themselves warm. The clothes they were wearing clearly had a lot of patching, and it did not look like they were frequently washed either. These people were even carrying improvised firearms with them, so it was obvious they were bandits who lived in the wilderness throughout the year.

A rat-faced middle-aged man said, "Boss, do you think they're gonna appear? The set date has passed."

"I dunno." A burly, middle-aged man rubbed his hands together. "Who knows what's going on in the grasslands? I heard that it's quite chaotic over there as well. Some of the smaller tribes have been wiped out just like that."

"Then should we keep waiting? We've already been waiting for two days." The rat-faced middle-aged man cursed and said, "If the goods that they bring here ain't as good as they claim, we'll have wasted a trip."

"Wang Ergou, can you stop mouthing off for a moment? I've been listening to your nagging for the past two days. If you don't wanna wait, you can go back by yourself," said a man in the group who then spat on the ground.

The leader of the bandits did not say anything further. He had been waiting here for two days, not because of his integrity or anything, but because he would soon be unable to make ends meet.

They lived in the Central Plains along the route leading to the Northwest, but the trade route between the Northwest and the Central Plains had been cut off for an indefinite number of years. The bandits who used to live gloriously were now forced to farm every day, and it felt really degrading to them.

Although they heard the trade route was going to reopen, it still wasn't open yet, right? They had encountered several merchant groups and wanted to rob them. But the merchant groups that could travel between the Northwest and the Central Plains at the moment were all big-time merchants who were equipped with much better weapons than them.

And he was a smart person. Who were the ones running the trade route? Fortress 178!

Fortress 178 was different from the consortiums. If the bandits continued plundering the merchant groups in the future, those damn fucks from Fortress 178 might just disregard everything and come to exterminate them all.

The leader of these bandits thought that since there were risks in continuing as bandits, maybe he could take advantage of the situation and start a business as well.

But what kind of business could he do? He had no goods on hand.

Therefore, when a nomad riding a horse arrived from the north and said he wanted to do business with them, this bandit leader named Su Lei was immediately tempted.

That nomad rode in on a rugged and muscular horse and said they had a lot of fur hides harvested from the prey they hunted in the grasslands, as well as beef and mutton they could trade.

These items, be it in the Northwest or the Central Plains, were all very scarce!

Fur coats, in particular, were one of the favorite items of the aristocrats in the strongholds. It was the same reason why exotic meat was so in demand. If you could wear a beautiful fur coat that was obtained from the wilderness, you would be the most dazzling presence at a banquet.

Of course, Su Lei only heard about this from others and did not see it with his own eyes.

But in the towns of the Zong Consortium's strongholds, it was true that the grocery store owners there would often take in fur coats from people selling them.

No, wait! Those strongholds were now under Fortress 178's control.

The Shenmu River was very shallow, and due to the cold weather, it had frozen over.

There also had to be a reason why nomadic tribes always chose to travel south during the winter, and part of the reason was probably because they could cross rivers.

While the leader of the bandits, Su Lei, was deep in thought, he suddenly heard the faint sound of horses galloping coming from afar. He looked up and was surprised to see a group of people coming towards them on the surface of the frozen river. They were led by a young man at the front.

Su Lei stood up. "I'm Su Lei. You people are late."

The young man on the horse said with a smile, "Good things always arrive a little late. We've brought a lot of fur hides with us. There's a ton, and they're all in great condition too! Did y'all bring what we asked for?"

Su Lei thought of something he found very odd. Based on what he knew, the northern nomadic tribes should be trading for items such as salt or weapons. But strangely, the other party had specifically requested tea leaves, cabbage, coriander, onions, ginger, garlic, pepper, and other seasonings instead.

And of course, they also asked for some antibiotics and ironware. However, the ironware they requested were just pots and pans rather than weapons like knives and swords.

Su Lei said, "We've kept the goods a few kilometers away from here. We need to be sure of your sincerity before we bring you to retrieve them."

The few dozen people behind Su Lei quietly sized up the young man and the hundreds of burly men behind him. These people were all riding on tall horses and following close behind the young man.

The young man smiled at Su Lei and responded, "Send your men over to inspect the goods."

Su Lei looked at the rat-faced middle-aged man and signaled for him to inspect the goods, but the latter shrank back.

Instead, the man who had reprimanded this middle-aged man took the initiative and stepped towards the nomads.

The young man looked at the man and praised, "You're quite brave. What's your name?"

Su Lei suddenly felt the young man had an air of confidence like he was superior. The man did not mind and answered normally, "Cui Qiang!"

During the exchange, the man walked up to the nomads. He was surprised to see the people were carrying piles of fur hides on horseback.

Cui Qiang reached out and checked the fur hides. They were in such good condition that even the best hunters in the Central Plains could achieve this quality of fur. There were no bullet holes, and only two small punctures that looked like teeth marks. It was as though they had been bitten to death by wolves.

If the fur hides here were sold to the Northwest or the Central Plains, they would definitely make a fortune. It would be best if they could sell them to the Central Plains where the people were wealthier!

Cui Qiang checked for half an hour before he finally stopped. He turned around and shouted at Su Lei, "There's no problems."

Su Lei took a deep breath and said to the young man, "Follow me. I'll lead you to where the goods are stored. Vegetables, ironware, medicine, we have them all"

The young man smiled happily. "When I saw that you didn't have any goods with you, I thought that you were planning to take our stuff without giving anything in return. Since you're sincere about making a deal with our tribe, you've made a very wise decision this time."

While speaking, Su Lei realized the young man did not seem to be afraid of their guns at all. But these nomads were clearly not carrying any firearms, so where did their confidence come from?

After all, no matter how improvised a gun was, a gun was still a gun.

As Su Lei led the way, he wondered, "Why didn't y'all ask for things like weapons and chose instead to get so much of these daily necessities?"

The young man laughed. "You make it sound like you can get us weapons if we ask for them."

His reply was full of sarcasm, but Su Lei was really unable to refute him. If he could get his hands on better weapons, they would not have to run around carrying these improvised guns.

The young man looked at Su Lei and said with a smile, "Don't mind me, I was just stating the facts. After this transaction, you'll slowly start getting richer. By that time, it won't be too late for us to trade other goods."

Su Lei was stunned. He realized this young man was actually looking to cooperate long term with him.

The other party did not ask for guns now because he knew that Su Lei and his men could not get their hands on any either.

But even though he could not get them now, it did not mean he could not get them in the future.

Chapter 663: Looking to the future

The young man rode slowly on his horse with Su Lei following beside him. After a full five kilometers, the young man finally saw the goods Su Lei and the others had piled up in the dip of a hill.

However, the young man frowned. "Is that all?"

He got down from his horse and circled the goods. They were mostly vegetables while the medicine was pitifully little. There were also not many ironware items to be seen but a lot of seasonings like scallions, ginger, and garlic.

In conclusion, most of the items were not valuable at all.

Nearby, Su Lei explained, "We were a little rushed, so we only managed to get these items. You live in the grasslands and have never been to the south before, so you might not know that the supplies in the south are not as readily available as you think. It was very difficult to even get ahold of these things."

The young man looked at Su Lei with a half-smile. He grasped what was going on. "I'm guessing that you didn't have the money to buy what I asked for?"

Su Lei immediately felt embarrassed. "How could that be? I'm telling the truth."

“Alright then.” The young man did not expose him further. Instead, he said bluntly, “We don’t have any shared currency between us, so let’s just barter instead. How do you propose to trade?”

Su Lei thought for a moment and said, “As you can see, the people in the south are actually also very poor. Even if you give me your stock of fur hides, I can’t sell them for a good price. In this day and age, food is still the most valuable of all.”

On the way here, Su Lei had thought of how to bargain. It would be nothing more than bullying the northern nomads for not knowing the situation in the Central Plains and making them think their fur hides were worthless. Then he would jack up the value of the tea leaves, medicine, ironware, and vegetables he was holding. With that, he would make a killing for sure!

The young man did not refute him. Instead, he continued listening to Su Lei’s nonsense with great interest. “It’s not like the Central Plains is cold, so there’s no point in wearing a fur coat like that. But ironware is really hard to find around here. Do you know how much this pot is worth?”

The young man said with a smile, “900 yuan?”

Su Lei was taken aback, as the young man had accurately stated the value of the iron pot.

Of course, the price he had said was still not accurate enough. Although the availability of iron goods was quite scarce these days, after Fortress 178 took over the Zong Consortium’s territory, many of the daily necessities previously controlled by the Zong Consortium had started dropping in price. Currently, the price of an iron pot was just 800 yuan.

But a month ago, an iron pot was still selling for over 900 yuan.

Su Lei suddenly realized the young man in front of him probably had knowledge of the south!

Su Lei stayed silent for a moment before saying, “Let’s forget about this iron pot for now. You should also know that as long as a person is alive, they definitely need to take medicine at some point, right? Who doesn’t suffer from headaches and fevers? Many people end up dying after running a fever, so the price of medicine has always been very high. Guess how much an antibiotic pill like this costs?”

The young man said with a smile again, “200 yuan?”

Su Lei was speechless. It might have been a coincidence the young man got the price right the first time, but getting it correct a second time was definitely not.

“How do you know the prices of these items?” Su Lei was puzzled. Could it be that a traitor had defected from the South to the grasslands?

Who could have leaked the info?!

However, the young man said with a smile, “OK, the most expensive items you have here are these few dozen antibiotic tablets and ironware. I can tell that you must’ve spent a lot of money to purchase them. As for the vegetables, they aren’t worth much. Although the strongholds regulate the distribution of

grain, they don't do so for vegetables. The refugees themselves are allowed to grow vegetables in the wilderness. I'm guessing that these vegetables were also planted by you guys."

Su Lei felt a little helpless, but he still wanted to continue bargaining. "The price of the fur hides—"

"To show you my sincerity, all of the fur hides that we brought this time are the best-looking ones," the young man interrupted with a smile. "These items can go for at least three to four thousand yuan each at the store in town."

Su Lei was at a complete loss for words. He was still thinking he could cheat the northern nomads. After all, in the eyes of the Southerners, the nomads did not seem very smart and were especially gullible.

Moreover, didn't everyone say that in the course of human history, the Central Plains' people had always been able to cheat the nomads from the grasslands when it came to doing business? So why didn't it work when it was their turn?

Now that he thought about it again, although the young man was wearing a nomad's robe, his way of speaking and acting was not too different from the Southerners.

It was just that Su Lei had never seen a nomad before, so he did not know how to differentiate between them.

Su Lei looked at the group of horsemen behind the young man. He estimated he could probably only trade for 10% of the fur hides they brought this time. Or maybe he would not even have enough to get 10%.

The young man consoled him, "You don't have to feel depressed. Of course I won't do business with you based on the prices offered in town. After all, everyone is trying to make a profit here. That's the only way we can look forward to future dealings, right?"

Su Lei perked up. "Then how do you propose to bargain?"

"How about this? You can sell these fur hides to the stronghold for at least three to four thousand yuan each, but I'll only charge you at a unit price of 2,000 yuan, so I don't think I'll have to get into detail about the profits. As for these items of yours, I'll buy them at the market rate. Furthermore, I'll also let you have another 50 fur hides on credit to fund your supply run. This way, you won't have wasted a trip, right? Just bring me a 100,000 yuan worth of goods on the same day next month."

Su Lei was overjoyed. Although it was much less than what he had expected to earn, this outcome was by no means not a profit!

Moreover, for the other party to let him have 50 fur hides on credit, it was as though someone had stuffed a pillow under his head as he was dozing off. What did he lack now? Wasn't it capital?

However, Su Lei was a little puzzled. "Aren't you afraid that I'll take all 50 of your fur hides and run away?"

After all, these fur hides were worth over a 100,000 yuan total.

The young man smiled and said, "You were already willing to travel several hundred kilometers to meet me, so I believe that you're not a shortsighted person. If you run your business honestly, you'll probably be able to earn ten or a hundredfold more than what these 50 fur hides are worth. I'll leave you to consider the pros and cons of this for yourself."

Of course, this was also because things like fur hides were not worth much to the young man. He had plenty of them back where he came from!

A business deal that suddenly came about was quickly completed. The nomads behind the young man loaded the goods Su Lei and his gang had brought up onto their horses and left in high spirits.

One thing to be unhappy about was how they had to bring back most of the fur hides they had transported here. After all, Su Lei and his gang were too poor and had brought too few goods to trade with.

On the way back, a man said guiltily to the young man, "Master, the person I sent out was too incompetent. I didn't expect him to have found such poor bandits to do business with."

The young man said with a smile, "Hassan, you don't have to be too concerned about this short-term loss. I believe that this group of people will surprise us next month. We have to look further into the future. Right now, he's just a small-time bandit, but one day, he'll become a successful businessman. When that time comes, I'll be able to get some automatic rifles for y'all to play with. Y'know, there's quite a lot of arm dealers in the south. The other tribes in the grasslands are still stuck at the level of occasionally raiding the Central Plains for their supplies. But actually, doing business is the surest way of securing the livelihoods of the nomads. I won't come here next month. I'll leave this matter to you in the future, so you can just bring some people along with you to carry out the deals."

"Yes, Master," Hassan answered respectfully. "Master, can you get the wolves to escort me then?"

The young man laughed out loud. "Hassan, don't be afraid of those people. I'll have the wolves accompany you, but they won't show themselves if there's no danger. I don't want us scaring away these new 'friends' of ours."

Chapter 664: Pyro in the grasslands

After Yan Liuyuan, Hassan, and the others left, Su Lei, who had stopped in the distance, heaved a sigh of relief. The transaction this time was way too important to him.

Yan Liuyuan was right just now. He really did put together everything he had in order to purchase those goods. He even needed to sell off a small gold bar he treasured to raise the money.

The last gold bar on a bandit was hidden in his waistband. When the bandit's life was threatened, this gold bar would act as his lifeline.

Of course, only the more successful bandits could afford to keep a gold bar hidden in their waistbands.

This small gold bar weighed about 50 grams and was passed down from his grandfather's generation. Su Lei had inherited it from his father, but he did not expect it would be gone in his generation.

The money he had raised for today was Su Lei's last bit of wealth. All of it had been used to purchase the medicine and ironware. If Yan Liuyuan had not shown up today, Su Lei would have had to go back to town and set up a stall there.

The people in the walled village did not understand why Su Lei would take such a risk.

But to be honest, Su Lei really felt that the opening of the Northwestern trade route was an opportunity for everyone. Whether they could seize it or not would depend on themselves.

At this moment, Wang Ergou, who was standing next to Su Lei, instigated, "Boss, I've been watching them closely. Those people don't even have any guns on them and are only using sabers to defend themselves. We have three improvised guns here. Although they have more people, we have nothing to be afraid of since we have guns. How about finishing them off?"

When this person saw the fur hides Yan Liuyuan had brought with him, he started coveting the goods. After all, 90% of the fur hides had been taken back by Yan Liuyuan.

And that 90% was worth nearly a million yuan!

It suddenly quieted down among the bandits. Su Lei looked at Wang Ergou. "After we steal it, then what?"

"The one million yuan is enough for all of our men to not have to worry about food and drink for the rest of our lives. Boss, let's do this," he replied.

Su Lei laughed and said, "My ambition isn't easily satisfied with just a million yuan."

With that, Su Lei led the group back towards the South. Their village stood along the route to the Northwest from the Central Plains.

On the way back, Su Lei found an opportunity and ordered Cui Qiang, "After we return to the village, find a chance to finish off Wang Ergou quietly."

Cui Qiang was stunned for a moment as he looked at Su Lei. He seemed to be very puzzled by this decision but ultimately did not reject it. He just nodded and agreed to do so.

Su Lei gave him a look and said with a smile, "That Wang Ergou is way too good at stirring up trouble. That time he fought the people from Hexi Village, wasn't it because he tried to hook up with the wife of their second-in-command? And he didn't even succeed at hooking up with her! If we wish to start taking the right path in the future, we can't keep someone like him around."

Perhaps Su Lei could have chosen to give Wang Ergou some money so he would leave their village and go make a living for himself. However, Su Lei was worried someone like him would be resentful and come back to cause unnecessary trouble for him.

Therefore, he thought they might as well just kill him.

Su Lei was a bandit who risked his life daily doing what he did. He was very polite in front of Yan Liuyuan, but he would not hesitate when he needed to kill people.

Now that Su Lei wanted to change their group's direction, a person like Wang Ergou could not be allowed to live.

Cui Qiang did not say anything. He was only a fighter, so there was no need for him to think too much about it. Besides, he had already disliked Wang Ergou for a long time, so what if he killed him?

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It only took Yan Liuyuan two days to return to the tribe with Hassan. The horses they rode on were all very fast and had evolved in the steppe to become like the mythical horses in the storytellers' tales. When the horses ran, the sweat on their bodies would form white mist in the cold air.

The first thing Yan Liuyuan did when he returned to the tribe was to ask Xiaoyu to cook a small pot of cabbage for him.

Hassan watched with his jaw hanging from off to the side. He realized his master was eating the cabbage with a blissful smile on his face.

"Master, is it that delicious?" Beside him, Tsetseg was watching this as well. As Hassan's daughter, she would spend most of her time in Yan Liuyuan's tent every day. This was something Hassan had instructed her to do.

However, she would not disturb Yan Liuyuan when he was deep in thought. She would just accompany him and stare into space together. Although Yan Liuyuan would always spend hours thinking each time, she did not feel bitter at all.

Yan Liuyuan smiled and looked at Tsetseg. "You can have some if you want."

When Tsetseg heard that, she reached out and tried to grab some of the cabbage with her hand. Yan Liuyuan shook his head with a wry smile. "Didn't I teach you how to use chopsticks? Here, use the chopsticks to eat."

Tsetseg had a reluctant look on her face. "Master, are you unhappy because we look too barbaric eating with our hands?"

Before The Cataclysm, the nomads in the north had started using chopsticks to eat their meals. But after The Cataclysm, it was clear that using hands was more in line with their cultural habits as it was more convenient.

Yan Liuyuan shook his head and said, "Some people might think that I despise y'all for being barbaric when I made everyone in the tribe use chopsticks to eat. But the purpose of using chopsticks is actually for the sake of hygiene. Y'all don't know how much bacteria is on your hands, and y'all don't have the habit of frequently washing them either. It's also one of the reasons why children in the tribe often die young."

Tsetseg suddenly remembered something. “By the way, the child from Bohan’s family fell sick. But he recovered immediately after taking the medicine that you brought back from the South. It’s such a miracle.”

Yan Liuyuan nodded and said, “Although we brought back some medicine from the South this time, we still have to be careful about hygiene. This includes my rule that everyone in the tribe is not allowed to drink unboiled water. The reason we have to boil it before drinking is also because of this.”

Tsetseg looked at Yan Liuyuan in admiration. “So there’s actually so many reasons for this? Master, why do you know so much?”

Tsetseg watched Yan Liuyuan’s expression darken. “It was my brother who taught me all of this.”

“You still have a brother?” Tsetseg was like a cheerful little bird, but Yan Liuyuan did not answer her question. Instead, he asked her to go back to her mother’s side.

Tsetseg understood that Yan Liuyuan wanted to be left alone for a while.

Right as Tsetseg lifted the tent flap, Yan Liuyuan saw some people approaching from afar through the lifted door curtain.

He walked out of the tent and waited quietly outside. There were a lot of people on the other side, and they were all dressed in black. It was obvious they were from the Central Plains.

Hassan asked, “Master, should we intercept them?”

“Don’t act rashly. Tell everyone to keep their mouths shut. I’ll handle it.” Yan Liuyuan took a deep breath. In truth, he had never dealt with people from the Central Plains before, so he would have to improvise on how to deal with them.

Gradually, the figures in the distance got closer. The other party had arrived on foot and were armed with sabers at their waists.

Hassan shouted for the young and strong men in the tribe to be on guard.

But when Yan Liuyuan eventually saw the flame logo on the chests of the other party, his pupils constricted.

This group of nearly a 100 that had come to the Northern Plains were actually from the Pyro Company!

Xiaoyu looked somewhat nervously at Yan Liuyuan. Yan Liuyuan smiled and said, “Let’s ask why they’re here first. At worst, we’ll just fight them.”

Chapter 665: Zhou Yingxue the liar

To the northwest of the Wang Consortium's territory and inside a forest that spanned over a 100 kilometers in the wilderness, Ren Xiaosu was carefully making his way alone across the mountain ridges.

The forest next to him was already full of dead branches. In the harsh winter weather, Ren Xiaosu could see the snow mixed together with rotten leaves.

He washed his face at a stream. The stream was so clear he could see the bottom of it. The cold water made Ren Xiaosu shudder, and he sobered up a lot.

Ren Xiaosu thought, *'The stream isn't even frozen in this season, so it's probably flowing down from a hot spring upstream, right?'* He had not taken a bath in seven days and seven nights, so he was wondering if he should go up to the hot spring to take a bath there.

During these seven days and nights, he had been chased for more than 700 kilometers. He was really starting to find it a little unbearable!

But before he could think further, a gunshot rang out in the distance. A bullet suddenly hit the stream in front of him, shattering the rocks within and splashing water all over him.

Ren Xiaosu wanted to cry. Why did that girl have such a bad temper? He and Zhou Yingxue were really innocent. He even put on gloves when they entered Stronghold 61 together back then!

But he did not have time to think too much. He turned around and went back into the forest again.

After Ren Xiaosu went away, Yang Xiaojin's figure slowly appeared from the forest. She walked up to the stream and slowly washed her face. If it weren't for the fact that it was too cold in this season, she would even liked to have washed her hair.

"What a silly fool," Yang Xiaojin muttered to herself. All she needed was an apology, but she ended up being made to chase after him for more than 700 kilometers.

To be honest, it was not only Ren Xiaosu who was finding it rather unbearable. Even she could not take it anymore.

However, she absolutely could not admit defeat. Otherwise, if that boy were to take in a few more maidservants in the future, who was she going to reason with, huh?

When Yang Xiaojin was still attending Qinghe University, she had heard about the story of that mysterious young man and his maidservant. Yang Xiaojin really did not expect Ren Xiaosu would actually do something like that when they had only been separated for such a short while!

A decent-looking person like him actually turned out to be such a player?!

With this thought, Yang Xiaojin got up again and decisively walked across the stream. Her footwear were excellent waterproof combat boots. But after seven days of chasing, the soles of her boots were almost worn out.

After entering the forest, Yang Xiaojin calmly examined the ground.

It was past the snowy season, so Ren Xiaosu's footprints were clearly left on the ground. She was not worried she would lose track of him.

But as she walked on, Yang Xiaojin suddenly stopped, because the footprints on the ground had disappeared!

While she was taken aback by this discovery, a sniper rifle went off in the distance. A bullet was fired and landed straight at her feet. The bullet penetrated the soft, decomposing leaves and soil, leaving the hole in the ground smoking...

Yang Xiaojin's eyebrows twitched under her cap. You were in the wrong for taking in a maid, yet you still dare to retaliate?!

Thinking this, Yang Xiaojin picked up her sniper rifle and went after Ren Xiaosu in the direction of the mountain.

Gradually, the temperature in the atmosphere seemed to increase by several degrees. The vegetation on the mountainside even started turning green. They had not withered due to winter at all.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu's footprints reappeared. Yang Xiaojin sneered and continued her chase up the mountain.

Suddenly, the meandering mountain path stopped, and there was flat land on the mountainside filled with warm pools.

The pools emitting hot steam in the winter looked like an enchanted land.

And at the edge of a pool, there was a bunch of white flowers.

Yang Xiaojin's eyebrows twitched again. This sight was really a little unexpected. It had completely caught her off guard. She really did not expect Ren Xiaosu would suddenly have such a trick up his sleeve after chasing him around for seven days.

Besides, Ren Xiaosu did not seem like a person who knew how to send flowers!

"Alright, come on out. I know you're here," Yang Xiaojin said.

Ren Xiaosu came out from behind the dense steam. "You're not angry anymore?"

"Where did you pick the flowers in the middle of winter?" asked Yang Xiaojin nonchalantly, not answering his question.

"The temperature around this hot spring is quite high. Not only are the plants not wilting, they've even bloomed." Ren Xiaosu explained, "I led you here mainly because I felt that both of us must have gotten really dirty after running around in the wilderness for seven days. When I saw that the stream at the foot of the mountain was not frozen, I realized that there had to be a hot spring up here. So I thought that maybe we... maybe you could take a bath here...."

Yang Xiaojin secretly rolled her eyes. Putting all else aside, Ren Xiaosu was still as wishy-washy as ever.

She glanced at Ren Xiaos. "I'll forgive you this time."

Actually, girls were very easy to appease most of the time. What they wanted was not a specific outcome but an attitude.

It wasn't that Yang Xiaojin insisted on hunting down Ren Xiaosu, but it was just that Ren Xiaosu did not seem like he had any intention of apologizing at all. This made her even angrier as she chased after him. It was clearly Ren Xiaosu who had taken in the maidservant, but in the end, it was as though she were the one being unreasonable.

"Step aside, and don't peek," Yang Xiaojin said.

"OK, alright," Ren Xiaosu said as he walked down the slope. He sat on the slope with his back facing the hot spring and said, "Not all hot springs are suitable for bathing in, but I've already checked this one. There's no problem with the water here, so it's very safe."

Yang Xiaojin asked nonchalantly, "What's the name of that maid of yours?"

As she was asking, she kept staring in the direction of Ren Xiaosu to see if he was peeking at her. She waited a long time before finally getting into the water.

"Zhou Yingxue," Ren Xiaosu replied. "You probably know her too, right?"

"Zhou Yingxue?" Yang Xiaojin was clearly taken aback. "Why is it her? Isn't she supposed to be in the Southwest?"

"Oh," Ren Xiaosu said, "after Stronghold 88 was destroyed, she went to the Central Plains. At first, she said that she wanted to make money to treat her mother's illness. But later on, I realized that she had lied to me when I found out her mother had passed away years ago."

Yang Xiaojin was silent for a while before saying, "Zhou Yingxue grew up in the Yang Consortium's orphanage, so how could she have a mother..."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. Had Zhou Yingxue really never told the truth before? He had thought Zhou Yingxue was being honest with him the second time she confessed, but he did not expect her to still be lying!

That maidservant was way too damn good at putting on an act!

"So tell me, what happened after that?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

When Ren Xiaosu heard the sound of water splashing, his mind went blank.

Noticing Ren Xiaosu did not answer her, Yang Xiaojin asked again, "What did I just ask you?"

“Oh... actually, I didn’t want to accept her as my maid. At the beginning, I only wanted to join the Anjing House through her. Don’t people say that after becoming an official member of the Anjing House, we can get the Anjing House to do something for us? That’s why I wanted to get into the Anjing House: so I could get them to look for all y’all.” Ren Xiaosu blushed when he came back to his senses. “We were only working together at the beginning!”

Chapter 666: The Wang Consortium and the Anjing House

“You two really worked well together, huh?” Yang Xiaojin sighed and said, “From working together, she actually ended up as your maid?”

Ren Xiaosu hurriedly explained, “I was originally acting as her assistant. But she suddenly addressed me as ‘Master’ once when I was saving her, and after that, she got really into character...”

“So you got into character as well then?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“Ahem, no, not at all.” Ren Xiaosu said, “I was still mainly trying to look for y’all through the Anjing House.”

“Then do you know the Anjing House and the Saboteurs are actually two organizations that share the same roots?” Yang Xiaojin sighed.

Actually, she should have already thought of this. After Ren Xiaosu caused such a big commotion in the Northwest, how could Yang Anjing not know Ren Xiaosu was still alive? After all, her aunt’s intelligence network was comparable to that of a consortium’s.

Otherwise, the Saboteurs and the Anjing House would not have progressed to their current scale either.

When Yang Xiaojin wrote to Yang Anjing time and again while she was attending Qinghe University to ask if Ren Xiaosu was still alive, she always answered that there was no news about him.

But actually, Yang Anjing was the one keeping it from her. Just like the time they parted ways at Luoyang City, Yang Anjing said there were no sentiments in this world that could withstand the test of time. No one would keep waiting for another person endlessly. That Yang Xiaojin was willing to wait only showed how much of a fool she was.

But it just so happened there were two fools in this world.

Thinking of this, Yang Xiaojin’s tone turned gentler. “My aunt founded the Saboteurs years earlier. But after destroying some of the consortiums’ nuclear test sites, the various consortiums started targeting the Saboteurs. As such, she reestablished the Anjing House and used it as cover for the Saboteurs.”

“Wait a minute.” Ren Xiaosu was stunned. In other words, he had actually been very close to finding Yang Xiaojin all this while? “Then should I have just told the people from the Anjing House that I was looking for Yang Xiaojin?”

Yang Xiaojin thought for a moment and said, “You probably couldn’t have found me even if you told them.”

“Why?” Ren Xiaosu did not understand.

Yang Xiaojin did not answer this question because Yang Anjing was her only family. She did not want Ren Xiaosu to have any prejudice towards Yang Anjing, so she chose to avoid the question.

When Ren Xiaosu realized she did not want to answer, he did not make it difficult for her either. Instead, he changed the subject and said, “I heard from the Riders that the Anjing House was also involved in the crisis at Luoyang City this time. Why’s that? Could it be that your aunt’s also targeting their satellites? But the problem is that the Anjing House and the Saboteurs don’t have a fixed base, so what’s the point of taking control of those seven satellites?”

Yang Xiaojin thought for a moment and said, “I guess she wanted to help the Wang Consortium seize those seven satellites.”

“Help the Wang Consortium?” Ren Xiaosu really did not expect this answer. “What is the Anjing House and the Saboteurs’ relationship with the Wang Consortium?”

“The Saboteurs have nothing to do with the Wang Consortium, but the Anjing House has been working with the Wang Consortium for years now,” Yang Xiaojin replied.

“Why?” Ren Xiaosu found it very strange. “Does your aunt and the Wang Consortium have any common interests? And will anything happen to you if you let me in on these secrets?”

Yang Xiaojin hesitated for a moment and lowered her voice to a whisper. “You’re not an outsider anyway, so it’s fine. At the beginning, my aunt was hoping she wouldn’t have to see another nuclear weapon appear in this world. But later, she realized that no matter what methods she used, there would always be people who wanted to get their hands on nuclear weapons rising to power. So she gradually began to look for ways to address the root of the problem.”

“So she found the solution at the Wang Consortium?” Ren Xiaosu remembered what was unique about the Wang Consortium. “Is it the AI? Why would an AI be able to solve this problem?”

“Because AI is absolutely impartial.” Yang Xiaojin said, “When a person takes charge of others, there will always be relationships and personal feelings involved. In the early years, Wang Shengzhi was robbed in his own stronghold and got hit by a bullet that paralyzed him from the waist down. Later, the Wang Consortium investigated the matter thoroughly and discovered the robber had actually committed multiple crimes before. He was once jailed by people from the Public Order Division. Logically speaking, someone like that should never step out of prison again for the rest of his life. However, this person bribed the prison guards and actually managed to get many chances to reduce his sentence.”

“So the reason why Wang Shengzhi regards the AI so highly is that he feels that it won’t make such a mistake, and it won’t be bribed by anyone either?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“That should be the case.” Yang Xiaojin said, “Besides, it’s also been proven that the Wang Consortium’s strongholds have a very low crime rate in this era. Also, even if someone were to commit a crime, they would be caught very quickly. After these criminals are put in jail, whether they can turn over a new leaf is fully assessed by the AI. No one can accept any bribes under its surveillance.”

Ren Xiaosu sighed. Actually, he already knew that no matter whether he liked the Saboteurs, the Wang Consortium, the Qing Consortium, or the Pyro Company, these organizations were only acting according to their own principles.

Ren Xiaosu could have his own principles and beliefs, Jiang Xu and his fellow colleagues at Hope Media could also have them, so the same applied to the Wang Consortium and the Pyro Company.

For example, when Stronghold 74 was attacked by the Experimentals, didn't the Pyro Company also step in bravely to help defend the place?

In that case, who was qualified to judge who was right and who was wrong?

Moreover, Ren Xiaosu was in no position to argue whether he accepted the artificial intelligence or not. After all, this had nothing to do with him, and he did not live in the Wang Consortium's stronghold either.

"Does your aunt think that if the AI gets instated as an impartial third party, there might be a chance that nuclear weapons will not appear anymore? What if the Wang Consortium starts their own nuclear research?" Ren Xiaosu said.

"I think Wang Shengzhi devised ten guiding principles in the AI's algorithm. There's a rule that says it must destroy all nuclear weapons," Yang Xiaojin explained. "But I'm not sure about the specifics. I've never had much contact with the Anjing House and the Saboteurs here in the Central Plains, so I'm not too sure about some of the events."

"Then why does the Wang Consortium want to seize control of the seven satellites?" Ren Xiaosu returned to the original topic.

"Probably because these seven satellites are needed to complete the final step of the Wang Consortium's AI program, Heaven's Eye," Yang Xiaojin said.

For some reason, Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt a little uncomfortable. He had a feeling it was not a good thing to have someone always watching him from above.

No matter who might be watching him, he did not like being surveilled like that.

However, Yang Xiaojin dispelled his worries. "Actually, those seven satellites can only be used to observe the contours of the terrain at most. It's not capable of seeing everyone's appearance. The seven satellites of the Qinghe Group don't have that ability either. My aunt probably helped the Wang Consortium seize these seven satellites because she wants to locate the Qing Consortium's nuclear test sites. Once the AI starts taking control of the satellites, the Qing Consortium will no longer be able to conceal their nuclear test sites. At that time, the Saboteurs can finally make their move."

Yang Xiaojin knew her aunt well, so she could guess what she was up to just based on some clues.

Chapter 667: Confession

At this moment, everyone, including the Riders and Ren Xiaosu, thought the Wang Consortium and the Anjing House had failed in their objective. After all, they had not seen Wang Wenyan transforming into a black mist and sneaking into the Qinghe Building. After that happened, the Qinghe Group's satellites continued operating as usual, and there were no signs that hinted they might have been hijacked.

Only Yang Xiaojin knew Yang Anjing must have succeeded after plotting for so long. Otherwise, her aunt would not have remained so calm that night.

Over the years, the only person who had made the Saboteurs experience failure was Qing Zhen.

Now, Yang Anjing had found a way to keep Qing Zhen in check.

While Ren Xiaosu was thinking about this, he suddenly heard Yang Xiaojin say behind him, "Do you want to come in and bathe? You also haven't bathed in more than a week, right?"

Ren Xiaosu asked in a trembling voice, "C-Can I?"

"Of course you can," Yang Xiaojin replied. "Don't you find yourself dirty?"

Ren Xiaosu was overwhelmed with joy. He said carefully, "I'll be coming in then...."

"Yeah, come here."

But when Ren Xiaosu climbed back over the slope on his hands and knees, he saw Yang Xiaojin, who had put on her clothes at some point, looking at him with a half-smile on her face. "Not bad, you've grown bolder than before."

She was probably referring to the tent incident from before.

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. He did not even hear the sound of the water splashing, so Yang Xiaojin must have purposely been teasing him.

Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu felt he couldn't accurately define the type of girl Yang Xiaojin was.

She was a Perfect Firearms Proficiency master who had killed many of her enemies. However, she also possessed many other childlike skills like jumping rope and singing nursery rhymes...

Yang Xiaojin was willing to make her way through a crowd to save him, but she was also capable of chasing him down for a week because he had taken in a maidservant. She could talk about things very seriously and help Ren Xiaosu understand this world better, but she would also tease him mischievously.

This girl always managed to bring some unexpected things to his life.

"Alright, that's enough. Go and take your bath." Yang Xiaojin beckoned him to the hot springs and walked off towards the mountainside. "Don't use the pool that I used just now."

"You think I want to? Seriously? Am I that kind of person?" Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

But as he was undressing, Yang Xiaojin's voice came from the slope, "You've really got quite a nice body."

Ren Xiaosu turned around in shock and saw Yang Xiaojin sticking her head over the slope to peek at him. Ren Xiaosu was so shocked he fell into the hot spring pool before he could completely undress. He roared, "What are you doing? Why can you look at me but I can't look at you! This is unfair!"

"Then why didn't you look?" Yang Xiaojin said.

With that, Ren Xiaosu backed off again.

"Let's get back to serious topics. What do you plan to do next?" Yang Xiaojin asked Ren Xiaosu as she sat on the slope with her back facing him.

Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought. "Old Wang wants to do some business in the Northwest and the Central Plains. I think the Great Hoodwinker is very right about one thing. At the least, I still command some influence in the Northwest. When I fought against the Zong Consortium back then, I made some friends in the Northwest after going through thick and thin with them on the battlefield. Rather than being disliked by everyone here in the Central Plains, I might as well head to the Northwest. I don't have much ambition, so it's good enough if I can find a place to settle down at."

Yang Xiaojin's voice suddenly turned gentle. "Were you injured during the war?"

"No." Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said, "As you know, I'm a very cautious person. I usually only make a move when I'm sure that I can succeed."

"Mhm," Yang Xiaojin acknowledged simply. She could imagine how dangerous it was back then. The survival of a person in a war was not something that could be decided by an individual. No matter how strong you might be, bullets on the battlefield do not recognize friend from foe. In a small battle, there would be hundreds of thousands of bullets flying around, so the probability of getting injured was extremely high. Although Ren Xiaosu did not get injured, that did not mean it was not dangerous.

In the end, she said, "I didn't know you had survived. If I knew, I would've gone to the Northwest to help you."

Ren Xiaosu could hear from Yang Xiaojin's tone that she felt a little guilty.

"You don't have to feel bad. Look, I'm fine, aren't I?" Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh.

"Then do you plan to return to the Northwest?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"I want to eliminate the bandits along the Northwestern trade route first." Ren Xiaosu said, "Fortress 178 is also annoyed by those bandits. But because of the sensitive geography, they can't deploy their troops to resolve the issue. In that case, why don't I just help them clear out these obstacles? Once I'm done with this, I can rest assured that Old Wang can carry out his business on this trade route."

"And then?"

"Then I'll find Yan Liuyuan. Do you have any news of Liuyuan?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

“No, I went to chase after the person who attacked you at that time and didn’t pay attention to anything else.” Yang Xiaojin said, “But he and Big Sister Xiaoyu should be fine. At least, they weren’t caught by the floodwaters.”

“Mhm, I’ll definitely find them,” Ren Xiaosu said firmly. “By the way, where are you going next? What are your plans?”

“Me?” Yang Xiaojin pondered it for a moment. “I’ll go wherever you go.”

Too many words in the world could be used to confess love. For example, “the moon is so beautiful tonight,” or as a famous artist before The Cataclysm had sung, “I turn into a werewolf for your sake. / I go wild for your sake.”

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt the five words Yang Xiaojin uttered sounded the nicest.

...

A small town that laid between the Northwest and the Central Plains was a very strange existence. This was a place that seemed to be completely independent of the stronghold system.

All the people who lived in these mountains used to be bandits. There was not really much interaction among the different groups of bandits, and they would always fight to the death when they encountered each other.

But later, when their “business” got worse, some of the bandits started moving down to live at the foot of the mountains. They traded their crops and game with each other, and gradually, the long and narrow strip of land at the foot of the mountain turned into a small town.

Due to the sensitive geography, the former Zong Consortium and the Central Plains’ Wang Consortium did not care about this place. It was just like a no man’s land that lay between the two consortiums, and this gave the bandits some respite.

Currently, most of the people here were no longer involved in banditry. Although most of them considered themselves bandits, they mostly only farmed and herded sheep as their daily activities.

There was no choice. Life got in the way.

The recent reopening of the trade route had finally caused a stir in the town. The townspeople here were divided into two factions. One faction felt that since merchants were going to appear, they should resume their old trade. The other faction felt that since they had not been involved in banditry for many years, they should just focus on their agriculture.

While everyone was having an intense discussion, a young couple arrived in town. They said they had gotten lost in the mountains and wanted to settle down here for a few nights.

They mentioned they would not be staying for free and that they had money on them. It was even money issued by the Wang Consortium's banks.

Currently, the Wang Consortium's currency was very strong. Anyone could go to the towns outside the Wang Consortium's strongholds to buy a lot of things with it, and they could also use it to purchase items from the traveling merchants along the trade route.

Chapter 668: A record of eliminating bandits

When Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin arrived at this small town in the northwest, they did not bother hiding the fact they had money. In fact, they even deliberately acted like they were extremely extravagant.

When they expressed they needed a place to spend the night, a family even vacated their own house for them to stay in. After that, the entire family moved into their relatives' place, all because they could earn quite a bit of money from Ren Xiaosu.

When the neighbors saw that the two of them were very easygoing, they immediately brought over food for Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin. They even killed one of the chickens they reared and braised it before sending it over.

Ren Xiaosu did not reject anything at all. He accepted whatever was given to them at the door, paid for it, and carried the food into the house for Yang Xiaojin to eat.

As a matter of fact, the chicken stew made with local chickens was quite delicious.

After closing the door, Yang Xiaojin said while eating the chicken stew, "Are you trying to show them you're rich? And then wait for them to make a move on you before killing all of the bandits here?"

Ren Xiaosu looked out through a gap in the door. Many of the refugees in town were quietly discussing them not far away from the house. Ren Xiaosu said, "You saw it too. There's so many of them here. If we went on a killing spree at the entrance, wouldn't most of them start fleeing? We're not gonna run all over the mountains just to catch them, right? There's only two of us, so it'd be great if we could catch just a fifth of them."

Yang Xiaojin asked with a half-smile, "Didn't we agree to say we're siblings? Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

"I was just thinking that we don't look like siblings at all. What if we end up getting exposed by claiming that we're siblings?" Ren Xiaosu muttered.

Yang Xiaojin raised an eyebrow. So it seemed like he was implying that they looked more like a married couple? "By the way, I haven't agreed to anything."

Ren Xiaosu looked at her. "I went to Qinghe University and stood up for you. You said the guy you like doesn't lead a pampered life, so I killed all those thugs before announcing to the students that I'm the guy you like."

"Wait." This was the first time Yang Xiaojin was hearing about this. She was stunned for some time before saying, "I only said that by the by. Obviously, you were the one who liked me first."

Ren Xiaosu smiled good-naturedly and said, "It's all the same."

Yang Xiaojin realized Ren Xiaosu was often quite shameless, but that was only in speech. His actions were as cowardly as ever.

"They don't really know what the situation is with us at the moment, so it's unlikely they'll make a move for the time being." Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "But I keep getting the feeling that this town is a little strange. They don't look like bandits at all."

But then, another group of people came back from outside the town. All of the townspeople rushed over. "Lei-zi, I heard that you gathered some people and headed to the North to do business with the nomads. How was it? Did you make a profit?"

Su Lei smiled and patted the fur hides he was carrying on his shoulder. "Look here, whaddaya see?"

When some of the refugees saw the glossy fur hides, their eyes turned green with envy. Some of them wanted to feel it, but Su Lei and the others moved out of their way.

Su Lei joked, "These are the goods that our investor, a lord from the grasslands, have given us on credit. You can't afford to pay if you damage it."

Although Ren Xiaosu had his door closed, he could hear everything going on outside. "The grasslands? Xiaojin, do you know anything about the grasslands? I've never been there before."

"It's quite chaotic in the grasslands. The nomadic tribes are always fighting and killing among themselves. Sometimes, they head south to the vicinity of Stronghold 176 to plunder the factories or the refugees, but they rarely head any farther south than that," Yang Xiaojin replied after thinking for a bit. "However, the tribes in the grasslands have not been to the Central Plains in several years, so almost everyone has forgotten about them. And there aren't any strong military forces in the grasslands. I think they're still stuck in the era of melee weapons. The firearms they have are only in the hands of a few people, so there's nothing to fear."

"Then why didn't the Central Plains take them out?" Ren Xiaosu wondered. From Yang Xiaojin's description, it seemed like the combat strength of the steppe nomads was very weak.

"It's not easy to fight them." Yang Xiaojin shook her head. "Disregarding the issue of acclimatization and not knowing the terrain well enough, the main issue is that the cows, goats, and horses over there have evolved to become very powerful. If they come to the Central Plains, we might still be able to fight them. But if the Central Plains people go north, the consortiums can't catch them if they decide to hide. Unless some consortium is willing to go all the way against them, it's difficult to achieve victory."

Ren Xiaosu understood now. On one hand, it was because the nomadic tribes were very mobile. The armored brigade of the Central Plains could only travel at an average speed of 60 kilometers per hour at most, but the nomadic tribes could easily beat them anytime. So it would still be very easy to escape if they wanted to.

On the other hand, the grasslands did not have many resources, with the greatest resource being their livestock and meat. Since there was no threat from the grasslands, there was no need for anyone to mobilize so many people to target the Northern Plains. It would not be good if the other organizations were to take advantage of the situation and invade whoever started a campaign against the nomadic tribes.

“However,” Yang Xiaojin changed the subject and said, “the Central Plains has always imposed sanctions on the Northern Plains and prohibited anyone from selling arms to them in case any new problems arise.”

Ren Xiaosu wondered, “I can understand that, but they don’t have tanks or armored vehicles anyway, so even if they can get their hands on some guns, they can’t cause much trouble, right? Don’t people say the era of firearms and explosives signaled the end of cavalry?”

“No, a lot of people misunderstand that.” Yang Xiaojin explained, “Actually, in the history of mankind, a small part of the top ten most powerful empires were all cavalry empires that existed during the era of firearms. They dragged along artillery with them to attack cities and conquer lands, and their enemies could not do anything about it. Later, cavalry was only eliminated because the mobility of horses had become inferior to modern technology. But if the horses had also evolved, no one would know the outcome of a battle before it was fought.”

Just as Yang Xiaojin had said, if the nomads had access to firearms and explosives now, it would still be uncertain if anyone could defeat them. Therefore, there was no point in continuing to discuss this.

Then they heard someone outside say, “Lei-zi, it looks like the goods that y’all bought with your hard-earned money have all been sold?”

Su Lei laughed and said, “But of course. The lord from the grasslands was very generous too.”

“Since that’s the case, why don’t you bring everyone along to earn money together?” A shrill voice shouted, “It’s not easy being a bandit anymore, so we might as well follow you to do business.”

However, Su Lei laughed and said, “Li Mazi, what did you tell me when I asked you to join us? Didn’t you say that doing business with the nomads was unreliable? You even said that they were poor and barbaric people. It’s a little too late to join us now, isn’t it?”

“Lei-zi, you can’t talk like that. We grew up together in the same town, so don’t you think you should lift us up as well?”

Su Lei replied calmly, “No.”

He had finally found an opportunity after putting in so much hard work, so Su Lei was not going to allow anyone in town to ruin his business.

Suddenly, that shrill voice asked, “Eh, where’s Wang Ergou? Didn’t he go with y’all? Why isn’t he back?”

Chapter 669: A town in chaos

Su Lei had wanted to find an opportunity to kill Wang Ergou after getting back to town. He was a ruthless person trying to achieve great things, so he would definitely kill Wang Ergou if he said so and had already discussed this with Cui Qiang while on the way back.

In the end, it was even Cui Qiang who reminded him that since he had to kill Wang Ergou sooner or later, he should just kill him as soon as possible.

Otherwise, when they returned to town, Wang Ergou might get other ideas and collude with the other bandit groups to steal their business opportunity. If that happened, it would get very troublesome.

After all, Wang Ergou knew the details of their next transaction. What the investor from the grasslands mainly wanted was just goods; he did not care who delivered them.

Su Lei knew he was not that important to Yan Liuyuan yet. Therefore, before he managed to establish a true “friendship” with Yan Liuyuan, he could not let any of the other bandit groups know where the business deal would take place.

As such, Su Lei decided to personally kill Wang Ergou.

At this moment, Su Lei looked at the other party coldly after being questioned. “Wang Ergou decided to seek his relatives’ help in the Central Plains, so I thought that since he had such a promising future, there was no need for me to stop him, right?”

But the other party did not believe Su Lei’s explanation at all. Instead, he retorted, “I think you must’ve killed him, right? Since when did Wang Ergou ever have relatives in the Central Plains?”

The other party thought Su Lei would fly into a rage after being humiliated like that, but Su Lei laughed out loud instead. Su Lei looked around. “Since when have y’all cared about other people’s lives? So what if I killed Wang Ergou? Do y’all want to avenge him? Have y’all thought about the consequences?”

Su Lei understood everything about this group of people. So what if he killed the guy? Wang Ergou did not have any friends, so he was not afraid of anyone coming to seek revenge!

There was a tense atmosphere among the onlooking bandits surrounding them.

Seeing that no one was going to speak, Su Lei sneered and said, “I’ll spend the night in town and set off for Fortress 178 with my men tomorrow. Since this place won’t accommodate me, I won’t force it either. But as I, Su Lei, have found a path out now, if anyone dares to ruin my plans, I’ll make sure this path of mine becomes all of your deathbeds. Cui Qiang, let’s go!”

With that, Su Lei led his men into town. They had only returned this time to pack their belongings.

Ren Xiaosu was muttering in the house, “These bandits are such a mob. Besides, why do I feel like these bandits are all trying to get onto the right path?”

"I have the same feeling as well. It looks like it isn't easy being a bandit anymore, so they're all looking for other ways to survive." Yang Xiaojin pondered things for a moment and said, "Are we still gonna kill them then?"

"Let's wait and see." Ren Xiaosu sank into thought and said, "I think that this Su Lei person is quite interesting. What he's doing now is equivalent to helping Fortress 178 connect the trade route to the grasslands."

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him. "As expected of Fortress 178's future commander. You're always looking out for Fortress 178's interests."

"Ahem, married couples should not speak so sarcastically to each other!" Ren Xiaosu said.

"Ren Xiaosu!" Yang Xiaojin raised her voice. "We're only putting on an act, so don't get too into character! I haven't even agreed to anything yet!"

"Alright then." Ren Xiaosu stared down the dark barrel of the sniper rifle in front of him and reluctantly shut his mouth.

He recalled the situation Fortress 178 was facing. Actually, Ren Xiaosu also roughly understood from his conversations with the Great Hoodwinker that Qing Zhen and Zhang Jinglin had suddenly formed an implicit alliance so they could deal with the Wang Consortium in the future.

Since the Qing Consortium and Fortress 178 could work together, could the Northern Plains also be used as leverage for that cause?

Unknowingly, Ren Xiaosu's thoughts were already starting to align with Fortress 178's standpoint.

This outcome was probably what the Great Hoodwinker had hoped for when he kept nagging Ren Xiaosu back then.

He had unconsciously changed his mind regarding some matters.

Ren Xiaosu thought about it. Actually, if he wanted to borrow the strength of the nomadic tribes, he would not even have to form an alliance with them. He would only have to secretly provide them with weapons so they would have the capital for an expedition south. After that, the nomadic tribes would automatically start journeying downwards themselves.

Ren Xiaosu had learned about the nomads that lived before The Cataclysm from the library in Stronghold 88. Due to the cold weather in the North and a shortage of supplies, it was common for cows and goats to freeze to death during winter. This caused the nomadic tribes' livestock numbers to shrink and food to become scarce.

In order to maintain the stability and balance of the tribes, the leaders of the large tribes had to direct the conflicts towards the Central Plains. This was also a tradeoff they had to employ. During wartime, the nomads would always treat the South as their granary.

Therefore, if the enemies of Fortress 178 and the Qing Consortium really turned out to be the Wang Consortium in the future, Su Lei, who no longer wanted to be a bandit and was capable of doing business with the nomads, could become a key turning point at this moment.

Almost tacitly, Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Are you planning to recruit this Su Lei?"

"Recruit him for what?" Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, "I already have enough people to take care of! It's too tiring to take care of everyone by myself, so I don't want to add any more burdens."

Yang Xiaojin was taken aback. "Don't you still have me?"

Ren Xiaosu immediately said happily, "It's not that I'm doubting your ability, but it's mainly because I don't know this Su Lei well enough and have no intention of interacting with him too much. I'm just thinking of pointing him towards a clear path that he can pursue. As long as he goes to Stronghold 144 and mentions my name to Zhang Xiaoman, Zhang Xiaoman will definitely report Su Lei's story to Mr. Zhang. Then Mr. Zhang will naturally understand my intention of guiding Su Lei there."

Fortress 178 did not lack for basic firearms. By taking this seemingly pointless step now, who knew when it might become useful in the future?

Sometimes, Ren Xiaosu was especially envious of Qing Zhen, because he did not even know how Qing Zhen's brain worked. He was always ten steps ahead at any point in time.

Ren Xiaosu knew he could never be as flawless in planning as Qing Zhen, so he could only try his best to think harder sometimes.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not feel inferior in the slightest. He believed he had his own strengths as well.

With Su Lei's appearance, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin's plan to wipe out the townspeople was temporarily shelved. To normal people, this plan would have seemed incredulous. The two of them wanted to wipe out a town with over a 1,000 people in it? That was a joke, right?

But for Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin, neither of them doubted this plan would fail.

They had also thought there might be supernatural beings in this town, but neither of them really cared.

After all, not that many supernatural beings could survive against the combined pursuit of Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

However, the atmosphere in town was starting to feel a little odd. Su Lei quietly looked out from his house and was surprised to find the townspeople were starting to hang around the vicinity of his residence, whether intentionally or otherwise. They did not do anything, and it felt as though... these bandits were scouting before taking action!

Su Lei said sternly to Cui Qiang, who was behind him, "I was too careless this time. We shouldn't have returned here. I wanted to come back to pack up before we left, but it looks like we can't leave anymore."

Su Lei had come back to town to retrieve something very important to him, his parents' wooden memorial tablets.

Only something like that could make Su Lei risk coming back here.

Chapter 670: Ren Xiaosu makes his move

Su Lei had wanted to take his parents' memorial tablets and leave right after. But when he got back home, he realized it was too late.

It seemed that some of the bandits in town had already discussed how to deal with his gang before their return.

Just as Su Lei had guessed, the bandits started plotting as soon as he left town. If Su Lei did not manage to get the business deal done, everyone would just go on with their lives as usual. If the deal were successful, they would want in as well. If Su Lei were unwilling to share, they would kill him and force Wang Ergou to tell them everything that he knew.

Wang Ergou was a very spineless person. As long as they scared him a little, he would spill the beans.

Whatever it was that the rich investor from the grasslands wanted, or the time and place of the next transaction, they could find out all that from Wang Ergou.

This was also the reason why they immediately noticed Wang Ergou did not come back with them. However, they did not expect Su Lei to be even more ruthless than they had imagined. He actually killed Wang Ergou in advance!

This caught everyone by surprise. It was also why a few groups of bandits had surrounded the place where Su Lei and his gang were staying. They did not make a move yet as they were still discussing what to do.

Su Lei was definitely going to be killed. If they let him off today, it would be the same as letting the tiger back into the mountains. If such a ruthless person did not die, they would not be able to sleep well.

The crux of the problem was that they did not want to give up on this business opportunity either. They were eyeing this trade route with the grasslands since it would definitely earn them a lot of money.

The most important thing right now was how were they going to kill Su Lei and steal his business deal.

With Su Lei's return, everyone in the town had completely forgotten about Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

In the evening, Ren Xiaosu prepared the money and was waiting for the refugees to voluntarily send some food over. However, no one came by.

"They've even given up on a target who's stupid and rich? What are these refugees thinking?" Ren Xiaosu pondered things. "Something big is probably going to happen in this town. It should be related to Su Lei, right? I guess they're still bandits, after all. Their hearts get stirred up in the presence of a fortune."

“So are we going to do anything about it?” Yang Xiaojin asked as though she were waiting for Ren Xiaosu to decide.

“Of course we are.” Ren Xiaosu grinned and said, “We definitely have to!”

...

As night fell, Su Lei took Cui Qiang and his fellow men out to guard their residence’s yard. Everyone was really tense as they silently gripped their weapons.

Some of the higher-ranked people were armed with improvised guns, while the others made do with bone knives or whatever iron weapons they could get their hands on.

White bone knives near their waists, it added a sense of gravity to the bandits in the yard.

Su Lei said, “I’m sorry, my brothers. This was all because I insisted on making a trip back here.”

His men did not say anything. Su Lei’s gang might not be that united, as after all, they were still just bandits and could not be compared to military troops.

Some of the men were also blaming Su Lei in their heads, but no one would possibly open their mouths to criticize him at such a time.

Cui Qiang was sitting by a dirt wall next to the yard’s door and wiping the improvised gun in his hand until the steel barrel shone.

Their improvised guns were all single shot only, so they had to reload every time they fired the weapon once. There were too many people watching them on the outside, so Cui Qiang knew that in a fight to the death, their gang would definitely be at a disadvantage.

Someone whispered, “Boss, why don’t we just hand over the business deal to them? They have so many people, and a wise man knows better than to fight when the odds are stacked against him. We can look for other business opportunities, but we only have one life.”

Su Lei was about to say something.

But just as this person finished speaking, Cui Qiang shot to his feet and jumped in front of him. As he moved, Cui Qiang pulled out a dagger from his waistband and stabbed it ruthlessly into the neck of the person who spoke.

Cui Qiang’s movements were so fast he looked like a wild cat on the hunt, swift and powerful!

“None of that nonsense here.” Cui Qiang said coldly, “It wasn’t easy for Boss to get this deal, so how can you ask him to give it away just like that? We’re all gonna listen to Boss’s orders later and fight our way out of here. Those who survive can go on to enjoy life with the boss, and we’ll live in luxury for the rest of our lives!”

The people around them were all stunned. Cui Qiang rarely spoke much, so when he made this move to kill someone, it left the others in a state of silence. They were all afraid they would get killed by Cui Qiang.

Su Lei sighed in his mind. He had thought of just handing over the business deal. However, Cui Qiang did not even ask him before making a move. Thus, it would obviously not be appropriate for him to talk about giving up the business deal.

He had no other choice now.

However, Su Lei knew full well he would not survive even if he handed over the business deal.

Then the outside of the residence gradually lit up like it was illuminated by a fire.

Numerous people had lit torches and surrounded the yard of Su Lei's residence. The leader of a group of bandits said, "Su Lei, I think it's better that you step out. Just hand over the business deal to us obediently and we can make money together. When the time comes, we can all enjoy life together. Wouldn't it be better that we bros be happy together?"

Su Lei laughed and scolded, "Li Mazi, don't pretend to be kind and just. Do you think I'll survive after I give up the deal to y'all? You'll probably find it difficult to sleep if I'm not dead!"

Li Mazi said coldly, "I'm gonna count to ten, so step out by yourself. Otherwise, we're gonna set your place on fire! Then we'll see if you come out or not!"

Su Lei's heart had already hit rock bottom. He knew he was doomed.

But then, a young man's voice suddenly rang out outside. "Hey, it's so lively out here tonight. Everyone has gathered around here, but no one has cooked anything for me and my wife. I'm really unhappy about that."

Everyone was stunned. Su Lei turned around and looked at Cui Qiang. "Whose voice was that?"

"I've never heard it before." Cui Qiang shook his head. They still did not know a couple strangers had come to their small town.

Li Mazi looked at Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin and grinned. "Young man, don't be a busybody. This is none of your business."

Someone next to Li Mazi said, "Why not just kill these two people as well? They seem to be quite rich, so we can use their money as our business's capital! Besides, that woman—"

Ren Xiaosu could not be bothered to say anything further.

Su Lei and the others heard a flurry of screams come from outside. This group of bandits in the yard were so frightened their hearts were pounding. They did not know what was going on outside.

The sound of bones breaking and tendons snapping reverberated in between the wails. It was terrifying to listen to!

Half an hour later, Ren Xiaosu's voice came again from outside. "Alright, I've killed them all. Come on out."

Su Lei carefully opened the yard's door and was surprised to see Ren Xiaosu standing outside with a torch in hand. He was smiling at him. Next to the young man was a girl wearing a cap, and it was obvious there was an extraordinary demeanor about her.

Bodies were strewn all over the ground next to the two of them, but there were no traces of blood on the two of them.

"Wh-Who are you?" Although Su Lei was a ruthless person, he was still only starting out and had not seen much of the world yet.

Corpses were strewn all over the ground while the killers stood around calmly.

The impact he got from this sight was something he would not forget for the rest of his life.

Even if he were to become a big shot in the future, he would still feel a sense of reverence if he saw Ren Xiaosu again.