

First Order 71

Chapter 71: Ren Xiaosu's perfect skill

When Ren Xiaosu listened in on Zhang Jinglin's lessons on top of the school walls, he had once heard Zhang Jinglin sharing some strange stories, including some that talked about "disappearing cities."

Sometimes, when Ren Xiaosu remembered Zhang Jinglin, he would feel that he wasn't always a serious person. Whenever this teacher got tired of teaching, he would simply take a chair to the podium and sit down to share some interesting stories to fill the class time.

However, Ren Xiaosu felt that this was quite normal. After all, being the only teacher in town, it would be quite difficult for Zhang Jinglin to only talk about lessons all day.

In the past, Mr. Zhang had told of an ancient city in the wilderness during one of his story sessions. The ancient city had been prosperous for some time but suddenly started declining for some reason. Zhang Jinglin said that it seemed like demons started appearing after the decline of the ancient city.

At the time, Ren Xiaosu was tempted to say, "Like hell I'd believe that!" If he didn't want to teach the lesson, so be it. Why did he have to make up topics like demons and the such? How could there really be demons in this world?

But Ren Xiaosu was a little convinced now.

In fact, Zhang Jinglin should not be too old and was probably only in his thirties. Ren Xiaosu had heard from Wang Fugui before that Zhang Jinglin came from a different place a long time ago. As for how long ago that was, no one could remember.

Ren Xiaosu would sometimes question whether Zhang Jinglin was a resident of the stronghold before he became a refugee. How else could he know so many things? Even though some of the things that he said could have been made up...

Now, when Xu Xianchu said that there was a mysterious city hidden within the Jing Mountains, Ren Xiaosu remembered what Zhang Jinglin had said. Then did that mean there were demons in the Jing Mountains?

Ren Xiaosu asked Xu Xianchu, "Did they talk about any other things?"

Xu Xianchu thought it over carefully and said, "I think Wang Congyang also found out from his sources right before we set off that this information about the Jing Mountains was not only exclusive to Stronghold 113. It seems that other teams are also on their way there."

Ren Xiaosu thought that Xu Xianchu was going to reveal some secrets, but it turned out to only be this.

"Actually, be it the stronghold overseers or the corporations, they're all very interested in the evolution of these supernatural beings." Xu Xianchu said, "You all should also know about the newly built

psychiatric hospital in the stronghold, right? The supernatural beings are being studied not only because the overseers want to learn how to defend against them, but also because they intend to make use of them.”

“Can you talk more about these supernatural beings?” Ren Xiaosu said, “As a supernatural being, you should be very concerned about this issue, right?”

“Supernatural beings...” Xu Xianchu pondered it before saying, “Actually, supernatural beings existed since a long time ago. It was just that everyone regarded them as legends in the past. There’s increased attention on them again these days because the supernatural beings have started appearing more frequently. There’s even an extremely secretive organization of supernatural beings that has appeared in some places.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. “They even have an organization now?”

The existence of such an organization would mean that the number of supernatural beings was not small.

“You guys might’ve already heard about the event where a supernatural being tried to assassinate a stronghold overseer sometime back, right?” Xu Xianchu said, “Wang Congyang told me that the supernatural being was from an organization called the ‘Saboteurs,’ or at least that’s what that supernatural being claimed.”

“Did he get caught?” Ren Xiaosu was curious.

“No.” Xu Xianchu shook his head. “He’s far more powerful than you can imagine. Nowadays, every major stronghold is targeting the supernatural beings. It seems that they’re still assessing the danger ratings of these people, but I’m not sure how they’re being evaluated.”

Ren Xiaosu muttered, “Why do they have to fight to the death? Can’t they just get along with one another?”

He said so because he could sympathize with the situation. As Ren Xiaosu was also a supernatural being, and having to suddenly face those large organizations, he felt a little uncomfortable. Yang Xiaojin glanced at him but did not say anything.

Xu Xianchu sighed and said, “I can’t return to the stronghold anymore. If the people in the stronghold learn that I’m a supernatural being, it’ll end tragically for me.”

Beside him, Liu Bu piped up, “Don’t worry, we won’t reveal your secret!”

Honestly speaking, Liu Bu was a little worried that he would get silenced by Xu Xianchu. As such, he hurriedly expressed his stance on the matter.

Xu Xianchu glanced at Liu Bu without saying a word. It could be seen that he still held to his principles and would not do something like silencing someone.

But who would believe Liu Bu’s assurance? It would be beyond idiotic to trust him.

Xu Xianchu gave Liu Bu the rare rebuttal. "Of everyone here, you're the one who worries me the most!"

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Then you can go back if Liu Bu dies in an accident, right?"

Liu Bu was stunned. How could he curse him like that? Liu Bu wanted to scold Ren Xiaosu but did not have the guts to do so!

Xu Xianchu, who was standing off to the side, said with a sigh, "You're also a supernatural being, right?"

Ren Xiaosu said, "Huh?"

Ren Xiaosu wondered whether he had given himself away somehow and that had Yang Xiaojin noticed that something was up.

Then Xu Xianchu said, "You must have awakened your powers to annoy people."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. But, Ren Xiaosu got a sudden inspiration. He said to the palace in his mind, "Palace, do I have a skill to annoy people? What's my level of proficiency?"

The voice from the palace calmly answered, "Perfect."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

It was actually perfect!

Ren Xiaosu had gasped in admiration at Yang Xiaojin when he found out that she had a perfect skill. But he did not expect himself to have one as well! But comparing his perfect skill with hers, what he had was bullshit! 'Palace, are you serious?!

When Ren Xiaosu thought of himself also having a perfect skill, his balls ached. But it was nonetheless a perfect skill, so he was still kind of happy.

Some people talked about how it wasn't easy to perfect a skill in life... but who could have expected that he would accomplish it so early in life?

Xu Xianchu cast a glance at the three corpses outside the hollow and finally said, "Let's go. Whatever it is that lies in the Jing Mountains, I'll go and have a look at it myself."

This was what supernatural beings desired. Everyone used to think that what was said in the legends were unrealistic, but once they started closing in on the legends themselves, they would develop a desire for the world at large.

It was the same for Xu Xianchu and Ren Xiaosu too.

Xu Xianchu said, "I don't know if you guys have ever read a book called Journey to the West. I've seen it in a library at the stronghold. When I read in the book that someone could lift a cudgel weighing 13,500 catties, I found it unbelievable. But these days, I kinda wonder if the characters in the book could possibly exist in this world. The book said the cudgel was so powerful it could crush mountains."

Ren Xiaosu pondered it and said, "I've never come across the book you just mentioned as the school in town doesn't carry it. But I have an issue with it if you say that a cudgel weighing 13,500 catties can crush mountains. That works out to only be around six tons. The tractors at the factory outside town can already bear a load of ten tons. Even if they went over the limit by a little and carried two of those cudgels, it wouldn't be an issue at all."

Xu Xianchu took a deep breath before he turned around and walked towards the forest. He was about to head into the unknown Jing Mountains.

Chapter 72: Ghost

After they went into the forest, Ren Xiaosu paid close attention to any signs of a struggle, as the mystery of the two missing soldiers from last night remained unsolved. Ren Xiaosu wanted to know what exactly happened to them.

The heavy rain had washed away both of their footprints, which made it very difficult for Ren Xiaosu to locate their tracks.

Without any footprints, he could only examine the leaves and branches in the surroundings.

As the forest was extremely dense, thick bushes could be found everywhere under the huge canopies. If the two of them had passed through the forest, they would definitely break some branches along the way. This was something that would not get washed away by the rain.

Ren Xiaosu followed the path of some slightly broken branches, but the trail only lasted a few dozen meters before vanishing.

When Xu Xianchu realized that Ren Xiaosu was looking for something, he asked, "Found anything yet?"

"No." Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "They didn't go any further than this. Their tracks abruptly stopped over here."

The two of them must have been terrified, so they shouldn't have ventured too far away from the hollow. However, something here did not make any sense. The two of them were just barely more than ten meters out from the hollow at the time. If an accident had happened here, those of us in the hollow should have heard it.

Even if there the sound of the rain was muffling it at the time!

So the most probable reason was that, when they came here to relieve themselves, they encountered something that caught them so off guard that they didn't even have the chance to make a sound!

When Ren Xiaosu looked at the trees in the surrounding area, he found that not a single tree had bark torn off the tree trunks. There were no traces of fighting or struggle, nothing at all.

What was truly scary here was the fear of the unknown.

“Let’s go.” Xu Xianchu said, “In such circumstances, we need to find an even safer place to set up camp. We have to do that even if we have to end the day’s journey earlier than scheduled.”

Ren Xiaosu agreed with Xu Xianchu’s point of view. “It’s best if we can find a cave similar to the hollow from last night. Although we don’t know what happened, we were safe in the hollow. So I think it’s better to find a similar cave to set up camp tonight.”

The sky had not cleared up yet after the rain, so it could still rain again afterwards. As the saying went, “A cold spell comes after the autumn rain.” The rain had also staved off the sweltering heat caused by the volcanic activity.

The group of people walked through the forest with extreme difficulty. Ren Xiaosu suggested to Xu Xianchu to try his best to take a path where there were no puddles. In the current era where ants could grow to as large as a human finger pad, and face bugs were even a freaking thing, encountering something like leeches now might just get someone killed.

The clothes they were wearing could not protect them from a leech’s bite.

“I wonder how the bugs grew to such a large size?” Ren Xiaosu wondered, “Just what are those face bugs, really?”

Xu Xianchu thought for a moment and said, “Whatever they are, those face bugs shouldn’t be able to surpass the limitations of being an insect, right? Their body structure ensures that they can’t grow to a large size like mammals since the supply of oxygen just wouldn’t allow for something like that to happen. That’s why I suspect the proportion of oxygen in the air here is very high, which has allowed them to grow to the size they are. Have you guys noticed it yet? Even though we’re fatigued physically, our minds are in fine shape, and we can still think clearly. This definitely has something to do with the increased amount of oxygen we’re breathing.”

As Ren Xiaosu listened to Xu Xianchu’s analysis, he found that it sounded quite reasonable. It was not only due to the lifeforms here evolving, there was also some scientific reasoning involved.

“Wait a minute.” Ren Xiaosu was surprised. “Is it because the plant life here is also mutating and evolving that it increased the oxygen levels? The vegetation near the stronghold has also started thriving a little. In that case, will there also be incidents of insect infestations in the future?”

“That’s very possible,” Xu Xianchu said.

Everyone’s difference in stamina became obvious as they continued to advance. It was a cakewalk for Ren Xiaosu. With his current stamina, he could easily trek through the forest without losing strength and not feel tired at all.

Although Xu Xianchu was a supernatural being, his physical fitness did not seem to have improved much. Xu Xianchu himself also admitted that his physical fitness had only started to enhance after becoming a supernatural being.

But it seemed like this was a slow process. As such, Xu Xianchu's physical fitness was not so good that it could be on par with Ren Xiaosu's.

Xu Xianchu said, "Ever since my power awakened and I became a supernatural being, I realized that every time I push my body to its limits in training, my physical fitness gets raised further."

Ren Xiaosu wondered if that was really true. Could he also try that out in the future? But he would have to wait until he got back to the town for that. Pushing himself to his limits out here would probably spell an earlier end for him.

Meanwhile, Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei were all in miserable states as their clothes were getting a little ragged. When they came out of the stronghold, they were all prim and proper. But now, their faces had become almost as dirty as Ren Xiaosu's.

But they did not dare to fall behind since they were afraid that Ren Xiaosu, Xu Xianchu, and Yang Xiaojin would not wait for them. If that happened, there would only be death waiting for them.

The person that surprised Ren Xiaosu the most was Yang Xiaojin. He realized that she also looked a little tired now, but her endurance was still much better than Xu Xianchu's.

All of a sudden, Ren Xiaosu saw a shadow clone emerge from Xu Xianchu's body. Ren Xiaosu thought that Xu Xianchu was reacting to some kind of danger, so he immediately went alert.

However, he saw Xu Xianchu climb onto the back of his shadow clone like no one was watching. He intended to take a piggyback ride on it!

Ren Xiaosu was dumbfounded. 'Hey, that's fucking cheating!'

Ever since Xu Xianchu exposed himself as a supernatural being, he was getting more and more fond of using his power openly. As he was used to keeping it hidden, there were even times when he could not remember that he could use its power.

The physical fitness of this shadow clone was twice of Xu Xianchu's own physical fitness. It could walk in the forest like it was walking on flat ground. If not for Ren Xiaosu's reluctance to expose the fact he had copied Xu Xianchu's Shadow Clone, he would have used it to carry him as well!

Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei were almost driven to despair. It was really frustrating to be drawn into comparisons with other people. Why couldn't they also have their own powers awakened so that they could become supernatural beings as well?!

Suddenly, Xu Xianchu's shadow clone stopped in front of them. This time, Ren Xiaosu got really nervous because he noticed Xu Xianchu's muscles tensing up just like a puffed up cat would!

They saw Xu Xianchu slowly get off from the back of the shadow clone to prevent himself from slowing it down. Then he whispered, "Everyone, look ahead."

Ren Xiaosu looked into the obscure and gloomy forest in front of him. Through the dense foliage of the forest, it seemed like there was something white lingering in front of them.

“W-What is that?” Liu Bu asked, trembling. While he asked that question, he subconsciously moved behind Luo Xinyu and Wang Lei, hiding all the way at the back of the team.

Xu Xianchu scrutinized it. He hesitated for a while before saying, “Look, doesn’t that white figure look like a woman in white scratching a tree?”

As the sight was so eerie, Ren Xiaosu’s hair stood on end!

Chapter 73: A Pre-Cataclysm civilization

In the gloomy forest, the rustling leaves seemed to suggest that there were some horrible creatures shuttling through the canopies. Everyone held their breaths as they kept their eyes on that strange, white figure in front of them. It was as though they were afraid that their “aura” would provoke it into attacking them.

Why was there a woman scratching a tree with her back facing them in a place like this? Nobody could understand it.

But the more they couldn’t explain it, the greater their fears.

Next to him, Ren Xiaosu found that Yang Xiaojin looked very nervous for the first time. He could see her pursing her lips while her knuckles turned white from gripping the gun so tightly.

Xu Xianchu’s shadow clone was standing right in front of him. It seemed that it was guarding against the woman in white in case she suddenly pounced at him. But in reality, that woman was still dozens of meters away from them.

“Should we take a detour?” Ren Xiaosu whispered, “She might not follow us.”

Just as he finished speaking, a strong wind gusted through the forest, and the woman in white seemed to float up.

Xu Xianchu clenched his teeth and said, “We can’t avoid it. If something like a ghost can stop us here in our tracks, how do you expect to get to the Jing Mountains?!”

Xu Xianchu then commanded his shadow clone to move towards the woman in white as he followed closely. Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin gave each other a look. They did not expect Xu Xianchu to be so brave in this situation.

Some people tended to make outrageous claims in normal times but would get timid, nervous, or scared in the face of something serious. Others were different. The more dangerous a situation, the calmer they would be. There was a kind of ferocity embedded in their bones!

“Let’s catch up,” Ren Xiaosu said.

A second later, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin tacitly followed Xu Xianchu. As they were all in the same boat now, they couldn’t let Xu Xianchu take on the risks by himself.

Liu Bu was trembling as he said, "What should we do? Should we follow them?"

"But what if something else like that also appears beside us?" Luo Xinyu said in fear. After that, she caught up to them with Wang Lei following close behind.

Seeing that he was all alone, Liu Bu got even more frightened. He whispered, "Wait for me!"

Ren Xiaosu said to Xu Xianchu from behind, "Once you find that you're no match for her, restrict her movements with your shadow clone and buy us some time so that we can concentrate our firepower on her."

Xu Xianchu, Ren Xiaosu, and Yang Xiaojin were all carrying guns. On the surface, this was the strongest direct form of attack they had. If this woman in white turned out to be unafraid of bullets, there was nothing more they could do!

Xu Xianchu answered softly, "OK... watch my back, and pay close attention to the surroundings."

Ren Xiaosu was a little puzzled. Perhaps the people in the stronghold had not experienced life like those who lived in town, so they were more trusting of others than the refugees.

Living in town, there was even a need for someone to keep watch at night while they slept. People who grew up in such an environment would never ask someone they barely knew to watch their backs.

Was that the difference between the town and the stronghold?

The three of them cautiously approached the woman in white. However, a strange feeling grew inside them the closer they approached.

Ren Xiaosu was initially crouching because this posture was the easiest for him to make a move. In the end, he slowly straightened up as he stood and said, "What the hell is this?"

Xu Xianchu was also confused. He commanded his shadow clone as it swayed towards the "woman in white" and "plucked" her down from the tree.

It was a... tattered, plastic, female doll, the type that looked inflatable.

"Uh..." Ren Xiaosu walked beside Xu Xianchu and looked at it for some time. "What is this thing?"

"I don't know," Xu Xianchu said, shaking his head. As they had never seen this thing before, they all expressed their lack of knowledge. "But it looks to be in terrible condition."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Is this not something from the stronghold?"

"I've never seen it before in the stronghold," Xu Xianchu denied again.

Everyone did not know whether to laugh or cry as they wondered what this doll was. They were just frightened by something as crappy as it! It wasn't until they got close to it that they realized something was off!

“Wait a minute, there’s something else under the tree.” Ren Xiaosu happened to spot a metallic box that was caught within the knotted tree roots.

Ren Xiaosu took his dagger and poked the rusty box. As a result, the metallic box, which was already badly corroded, crumbled the moment the dagger touched it slightly.

The metallic box contained several light-red pieces of paper. When the metallic box crumbled, the pieces of paper also turned into powder along with it. In the blink of an eye, only one item was left from inside the metallic box.

It was a piece of green plastic. Rather, it was a piece of green paper wrapped between two plastic sheets. The green paper had mysterious twisting and turning patterns, not unlike tadpoles, printed on it.

“This...” Xu Xianchu was stunned as he looked at the “plastic sheet” in Ren Xiaosu’s hand. “Could this be something that was left behind by human civilization from before The Cataclysm? And that plastic doll too? It takes several hundred years for plastics to fully decompose, even if they’re buried underground. So while everything else has already decomposed, this thing was preserved.”

“But what’s this strange pattern on it? Is it hiding some kind of a secret?” Yang Xiaojin frowned and wondered about it.

“Don’t you all think it looks like a map?” At this moment, Liu Bu and the two who had rushed over said, “These symbols contained within the square grid are turning in all sorts of different directions. It looks just like a maze!”

Xu Xianchu and Ren Xiaosu’s eyes lit up. “Could this be a map of that mysterious city in the Jing Mountains?!”

“Eh?” Luo Xinyu said, “Look, there are some words on it.”

Due to the decomposition, the plastic sheet had discolored and yellowed. But after Luo Xinyu’s observation, they took notice and saw a small line of words below the mysterious pattern.

Ren Xiaosu carefully read aloud, “Please scan the QR code for payment?”

The group was confused. “What’s a QR code? Who do we pay it to?”

“What? We still have to pay to get through the maze?”

Because knowledge of civilization had become lost through the generations, nobody knew how some things worked during the Pre-Cataclysm times. Some of these practices had been abandoned by humans because they had no use for them, while others were forgotten during the Dark Age of Survival.

No one had seen these things in the stronghold or town before, so its function had become a mystery.

In any case, it was not a map of a maze.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Xu Xianchu. “Are you sure there’s a mysterious city in that place? Can the mystery of the evolution really be found there?”

"If not, how do you explain the current changes occurring in the Jing Mountains?" Xu Xianchu asked.

"Indeed..." Ren Xiaosu said, "The mountains are always full of secrets, but I keep getting the feeling that the city might not be that mysterious..."

"Let's go, we'll only find out after we see it for ourselves." Xu Xianchu carefully placed the QR code into his breast pocket as though he was afraid of damaging it.

"Should we take this tattered doll with us?" Liu Bu asked.

"Just bring it along, I guess. Who knows if it'll be useful or not?" Xu Xianchu said.

Chapter 74: Pyro

Of course, Xu Xianchu, Ren Xiaosu, and Yang Xiaojin were not willing to carry the tattered doll with them. And since the question of whether to take the doll along with them was brought up by Liu Bu, he was automatically tasked with the responsibility of carrying it.

In reality, Ren Xiaosu and company didn't think the doll would be of any use to them. Although no one knew what usage it served before The Cataclysm, they were not dumb either.

But since they didn't have to carry the doll themselves, it wouldn't trouble them to bring it along.

As such, Liu Bu felt miserable the entire way. Even though he was exhausted, he still had to carry that tattered doll around with care.

The worst thing was that all of them had not eaten yet today.

Xu Xianchu suddenly stopped walking. Xu Xianchu could barely take it for much longer, let alone Liu BU, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei. He turned around and said, "Everyone, let's find some pine trees to pluck pine cones from. We'll eat something first before we continue on our journey."

Based on Xu Xianchu and the others' wilderness survival lessons thus far, they had only learned the extent of plucking pine cones to fill their stomachs. In reality, these pine cones were incredibly difficult to peel and had very few nuts in them.

The pine nuts they could retrieve from a large pine tree wouldn't even be enough to fill their stomachs, but what else could they have if they did not eat this? They could only look at Ren Xiaosu, who did not seem to care about them at all.

They saw him take his dagger and cut into an unidentified tree next to him. Then a white, milky sap started flowing out of the incision he made. Xu Xianchu's eyes lit up. "Can you drink that?"

The others also looked over in surprise. However, Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said, "The majority of the milky saps that can be found in the forest are undrinkable because there's a high chance of getting poisoned if you do."

Xu Xianchu wondered, "Then why did you make an incision to get the sap?"

"I'm applying it onto my dagger," Ren Xiaosu said, as though it were a matter of course.

The others immediately wondered what kind of person he was. He actually thought of applying poison onto his dagger? What a treacherous person!

But they did not dare to despise Ren Xiaosu's treachery. After all, they had been depending on him too much for the entire journey. If any of them were to get injured, they could only rely on him to suture their wounds together and apply the black medicine for them.

Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei still had some money left on them in case of any emergencies that would require Ren Xiaosu to save them.

They had already realized that having money might mean keeping their lives with Ren Xiaosu around.

If they offended Ren Xiaosu at this time, he would probably still be willing to treat their wounds if they paid him money. But who knew if Ren Xiaosu might end up having an extra kidney in his hand after suturing up their wounds? If that happened, what could they do?

While Liu Bu was plucking pine cones, he accidentally fell out of the tree. But luckily for him, it did not hurt as the ground was covered with soft pine needles that cushioned his fall.

He got so emotional that he nearly broke down. "This is all the wolves' fault. Didn't they say in the stronghold that the wolves had run off to another mountain range? Why did they suddenly reappear here?! If not for those wolves, we might've already gotten back to the stronghold! It's just as the proverb says, 'The Wolf and the Bei make mischief. 1 ' Wolves were never good to start off with!"

However, Ren Xiaosu disagreed this time. "I've also heard that proverb before, but have you seen an actual bei before?"

The others were stunned. "Isn't the bei an animal that clings onto a wolf's behind? This proverb says that the wolves and bei work together to catch livestock by using their forelegs and hind legs respectively. It means that they collude 1 with each other to do bad things."

"Yes." Ren Xiaosu nodded and said, "That's what Mr. Zhang said in school, but my question remains, has anyone ever seen a bei before?"

Liu Bu was stunned. He muttered, "How could we see one if we live in the stronghold?"

"I've seen one before." Ren Xiaosu said, "It was among the wolf pack that chased us into the canyon. When I encountered them last year, I saw a bei with them."

"What does a bei look like?" someone asked with curiosity.

“The bei is actually a wolf as well.” Ren Xiaosu said calmly, “It’s just that its forelegs could no longer move after it got caught in a hunter’s trap. So the other wolves carried it around on their backs and helped it continue living.”

Xu Xianchu and the others were startled. They had learned the proverb “the Wolf and the Bei make mischief” during their school days in the stronghold. The teacher told them then that the wolves and bei were both evil. They were even taught which insects were beneficial and which were pests.

But Ren Xiaosu, who had ventured into the wilderness, did not think that way. He heard from Zhang Jinglin that the nomads of the grasslands used to worship wolves. Back then, he wasn’t allowed to attend lessons in the school, so he asked Yan Liuyuan to help him ask a question. “Aren’t wolves harmful to livestock? Why did the nomads worship wolves?”

Mr. Zhang replied with a question. “Are the wolves at fault?”

True, wolves eat sheep and sheep eat grass. Neither was in the wrong. This is the order of the food chain and this is what they were born to be.

Although wolves were harmful to humans, they would never abandon their disabled counterparts. Would a human do that? Just how many people had died due to the disregard shown by their companions during this expedition to the Jing Mountains?

It was not that they were in the wrong, but Ren Xiaosu sometimes envied the wolves. At least when something happened, they would not get left behind mercilessly.

Ren Xiaosu didn’t care what the rest of them thought. He started digging up the soil at the roots of the pine tree with his dagger and said, “Don’t clear the piles of leaves with your bare hands in the wilderness because there might be scorpions, centipedes, or poisonous snakes hidden in them. If you disturb them, it’ll lead to your death.”

When Ren Xiaosu did not find any scorpions or the like, he was a little disappointed. After all, roasted scorpions tasted rather good. Ren Xiaosu wondered if he should deliberately try to catch some scorpions and centipedes to eat for dinner.

As he was thinking about it, he dug out some of the pine tree’s roots. “If y’all feel that the pine cones are not filling enough, you can cook the pine roots to eat for dinner.”

The others looked at Ren Xiaosu in surprise. It seemed like everything was edible in Ren Xiaosu’s eyes. It still wasn’t too bad when they were told to eat the pine nuts. But now, he was even telling them they could eat the pine roots?

‘Is this even food? This is more like building materials, alright?!’

But Ren Xiaosu did not mind. He had eaten so many things in the wilderness over the years that other people thought were inedible.

Suddenly, Ren Xiaosu thought of a question. “Are there any similar places like the Jing Mountains near the other strongholds? I’m talking about those places that experienced a sudden mutation and evolution of their lifeforms.”

Xu Xianchu was silent for a moment before saying, “Yes, but it’s already under the control of the Pyro Company.”

“The Pyro Company?” Ren Xiaosu wondered, “Why haven’t I heard of it before? Which of the organizations does it fall under?”

“None, it’s an independent corporation with more than 20 strongholds under its control.” Xu Xianchu said, “But they’re quite far away from our Stronghold 113, so it’s normal that you haven’t heard of them before.”

“What’s the place controlled by the Pyro Company like?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

Xu Xianchu looked embarrassed. That seemed to be the extent of his knowledge. Instead, it was Yang Xiaojin who spoke up. “That place the Pyro Company controls are very mysterious. Someone mentioned that they’d seen huge prehistoric birds flying over the skies there, but the Pyro Company has such a powerful military that it managed to gain control of that place. Perhaps only the core personnel of the Pyro Company know what really happened there.”

Chapter 75: Prehistoric birds

When Ren Xiaosu heard Yang Xiaojin talking about the Pyro Company, he quickly processed what she said. That was because a lot of information was contained within that short passage of words.

Xu Xianchu obviously did not know this information about the Pyro Company. That was to say, Yang Xiaojin had far surpassed Xu Xianchu, who was a soldier of the private army, in terms of gathering intelligence.

Moreover, Yang Xiaojin had mentioned, “Perhaps only the core personnel of the Pyro Company know what really happened there.” Why was she so sure that only the core personnel knew about it rather than the entire Pyro Company? Yang Xiaojin must have sought out information from some of the Pyro Company’s members before but to no avail.

Ren Xiaosu felt that Yang Xiaojin couldn’t have managed that alone. It was just like how he didn’t know how many strongholds had been built by humans until now, with the highest number that he had ever heard of being Stronghold 178.

He did not know about the Pyro Company, nor how many organizations were out there. To be able to understand the overall situation of the world in this era where communications infrastructure was underdeveloped, she had to have an organization behind her!

Therefore, Yang Xiaojin must belong to an organization. As for which organization she belonged to, nobody knew.

Ren Xiaosu was someone who liked learning and contemplation a lot. At this moment, Yang Xiaojin stopped talking when she noticed that Ren Xiaosu was deep in thought. Yang Xiaojin was not stupid. She realized that Ren Xiaosu was analyzing the information she had just said.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Are these the only two known locations with mysterious activities happening?"

Yang Xiaojin gave him a look. "There will be more and more of such places."

In the afternoon, everyone was showing signs of fatigue except for Ren Xiaosu. As Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei were only normal people, their soles had already started blistering. However, they did not dare to fall behind or ask if they could take a rest.

Ren Xiaosu finished a bottle of water and then refilled it in a shallow stream. As the other three did not have any containers with them, they had to find some large leaves to hold the water.

In front, Xu Xianchu had a canteen while Yang Xiaojin had a bottle of water hidden on her too. As for Ren Xiaosu, needless to say, he not only had a water bottle, there was even the metal cup he'd brought from home.

However, Luo Xinyu, Liu Bu, and Wang Lei did not have any containers. As such, Ren Xiaosu, Yang Xiaojin, and Xu Xianchu were strolling ahead of them with their hands swinging about. Meanwhile, Luo Xinyu, Liu Bu, and Wang Lei each held a leaf in their hands as they followed them and looked pretty pathetic.

When they were getting water, Ren Xiaosu expressly instructed, "Y'all can't go near the deep end. Just get water from the streams. Once you get it, leave A-SAP."

When Xu Xianchu mentioned the prehistoric birds had appeared in the place controlled by the Pyro Company, he remembered the dark shadow in the river he encountered when he was catching fish!

It was a creature that even other fishes in the water were afraid of. Ren Xiaosu even regretted that he didn't catch a glimpse of what it really was.

At dusk, they finally found a new cave to settle in, but it was tiny this time. It was a little crowded with six people sitting inside, but they had no choice. The forest was too scary at night.

When they huddled together to keep themselves warm over a fire, everyone felt a rare sense of security. Perhaps humans would only realize the importance of companionship during moments like this.

Ren Xiaosu carefully checked the inside of the cave to look for any traces left behind by humans, such as inscriptions like the ones left in the hollow last night. Unfortunately, he could not find any traces of that here.

Xu Xianchu instructed, "If anyone wants to relieve themselves, it will be best not to head into the forest in case of accidents. If the ladies want to relieve themselves, we'll just turn our heads the other way. The

two of you can take turns to watch over us to make sure we're not peeking. This is also for the sake of everyone's safety."

As the group chewed on the cooked pine roots, Liu Bu remembered the aroma of the roasted boar from before and joked to Ren Xiaosu, "Why don't you make another wish? Wouldn't it be great if another animal ran into a tree?"

Ren Xiaosu snapped at him, "Why don't you wish for it yourself then?"

He wouldn't sacrifice Yan Liuyuan's health in exchange for food for himself. This pine root tasted just like celery anyway and was not too difficult to swallow either.

Right now, Ren Xiaosu was paying great attention to what he said since he was afraid of causing harm to Yan Liuyuan at home.

After getting rebuked by Ren Xiaosu, Liu Bu felt a little embarrassed. "Come on, it was just a joke. I would have wished for it a long time ago if it were effective. If I wished for a wild animal to get presented to us, do you really think that a wild animal would really get presented to us?"

But at this moment, they heard a strange sound coming from the forest outside the cave. It sounded like there was a lot of movement.

Ren Xiaosu, Yang Xiaojin, and Xu Xianchu instinctively picked up their guns upon hearing the sounds. The next second, three boars, two wildcats, two snakes, and seven monkeys scattered out of the forest.

The wildcats already looked the size of the leopards found in the schoolbooks, not to mention the size of the boars! The monkeys were nearly as tall as humans, and if they stood upright, they would probably be 1.6 meters tall!

Ren Xiaosu was quite sure this was not caused by Yan Liuyuan's luck from making a wish. With all of these animals put together, they would probably be more than enough to kill the six of them. This should not fucking be considered good luck!

Ren Xiaosu stared blankly at the wild animals and said, "Liu Bu, is your mouth fucking jinxed?!"

Liu Bu was nearly in tears. "I was just saying..."

The wild animals and humans were caught in a deadlock. It seemed that the wild animals had not expected anyone to be in here either. Ren Xiaosu lowered his voice and whispered, "Liu Bu, go tell them that we're vegetarians today so they can leave."

Liu Bu burst into tears. He looked at the pack of wild animals outside the cave and said, "Would my words be effective? Hey, you all there, please leave!"

Ren Xiaosu was just kidding. But after Liu Bu said "please leave," those wild animals actually turned around and ran in another direction.

In reality, Ren Xiaosu felt that he could defeat them. Although pistols would barely cause any substantial harm to these animals, he still had a “shadow clone” as his greatest trump card.

But Ren Xiaosu did not want to get exposed. As soon as his shadow clone appeared, Xu Xianchu and the others would know that he could copy other people’s powers. It would be difficult to say what kind of consequences there would be.

Moreover, the Shadow Clone he copied turned out to be even stronger than Xu Xianchu’s, so that wouldn’t make him look good either!

Ren Xiaosu looked back at Liu Bu in surprise. ‘Did this guy awaken his skill of luck just like Yan Liuyuan had?! That’s not it!’

Ren Xiaosu looked back to the forest and said, “What drove those wild animals out here to where we are?! Wild animals shouldn’t get along this well. They neither attacked each other nor attacked us. That means something even more terrifying is oppressing them inside the forest. They intended to take refuge in this cave!”

“It seems like that’s really it.” Xu Xianchu nodded and said, “But because we’ve already occupied the cave, they have no choice but to go elsewhere.”

“Do y’all remember? Some strange commotions came from the forest yesterday evening as well, but whatever made that noise went away before it showed itself. I assumed that whatever made that sound was the source of the danger. But now that I think about it, it might’ve been animals searching for a cave to seek refuge in,” Ren Xiaosu recalled. “Just what’s in this forest that made these ‘natives’ stay away from their own territory and cause the different species to get along with each other?”

Chapter 76: Chains

They had all been relieved when they found a cave to settle in for the night. However, no one thought something unexpected would soon happen.

“Should we hide elsewhere?” Someone whispered, “What if something dashes out of the forest?”

“There’s no need to go elsewhere.” Ren Xiaosu shook his head. “The animals obviously wanted to hide in here but we already occupied the spot. Just this point alone proves that the cave we’re in should be safe enough.”

“Just what could they be avoiding?” Liu Bu wondered.

Xu Xianchu looked at the forest outside the cave. “They might be trying to avoid the forest. Or more specifically, the forest at night.”

Ren Xiaosu nodded. “I think so too. Animals are far more alert to danger than humans because of their instincts. Do y’all remember? When we passed through the canyon, we saw some human skeletons lying there. But since we entered the forest, we did not see any skeletons of animals. That’s unusual.”

“As long as it’s a living creature, it will live and die. How is it possible that we didn’t even see the skeletal remains of an animal?” Ren Xiaosu continued, “I had dumped some fish scraps and bones in the forest south of the canyon. But when I went to check on it the next morning, I found that they’d already disappeared. There were no traces of it being moved away in the surrounding area. It just disappeared in the same way as Xu Xia’s corpse had. There’s one thing in common about these missing skeletal remains and the corpse, which is that they were in the forest at the time.”

“Yes.” Xu Xianchu nodded. “Besides, these creatures show that they’re really afraid of the forest, so it’s clear that it’s fishy.”

A forest that eats living creatures...

The others gazed into the forest and started wondering if the botanical life had also started evolving after the animals had evolved.

Xu Xianchu comforted, “But actually, this is a good thing. Now that we’ve identified a pattern, we can take precautions.”

When an unknown fear becomes known, and when you can even understand the logic behind it, that fearful feeling will lessen.

That’s right, as long as no one entered the forest at night, everything should be fine.

Thinking of this, their fear from earlier dispersed a little. Wang Lei smiled and said, “Then we must find a place far away from the forest to set up camp before nightfall.”

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. “We need to be careful not only at night but also during the day. We don’t know whether these animals and plants have evolved to the stage where they might even eat people during the day.”

“Then we’ll just walk along the sparser areas of the mountain ridges!” Xu Xianchu made the final decision.

Everyone went back to chewing on the pine roots before someone asked, “Ren Xiaosu, how did you discover that pine roots are edible?”

“I didn’t discover it myself. Someone in town mentioned it before,” Ren Xiaosu said as he calmly added more firewood to the campfire.

Liu Bu was looking to ease his relationship with Ren Xiaosu, so he quickly praised, “You townspeople know so much about the wilderness. This is truly humanity’s wisdom!”

Liu Bu did not know how he should praise him, so he came up with something random for the sake of praise.

However, Ren Xiaosu did not quite agree with his statement. He looked at him and said, “That’s not wisdom. Who would be willing to eat pine roots if they had proper food to eat? The townspeople have

long said pine roots are edible. When I first heard it, I imagined just how many people died of hunger in the past.”

In an era where refugees might not even be able to survive until the next day, everything they did would be related to their survival.

Liu Bu had only wanted to pepper him with some good words, but he ended up falling into an even more embarrassing situation.

Luo Xinyu eased the tension. “Why are the wild animals getting larger in size but not humans? Instead, we’re evolving into supernatural beings like Xu Xianchu.”

“Maybe it’s because humans evolve in a different way.” Xu Xianchu said, “From the ancient times to the present day, humans have always been evolving their brainpower.”

Ren Xiaosu said, “I’ve heard another explanation. Last year, I had some doubts after I escaped from the wolves, so I asked Mr. Zhang from the school about it. He said to me, ‘Some living creatures in nature can develop strong muscles without the need for much exercise. There used to be a species of animal called the chimpanzee that was caged by humans in the past. Even if they just ate and slept every day, they would still develop greater muscle mass than humans. But if humans only ate and slept every day, their muscles would end up shrinking.’”

Yang Xiaojin spoke, “That Mr. Zhang from your school is no normal person.”

Ren Xiaosu did not know how Yang Xiaojin passed that judgment. He did not know if Zhang Jinglin was a normal person, but he knew he was a good person.

He continued, “Mr. Zhang mentioned that there’s a gene in the human body that restricts muscle development, and that gene has been evolving as humans get smarter and smarter. He said that it’s the price to pay for wisdom.”

Everyone got lost in thought as though that were really the case. People among them from the upper class liked exercising to lose weight, and it even became a trend among them. This activity was especially popular two years ago.

Even Liu Bu participated in such activities by joining the trend to fit in with the upper class, but he later realized how difficult it was to gain any muscles through exercising.

But suddenly, Yang Xiaojin poured cold water on Ren Xiaosu. “I’ve seen a supernatural being with an evolved build before, so how do you explain that?”

Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. He pondered it before saying, “Could his ancestors have had an illicit relationship with a wild animal?”

Yang Xiaojin was speechless. Xu Xianchu was speechless. Liu Bu was speechless.

Everyone was speechless as they looked at Ren Xiaosu. This turned into a fucking insult!

Luo Xinyu suddenly became interested in this topic. "That Mr. Zhang from your school seems outstanding. He must be very knowledgeable, right?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while and answered, "He's quite knowledgeable, but when he encounters a subject he doesn't understand during class, he just bluffs his way through."

"Does he usually read books to brush up on his knowledge when he has free time? There are also such people in the stronghold." Luo Xinyu said, "Those people are all very smart."

"Nope." Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "He just plants vegetables in the school yard when he has free time."

Luo Xinyu was speechless for a while. Why were the majority of things in town so different from what she expected?

However, Ren Xiaosu felt that Zhang Jinglin was quite good in this way. He studied hard but not overzealously. Even though he was very knowledgeable, he would still do manual labor like hoeing.

All of sudden, everyone heard the rattling of chains being dragged on the ground coming from the forest.

When the chains collided with the ground, a sharp rattle could be heard. The creator of the sound seemed to be crawling the forest grounds and patrolling its territory.

Ren Xiaosu and the others felt chills running up their spines. How could there still be a living creature walking through the forest at this time of night? Could their previous assessment of the situation be wrong?

Were those animals not trying to avoid the forest?!

Chapter 77: The Qing Consortium

Earlier, everyone was chatting happily because they thought that they had discovered the secret of the forest: As long as they stayed away from it, they would be safe at night.

But what was going on now? The rattling of the chains being dragged was getting closer and closer. What creature would move around while dragging chains? Had it been chained up but broken free somehow?

Just what sort of a place was the Jing Mountains? Why was there such weird happenings here?

That rattling of the chains being dragged seemed to be attracted by the light in the cave. It slowly came towards the edge of the forest.

Ren Xiaosu, Yang Xiaojin, and Xu Xianchu each disengaged the safety on their guns and were prepared to shoot in the direction of the sound.

Almost instantaneously, Yang Xiaojin realized that Ren Xiaosu's handling of the gun was too professional and even looked a little familiar!

This familiarity was somewhat baffling, but it made her feel extraordinarily comfortable. It was like how patients with obsessive-compulsive disorders felt after finally properly placing blocks of wood in front of themselves.

But right now, she did not have time to think about that. This was because the owner of the chains had crawled to the edge of the forest.

The people in the cave were straining to see what it was, but the other party kept itself hidden in the darkness and never showed itself.

When Ren Xiaosu heard a dripping sound from the forest, he felt nauseous as he realized it was the other party's saliva that was dripping onto the leaves on the forest floor!

"The moment it shows up, shoot it." Xu Xianchu said, "Our firepower will be quick enough to cover all of the directions that it can rush into the cave from. Then I'll command my shadow clone to subdue it."

"OK," Ren Xiaosu answered softly. He thought, 'If the creature turns out to be too strong, I won't care about hiding my shadow clone anymore.'

Nobody knew where those cheetah-sized wildcats and the boars built like miniature mountains had escaped to, but Ren Xiaosu knew that only a stronger and more unstoppable force could send those ferocious animals running from the forest.

As Ren Xiaosu took longer breaths, his emotions calmed down. He no longer paid attention to his heartbeat and breathing, but listened attentively for any sounds or movements coming from the forest.

The secret of the forest might just reveal its true face at the very next moment.

But what they didn't expect was that when the rattling chains rang out again from the forest, it was of the chains' owner moving further away.

"What's happened?" Xu Xianchu frowned as he said, "Could it be afraid to come out of the forest?"

The three of them were still holding their aim as they were afraid the other party was trying to pull a fast one on them. Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought and said, "It's very possible that the other party isn't willing to walk out of the forest. Otherwise, the wild animals from earlier wouldn't have regarded this cave to be their refuge when it's only about ten meters away from the forest."

The rattling of the chains being dragged on the ground sounded further and further away. Ren Xiaosu and the two of them could finally relax a little. "It seems that we're still too optimistic. We can't explore the secret of the Jing Mountains with just our guesswork."

"Something is definitely fishy about the forest, or there could be some other forms of terror in it." Ren Xiaosu said, "Otherwise, it would be impossible to explain the disappearance of Xu Xia's body without any clues."

“Everyone, get some rest.” Xu Xianchu said, “I’ll take the first shift tonight. You guys can take over from me after midnight.”

But despite the words, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin still tacitly stuck to their own two-shift rotation, with one keeping watch for the first half of the night and the other taking the second half.

Seeing this, Xu Xianchu gave a wry smile in his mind. It seemed that he was still an untrustworthy person to them.

Nothing else happened through the night. When the first rays of sunlight shone down in the morning, Ren Xiaosu could hear the shuffle of wild animals returning to the forest in the distance. From the looks of it, these animals were accustomed to taking refuge during the night and returning into the forest during the day. Could the wild animal with the chains from last night be a creature that slept during the day?

Ren Xiaosu stood up to stretch. But before he could even stretch his back, he heard a loud explosion come from the depths of the Jing Mountains.

The sound was so abrupt that Ren Xiaosu jumped in fright.

The people in the cave came out one after another. “What’s going on? What happened?!”

Someone asked, “Could a volcano in the Jing Mountains have erupted?”

“It doesn’t sound like a volcano.” Xu Xianchu shook his head. “It sounded more like the explosives that we humans use.”

If Xu Xianchu couldn’t confirm it, Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin could. Ren Xiaosu had copied the Advanced Bomb-making skill from Yang Xiaojin, together with an indeterminate number of experimental blasts she had carried out.

From that sound, Ren Xiaosu was sure it was the directional blast of a shaped charge 1 .

This sort of shaped charge would be similar to that of an armor-piercing projectile, which usually used violent blasts to create holes in a hard ground. It used the Munroe effect 1 to orient the wave of the blast to create huge holes in the ground.

The sound of this explosive was clearly different from that of a “satchel charge” and “mine-clearing line charge.”

” Satchel charges 1 ” were packed explosives with powerful shockwaves used for demolishing bunkers and other types of buildings.

“Mine-clearing line charges” were demolition devices like the Bangalore 1 .

Ren Xiaosu knew that if he could recognize the sound, Yang Xiaojin could definitely recognize it as well. Someone was excavating the depths of the mountains!

Why were they excavating? Could there really be some sort of huge secret buried beneath the Jing Mountains?

“Earlier, you said that there were also other squads that came to the Jing Mountains?” Ren Xiaosu turned around and asked Xu Xianchu.

“Yes, they were likely from the Qing Consortium as well.” Xu Xianchu said, “After all, Stronghold 112 is also controlled by the Qing Consortium, so it would be very hard for any other organization to get past them to enter the Jing Mountains.”

Ren Xiaosu flicked a glance at Yang Xiaojin. So her purpose for coming here under that guise was also because of the secret in the Jing Mountains?

Ren Xiaosu did not know what Yang Xiaojin’s trump card was even now. Other than her Perfect Firearms Proficiency, this cap-wearing girl must have had something else she could rely on.

“Let’s go, we have to hurry.” Xu Xianchu was not about to be left out of whatever was happening.

“Based on this explosion we heard, the Qing Consortium might’ve sent out a massive military force from Stronghold 112. We have to rush there before they get to the secret.”

“Do you have a death wish?” Ren Xiaosu looked at Xu Xianchu in a speechless manner. “Knowing the Qing Consortium has already sent reinforcements, you still dare to rush in there?”

After a long silence, Xu Xianchu said, “But we’re already here.”

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin looked at each other. For some reason, those words had a magical charm.

“Besides, do we have anywhere else to retreat to?” Xu Xianchu asked, “Since we can’t fall back, we can only go forward. If we don’t get an opportunity when we’re there, we’ll just go around the Qing Consortium and leave the mountains in the direction they came from. I believe the path they took here will be much safer than us turning back here.”

That was true. They knew even explosives had been used, so the Qing Consortium had probably cleared out an entire path to Stronghold 112.

Chapter 78: No retreat

If they could not retreat, they had to go forward.

It seemed like Ren Xiaosu, Xu Xianchu, and Yang Xiaojin were the most interested in the secret of the Jing Mountains. Luo Xinyu, Liu Bu, and Wang Lei were different. They only hoped to quickly join up with those from the Qing Consortium!

Regardless of the secret, they would only have a chance of survival if they headed somewhere with a lot of people!

They had seen the Qing Consortium's combat brigade in Stronghold 113 before, and the private troops definitely paled in comparison. So they believed they would be safe once they joined up with them.

And besides, both Luo Xinyu and Liu Bu could say that they were on good terms with the Qing Consortium. Although they were not particularly close, they had met Boss Luo on several occasions.

Therefore, if they brought up Boss Luo's name and made known their identities when the time came, they would immediately get returned to "human civilization."

To them, the wilderness was a world that belonged to the beasts.

There was also another point. As they almost had an encounter with the mysterious monster of the forest last night, they wanted to quickly get out of this place before it got dark again.

Worried about the monster, Ren Xiaosu tried his best to travel in the open areas of the mountains instead of going through the forest.

Who knew if that monster would be active during the day? It was not as though it had personally informed them that it wouldn't venture out in the day! What if it just liked being a night owl and was actually not afraid of daylight? What if its daily routine had been messed up today?

No one knew for sure!

Their cave was about several dozen kilometers away from the sound of the explosion in the Jing Mountains. If they hurried up, they could reach the range by evening.

Of course, Ren Xiaosu was also afraid of any potential accidents. He held a discussion with Xu Xianchu and Yang Xiaojin. "We can't only consider the straight line distance of the route in the mountains. We have to account for the winding paths that we might need to take. We may need to walk for several more days based on the distance that we worked out before we can get there."

"What do you mean?" Xu Xianchu asked.

"If we can't get there by today, we must not take the risk of traveling through the night." Ren Xiaosu said firmly, "If y'all insist on it, I'll find a place by myself and wait until dawn."

Xu Xianchu thought for a moment and said, "I agree. We won't travel through the night."

Xu Xianchu and Ren Xiaosu looked over to Yang Xiaojin, and she said, "I agree."

"Let's hope the journey won't be too difficult," Ren Xiaosu said.

Nobody knew where Luo Xinyu and Liu Bu found their strength from for today's march. They had just burst the blisters on their feet last night by picking at them. But with the intensity of walking to be done today, the skin on their soles would probably be torn off by the time they were finished.

Seeing this, Ren Xiaosu teased them by suggesting that they could rest for the day. However, Liu Bu stated matter-of-factly that he was fine with carrying on.

As Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei were just normal people, it was obvious they had unleashed their greatest potential due to their desire to survive.

Suddenly, Xu Xianchu said, "There's a human body up front."

Ren Xiaosu looked up and spotted a human body lying quietly in the middle of the valley of the mountain pass. But what surprised him was that there were scattered pieces of clothing lying next to the nearly skeletal remains of the body. The blood had dried into a dark purple patch on the rocky ground.

Ren Xiaosu said in bewilderment, "Since there's still flesh and blood and no decomposition, it means that this person died not too long ago!" "Wait a minute, why would a relatively fresh human corpse appear here?" "Could it be someone from the Qing Consortium?"

"No." Xu Xianchu shook his head and said, "Look at what he was wearing. That's the uniform of the private army. The uniform of the private army is dark blue while the Qing Consortium's uniform is black."

"The private army? Which private army? Does Stronghold 112's private army also wear the same uniform?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

They warily approached it and had an ominous feeling. Xu Xianchu saw a small dog tag that was supposed to be hanging around the neck of the corpse. In this way, everyone would know the identity of the deceased.

But he was stunned when he picked up the dog tag. "Xu Xia? How could this be Xu Xia?"

Ren Xiaosu felt a chill in his heart. "Are you sure this is Xu Xia?"

"Look at this. The name on the dog tag wouldn't be wrong," Xu Xianchu said. As he spoke, he had his automatic rifle up in the fear that something terrible would charge from next to him.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the dog tag. "It's really Xu Xia. Why would his corpse be here?"

Xu Xia's corpse had gone missing before they entered the canyon. As they had walked almost a 100 kilometers over the past two days, how could Xu Xia's corpse suddenly appear here by itself?

What could have brought Xu Xia's corpse here?

While Yang Xiaojin and Xu Xianchu raised their guns in response to this discovery, Ren Xiaosu squatted down and inspected the corpse. Luo Xinyu and Liu Bu were sickened by this sight from the start and after vomiting for a while, Luo Xinyu asked, "Aren't you afraid?"

Ren Xiaosu's expression did not change at all. "I've seen worse.... Wait, there's something off about the wounds on this corpse. Although that monster ate his organs, look at the wounds on the edge of the abdomen. What could create such neat bite marks? I've never come across any animal with a set of teeth like this."

Even Yang Xiaojin and Xu Xianchu couldn't help but look over when Ren Xiaosu said that. They understood just how much Ren Xiaosu knew about the wilderness. If Ren Xiaosu said that he hadn't seen it before, it would have to be an unusual animal.

But when Xu Xianchu saw it, he frowned. "Fuck, these are the bite marks of a human!"

It seemed that Xu Xianchu had even started spouting obscenities due to a deep kind of fear. But not just Xu Xianchu. Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin were also getting the chills. Ren Xiaosu looked up and asked, "Are you sure?"

"I'm very sure." Xu Xianchu said, "I was bitten on the arm by my first love when I broke up with her in school."

Ren Xiaosu snapped, "Why the hell are you telling us that when we were scared to death?"

Ren Xiaosu was truly afraid now!

Xu Xianchu also felt a little scared. "Why are there human bite marks on the corpse?"

"I wonder." Ren Xiaosu asked, "Could it be possible that the one dragging the chains last night... was a human?"

"Let's get out of here." Yang Xiaojin said, "Set up a three-man tactical formation in case something attacks us! If that thing can silently take the corpse away, it can silently sneak up on us as well!"

Ren Xiaosu asked nervously, "What's a tactical formation?"

He was not fooling around as he really did not know!

"You stand on my left!" Yang Xiaojin did not explain too much. "Each of us will take care of whatever comes into our field of view. If any strange creatures approach us, shoot them down."

All of a sudden, Yang Xiaojin had taken command of the team. However, neither Ren Xiaosu nor Xu Xianchu said anything.

At this moment, everyone understood that they were walking a tightrope. If they were not careful, they would be doomed.

Everyone wanted to survive, especially Ren Xiaosu.

Chapter 79: Not a single snowflake in an avalanche is innocent

Perhaps due to it being daytime, Ren Xiaosu and the others did not really encounter any further danger that threatened their lives. Along the way, they encountered a wildcat that was coming at them from the opposite direction. However, it did not attack them and ran away.

When Ren Xiaosu and the group got closer to where the Qing Consortium was, they became even more cautious.

“Based on the usual strategies that a combat brigade uses, scouts set up observation posts 1 around the area while they conduct demolition and reconnaissance.” Xu Xianchu said, “So we must be as careful as possible when approaching them.”

“Are they that professional? There are even observation posts?” Ren Xiaosu said, “But it’s not like there are only observation posts, right? They’ve probably cleared the entire surrounding area with their military force. You saw how frightened that wildcat was just now, didn’t you?”

Ren Xiaosu understood animal behavior very well. Cats had become extremely calm and cautious animals again after they went feral. They seldom panicked in the way the wildcat did just now.

Sure enough, they could vaguely hear the intense sound of gunfire as they slowly started approaching again.

Ren Xiaosu thought that the armed forces of the consortium were truly much stronger than the private army. The private troops seemed to have been sent here to die while the consortium could give the beasts of the Jing Mountains a good thrashing.

He suddenly recalled what Zhang Jinglin had said before: “The firearms and explosives humans possess are far more powerful than you all can imagine.”

With the advanced firearms skill, Ren Xiaosu could now deeply understand how true Zhang Jinglin’s statement was.

At this moment, a wounded boar ran towards Ren Xiaosu and the team. Xu Xianchu whispered, “Don’t shoot, let it go!”

The boar was a little larger than the ones they had seen. However, its head and abdomen were bleeding profusely, making it very aggressive as well.

Xu Xianchu and the others quickly moved away to avoid the path of the boar. It was not that they couldn’t kill the boar... but since they could hear the gunshots of the consortium’s combat troops, the consortium could hear them as well.

Furthermore, what worried them the most was that they would get discovered in advance by the consortium.

Liu Bu looked at the boar and said, “Since we haven’t eaten for almost a day now, it’d be great if we could stop it and roast it!”

Ren Xiaosu lamented how such a group of people could actually exist in this world. Their existence merely served as a foil to make others look better? He said to Liu Bu, “I’m so envious of you. Even though you’ve evolved into something with intelligence, you don’t use it. You look super carefree...”

Liu Bu choked on his words and did not say anything more. Xu Xianchu explained, "By setting up a naked flame here, aren't you telling the Qing Consortium that you're here?"

Seeing the boar pass them by, Wang Lei wondered, "Shouldn't we quickly make contact with those from the Qing Consortium? Since we're all humans, why should we be worried about getting discovered by them?"

Wang Lei, Liu Bu, and Luo Xinyu were hoping that the Qing Consortium would come and rescue them immediately!

Yang Xiaojin replied, "Many organizations have sent out their military forces to carry out investigations at the mysterious place controlled by the Pyro Company, but all of them have been silenced. Do you think that if the Qing Consortium also finds you here, they would treat you nicely and keep you well-fed, then send you back to the stronghold? This is also the reason why the private troops dispatched by Stronghold 113 had to travel under the guise of being part of a band, even if it was pretty obvious they were not."

To the consortium, the secrets here were more valuable than human lives.

"You guys actually think that something like a corporation would save you?" Xu Xianchu sighed.

When Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei, who had originally planned on seeking help from the consortium, heard this, they looked bereaved. Frankly, they did not have much contact with the world at large and would be considered relatively inexperienced by the consortium's standards. As such, they did not understand how an organization worked nor knew how cruel this world was because they had lived a sheltered life all this while.

They were only required to do well in their everyday jobs in the stronghold to ensure there would be food and drink without having to worry about other things like wild animals or hunger.

The consortium told them the outside world was very safe and that the wild animals had already been cleared out of the stronghold perimeter. As such, they all fell for the false show of peace and prosperity that was put up in the stronghold.

"Why are we still headed there then?" When Liu Bu realized he would be silenced if he were found, he lost the pillar of support that kept him going for the day. His desire to seek help from the Qing Consortium had almost become his last lifeline.

Liu Bu sat on the ground, dejected. "You all can go ahead. I'm not going to walk any further."

Ren Xiaosu and the others continued moving forward without paying attention to Liu Bu. To them, it didn't really matter whether Liu Bu died or not. Honestly, Ren Xiaosu preferred that Liu Bu stayed here.

Listening to the subtle sound of the wind in the trees around him, Liu Bu got even more frightened. Before the others could walk out of sight, he got up again and said, "Wait for me!"

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu asked, "What should we do if we encounter the Qing Consortium's troops?"

Xu Xianchu thought for a moment and said, "We should be making retreating our main priority. Their main mission must be the excavation of the Pre-Cataclysm civilization, not hunting us down."

"You all have underestimated the consortium's determination to lock down the news." Yang Xiaojin shook her head and said, "They're definitely not going to let the matter rest once they discover our presence. Moreover, they have wireless comms in their helmets. If they discover they can't kill us off immediately, they'll definitely call for backup. When that time comes, you'll find that you'd rather spend time with the face bugs."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Was this Qing Consortium really that fearsome? He asked, "You seem to know a lot about the troops of these consortiums?"

Yang Xiaojin glanced at him but did not answer the question. "We must kill all visible targets once we encounter them. Do not show mercy to them because they will not show mercy to us either."

"But the consortium's soldiers also have children and mothers." Wang Lei said hesitantly, "Wouldn't that be too cruel?"

Yang Xiaojin said calmly, "Not one snowflake in an avalanche is innocent. Be it voluntary or forced, anyone in war is a tragic figure, while also inflicting tragedies onto others."

"Let's go." Xu Xianchu looked at the forest up ahead.

The secret of the Jing Mountains was calling out to them. If the consortium had given up on this place, they would probably have lost interest as well. But if this secret were so precious to the consortium, there must be something valuable about it.

They would die if they turned back, so the only way to survive was to march forward.

Xu Xianchu and the others carefully identified the direction of the gunshots, as they tried their best to avoid a head-on encounter with the consortium's combat troops. Ren Xiaosu estimated they would probably find out what was hidden in the Jing Mountains in an hour's time.

Chapter 80: Experimentals

The intense gunshots in the forest ahead came to a stop. It sounded like the Qing Consortium had completed its sweep of the outer perimeter. All of the wild animals that could pose a threat to them had been eliminated.

Xu Xianchu whispered to Ren Xiaosu, "This is when the Qing Consortium will set up the observation posts around the perimeter. Even with their manpower, they won't be able to lock down such a large area with just several hundred people."

"About how many people are there in a Qing Consortium combat brigade?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Xu Xianchu hesitated before saying, "Approximately 4,000 to 5,000, but it's impossible they would mobilize all of them. After all, they still have to consider keeping order in the stronghold."

“No.” Ren Xiaosu shook his head and said, “I don’t think there’s a big problem in the stronghold. Will the people in a stronghold dare to rebel in just a few days? That’s impossible. So we have to be prepared that they have turned out in full force with at least a few thousand people.”

“Alright.” Xu Xianchu understood his argument but was hoping they would be lucky. He analyzed the situation before saying, “But actually, they will not mobilize their full force. The supplies of the various strongholds are not enough to provision a few thousand-strong expedition into the Jing Mountains for such a long period of time. It’s not that there aren’t enough supplies, but that the transportation, logistics, manpower issues, etc., all have to be considered. As their soldiers brought a lot of firearms and explosives with them, I believe the advanced party that arrived at the Jing Mountains should number around a thousand men or so after taking into account a comprehensive mix of factors.”

Ren Xiaosu thought it over. Xu Xianchu probably had a more expert opinion on military operations. He said, “I trust your judgment. But I’ll still say the same thing. If the observation posts make the perimeter too secure, I’ll take a detour out of the mountains in the direction of Stronghold 112 without hesitation.”

“OK.” Xu Xianchu nodded. He knew that Ren Xiaosu’s decision was right. After all, if he, Ren Xiaosu, and Yang Xiaojin were to face the pursuit of over a thousand people, it would surely lead to a very bad end. Xu Xianchu put on a face of determination. “If we need to resort to guerrilla warfare, we’ll have to abandon the other three since they won’t be able to keep with our pace—wait a minute!”

As he spoke, Xu Xianchu was stunned. He looked around and asked, “Where’s Yang Xiaojin?”

Ren Xiaosu was also shocked. After looking around, he asked Liu Bu, who was at the rear of the team, “Have you seen Yang Xiaojin?”

“No, I wasn’t paying attention,” Liu Bu answered blankly.

Everyone realized that no one knew when Yang Xiaojin had disappeared during their journey!

If it were Liu Bu who went missing, Ren Xiaosu would think that he might have been taken away by something. But for Yang Xiaojin, that would definitely not be the case!

Ren Xiaosu and Xu Xianchu had thought that Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei would be their burden, but they suddenly got a feeling that Yang Xiaojin thought that all five of them were her burden.

But what exactly was Yang Xiaojin’s purpose in coming here? Ren Xiaosu realized that she might not be after the secret of the Jing Mountains at all!

Yang Xiaojin carried an even greater secret!

Ren Xiaosu and Xu Xianchu looked at each other as though they came to a decision at the same time.

“So...” Ren Xiaosu said righteously, “Yang Xiaojin might have fallen behind. As teammates, we should split up to look for her. It’ll be too dangerous if she’s found by herself.”

Ren Xiaosu and Xu Xianchu then walked separately in two different directions. Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei looked back at the way they came and wondered how Yang Xiaojin could have disappeared so quietly. Liu Bu asked, "Do you feel that Yang Xiaojin has been behaving very strangely? She paid us to join the team, but it's clear that she has her own purpose in coming here...."

Liu Bu turned to look in the directions of where Ren Xiaosu and Xu Xianchu went. However... both of them had also gone missing!

What the fuck?!

What did you mean by splitting up to look for her? You two were obviously making your escape!

Ren Xiaosu, Xu Xianchu, and Yang Xiaojin had respectively made their decisions to drop their burdens once they got near the hinterlands of the Jing Mountains.

After all, they knew how powerful the Qing Consortium's troops were. Whether they were to sneak in or take a detour and leave, they couldn't afford to bring Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei along with them.

Anyway, they were not related nor owed them anything, so there was really no stress when it came to making the decision to abandon them.

But Ren Xiaosu found it quite unfortunate as he had been constantly trying to find ways to gain the gratitude of these people during the past few days. After putting in much effort and gaining 93 gratitude tokens from them, it would not be easy to earn more of them now that he had to go solo.

Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei panicked on the spot. They had wanted to seek help from the Qing Consortium but found out that they might get killed instead. Thus, they thought that it would also be a good idea to leave with Ren Xiaosu, Xu Xianchu, and Yang Xiaojin. But to their surprise, the three of them ran off one after the other!

But while they were in a state of confusion, Liu Bu, Luo Xinyu, and Wang Lei suddenly heard the rattling of chains being dragged on the ground!

They felt a tingling sensation on their scalps. Didn't they say the monster wouldn't be active during the day? Why did it keep following the team then?!

They remembered Xu Xia's ravaged corpse and the wild animals that had fled from the forest the previous night. Liu Bu could even remember the sound of the monster's saliva dripping onto the leaves.

A second later, Liu Bu turned around and ran away. He didn't care anymore whether the Qing Consortium would kill him or not. He just didn't want to die!

When Liu Bu started to run, the other two followed him. However, Liu Bu suddenly discovered that he could not run as fast as Wang Lei and Luo Xinyu.

Although Wang Lei was wounded before this, he had already fully recovered in slightly over two days due to the magical effects of the black medicine. He was terrified of the mysterious monster behind him,

but right as he passed Liu Bu, Wang Lei suddenly saw that Liu Bu had unexpectedly stretched out his foot to trip him!

With a loud thud, Wang Lei fell heavily onto the ground. Liu Bu could only apologize in his head. Someone had to be sacrificed in order for others to live!

Liu Bu ran away as fast as he could. But before he could get far, he heard Wang Lei's scream and the disturbing sound of chewing flesh!

Wang Lei's scream tore into Liu Bu like a fearsome ghost. However, this scream did not last long before it stopped.

The rattling of the chains could be heard again, and the monster chased after them once more!

Liu Bu was in despair. When he thought of pulling Luo Xinyu down this time, he found that she had already gotten far away from him.

"Who is it?" Someone was talking up ahead in the forest. Liu Bu focused his vision over there and realized that the person was wearing a pure black uniform and holding a gun in his hands.

Liu Bu shouted, "A monster! There's a monster behind me!"

He saw the consortium's soldier making several tactical hand signals, followed by more than 20 soldiers appearing out from the forest beside him as they slowly made their way towards Liu Bu. It was a full platoon of soldiers!

The person leading the platoon ordered, "Kneel down and put your hands behind your head!"

Liu Bu immediately knelt down on the ground. He knew that if he did not follow his instructions, these combat troops would open fire and kill him. All he could do now was to leave his life in the hands of fate!

The rattling of the chains grew closer. When the owner of the chains showed up, the soldier shouted through the wireless communications equipment in his helmet, "Please send reinforcements! We've spotted an escaping Experimental! Fire!"

Gunfire thundered!