

Chapter 711 The maidservant's team

Entering the Sacred Mountains from the direction of Mt. Shenchu had always been referred to as the "Western Route." Meanwhile on the "Eastern Route," Vanilla and Tang Hualong were leading a group of people forward. They could already see the outline of the Sacred Mountains from afar.

Compared to Cheng Yu's team, Vanilla's team was exceptionally easy to handle. In this group, there were no intelligence personnel from the consortiums harboring ulterior motives like Wang Yun, nor were there weird intruders like Ren Xiaosu.

In Vanilla's group, there were only A-rank hitmen who had been carefully selected. As all of them here were people who truly wanted to participate in the Anjing House trials, they were especially united.

It was different from the hooligans in Cheng Yu's group. If something happened to Cheng Yu, many of those in his team would probably gloat at his misfortune.

Meanwhile, almost everyone in Vanilla's group scrambled to showcase themselves. They would volunteer to take down whatever obstacles were blocking their way.

Vanilla did not even need to do anything himself. The A-rank hitmen who wanted to join the Anjing House had already done everything for all of them.

For example, someone had scouted the surrounding terrain beforehand, while others knew in advance of the tarantulas' existence in the periphery of the Sacred Mountains. They were putting on such a good performance so that they could get Vanilla's attention to help increase their chances of joining the Anjing House after the expedition to the Sacred Mountains.

At some point, Vanilla felt a little emotional. He did not have to put in any effort at all on the journey since everyone was way too enthusiastic.

However, there were always one or two exceptions in a group. Vanilla looked back at Zhou Yingxue, who was in the group behind him. He could not understand what the woman had come here for and why she was selected during the previous screening.

Actually, the Anjing House was also unsure if there were any problems with Zhou Yingxue. The Anjing House had even sent Vanilla to the black market outside of Luoyang City to investigate her, but he did not find anything unusual.

Regarding the Anjing House's suspicion and speculation on Zhou Yingxue, they always felt something would happen wherever she went, but they did not have any conclusive evidence.

After entering the mountain range, Vanilla realized some problems as well. The woman named Zhou Yingxue did not seem to be that interested in the Anjing House trials anymore. She only cared about asking him the whereabouts of the other groups during the journey.

For the rest of the time, she focused all her attention on the exotic plants growing by the side of the paths. At the beginning, she did not interact with anyone at all.

Gradually, Zhou Yingxue even ordered the others to find her some exotic plants. Many people in the team could not tell who she was, so they could only obediently help her find them.

It was not that everyone was kind, but it was rumored the Anjing House would test them on many aspects. Perhaps, Zhou Yingxue was sent by the Anjing House to see if they had any compassion.

After all, everyone also felt Zhou Yingxue was a little unique. It was as though she had a different purpose in coming here.

Therefore, everyone assumed this uniqueness to mean she was an “examiner” hiding in the crowd.

When Vanilla thought about this, he was put in a dilemma. After all, there was a reason why the boss had arranged for him to lead this team. Everyone in the group was extremely important, and they might become the core members of the Anjing House in the future.

Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been specially assigned to the same team.

Zhou Yingxue had just followed the group into the mountains for a few days, but she already successfully obtained two seeds. One of them was an evolved sweet potato plant that did not have any uses other than producing a higher quantity of potatoes. It was especially sweet when roasted too.

Zhou Yingxue felt this plant was very compatible with the Potato Shooter, so she decided to name it the Sweet Potato Buddy from now on. This way, the Potato Shooter would not be that lonely anymore.

The other plant was a little stranger. After all, Zhou Yingxue still lacked wilderness survival experience, so she could not recognize what the plant was.

Not only could the plant grow on a rock, it could even crush it.

At this moment, Tang Hualong walked over from the other side and beckoned to Vanilla, “Vanilla!”

Zhou Yingxue perked up. “Vanilla? What kind of plant is vanilla? Old man, did you discover an exotic plant?” She was already planning to get up and turn “vanilla” into a seed.

Vanilla said with a dark expression at the side, “Vanilla is my name. Lady, just what is your purpose in coming here?” “I’m here to participate in the Anjing House trials, of course.” When Zhou Yingxue heard that vanilla was only a name, she immediately felt a little disappointed, and the way she looked at Vanilla turned disdainful.

Vanilla said unhappily, “Why do I get the feeling that you’re not interested in participating in the trials at all? Just look at the other participants! All of them are spirited and ready to take on the dangers in the mountains. But you? I’ll let it slide that you keep picking flowers and plants by yourself, but what’s with ordering others to do that for you as well?” “I’m a floral supernatural being. Since there’s exotic plants here, of course I have to collect them.” Zhou Yingxue was also getting unhappy. After following Ren Xiaosu around for a long time, even people like Luo Lan, Li Yingyun, Zhang Qingxi, and Xu Ke would treat

her courteously. Where did this Vanilla, an insignificant character, pop out from? How dare he yell at her.

Zhou Yingxue was a slightly superficial woman. Otherwise, she would not have bought ten rings and worn them all on her fingers. She was already starting to miss the days of being around Ren Xiaosu. No one dared to shout at her, and she could even throw her weight around and intimidate others.

Recently, Zhou Yingxue had been wondering if she had been too impulsive by coming to the Sacred Mountains. Since her master was definitely with Yang Xiaojin, what should she call Yang Xiaojin when she saw her? Madame? Mistress?

It felt a little strange no matter what. Besides, she came here in such a hurry that she did not bring along any gifts. Should she just give her ten rings to Yang Xiaojin? She wondered if Yang Xiaojin would like them or not.

Of course, Zhou Yingxue had also considered Yang Xiaojin might not want her hanging around Ren Xiaosu.

But it didn't matter to her. If the Central Plains were to continue getting more and more chaotic, she could simply head to the Northwest.

Regardless of whether Ren Xiaosu would return to the Northwest, she could tell the people of Fortress 178 she was Ren Xiaosu's maidservant. They would definitely be very polite towards her then.

Zhou Yingxue had heard from the Great Hoodwinker that Ren Xiaosu was the future commander of Fortress 178. In that case, the maidservant of the future commander would surely also enjoy a high status, right?

Even if she did not hang around Ren Xiaosu at that time, she could still lead a very comfortable life.

Zhou Yingxue was not useless eye candy either. She heard there was a lack of food in the Northwest and the residents barely had enough to sustain themselves. Sometimes, there would be famine when the harvest was not good.

Zhou Yingxue had heard Wang Fugui mention in town that he had brought such a large convoy to the Central Plains because he had the very important task of delivering crops.

Although the territory of the Northwest was large, a lot of it was unsuitable for growing crops. It was not that Fortress 178 was poor at management, but that there was a natural climate constraint to it.

Now that she possessed the Potato Shooter and Sweet Potato Buddy seeds, she could easily become the most popular person in the Northwest.

After all, the crops she planted with her own hands were not afraid of the harsh weather!

Thinking of this, Zhou Yingxue felt a little more at ease. In any case, she would have a place to go no matter what.

Chapter 712 Li Shentan joins the team

When Zhou Yingxue thought about how it did not seem necessary to join the Anjing House anymore, or even totally pointless to do so, her attitude towards Vanilla turned even more hostile. “Who the hell are you?! Why are you poking your nose into my business?”

Vanilla was stunned. This was the first time he had come across as fierce a candidate as her.

Before he could even flare up, Tang Hualong, who was standing next to him, interrupted, “The boss sent out a message saying White Mask has shown up in Cheng Yu’s group. Moreover, some of the Pyro Company spies have appeared in that group as well. She’s telling us to act carefully.”

Vanilla sneered, “Anyone could have guessed the Pyro Company has planted spies in the groups. Tonight, we’ll find an excuse to check everyone to see if they have any tattoos near their ribs. But I believe White Mask’s involvement in this mess is also something the boss wanted to see. I’m looking forward to seeing how much chaos he can cause for the Pyro Company.”

Beside them, Zhou Yingxue’s ears pricked up when she heard them mention White Mask.

Actually, Zhou Yingxue also did not know if White Mask was related to Ren Xiaosu in any way. However, she knew full well White Mask would always appear wherever her master went.

Although the maidservant was silly at times, she was not a fool. She could still discern a pattern like this very easily.

Moreover, the intel had mentioned that a sniper was also there to provide assistance when White Mask intercepted the Pyro Company’s convoy.

First of all, she had witnessed Ren Xiaosu’s sniping before. Second, she had also heard of Yang Xiaojin’s sniping before. Therefore, when Zhou Yingxue found out about this information, she felt it was very likely these two people were Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Zhou Yingxue interrupted the conversation between Vanilla and Tang Hualong and said, “Where is White Mask? Where’s their group now?”

Vanilla glanced at her and said, “Why are you asking that?”

“It’s because I want to find someone powerful to protect me, of course,” Zhou Yingxue said. “Based on how weak you look, how are you going to lead us into the Sacred Mountains? So we definitely have to seek out someone more powerful to lead the team, right?” Vanilla got so angry he nearly vomited blood. “What makes you think I’m weak? As a floral superhuman, where did you get the courage to mock a metallic superhuman from?” “But you look very weak,” Zhou Yingxue said disdainfully. “Moreover, you’ve displayed your combat capabilities in the Wang Consortium’s stronghold before, right? That news has long been spread. Everyone said you were a little slow at controlling metal and there wasn’t much you could do about that Dusk team.”

“Then what about you? You think you’re that powerful?” Vanilla stuck his neck out and shouted, “White Mask is over on the west side of the Sacred Mountains now, and we’re on the east side! Why don’t you walk through the Sacred Mountains to look for him then?”

When Zhou Yingxue heard this, she started having second thoughts, because she was not confident of crossing the Sacred Mountains by herself.

Of course, it was not that she was afraid of death. After all, even she was a little afraid of wielding her own powers. Zhou Yingxue was worried that if she walked straight through the Sacred Mountains, she might end up causing a huge commotion and disrupt her master’s plans as a result. If Vanilla knew the terrifying creeper vine in Stronghold 61 was in Zhou Yingxue’s possession now, he would probably change his tone too.

At this moment, Zhou Yingxue even felt a little smug as though she were a royal traveling incognito. Thinking of this, Zhou Yingxue got a little unhappy again. Her master had only randomly taken her around to collect exotic flowers and plants, but she ended up gaining something on the level of the creeper vine. Meanwhile with these people, she was only able to find a food crop after spending so much effort searching.

There must still be a lot more exotic plants in the Sacred Mountains, right? If she could only travel with her master into the mountains, couldn’t she collect the seeds with ease? And when she finally headed to the Northwest, the people of Fortress 178 would surely be amazed by her powerful ability.

She wondered if her master had any competitors in the Northwest. Power struggles should be very common in large and formidable organizations like Fortress 178, right? At that time, she could become her master’s right-hand woman and help him eliminate his enemies.

While Zhou Yingxue was letting her imagination run wild, the sound of footsteps suddenly came from the forest.

The footsteps sounded so orderly no one in the campsite could tell whether it was a person or a group of people approaching.

“Prepare for battle,” Vanilla said in a low voice.

Based on the intel they had received, there shouldn’t be any Anjing House members in the vicinity. Therefore, anyone who appeared here would most likely be an enemy.

Before this, they had been ambushed by the tarantulas, as well as encountered an attack by the Pyro Company members. So everyone knew full well it was not safe here. A moment later, Vanilla formed up more than 30 A-rank hitmen into a defensive formation. Some of the strength-based superhumans had already lifted heavy machine guns up to their hips, ready to set off a metal storm against the intruders.

“There’s no need to start a fight. I was just passing by.” A laughing voice rang out from the forest.

Vanilla frowned. He was surprised to see a group of people making their way out of the forest. But the strange thing was that these people had a blank expression on their faces, and they were even carrying a young man in a palanquin.

The people in the group were dressed in a mix of attire. Some of them were in casual wear while others were dressed in the Pyro Company's uniform. The people in casual wear looked like they were also here to invade the Sacred Mountains like their group, while the Pyro Company members were those who were sent after them.

These two groups of people had combined to form a new group that ended up protecting the young man and the little girl floating in the air. It was a sight that could not get any stranger than this.

"Hello, everyone, my name is Li Shentan," the young man said with a smile.

Li Shentan's name seemed to have a magical ring to it. When everyone heard it, their mood immediately sank.

It had been some time since the destruction of the Li Consortium in the Southwest. What supernatural being would not have heard of the name of the Demon Whisperer by now?

The people who surrounded themselves around Li Shentan were probably puppets he had hypnotized.

After entering the Sacred Mountains, everyone was totally exhausted. However, it was different for Li Shentan. He had actually hypnotized a few dozen people to protect himself and even made a palanquin for them to carry him on!

Vanilla's fingers were already wrapped around a metallic needle at his waist. "Why are you—".

But before he could finish speaking, Li Shentan suddenly jumped down from the palanquin and ran towards... Zhou Yingxue!

Li Shentan said happily, "What are you doing here? Where's your mas—your boss?"

Li Shentan was going to ask her where her master was. However, he thought it might expose some information about Zhou Yingxue and Ren Xiaosu, so he immediately corrected himself.

Zhou Yingxue looked at Li Shentan. "Wait a minute, aren't you that magician from Luoyang City? What are you doing here?" "I came here to have some fun." Li Shentan said matter-of-factly, "I had wanted to go to the South to watch the typhoons, but didn't something more interesting crop up here? That's why I'm here. So, where's your boss?"

"Why are you looking for him?" Zhou Yingxue said disdainfully, "Is my boss someone you can meet as you like?"

Li Shentan said with a serious look, "I am your boss's best friend!"

Just a simple exchange of a few words had left Vanilla and the others standing at the side dumbfounded.

Chapter 713 Li Shentan's friend

Li Shentan did not care about anyone else as he stood in the middle of the Anjing House group of hitmen. It was as though he were not worried for his safety at all.

Instead, it was Si Liren, who was carrying a box on her back, who kept a close eye on everyone in case somebody tried to sneak attack Li Shentan.

Zhou Yingxue glanced at Li Shentan. "My boss only said you were his friend. He didn't say you were his best friend."

"Really?" Li Shentan's eyes lit up. "He said I'm his friend?"

He didn't at all care about the latter half of Zhou Yingxue's reply. Instead, it seemed he was happy enough to hear that Ren Xiaosu regarded him as a friend.

Around them, Vanilla and the other Anjing House hitmen were looking at Li Shentan and Zhou Yingxue in bewilderment.

Actually, Vanilla was certain the young man before him was Li Shentan and not actually an impostor. After all, who had nothing better to do than impersonate the Demon Whisperer? Besides, no one was capable of doing that either.

But this was a really strange situation. Although Li Shentan claimed he was best friends with Zhou Yingxue's boss, Zhou Yingxue seemed to despise him.

To this day, stories of Li Shentan had been spreading around the whole world to the point he was really terrifying. He was so scary that even babies would stop crying.

What was so extraordinary about Zhou Yingxue's boss that made Li Shentan so eager to be his friend?

Moreover, Li Shentan seemed to be very happy just because he was addressed as a friend by the other party. All of that had subverted their understanding of this person.

Zhou Yingxue was a supernatural being, while her boss was also a friend of Li Shentan's.

Vanilla felt like he was going nuts. Just who the fuck was her boss?

Wait a minute! After Zhou Yingxue heard White Mask get mentioned earlier, she immediately switched topics and asked them about him. Could that legendary and mysterious White Mask be Zhou Yingxue's boss?

Vanilla was pondering if there was such a possibility, and the conclusion he reached was that it was highly plausible!

Vanilla was an elite hitman whose expertise was taking out his mission targets by making it look like an accident. Even the Kong Consortium's intelligence agency could not find anything unusual for a long time after Kong Erdong was assassinated. A person like him had an extremely keen eye for detail, so he was able to deduce that Zhou Yingxue's boss was White Mask in just an instant!

For some reason, Vanilla actually felt a little emotional at this moment. He had finally discovered some clues about White Mask.

White Mask had been exceptionally mysterious ever since he first appeared. No one knew where he came from, and there were no probable suspects linked to him. He was just an extremely mysterious person. Everyone was trying to guess who White Mask was, but there was a lack of key clues regarding his identity.

Meanwhile, Vanilla felt like he was a prophet who had grasped something no one else knew about yet.

As long as he followed the lead through Zhou Yingxue, he might just be able to find out the true identity of White Mask.

However, he would have to get past Li Shentan first.

Vanilla turned his gaze to the few dozen people standing behind Li Shentan and saw them standing there in a daze without moving. Everyone knew Li Shentan was good at hypnotism and could gain complete control over others without them realizing it. Who knew if Li Shentan would control all of them as well?

In this era of the "Rise of Gods," Li Shentan was defined as a "demigod" by people. Of course, the label of "demigod" had to be in quotation marks, since everyone's assessment of Li Shentan was exaggerated to signify how strong he was and did not literally mean he was representative of the gods. But who knew just what heights Li Shentan's power were really at now?

Actually, Vanilla's anxiety was totally uncalled for. There was not only one "demigod" standing in front of him at this moment but two.

At this moment, Zhou Yingxue said, "I don't know where my boss is either. If you want to find him, you'll have to head into the Sacred Mountains with me. I think he's there."

"OK, let's head into the Sacred Mountains together then," Li Shentan said happily. When he snapped his fingers, people behind him immediately came forward to set up a tent for him. Some of them even went to collect firewood while the others began cleaning up the grounds and started a fire for cooking.

With just a snap of his fingers, dozens of people suddenly got down to work. However, they only served Li Shentan alone.

This scene was out of this world!

"Little Liren, come and sit down. I got them to cook for you," Li Shentan said.

"I want to eat sweet potatoes," Si Liren muttered.

When Zhou Yingxue saw how adorable Si Liren was, she was overwhelmed with love. "I have some evolved sweet potatoes here that are scrumptious."

Afterwards, Zhou Yingxue took out two sweet potatoes from her backpack.

When the others saw this joyous exchange, they did not know what to say. Their minds were no longer able to keep up with these changes.

Moreover, with Li Shentan around, none of them dared to act rashly. They were all afraid they would offend this legendary demon.

Li Shentan looked at the crowd with a smile. "What are you all standing around for? Have a seat. I'm in a good mood today, so why don't I do some magic for everyone?"

"No, you don't have to." The group of people quickly shook their heads.

Li Shentan said in a stunned manner, "You all don't like my magic tricks? Are you looking down on me?"

"No, it's not that." Everyone shook their heads again.

In the eyes of normal people, everyone at the campsite was mysterious and powerful. But in front of Li Shentan, this group of people felt an inexplicable sense of reverence.

Li Shentan was way too famous!

Some of the people here who were not supernatural beings had heard rumors of Li Shentan killing people like flies. They could not overcome the psychological fear of him so easily by just cheering themselves on in their heads.

Vanilla could only sigh in his mind. Just as he thought his group was extremely easy to handle, he encountered a legendary supernatural being, Li Shentan. What the hell!

Was Li Shentan about to seize control of the group?

After Vanilla calmed down a little, he pointed at the busy crowd of people around Li Shentan and said, "Are they under your control?"

"That's right." Li Shentan said with a grin as he took out a deck of cards and started shuffling it, "But you don't have to worry that I'll control you all. When I encountered these people, they were in the middle of a battle. If I didn't control them, many of them would've definitely died. After the expedition to the Sacred Mountains, I'll release them from my control. At that time, they'll have to thank me for saving their lives, don't you think?"

Vanilla gave a mental sigh. Li Shentan's logic was indeed different from normal people's. He was indeed a lunatic as the rumors said.

In Li Shentan's opinion, he was not trying to control these people at all. Instead, he wanted to "save" them so they would be spared from the pain of war.

If it were anyone else who said that, Vanilla would have scoffed at this logic. But when it was Li Shentan who said it, it felt like it was only reasonable to do so.

If their group encountered the Pyro Company later, should they fight or not? If they did, what if they were also “saved” by Li Shentan?

Vanilla was unsure whether he could resist Li Shentan’s hypnotism!

He secretly decided that if they really encountered the Pyro Company members in the next few days, he would quickly shout that Li Shentan was here and that nobody should make a move.

With Li Shentan’s arrival, Vanilla felt there would probably be a lot of trouble on this expedition to the Sacred Mountains.

Chapter 714 Trample the mountains underfoot

Li Shentan’s arrival was not necessarily bad news for Vanilla. At the very least, they would not need so many people to keep watch at night anymore. When Li Shentan was ready to go to bed, the people under Li Shentan’s control stood outside the campsite in a circle and held hands with each other. Vanilla suddenly felt like he wanted to play the Drop the Handkerchief.[1]

Disregarding whether this was a strange sight or not, with such a force guarding around the campsite tirelessly, no one could successfully launch a sneak attack at all.

Just as Li Shentan was about to enter his tent, he suddenly stepped back. “Oh yeah, I forgot something important.”

When he said that, everyone at the campsite stopped what they were doing for fear that Li Shentan would do something crazy.

Li Shentan walked to the center of the campsite and said, “Listen, will our friends from the Pyro Company please turn around?”

With that, around 30 people standing guard outside that were under his control turned around to face the campsite.

Then Li Shentan said, “You all were active in this vicinity. I’m guessing you all were waiting for someone to give you a signal, right? See if there are any of your fellow members in this campsite. If there are, point them out to me.”

Vanilla was stunned. When he received news from Cheng Yu’s side during the day saying they had discovered some Pyro Company spies in their group, he was still thinking about identifying them based on the tattoos near their ribs.

However, his plans were disrupted by the arrival of Li Shentan. He had completely forgotten about this matter.

And now, Li Shentan was actually using the people under his control to identify their accomplices.

“He can even do that?” Vanilla muttered softly.

Next to him, Tang Hualong gave a wry smile. “The Demon Whisperer is very eccentric and unpredictable. I wonder who’s capable of being friends with him.”

Right at this moment, two Pyro Company members suddenly raised their hands and pointed at two people in the campsite.

The two who were pointed out looked terrified. "We aren't members of the Pyro Company. We don't have any tattoos near our ribs. You can have a look if you don't believe it."

Li Shentan clapped his hands and started laughing. "Your Pyro Company was the one that spread the information about those tattoos to the public. Wasn't that precisely so it could throw us off in times like these? I won't trust any common knowledge that everyone is aware of."

It was very easy for humans to trust what was known as common knowledge to them. However, how could there be so much common knowledge in life? Most of them were just castles of lies.

So only at this moment did the others in the campsite finally understand that not all Pyro Company members were tattooed at their ribs. Some of them simply did not have any tattoos at all.

Vanilla sighed. They had been very cautious when they were screening the candidates for this group. But in the end, two Pyro Company members still managed to sneak through.

The two Pyro Company members suddenly saw Li Shentan take a silver coin out of his pocket. Li Shentan said with a smile, "Let's play a game of heads or tails. If you guess right, I'll spare your lives."

The two Pyro Company members looked at each other. If it were someone else that said this to them, they would be lying. How could the Anjing House possibly let the two of them from the Pyro Company leave? However, when Li Shentan used a game to decide their fate, it somehow sounded more convincing. One of the Pyro Company members said, "I'll guess tails."

Li Shentan nodded. "Watch carefully."

As he spoke, he flipped the silver coin high up into the air with his thumb. There was an engraving of a young woman on the heads' side of the exquisite silver coin. She had bright eyes, white teeth, and a graceful smile on her face. On the back, there was an engraving of a bouquet of lilies.

No consortium in this world had ever issued such a silver coin. Li Shentan had personally carved it.

As the silver coin flew past the bridge of Li Shentan's nose, it hovered at the position of his eyes and kept spinning.

Everyone was waiting to see the outcome of the toss, but it just remained suspended in the air and did not fall back down!

Vanilla shouted, "Everyone, shut your eyes!"

However, it was too late. Many of those in the campsite turned blank at the same time, with only a few managing to escape the hypnotism.

Li Shentan looked at Vanilla and said with a smile, "You've got a pretty quick reaction."

Vanilla's face darkened as he was immediately prepared to start a killing spree. Although Li Shentan had a reputation, Vanilla was no small fry who could easily be manipulated either.

Honestly, though, no one expected Li Shentan's hypnotism to be so difficult to guard against. But before he could even make any moves, he heard Li Shentan say with a smile, "Other than the Pyro Company members, the rest will have their hypnotism lifted after I snap my fingers."

When he snapped his fingers, some of the people, including those who had been under Li Shentan's control earlier, woke up from their hypnotism. Only the Pyro Company members remained standing there in a daze.

Vanilla was stunned. What was Li Shentan trying to do? Why couldn't he grasp the logic of his actions?

He had thought Li Shentan was trying to use this opportunity to control everyone. But now, even the people he had been controlling earlier had their hypnotism dispelled. Just what was Li Shentan planning? Nearby, Si Liren, who had been staring at the silver coin, curled her lips and said, "I'm still waiting to see the outcome. How can you not keep your promises?"

Li Shentan smiled and said matter-of-factly, "What's the point of asking a mental patient like me why I can't keep my promises?"

Si Liren curled her lips again. Li Shentan was always using his mental illness as an excuse these days. It was as though mental patients could just do whatever they liked!

Those who had just regained consciousness felt like they had been in a long dream. They stood where they were and did not know what to do.

They could not even remember what happened while they were under Li Shentan's control.

A majority of them were feeling a little weak. That was because they had not been eating or sleeping ever since they got hypnotized by Li Shentan. They were fully drawing on their life force to maintain their mobility.

Among these people, some were from the various consortiums, and there were Anjing House members as well. Vanilla quickly had his subordinates settle the people down. Then Li Shentan turned his head to Zhou Yingxue. "Why didn't you get hypnotized just now?"

"What do you mean by why?" Zhou Yingxue said disdainfully, "That was just some party trick."

Li Shentan smiled and said, "It looks like you aren't typical either. No wonder you became his maid."

Zhou Yingxue beamed. "At least you're observant."

Although Li Shentan's hypnosis just now was done casually without using his full strength, it was still not something anyone could withstand so easily.

Since Zhou Yingxue was not affected, it showed that Zhou Yingxue's mental strength far exceeded that of normal people's. And the relationship between a supernatural being and their mental strength corresponded to how powerful they were.

There were only a few people in this world Li Shentan could not see through. For example, when he first saw Ren Xiaosu back at the Li Consortium's stronghold, he could sense his mental strength was unique, vast like the sea. Li Shentan asked Zhou Yingxue in a whisper, "Do you really not know where your boss is? I think you should also want to see him, right? Tell me where he is, and we can go and look for him together."

Zhou Yingxue carefully sized up Li Shentan. Ren Xiaosu had indeed said Li Shentan was a friend. Moreover, when they were at Luoyang City, both parties had also expressed their attitudes clearly. At the very least, Ren Xiaosu did not have any clear animosity for Li Shentan, and it was the same for Li Shentan.

She thought for a moment and said, "He should be on the west side. We're separated by the Sacred Mountains between us."

Li Shentan laughed and said, "When you want to meet your friends and the mountains are in your way, trample on them."

Chapter 715 The mystery of the statue

In the evening, Vanilla briefed Yang Anjing after Li Shentan had gotten rid of the Pyro Company spies in their group. His main point was to inform the other groups that not everyone from the Pyro Company were tattooed with their serial numbers.

At the very least, the two Pyro Company members discovered in their group were not tattooed.

It might not necessarily be useful to let the other teams know about this. After all, without any identifiable symbols or Li Shentan's method of puppeteering, it would be very difficult to weed out the Pyro Company's spies.

They could only be careful to avoid falling into the Pyro Company's trap.

After Cheng Yu received the news, he started thinking back on everyone on the team to see if he could identify who might be suspicious.

The first person that came to mind was actually Wang Yun.

That was because Wang Yun left the group the most times during their journey. Although he did not know what Wang Yun was doing, relaying intel was essentially a solo operation. Therefore, Wang Yun was the most suspicious. However, Cheng Yu immediately ruled out Wang Yun. That was because he knew Wang Yun's true identity. As the Kong Consortium and the Pyro Company were neighbors, there would often be friction between them. If Wang Yun were a Pyro Company member, how could he possibly get into a place like the intelligence agency where political background checks were extremely strict?

Then Cheng Yu also ruled out Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin. However, it was not because of what Ren Xiaosu did but because of Luo Lan.

After all, the animosity between the Qing Consortium and the Pyro Company all these years could not have been faked. It was undeniable that the Qing Consortium had killed many members of the Pyro Company. If Ren Xiaosu were really Luo Lan's backer, he would definitely not be related to the Pyro Company.

Cheng Yu locked onto 12 people as the prime suspects. They were the two teams with five and seven members respectively.

The reason he suspected them was because their people often disappeared somewhere as well.

Furthermore, Cheng Yu also took note that more than half of these people had been keeping watch on the night the middle-aged man carried out a sneak attack on White Mask. By picking this timing, who knew if it might be related to this as well?

Cheng Yu did not tell the others about this. Instead, he decided to observe them for a while more to avoid alerting the enemy.

When the night sky was completely covered in darkness and the night watchmen were about to switch shifts, a strange power suddenly enveloped the shattered statue at a spot far away from the campsite.

The statue had been completely smashed by Luo Lan, and the fragments alone probably numbered in the dozens.

But under the control of this mysterious power, the dozens of fragments actually started moving by themselves and strangely reassembled back together to form a complete statue.

Moreover, with the body and face of the statue fully covered in cracks, it made the smiling statue look exceptionally terrifying and ferocious.

Following this, the statue slowly lifted off the ground and flew towards the campsite at a constant speed.

As it passed through the forest, it did not touch a single leaf or a single weed. It was silent as it approached the campsite.

The statue was approaching the flickering flame of the campsite. When it was about five meters away, the statue suddenly came to a stop and seemed to be spying on the movements in the campsite.

At this moment, there was still another half an hour before the night watchmen switched shifts. Right now, it was the most tiring period for these people.

The statue started moving again and flew towards the entrance of a tent in the campsite.

But when it was about to enter the campsite, a figure leaped out of nowhere and attacked it with a kick. With a crash, the statue shattered to pieces.

Wang Yun opened his eyes in the tent. Through the gap in his tent, he looked silently at Ren Xiaosu, who was standing at the edge of the campsite. The others in the campsite were also alarmed and trickled out of their tents. Cheng Yu asked with a frown, "What happened?"

"Oh, this statue suddenly flew into the campsite. I don't know how, but it somehow managed to stick itself back together." Ren Xiaosu said in a very relaxed manner, "But don't worry, I've already smashed it to pieces. Those of you who are already up and scheduled for night watch in the second half of the night, don't go back to sleep. Just take over my shift."

Wang Yun's eyes twitched a little. Ren Xiaosu was one of the night watchmen for the first half of the night, but he didn't expect Ren Xiaosu would foil his plan in such a straightforward manner. In truth, Luo Lan and the others had guessed correctly. This statue was indeed Wang Yun's doing

If a statue weighing dozens of kilograms wanted to get into the campsite quietly, it would definitely require the power of a supernatural being to bring it in.

Meanwhile, Wang Yun's superpower was to control the air. He could use it to kill people without leaving a trace.

There were all kinds of strange superpowers in this world, and Wang Yun was very satisfied with his since it was very well-suited for his profession.

When he was still serving in the field, he had used this power to assassinate many people. There were no murder weapons, fingerprints, or any evidence that could be found.

Furthermore, Wang Yun himself was also pleasantly surprised by his amazing ability to control air.

His motive for killing people this time was because he had discovered his competitors' subordinates in the group.

Although the five of them had never appeared in the intelligence agency's records before, Wang Yun had a photographic memory. He could clearly remember these five people had participated in the selection process of the Kong Consortium's intelligence agency. However, they had all failed to get through it.

Thinking about it now, they were probably recruited and trained as suicide agents by his competitors after they were eliminated from the intelligence agency's selection process.

He had never expected his competitors would still send people to disrupt his mission even though he had shown signs of backing down by leaving the Kong Consortium. In that case, how could Wang Yun possibly not think about killing them?

When it came to conflicts of interest and status within the consortiums, it was always a matter of life and death. Wang Yun could not afford to fail in his operation.

Later on, after he realized the statue might have attracted a lot of poisonous bugs because there was a child's skeleton in it, he planned to use the statues to help him kill others. It could even end up frightening the other team members and mentally exhaust them with fear.

He was only trying his hand at this strategy with yesterday's incident. Wang Yun was quite happy when he saw the reaction of the others at that time. However, he did not expect someone would kick and smash the statue to pieces today. Yesterday, the statue had only been broken into several dozens of pieces. But now, the head of the statue was almost pulverized.

However, this incident still caused a panic among the people at the campsite. Although Ren Xiaosu had smashed the statue to pieces, what they were terrified of was why the statue could piece itself back together and even follow them.

Could there really be something spooky going on in the mountains?

Cheng Yu asked Ren Xiaosu, "How did it get here?"

A person next to him asked anxiously, "Could someone be playing a trick on us?"

Actually, everyone just wanted to be sure if it was someone manipulating this from behind the scenes. As long as it was someone's doing, it would not be that scary anymore and would prove it had nothing to do with mysticism.

Ren Xiaosu looked at everyone and comforted, "It flew over here by itself."

With that, everyone got even more afraid.

However, Ren Xiaosu was not lying. It had indeed flown over by itself.

Chapter 716 Bestselling lipstick

As Ren Xiaosu was the one who personally witnessed and smashed the statue, he naturally had to describe the events in detail to everyone. "At the time, I was keeping watch right here when a statue suddenly floated over. It looked extremely ferocious after fixing itself up from the shattered fragments yesterday. Do y'all understand what I'm saying? Its face was full of cracks..."

At the side, Cheng Yu's expression darkened. He realized the more Ren Xiaosu talked about it, the eerier the atmosphere became. When he looked at the expressions of the others around him, they were basically the same as his. Even though they were very nervous, they needed to understand what happened exactly.

After Ren Xiaosu finished talking, he didn't care what the rest of them thought and just went to bed.

For some reason, Ren Xiaosu felt it had been too peaceful since they entered the Sacred Mountains.

The statue incident was definitely someone's doing. When the statue was secretly observing from outside the campsite, Ren Xiaosu was secretly observing the statue as well. Then he realized the statue was watching the tent where the girlfriend of that person who had died earlier was staying.

Therefore, Luo Lan's guess was most likely correct. The murderer was Wang Yun. Putting this matter aside, they had actually not encountered the Pyro Company members ever since they came into the Sacred Mountains.

Yet this place was the Pyro Company's core strategic location. If they had encountered sneak attacks by the Pyro Company before coming in here, why weren't there any more attacks after they had arrived?

This left Ren Xiaosu feeling wary instead. Whatever tricks the Pyro Company had in store for them next would probably be even stranger!

The entire mountain range covered a very large area, spanning hundreds of kilometers in length. Based on their current marching speed, they would probably arrive at the true center of the Sacred Mountains in another ten days.

While Ren Xiaosu and the others continued venturing deeper into the Sacred Mountains, a convoy of off-road vehicles had arrived outside Stronghold 144 in the Northwest from the Central Plains.

Zhang Xiaoman had been waiting here for quite a while now. But this time, he was only an escort. The officer in charge of welcoming the convoy was Wang Fengyuan, the intelligence director of Fortress 178.

Generally, any matters that required Wang Fengyuan to oversee personally would be handled with the utmost confidentiality.

Next to him, Zhang Xiaoman probed, "Boss Wang, who's the person coming this time? They even needed you to come here personally?"

Wang Fengyuan glanced at him. "Oh, I haven't seen you for a few months, but our Zhang Xiaoman knows how to use honorifics now. Why is it that the higher your rank is, the more polite you become?" "Heh." Zhang Xiaoman did not mind Wang Fengyuan's sarcasm. "This is an improvement that I've made."

"Not bad, not bad at all." Wang Fengyuan nodded approvingly. Then Zhang Xiaoman realized Wang Fengyuan had simply changed the topic. It did not seem like he intended to answer his question at all.

When the convoy of off-road vehicles reached the base of the stronghold walls, the people in the vehicles did not even need to get out of their cars. Wang Fengyuan got into one of the vehicles, and they drove off farther northwest. The rest of the convoy that had traveled here from afar was following right behind.

Zhang Xiaoman watched as the convoy drove off and curled his lips. "He always acts so secretively."

The convoy continued to drive for more than a 100 kilometers westward before finally coming to a stop at a hill. Someone had already set up a temporary military camp in the flat of that hill. It was not very large in size, and Lin Yuze, who was in charge of the logistics here, was beckoning to his cooks to make food.

When Zhang Jinglin heard the commotion outside, he walked out of the military tent he was in. Someone from the convoy that had just arrived quickly retrieved a wheelchair from the trunk and carried Wang Shengzhi, who was sitting in the backseat, onto it.

Wang Shengzhi kept smiling throughout and even had time to wave at Zhang Jinglin. "Long time no see. When I passed by Stronghold 144 earlier, I noticed a lot of merchant trucks were parked outside. It looks like the decision to reopen the trade route was right."

Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "It's always a good thing to do business with one another. But you probably wouldn't have expected that the bestselling product in the Northwest from your Central Plains would turn out to be lipstick."

Wang Shengzhi really was taken aback. As the true controller of the Wang Consortium, even if he were to pay attention to the ongoings of the trade route, it would be data related to staple goods. He really had not expected that lipstick would be the bestselling product in the Northwest.

Even Wang Fugui, the biggest lipstick distributor, could not have expected that either.

Back then, Zhang Xiaoman had forced some of the local businessmen to pick up the goods when Wang Fugui brought in a few truckloads of lipstick with him. The businessmen were all complaining the goods might be left unsold on the shelves.

But who knew that Wang Fugui would have such great foresight? This batch of lipstick everyone thought might end up unsold actually turned out to be the hottest item as soon as it was released on the market!

Before this, everyone was wondering who would want to buy lipstick with their spare cash when there was still a shortage of necessities in the Northwest.

In the end, it turned out they did not understand a woman's love for beauty.

Later, other people also wanted to jump on the bandwagon and start a lipstick business, but something unexpected happened. Zhang Xiaoman, that hooligan, came up with the idea of issuing an exclusive distribution license for lipstick and awarded it to Wang Fugui.

With that, the lipstick business essentially became Wang Fugui's exclusive source of income.

When Zhang Xiaoman's superior, Zhou Yinglong, heard about this, he wanted to get someone to take care of this matter. But on second thought, since lipstick was not considered a strategic resource, and this matter also involved Ren Xiaosu, he decided to just let it slide. Nowadays, whoever encountered Wang Fugui on the trade route would have to greet him politely and address him as Mr. Wang or Director Wang. Everyone knew Wang Fugui had to have a backer in Fortress 178. Otherwise, he could not possibly enjoy a monopoly on the lipstick business.

Some people even approached Wang Fugui to ask for his help in recommending someone to solve their troubles.

However, Wang Fugui was someone who knew his limits. He just focused on doing his own business and did not care about other people's messes.

Wang Fugui felt that since Ren Xiaosu would be taking over Fortress 178 one day, he did not want to tarnish his reputation.

Zhang Jinglin looked at Wang Shengzhi. "It's no longer peaceful in the Central Plains, right? Why do you dare to come to the Northwest so lightly escorted?" Wang Shengzhi said with a smile, "The troublemakers have all headed to the Sacred Mountains. That's why I've ventured out like this."

"You were the one who lured them there, right?" Zhang Jinglin got straight to the point. "Haha, what delicious food did Chef Lin prepare today?" Wang Shengzhi said as he pushed his wheelchair into the military camp by himself. He did not seem to want to answer the question.

Actually, what Zhang Jinglin really wanted to ask was whether the Anjing House and the Wang Consortium had already joined forces and set a trap for everyone in the world.

Ever since the cave-in of East Lake, the wide net the Anjing House had cast for so many years started tightening and began to affect the Central Plains as well. But that was only the beginning, and the impact was still not widespread yet.

But now, the entire Central Plains had sprung into action over the No. 001 Experimental. Zhang Jinglin felt that 70% of the supernatural beings in the Central Plains had already ventured into the mountains. Why was Wang Shengzhi doing this? He was probably trying to eliminate all of the unstable elements that were in his way.

Wang Shengzhi suddenly turned around and said with a smile, "Mr. Zhang, are you guarding against me by coming to an agreement with the Qing Consortium to connect their railway to the Northwest so they can trade with the Central Plains through you all?"

Chapter 717 The Wang Consortium's intentions

While everyone's attention was over at the Pyro Company's Sacred Mountains, Wang Shengzhi suddenly took a small group of his people and traveled to the Northwest to hold a brief, secret meeting with Zhang Jinglin in the wilderness.

Wang Shengzhi clearly placed great importance on this meeting. If not, he would not have come all the way to the Northwest under such secrecy.

Faced with Wang Shengzhi's question, Zhang Jinglin just smiled and said, "You're thinking too much. We're only seeking mutual trade benefits with the Qing Consortium. We've never thought about guarding against anyone before." "I'm relieved then," Wang Shengzhi said with a smile.

When the two of them entered the temporary military camp, Wang Shengzhi looked at the young officer who was protecting Zhang Jinglin from a distance and said with a smile, "You're Xu Xianchu, aren't you? I've heard about you; you're very impressive."

Xu Xianchu remained unmoved as he continued to stand guard.

Nowadays, supernatural beings were constantly surfacing, and their superpowers were getting more and more varied. In order to prevent anyone from assassinating Zhang Jinglin, the high-ranking generals

in the fortress suggested that Xu Xianchu be transferred to the garrison troops to ensure Zhang Jinglin's safety.

Xu Xianchu was really good in combat. Although it was a waste of his talent to manage the garrison troops' fighting forces, no one was more suitable than Xu Xianchu for this role. In Zhou Yinglong's own words, no matter who tried to assassinate Zhang Jinglin, Xu Xianchu would be able to hold them off until reinforcements arrived by using that large cauldron of his as a barrier.

Xu Xianchu's cauldron could definitely fend off more than a dozen enemies.

The only thing that everyone was puzzled about was why Xu Xianchu's cauldron was still growing larger at such a fast pace.

Lin Yuze ordered the cooks to bring over a small heating stove for Zhang Jinglin and Wang Shengzhi to keep warm in the tent. Wang Shengzhi's aide brought over a blanket for him to cover his legs with before everyone stepped out.

The conversation between Zhang Jinglin and Wang Shengzhi was definitely a confidential one, and even Wang Fengyuan had no intention of being in the tent with them.

Zhang Jinglin placed a wine flask by the stove and warmed it up. Then he said, "You're not the kind of person to go on a trip for no apparent reason. Tell me, what is it that you want to talk about on this trip to the Northwest?"

Wang Shengzhi said with a smile, "Now that the trade route between the Northwest and the Wang Consortium has been opened, our two organizations should already have a closer relationship with one another. In that case, can't I drop by since I have nothing to do?"

"There's no need to beat around the bush between us." Zhang Jinglin said with a smile, "The weather in the Northwest is cold, and the soldiers outside are still suffering from the cold. If we can finish our talk early, they can head back to the barracks earlier. What's the Wang Consortium up to?"

"To restore order to the world, of course," Wang Shengzhi said. "How are you going to do that?" "With the artificial intelligence." Wang Shengzhi looked at Zhang Jinglin and said earnestly, "I know your Fortress 178 has always treated the refugees very well. Yes, I understand that anyone with a tinge of conscience will not divide the human race into different classes of people after a disaster. But our Wang Consortium is even bolder since we've accepted refugees right into a stronghold."

"It sounds a little pompous when you put it that way." Zhang Jinglin lit a cigarette for himself.

"Stronghold 61's acceptance of refugees was only a strategy against the Zhou and the Kong Consortiums. Weren't a lot of refugees still sent to the various strongholds' towns and factories by you all?"

"That was only at the beginning." Wang Shengzhi said, "What I was most worried about was that it would be difficult to manage the refugees after they got into the stronghold. That could eventually lead to potential trouble. But now, the Wang Consortium's AI is mature enough. Although Stronghold 61 has the largest number of refugees, it has the best security."

“That’s the fear that you, Wang Shengzhi, have exchanged for thousands of lives.” Zhang Jinglin sighed and said, “I also hope the Northwest can become a peaceful place and that everyone will not have to worry about others committing crimes that hurt them. But how did your Wang Consortium manage to achieve that? The criminals are sentenced to death even for a minor offense like theft, so of course no one dares commit any more crimes.” “That’s just a small price to pay.” Wang Shengzhi said, “If I don’t do it this way, do you have a better solution? I’m not a cold-blooded killer, but it’s a fact that the people in Stronghold 61 do not need to close their doors at night. Although the Wang Consortium has taken a little detour in the pursuit of order, we’re still the first to arrive at that target.”

Zhang Jinglin shook his head. “Actually, what I dislike most is the phrase ‘taken a little detour.’ Anyone can say that very easily, but the sacrifices made by taking this detour is something that many people ignore.”

“Then please tell me your views.” Wang Shengzhi sat up straight in his wheelchair.

“As for whether the refugees should have equal human rights,” Zhang Jinglin sighed and said, “What you’re planning is to lock everyone inside the strongholds and let the AI run their daily lives. However, I prefer that stronghold residents can get to see the outside world. The gates will no longer be permanently closed, and there will be no need for a person to be of a certain status before they can walk in or out of a stronghold.”

“How are you going to deal with the refugees who have committed crimes in the stronghold? Are you not going to arrest them?” Wang Shengzhi asked.

“I’m not defending criminals.” Zhang Jinglin shook his head and said, “I just feel that your Wang Consortium is acting too ruthless in handling things. And most importantly, I don’t trust the AI.”

“You and I both know full well how bad humans are.” Wang Shengzhi said calmly, “Even in Fortress 178, there will still be corruption or inaction. You’re also aware of how I became crippled. If no one was bribed back then and that criminal was put through proper reform in prison, there would definitely be fewer victims like me. But can you make sure that everyone is fair and honest? You can’t, and neither can I! But the AI can do that. It’s the fairest third party that no one can bribe, and it will never get tired or slack off either.”

“So when you said that you wanted to restore order to the Alliance of Strongholds, you would have to first take control of the entire Alliance of Strongholds.” Zhang Jinglin said, “Actually, you’re already prepared to start a war, right? Luoyang City was just the beginning. You also have some people helping you to get rid of some of the unstable elements in the Sacred Mountains this time. Then a new pie will emerge, and the process of splitting that pie will be your Wang Consortium’s opportunity to take control.”

Only at this moment did they reach the main topic of their conversation. Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, “What I want is for the Northwest and the Central Plains to work together to keep the southwestern Qing Consortium in check when the war starts.”

“And what will our Northwest get in return?” Zhang Jinglin asked calmly.

“A world without the threat of nuclear weapons and a stable stronghold order. If external enemies attack Fortress 178 again, the entire Alliance of Strongholds will become Fortress 178’s strongest backing,” Wang Shengzhi said.

One of the conditions in the agreement between the Qing Consortium and Fortress 178 was that if any external enemies were to attack, the Qing Consortium would have to deploy their troops to cut off the retreat route and supply lines of the external enemies via the Western Highlands.

This was because Zhang Jinglin would never forget Fortress 178’s duty regardless of the situation.

Right now, Wang Shengzhi was also promising the same to Zhang Jinglin. However, Zhang Jinglin shook his head. “Only that? I’m afraid it’s not enough.”

Chapter 718 I won’t get to see that

Before this, Wang Shengzhi had not approached the Zhou Consortium and the Kong Consortium to discuss this matter. This meant he was not particularly worried they were a threat.

And now that he came to the Northwest, it was not because he was worried that Fortress 178 would hinder his plans. He needed the Northwest to form an alliance with him to keep the southwestern Qing Consortium under control.

Ultimately, Zhang Jinglin felt that Wang Shengzhi had personally come to the Northwest at such a time because he was afraid of Qing Zhen.

Of course, Zhang Jinglin could understand this since he was very familiar with that young man called Qing Zhen. Almost none of the consortiums in this world would underestimate this person.

Those who dared to look down on Qing Zhen were either dead, or just waiting for their time to be up.

Right now, the reason why Wang Shengzhi was looking to join forces with Fortress 178 was probably because of the Qing Consortium.

Therefore, if Zhang Jinglin were to accept Wang Shengzhi’s offer, the Northwest would definitely have to stand with the Wang Consortium and pit themselves against the Qing Consortium in the future.

Zhang Jinglin was not afraid of Qing Zhen, and neither was Fortress 178 afraid of the Qing Consortium. However, it did not have to come to that.

The key point was that “it did not have to come to that.” Their lives in the Northwest were already getting better, so why would he want to expand his ambitions and drag the entirety of Fortress 178 into the flames of war? This was the best time for the Northwest to recuperate.

“I’m not moved by what you are offering.” Zhang Jinglin said, “Whether the Wang Consortium will really do anything when Fortress 178 is faced with the external enemies in the future is just empty talk now. Besides, I’m not interested in war either.”

Zhang Jinglin had said before that war would not save humanity.

Wang Shengzhi looked at Zhang Jinglin and said with a smile, "What if you're the one taking control of the Alliance of Strongholds? When the entire Alliance of Strongholds under your control, are you still gonna be afraid that I'll make empty promises?"

This time, it was Zhang Jinglin that got stunned.

Honestly speaking, their conversation thus far was well within Zhang Jinglin's expectations. When Wang Shengzhi came to visit, Zhang Jinglin already knew why he had come to the Northwest.

But when they reached this part of the conversation, it suddenly exceeded Zhang Jinglin's expectations.

He frowned and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean the Alliance of Strongholds will no longer be under the control of the consortiums in the future." Wang Shengzhi said calmly, "The consortiums will be history, and future successors to the Alliance of Strongholds will no longer be hereditary. As for the first leader of the alliance, it will be you, Mr. Zhang."

Zhang Jinglin looked at Wang Shengzhi seriously. "You've been planning for so long and putting in so much effort just so you can benefit others? You aren't after anything?"

Wang Shengzhi said, "I only have one request, and it's that the Alliance of Strongholds must have its order kept by the AI. Of course, it's only managing the order I'm asking for."

"I don't understand." Zhang Jinglin said frankly, "I really don't know what you're thinking this time. Actually, you could have just taken longer to prepare, and you might still have achieved what you wanted without asking the Northwest for help. There's no need to use something like this as a bargaining chip to make a deal."

"No, I'm not looking to make a deal." Wang Shengzhi shook his head. "I don't have much time left."

"What do you mean?" Zhang Jinglin scrutinized Wang Shengzhi. Only then did he realize the man did not look healthy.

Wang Shengzhi pointed to his own chest and replied, "I have lung cancer."

"Was that why you joined forces with the Anjing House this time and led those people to the Sacred Mountains? So you can locate the No. 001 Experimental and then use it to find a way to treat cancer?" Zhang Jinglin asked. Most people seemed to already know the No. 001 Experimental was born during the times when the Pyro Company was researching cancer treatments. The rest of the other Experimentals also used to be cancer patients as well.

"Haha," Wang Shengzhi laughed and said as he pointed to his legs, "I don't have such plans at all. In my condition, wouldn't death also be a form of release for me? Why should I pursue a life that's not meant

to be mine? Mr. Zhang, what do you think makes life worth living? It's because life is finite. If life does not have an ending, then its existence will lose meaning."

For some reason, Zhang Jinglin and Wang Shengzhi suddenly reached an agreement on this subject after debating for so long.

Zhang Jinglin sighed, "My apologies."

He was implying that if he knew that Wang Shengzhi's days were numbered, he would have been more polite when he spoke just now.

Wang Shengzhi waved it off. "I don't think there's anything to be sympathetic about. I just want to finish what I have to do before I die. I don't covet fame or fortune in this world anymore. To me, you've always been the most clearheaded person in the world. Therefore, I hope you can take my cause over after I've finished building it."

However, Zhang Jinglin did not say anything. When Wang Shengzhi saw Zhang Jinglin staying silent, he tried to persuade him again, "I'll wipe out all the consortiums before I die and grant you an incorruptible Alliance of Strongholds."

When Wang Shengzhi mentioned wiping out all the consortiums, his tone was especially firm. This also included his own Wang Consortium.

At some point, Zhang Jinglin felt Wang Shengzhi's determination and his dissatisfaction with the consortiums.

He did not know how to assess Wang Shengzhi anymore. That was because he had always thought the man had been painstakingly planning all these years for his own ambition. It wasn't only Zhang Jinglin who thought this way; even Qing Zhen felt the same.

But now that Wang Shengzhi knew he was dying soon, he was thinking about how to unify the Alliance of Strongholds and wipe out all the consortiums.

Wang Shengzhi looked at Zhang Jinglin and said sincerely, "I know Mr. Zhang still has some prejudice against the AI. I just hope you will try to understand it better. Just look at how orderly Stronghold 61 is running now."

But in the end, Zhang Jinglin still shook his head and said with a sigh, "I'm sorry, I can't help you."
"Why?"

"I don't have the ambition to take control of the Alliance of Strongholds." Zhang Jinglin said, "If there's someone who can take over command of Fortress 178 from me now, I would retire right away."

Wang Shengzhi gave a bitter smile. "You still have time to groom that person, but I'm running out of time. Do you have anyone in mind already? Let me guess, it's Ren Xiaosu?"

Zhang Jinglin looked at Wang Shengzhi. "How did you know?" Wang Shengzhi said, "You don't have to look at me like this. Isn't it quite normal to have our spies in each other's organization? It's just that I

planted them earlier than the others. That's why you were unable to find mine even after you had weeded out the other organizations' spies. There's something I'm curious about. What's so special about him?"

Zhang Jinglin answered, "Maybe you'll find out in the future."

"I won't get to see that." Wang Shengzhi wheeled himself out of the tent. "Thank you for your hospitality. Although none of my wishes have been fulfilled, I still got to meet my old friend again. Mr. Zhang, do you remember how we first met?" "I remember," Zhang Jinglin said.

"Thank you." With these baffling words, Wang Shengzhi got into a vehicle, and the convoy of off-road vehicles sped off back towards the Central Plains.

It was now late winter, and the last snow had started falling from the sky.

Chapter 719 Artificial intelligence

Outside the gates of Stronghold 61, a group of people were standing at the entrance as they waited for their identities to be verified. "Name?"

"Jiang Xu."

"Did you bring your travel documents with you?"

"Yes, yes!" An accompanying reporter next to Jiang Xu quickly handed over their documents. Ever since Stronghold 61 accepted refugees into the stronghold, this place had been the focus of the entire Alliance of Strongholds. On one hand, it was because this was the only stronghold that was comprised fully of refugees. On the other hand, it was due to the presence of the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence.

Right as Ren Xiaosu and the others arrived at the Sacred Mountains, the Wang Consortium's official media did not idle around for even a moment. Every day, they would spare no effort to record the daily life in the stronghold, as well as how good the security was and how quickly criminal cases were cracked.

Since Jiang Xu wanted to report the truth of their entire era, how could he possibly miss out on something like this? It was likely that this was a revolutionary change of the times and could even affect the lifestyles of humanity in the future.

Therefore, Jiang Xu applied to visit Stronghold 61 in his role as chief editor of Hope Media, to which the Wang Consortium immediately agreed.

Stronghold 61 was not a pilot project. Everything that took place here made all of the stronghold overseers of the Wang Consortium extremely proud. They would even often lament publicly that they never expected refugees to be much easier to manage than stronghold residents.

Everyone in the Wang Consortium was very busy recently. It was even said that Wang Shengzhi was thinking about moving the Wang Consortium's administrative center to Stronghold 61.

The soldiers in charge of checking the travel documents at the city gate quickly verified the identities of Jiang Xu and his entourage. This included checking their documentations' authenticity and whether the photos were of the holders themselves.

It wasn't until ten minutes later that an officer came over and said politely, "Chief Editor, welcome to Stronghold 61. Let me immediately arrange for a private vehicle to facilitate your tour of the place."

Jiang Xu's influence was not only limited to Luoyang City. Everyone's respect for him was from the bottom of their hearts.

This respect did not come from his authority or wealth, but from his attitude and wisdom.

However, Jiang Xu waved it off and said frankly, "I'm here to find trouble with you all on this trip, so, please, you don't have to see to our needs. Moreover, I'm afraid I can't get an unbiased view if I follow the itinerary you all

set."

That Wang Consortium's officer smiled and said with an embarrassed smile, "We don't have anything to hide in Stronghold 61. Please feel free to look around all you want."

"OK, thank you in advance," Jiang Xu said with a smile. Then he strolled inside holding his cane. There were only five people in their group. Other than Jiang Xu, the rest were all reporters from Hope Media. He said to the four of them, "Take a good look around and take good notes. Don't forget what we're here for."

After entering the stronghold, the sight they saw was somewhat different from what they had imagined. Based on the reporters' expectations, since there were only refugees in Stronghold 61, shouldn't everyone be dressed poorly and have gloomy expressions on their faces?

However, the people here did not look any different from the stronghold residents at all. There was no sense that anyone was always looking miserable.

Jiang Xu turned around and said with a smile, "What? You all can't bear to see others doing well?"

"That's not it." One of the reporters scratched his head. "I feel it would be quite a slap in the face if we were to report this matter to the stronghold residents."

Before this, there were stronghold residents in Luoyang City who were very much against refugees being accepted into the stronghold. Some of the people also regarded the refugees as an inferior race. They said refugees would never learn to become stronghold residents even if they entered the stronghold.

as

But now, the refugees in Stronghold 61 did not look any different from those who were stronghold residents.

In just a few months, the refugees already started dressing neatly and even knew how to behave politely. It was rumored that the Wang Consortium had even set up night schools in Stronghold 61, with

many of the refugees voluntarily signing up to gain new knowledge after work. They were all extremely motivated.

Therefore, it seemed that circumstances shaped people, not that people shaped the circumstances.

Jiang Xu did not respond to that remark. Instead, he saw a middle-aged man standing on the sidewalk and went up to him and said, "Hello, I'm a reporter. Can you spare two minutes of your time for us to ask you a few questions? It's fine if you don't have the time. I just hope we're not troubling you."

That middle-aged man hesitated for a moment before agreeing

Jiang Xu suddenly saw the middle-aged man raise his head and look around. Jiang Xu followed his gaze and was surprised to see the man checking for cameras on the street.

However, Jiang Xu did not mention this. Instead, he asked, "What job do you have in Stronghold 61?"

"Oh," The middle-aged man said, "I work at the water company. My job involves supplying water to the people. Sometimes, I also help out with the heating systems." "How's the pay? Is it enough to cover your food and clothing expenses?" Jiang Xu asked.

"Of course it's enough. Besides, we don't get exploited by the foremen anymore, so it's still pretty good." The middle-aged man said, "When I was working at the construction site outside the stronghold, they said that they would pay us 2,000 yuan a month. However, we only received around a 1,000 yuan or so in the end. But these days, such bad practices don't exist anymore."

"Oh?" A reporter asked, "You must feel really lucky then?"

"We don't get what luck is. In any case, we're leading a better life than before," the middle-aged man replied.

The reporter muttered, "It looks like the Wang Consortium wasn't lying."

Jiang Xu smiled at the middle-aged man and said, "Alright, thank you. I'm sorry to have held you back for so long. We have a small gift for you. Please take it." Afterwards, he had the reporter behind him hand a box to the middle-aged man. There was an exquisite fountain pen inside.

Jiang Xu suddenly asked, "Earlier, I noticed you were standing on the sidewalk the entire time. Were you waiting for someone? If you're busy, we won't disturb you any further."

The middle-aged man smiled wryly and answered, "I wasn't waiting for anyone. It's just that I saw a wallet on the ground just now when I was passing by. I was the first to see it, so I had to wait here for the owner to come back for it."

One of the reporters was stunned. "Then you're a really honest person."

The middle-aged man waved it off. "Not really. It's mainly because of the stronghold's laws that state that if I don't pick it up and just leave, I'll be fined. If I keep it for myself, it will be even more serious, and I'll be jailed for seven days."

The reporters looked at one another. They did not expect there to be such laws in Stronghold 61.

But it was also a good thing to discourage people from keeping what wasn't theirs. It was just that it was a little too strict. Although it felt really weird, the intention behind it was still good.

The middle-aged man waited for the rightful owner of the wallet to return before leaving.

Jiang Xu thought for a moment before saying to the reporters around him, "Let's stay here for today. We still have to slowly observe what Stronghold 61 is really like."

Jiang Xu looked up and noticed the surveillance cameras nearby had turned in their direction. When Jiang Xu tried walking about 10 meters forward, the cameras followed him closely and turned as well.

He knew the cameras were capable of capturing audio, so their conversation with the middle-aged man earlier had also probably been recorded in full.

For some reason, even though the passerby who had just been interviewed had expressed he was leading a good life, Jiang Xu still felt that something was off.

Jiang Xu was someone who had his own freedom, with the definition of freedom being that he could make a choice based on his own initiative. But if this freedom were constantly being monitored by others, it would somehow make him feel an inexplicable sense of awkwardness.

But when Jiang Xu thought about it, it was great for the refugees to be able to live well in this world. The refugees would not have any unnecessary concerns like him, right?

Jiang Xu was not a bigoted person. If the artificial intelligence could prevent more people from starving to death by just monitoring everyone, he would not really say too much about it. After all, he could not represent the views of the refugees.

Chapter 720 Reformed bandits

The stronghold managed by the artificial intelligence had actually given Jiang Xu a sense of novelty.

An amazing stronghold like this had actually emerged in the era he was living in. As a witness to this, Jiang Xu wanted to explore this strange "world" more deeply. It did not matter if this was a positive or negative phenomenon.

After a full day of touring, all the people they came across were humble and did not take things that did not belong to them. Jiang Xu even saw some people not locking the door when they went out. He stood at the entrance of this house for three hours, but no one went inside to steal things.

Passersby would at most glance at the open door before continuing on their way.

A reporter muttered, "It looks like there is indeed something unique about the Alls governance of the stronghold. When I lost my bicycle in Luoyang City last month, no one in the Public Order Division even cared to take my case report."

“So you wrote that article to annoy the Public Order Division?” Jiang Xu said calmly, “But I ended up rejecting the draft?” The reporter was a little embarrassed. “What I wrote was also the truth. The Public Order Division in Luoyang City doesn’t care about the small matters anymore and only deals with big cases. Just look at Stronghold 61. Those bicycles on the sidewalk aren’t even locked.”

As the saying went, one would be most attentive to whatever was closest to their hearts. Jiang Xu did not pay any attention to the bicycles on the sidewalk, but the reporter who had lost his bicycle purposely went to take a look. The bicycles parked on the sidewalk truly were not locked.

It seemed like Stronghold 61 had eliminated the lock industry.

That reporter did not have the same foresight as Jiang Xu. So he felt it would not be that bad if he could live in a stronghold as safe as this.

But Jiang Xu suddenly said, “Are you all starting to feel a little envious of life here? Everyone has food to eat and a job to do, and there’s not even a need to worry about fights breaking out and theft.”

“Yeah.” The reporter nodded. “It doesn’t feel that good being monitored like this, but if the AI doesn’t interfere with daily life, it’s not that difficult to accept it. Actually, you see, the other consortiums are also monitoring their residents’ lives. It’s just that they don’t do it so obviously. How could normal residents be truly free?”

Jiang Xu nodded. Indeed, he agreed with this point. This was why he did not have a clear aversion to the surveillance cameras after noticing that they were monitoring him. Actually, it was the same everywhere.

However, Jiang Xu said, “I suddenly recall a saying: ‘Ruling a state with benevolence is impossible, but displaying benevolence while ruling is possible.’[1]

Coincidentally, the current head of the Wang Consortium was named Wang Shengzhi,[2] which was near homophonic with the word in the saying

Jiang Xu continued, “Look, there aren’t even any beggars around in Stronghold 61. Everyone has their own matters to attend to. The Wang Consortium uses the AI to analyze statistics and assign jobs to everyone to ensure they have food to eat and money to make. But have you ever thought about it? If you’re unhappy with your job at Hope Media, you can still quit and take a short break. But over here, you can’t do that.”

“Surely not, right?” The reporter was a little doubtful about that. He walked away to look for a passerby. When he came back, he muttered, “It seems like that’s really the case. You have to do whatever the consortium arranges for you. There isn’t a choice.”

“So there’s no place for something like the arts to survive here. Nobody has the time to stop and think about what they need or what suits them.” Jiang Xu sighed and said, “Because the AI does not consider things that are ‘pointless.’ Its guiding principles have a very strong sense of purpose, but that’s not how humans are.” However, a refugee who happened to pass by overheard their conversation and said with a laugh, “It’s already good enough that we can fill our bellies these days. Can art put food on the table?”

In the past, when we were living outside the stronghold, we never thought about something like art either.”

Jiang Xu was stunned. Then he bowed slightly to the pedestrian and said, “I’ve learned something.” The reporter let out a sigh. Perhaps this was the difference between him and the chief editor. Jiang Xu had never insisted that his thoughts were the only “correct” ones just because of his pride. He was always willing to accept his mistakes regardless of the person debating him.

Jiang Xu and the reporters had never considered whether their stomachs would get filled when they were living in Luoyang City. That was because having something to eat was so basic that they never had to worry about it. That was why they could afford to think about the arts and philosophy. But what about the refugees?

“Chief Editor, what do you think of the AI?” a reporter asked. Jiang Xu stood silently on the street for a long time. Even the reporters could feel his dilemma.

It wasn’t until night fell that Jiang Xu finally said, “Let’s go. There’s no need to continue with the visit anymore. Time will tell us the answer.”

Just as Wang Shengzhi was leaving the Northwest to return to the Central Plains, Su Lei, the leader of the bandits in the Northwest, was chewing on a goat leg outside Stronghold 144.

The business deal with the nomads made him understand for the first time that even without turning to robbery, there was joy in making money through his own efforts. The fur hides Yan Liuyuan had given him were sold for an extremely high price at Stronghold 144. It was even higher than what he was expecting to earn. Moreover, after Fortress 178 took control of the Northwest, the taxes were reduced, and daily necessities became surprisingly cheap.

This time, Su Lei made so much profit he was even willing to bring his men to eat roast goat legs! Nearby, one of his men said, “Boss, I see that the daily necessities you’ve gotten for the nomads are all quality stuff. Why did you have to buy such good ironware for them? Wouldn’t it be more profitable if we bought the cheap ones instead?”

Su Lei glanced at him. “Zhang Gong, do you know why we’re sitting here and enjoying roast goat leg?”

“Because Boss is extremely smart and talented in doing business, of course,” Zhang Gong flattered.

However, Su Lei laughed and said, “How is that my credit? This is only possible because those nomads trusted us and decided to do business with us. Do you think the nomads are stupid? That young man is obviously well-informed about the affairs in the South. If you fool them with inferior items, they can just find someone else to do business with at any time. When that happens, who are you gonna go crying to?”

Zhang Gong did not say anything more. Su Lei continued, “Look at that Wang Fugui. He’s able to get in and out of the strongholds like they’re his own homes, and everyone treats him with so much respect. Do you know why that is? It’s because he owns an exclusive lipstick business on the Northwestern trade route. And us? We have an exclusive business deal with the Northern Plains under our names now. As

long as we conduct business honestly, we can also become big shots like Wang Fugui sooner or later. Do you understand? The most important thing in doing business is integrity. As long as we hold onto the business firmly with our hands, will we need to worry about not having goat leg to feast on in the future? Don't keep thinking about taking advantage of others at every opportunity!"

"Got it, Boss," Zhang Gong replied.

However, Su Lei's men realized that ever since their boss had turned over a new leaf and stepped onto the right path, he had become very good at using reason to educate others. In times like these, even bandits were starting to talk about treating others with integrity.

Isn't that really frightening when you think about it?