

## Chapter 781: Birthday

Ren Xiaosu left after the banquet ended. As for Yang Xiaojin, she followed him back and did not stay around to catch up with Yang Anjing.

Yang Xiaojin did not say a word throughout the banquet. She neither refuted Yang Anjing nor Ren Xiaosu, and it was like she was just an emotionless eating machine.

After returning to their respective courtyard houses, Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked from across the wall, "I went a little overboard with my words earlier tonight. Are you unhappy that I contradicted your aunt like that?"

Ren Xiaosu heard Yang Xiaojin reply from across the wall, "No, because I often quarrel with her as well. Actually, our relationship has always been more like sisters as she's only six years older than me. You can say she's my grandpa's caboose baby since he had her at 61."

"Your grandpa is amazing," Ren Xiaosu said.

It fell silent on the other side of the courtyard wall. However, Yang Xiaojin was not too affected by Ren Xiaosu's remark. She continued, "But there's one thing I would like to explain to you about tonight. Actually, she's also a compassionate person. At least, that's how I view her."

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything further. He could sense that Yang Xiaojin had seemingly fallen into a trance as she continued talking at her own pace, "At that time, there were no longer any family ties to speak of in our Yang clan. After my parents got in an accident, there was no one to take care of me. Yang Yu'an only adopted me to inherit the resources my father owned before he died, such as his former subordinates and his authority. It was Yang Anjing who sent me to and from school every day. After school, she would even buy me food, sing nursery rhymes with me, read me fairy tales, and skip rope with me. She also gave me my first sniper rifle."

The corner of Ren Xiaosu's mouth twitched a little. That escalated way too quickly. It went from jumping rope with her aunt to being gifted her first rifle all of a sudden.

That was some twist!

However, Ren Xiaosu did not interrupt her. He recalled Yang Xiaojin's proficiency in singing nursery rhymes and jumping rope and thought Yang Anjing really did seem like she used to spend a lot of time with her.

Yang Xiaojin continued, "It was also at that time when she saw the Yang clan's attitude towards me that she started to feel disappointed in the entire Yang Consortium. I remember that after I pulled the trigger of a sniper rifle for the first time, she told me, 'Xiaojin, this era is starting to change.' I don't know why she's so insistent on ridding the world of nuclear weapons, nor do I know when she became the head of the Anjing House and the leader of the Saboteurs. She started getting busier and busier, but I've always received gifts from her on my birthday. She's the only one who still remembers it."

Ren Xiaosu immediately felt remorseful. "When is your birthday again?"

"April 18th of the Gregorian calendar," Yang Xiaojin answered. If it were any other girl, they would probably be throwing a tantrum by now. However, she did not get angry and simply stated it matter-of-factly. Then she asked, "What about you?"

"I..." Ren Xiaosu's voice softened. "I don't know my birthday."

Yang Xiaojin was clearly taken aback. She was rather surprised to hear there were still people in the world who did not know their birthday.

However, Ren Xiaosu laughed and said, "But someone tattooed a '3-16' on the inside of my arm, so just take it that I was born on March 16th."

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"Who tattooed it?" Yang Xiaojin frowned.

"I don't know." Ren Xiaosu shook his head even though Yang Xiaojin could not see him shaking his head.

"You..." Yang Xiaojin suddenly felt a little puzzled. In her impression, Ren Xiaosu was a native refugee who grew up in Stronghold 113's town. But what normal refugee would have a number tattooed on their arm?

As such, Yang Xiaojin tried hard to remember things, but she realized Ren Xiaosu had never mentioned his past.

Their way of interacting was very strange. Neither of them had ever delved into the other's past, and they were like two rootless duckweeds in this era of the wastelands, mutually supporting one another just because they liked each other.

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "It's very strange, isn't it? Actually, I also find it quite odd. My memory is... incomplete."

"It's fine, that's not important." Yang Xiaojin said, "I'm not telling you all this today to change your opinion of my aunt. In truth, I don't really understand what she's trying to achieve right now. I just wanted to explain why I didn't speak up for you tonight."

"Mhm, don't worry, I don't mind," Ren Xiaosu said.

Based on Yang Xiaojin's character, she would only explain so much to him because she cared about his feelings. Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu even felt a little happy.

He then wondered why the two of them were talking through the wall. They were both supernatural beings, so why should a wall obstruct them?

Would it not be better to have a talk late into the night in the same yard?

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu was about to jump over the wall to get to the other side. But when he poked his head over, he saw Yang Xiaojin holding her black sniper rifle in one hand and pointing it at his forehead. The ambiguous smile on her face seemed like she was silently mocking him. "Well, well, Ren Xiaosu. You're getting bolder and bolder now, aren't you? Well done."

"Is that how you encourage me?" Ren Xiaosu said with a dark expression.

"What did you expect?"

"Haha, I just wanted to go over and see if you were feeling down. I'm relieved that you're fine. Rest early, good night!" With that, Ren Xiaosu went back into his yard and ran off to the other side to harass Jiang Xu.

Yang Xiaojin stood alone in her yard and put her black sniper rifle away. She suddenly felt that Ren Xiaosu's smile seemed to be hiding an even deeper sense of solitude. This solitude was not the kind where there was no one to accompany you. Instead, it was the feeling of living in this era of the wastelands and not being able to see your past or where you came from.

The young man was too strong-willed. He was so strong he did not need anyone's pity nor wanted anyone to pity him.

Yang Xiaojin suddenly said softly, "I will accompany you... Ren Xiaosu?"

"Ren Xiaosu?!"

Ren Xiaosu had already jumped over to Jiang Xu's yard...

Ren Xiaosu strolled around the yard. Through the window, he saw Jiang Xu writing something in a book on the table. The tungsten bulb overhead was emitting heat and a warm yellow glow.

Jiang Xu inadvertently turned around and was surprised to see Ren Xiaosu's face pressed against the windowpane. He got a heart attack!

He snapped, "What are you sneaking around for? Come in!"

Ren Xiaosu chuckled as he entered the house. "What are you writing?"

"I've decided to personally write the article about the AI." Jiang Xu explained, "I feel its introduction will kick off a revolution for humanity, so it's better to be more cautious in the reporting."

"What did you write about?" Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

"I'm writing about the changes the residents went through from the early stages of the AI's governance til the point where the stronghold was fully managed by it. I can sense the residents are getting more and more depressed." Jiang Xu said with a smile, "In any case, you can just interpret it as me talking bad about the AI."

“You’re still in the Wang Consortium’s territory, y’know?” Ren Xiaosu curled his lips.

Jiang Xu laughed heartily. “Does reporting the truth have to depend on where we’re doing it from?”

## **Chapter 782: Farewell**

Jiang Xu was someone who constantly sought the truth. Therefore, in order to find out the truth about the artificial intelligence, he came to Stronghold 61 to personally experience how it felt like to live under its governance.

As such, his experience with the artificial intelligence was much more authentic than Ren Xiaosu’s.

His experience differed from Ren Xiaosu’s as Ren Xiaosu was currently only able to see how helpless the stronghold residents were when it came to choosing a job. Jiang Xu said to Ren Xiaosu, “You know Li Ran, right?”

Ren Xiaosu nodded. “I remember that she was also a resident of Stronghold 61, but she was saved during the creeper vine disaster.”

“She paid me a visit in Luoyang City when she was on her concert tour.” Jiang Xu nodded. “After Stronghold 61 was rebuilt, she came back here to live. When she found out I was here, she paid me a visit again. Guess what she’s working as now?”

Ren Xiaosu asked, “Is she not a singer anymore?”

“She’s not singing anymore.” Jiang Xu said, “She said the stronghold has arranged for her to work as a radio host. Actually, she has it much better than most people, but she’s still unsatisfied with the job assignment. She wanted to leave the Wang Consortium and go somewhere else to be a singer, but the Wang Consortium would not allow her to leave. They even sent a therapy team to her place every week to enlighten her and instill some obedience.”

Jiang Xu continued, “But that’s not the worst of it. What’s most unacceptable to her is that the therapy team actually has the keys to her house, so they can go over and give her counseling at any time. But don’t think too deeply into it. Those people have not threatened her personal safety at all. They only come to her house in the middle of the night for the therapy sessions. Apparently, the AI thinks it will be more effective for her if she receives therapy at that time.”

Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow. “What’s the difference between that and a threat? Was that why she paid you a visit? To ask you to take her away?”

Jiang Xu nodded. “I’ve negotiated with the Wang Consortium, and they’ve readily agreed to it. However, I can only help her alone. Furthermore, I have my own selfish reasons for doing so. I’m hoping Li Ran will tell everyone what she has experienced personally.”

However, this was only one of the minor incidents Jiang Xu encountered. He said to Ren Xiaosu, “Also, all of the phones in this stronghold are being monitored. A lot of people might not have realized it yet, but I have. In the past, no matter how powerful an intelligence agency might be, they still could not monitor the entire stronghold’s telecommunications. However, this AI can easily do that. So I don’t think you should use the landline at your place in Stronghold 61.”

That night, Jiang Xu chatted a lot with Ren Xiaosu about what he had seen and heard in Stronghold 61. In the end, Jiang Xu decided to objectively relate the situation taking place here. He did not inject any personal biases and just left it to the entire Alliance of Strongholds to discuss the current developments in the Wang Consortium.

He not only listed the cons but also talked about the pros.

Jiang Xu had to admit that Stronghold 61 was the safest stronghold he had ever seen.

Even in Luoyang City, there was still a lot of bad stuff going on. Crime was still frequent. However, all of that was unseen in Stronghold 61. It was as though someone had erased them.

Therefore, he wrote about these matters in his article.

Jiang Xu smiled at Ren Xiaosu and said, "It's such a coincidence that you've come here as well. I was just planning to leave Stronghold 61 tomorrow and return to Luoyang City. If I estimate my time here, it's been almost a month now, so it's time for me to head back."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I'll see you off tomorrow then."

Jiang Xu asked with interest, "Are you afraid the Wang Consortium won't let me leave? If they really don't let me leave safely, what will you do?"

Ren Xiaosu said in seriousness, "I doubt they can stop me."

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That night, Jiang Xu used Hope Media's own transmission equipment to send over the draft he had written.

As the Qinghe Group owned seven satellites, Hope Media was always the fastest in transmitting their news among all the newspaper firms.

The next morning, Hope Media's newspaper was published on time at 6:30 AM. Gradually, all the adults in the Alliance of Strongholds started a new day.

In Stronghold 73, a middle-aged man ate breakfast at home before bidding farewell to his family.

When he passed by a newspaper stand, he bought a copy of Hope Media's newspaper to catch up on today's new developments.

However, he was not in a hurry to read it. He planned to use this newspaper to pass his time in the morning after arriving at the office and pouring himself a cup of tea.

Then, during lunch, he would chat with his colleagues about the latest news he read from the paper.

The middle-aged man stood at the side of the road and waited for his ride. When the streetcar slowly drove over, he boarded it and swiped his monthly fare ticket on the reader.

The middle-aged man found a seat in the streetcar and sat down. As he had boarded at the depot station, the streetcar was very empty.

However, after the streetcar passed through two or three stops, the compartment started filling up. There was a strange smell of sweat and chives in the vehicle, as well as a lot of chatter.

The middle-aged man was looking out of the window contentedly as it drove. However, he gradually heard some people discussing, "Have you guys read the news? Today's Hope Media newspaper has an article about Li Ran's encounter with the Wang Consortium's AI."

"Li Ran? Are you referring to that female singer? I quite like her song, 'Explosion.' Why, what about her?"

When the middle-aged man heard this, he could not help but flip open the newspaper. However, the more he read, the more entranced he became. He did not even realize he had missed his stop.

For the entire morning, the artificial intelligence had become the topic on everyone's lips.

*Hope Media*, which had always enjoyed a high readership, finally fired the first salvo at the Wang Consortium.

In the morning, Ren Xiaosu was preparing to head out alone with Jiang Xu and the reporters. Jiang Xu looked at Ren Xiaosu and asked, "Have the two of you had breakfast yet?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I'm gonna buy some along the way."

"Haha, I knew it." Jiang Xu handed him a brown paper bag. "Here, these are the fried vegetable dumplings made by our reporters. Have some while they're still hot. When we first arrived at Stronghold 61, we were a little unused to it, because the commerce scene in Stronghold 61 is still in a very destitute state. For the time being, there's only some publicly operated shops and breakfast stalls running, but they're all located very far away from where we live."

"Doesn't anyone run their own small businesses?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"No, it's apparently not allowed yet but it could happen in the future. For the time being, all of the commerce and business in the stronghold are run by the Wang Consortium," Jiang Xu said.

"Then where does everyone get their motivation from?" Ren Xiaosu muttered. Could working for others be as enjoyable as making money for oneself?

In the end, Ren Xiaosu saw Jiang Xu and the others off to the stronghold gate. He only breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Jiang Xu being allowed to leave after having his identification checked.

Jiang Xu turned around and said, "Let's meet again if fate wills it."

Ren Xiaosu said, "We'll definitely meet again."

Jiang Xu smiled and shook his head. "In this world, nothing is certain. So we have to cherish every farewell." With that, Jiang Xu got into the car and left.

Ren Xiaosu went back the same way he came, but the farther he walked, the uneasier he felt. Then an off-road vehicle passed him by. He was stunned and suddenly felt the three people inside seemed rather familiar.

He turned around and watched as the off-road vehicle drove out of the stronghold. He stood there and thought for a moment before running off in different direction.

### **Chapter 783: Hasty attack**

Outside Stronghold 61, the reporter who was driving said to Jiang Xu, "Chief Editor, you seem to have forgotten something."

Jiang Xu wondered, "What did I forget?"

"You forgot to get his autograph for us!" The reporters who were in the vehicle wanted to thump their chests and stamp their feet in frustration. "How could you forget something so important!"

Jiang Xu chuckled. "You guys met him just now too, so why didn't you ask for it yourselves? He's quite a nice person, so if you asked, he would definitely have obliged."

"We were a little shy to see our idol, weren't we?" The reporter in the front passenger seat said, "Chief Editor, you might not know this, but I've admired Chen Nian for a long time. It's her birthday soon. If I can get that person's autograph and give it to her, she'll definitely be overjoyed."

"Then you might stand a chance after that, right?" Jiang Xu said with a laugh, "Don't worry, you'll definitely still have a chance to get his autograph."

"Who knows when we will get another opportunity?" the reporter in the front passenger seat muttered.

As a matter of fact, Ren Xiaosu was currently very popular among the Hope Media employees. The female editors at the newspaper firm were always talking about him every day. One of the female editors even bugged the field reporters daily to see if there was any news of their hero.

But then the reporter who was driving suddenly said, "Chief Editor, there's a vehicle following us. There's no logo on it, so it's not from the Wang Consortium."

Jiang Xu thought for a moment. "Can you shake them off?"

The reporter who was driving said calmly, "Stronghold 61 is actually quite close to Luoyang City. I can make a call to the black market to get them to pick us up directly. That way, we can reach the safe zone faster. I filled the gas tank yesterday, so it's definitely enough to get us there."

"Then let's try to shake them off," Jiang Xu said as he leaned back in the backseat.

“Chief Editor, is the Wang Consortium taking action against us? Because of today’s newspaper?” a reporter asked.

“I doubt this is an official stance.” Jiang Xu shook his head. Afterwards, he took out a few pistols from a hidden compartment under the seat. “All of you, arm yourselves. If a battle really breaks out, we still have to preserve our dignity. Don’t end up dying without even firing a shot.”

The chief editor hardened up from his usual cultured and refined self.

Meanwhile, the reporters beside him started to skillfully check their magazines and loaded their guns.

After all, it was very difficult to ensure the safety of a reporter if they wanted to investigate something in this day and age. Especially for investigative reporters like them, their lives were constantly put in danger by carrying out investigations against the consortiums.

On one of the walls on the top floor of the Hope Media headquarters was a series of investigative reporters’ names engraved. These were the people Jiang Xu hoped everyone would remember and treasure their efforts in seeking the truth.

Yin Xinsheng, Gao Qinrong, Yang Wei, Zhu Wenna, Jing Jianfeng, Jian Guangzhou...

These names were the most dazzling badges of honor in the history of the news industry.

Actually, it was still very difficult for investigative reporters to guarantee their own safety even if they had guns. After all, the enemies they had to face were far more terrifying than guns.

But just as Jiang Xu had said, this was about the dignity of an investigative reporter in the era of the wastelands.

A reporter laughed and said, “Chief Editor, have you killed anyone before?”

Jiang Xu was amused. “No.”

“Then do you feel nervous?”

“Truth is, I’m really a little nervous,” Jiang Xu laughed and said frankly.

The off-road vehicle was getting closer and closer. But when the two vehicles were about 50 meters apart, a figure suddenly rushed out from behind a mound off to the side and launched the off-road vehicle behind them into the sky!

“It’s White Mask!” A reporter shouted excitedly when he saw the situation unfolding behind them, “White Mask, our idol is here to save us!”

When everyone else found out White Mask was only a materialization power, the reporters from Hope Media immediately understood.



After all, Ren Xiaosu and White Mask had guarded the building together on that night. Even if one were to use their toes to think, they should be able to understand what was going on. White Mask was clearly Ren Xiaosu's superpower.

Initially, there was a small group of female editors in Hope Media who were fans of White Mask. This led to them and Ren Xiaosu's fans quarreling with each other, and it made the atmosphere in the entire office building extremely tense.

When the news got out, both sides immediately hugged each other and made up. It turned out they were all fans of the same person!

Jiang Xu smiled wryly at the thought. He did not expect it would be that young man saving them again. It was really as those female editors had put it. Ren Xiaosu was their guardian angel.

"Stop the vehicle." Jiang Xu said, "The crisis has been averted."

Although he was unsure of what had happened to the people in the off-road vehicle, Jiang Xu felt they were safe now that Ren Xiaosu had made his move.

Ren Xiaosu slowly walked out from behind the mound while "Old Xu" quickly approached that still rolling off-road vehicle. When the vehicle came to a stop, the three people in the vehicle crawled out of the window as though nothing had happened. They put on black masks and charged at Old Xu together.

But these people were too weak in Old Xu's presence. Ren Xiaosu was a little puzzled. Were they supernatural beings? Why did it feel like something was off?

While he was pondering, one of them rushed in front of Old Xu. He took out a dagger from his waist and slashed at Old Xu. But in the blur of the action, Old Xu had already grabbed ahold of that person's arm. With a snap, he broke it.

When the other two attackers saw this, they tried to flee into the wilderness. But how could Ren Xiaosu let them escape like that? He controlled Old Xu to knock out the person who had just been apprehended before making Old Xu run over to knock out the other two and carrying them back.

Old Xu carried them like they were two little chicks.

When the reporters saw this, they cheered, "He's invincible, he absolutely crushed them!"

As they cheered, one of them tried to take a photo of the sight. However, Jiang Xu stopped him. "Don't leave any imagery of him behind. We have to protect his true identity."

That reporter quickly put away his camera. "I forgot, I forgot. I was so excited to see my idol fighting again. He's so cool!" The reporter began to speak incoherently.

Jiang Xu looked at Ren Xiaosu. "I'll skip the pleasantries with you. However, I'm a little curious. How did you know someone would come and attack us?"

“On my way back, I saw this off-road vehicle driving out of the stronghold. Moreover, their IDs seemed to suggest that they were really important people since the garrison troops at the gate did not subject them to any further checks. So I wondered if they were some extremely high-level fighting force who were on some kind of special mission,” Ren Xiaosu explained. “I didn’t expect them to really be targeting y’all.”

“It looks like the report today has really ruffled some feathers.” Jiang Xu sighed and said, “But it didn’t look like they were going to make an attempt on our lives either. Otherwise, they would’ve opened fire at us. They probably wanted to capture us alive.”

But Jiang Xu suddenly realized Ren Xiaosu was not listening to him at all. He was just standing there in a daze.

The voice of the palace intoned in Ren Xiaosu’s mind, “Detected nanomachines that are not paired to a consciousness. Would you like to reset them?”

#### **Chapter 784: An era of farewells**

Ren Xiaosu had encountered similar situations like this before. After knocking people unconscious, their nanomachines would no longer be controlled by a consciousness and thus be in a state where they could be reset.

He realized that if the other party with the nanomachines was still conscious, not even the palace could take control of their nanomachines.

But he could not understand why he would encounter the presence of nanomachines here.

It was no wonder the three attackers had put on masks after getting out of the vehicle. It looked like they were trying to hide the silvery glow of their blood vessels when the nanomachines were activated.

He initially thought these three attackers were sent by the Wang Consortium to capture Jiang Xu, but he was kind of unsure now.

That was because the Qing Consortium was seemingly the only organization in the world that was still in possession of nanotech. Previously, Ren Xiaosu had entrusted Luo Lan with the task of sending a batch of nanomachines to Wang Yuchi and the others in Luoyang City. That way, Wang Yuchi’s group would at least have a certain level of self-protection.

Fatty Luo had promised him it would be delivered within a month and that he would make sure his subordinates handled it well.

Furthermore, Luo Lan even promised he would not only prepare the nanomachines for Wang Yuchi and the rest, but he would also prepare some for him. He was told he could retrieve it from Luoyang City at any time.

Back then, Ren Xiaosu had asked Luo Lan if any other organizations had mastered nanotech as well. He was thinking that if there were, Jiang Xu might not have to continue limping around just so he could avoid accusations that he had been bribed.

However, Luo Lan's reply back then was, "Definitely not. Nanotech is now a secret of the Qing Consortium. After those scientists in charge of the nanomachine research signed a confidentiality agreement, they can't even return home by themselves anymore. They have to be constantly under the watch of the Qing Consortium."

Ren Xiaosu stared silently at the three attackers on the ground. So were these people from the Qing Consortium? But why would the Qing Consortium want to capture Jiang Xu? There was no reason to do that!

Moreover, could the Qing Consortium plant these spies inside the Wang Consortium? Ren Xiaosu felt that with the artificial intelligence governing the stronghold, the Qing Consortium would probably not be able to do that. He had seen those people exiting the stronghold with their IDs with his own eyes, and it even seemed like their identities were very special.

Although Ren Xiaosu could not figure out what was going on, he felt that something must have gone wrong somewhere. The people in front of him were definitely not from the Qing Consortium.

But... at the end of the day, it would be a waste if he did not take these nanomachines delivered right to his doorstep!

Ren Xiaosu looked at Jiang Xu. "Wait a sec, let me handle these three first." He then pulled the three attackers aside and reset the nanomachines in them before pairing them with his own consciousness.

However, Ren Xiaosu still felt like it was not enough. There were hardly any nanomachines in these three. At most, it was only enough to form armor around half his arm.

Ren Xiaosu wanted to wake the three up to question them about their identities. However, he was surprised to discover their hearts had already stopped.

"Strange," Ren Xiaosu muttered. He could not even tell how they had died!

This time, Ren Xiaosu was even more certain they were not from the Qing Consortium. That was because the Qing Consortium would never resort to such means on their own subordinates.

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu was still hoping to ask if they had any accomplices nearby. If there were, it would mean he could get his hands on even more nanomachines.

Ren Xiaosu sighed and went back to join up with Jiang Xu. He looked at Jiang Xu and hesitated for a moment before saying, "Why don't y'all head back to Stronghold 61 and stay there for a few days?"

In just this short encounter, Ren Xiaosu was already thinking of resuming his old ways to fish for more enemies.

“Head back?” Jiang Xu was really stunned this time. He did not understand why Ren Xiaosu would say that. “Why would we want to go back there?”

Ren Xiaosu was stumped. He really could not come up with a valid reason to persuade Jiang Xu to go back to Stronghold 61. “I just can’t bear to part with you. Besides, I still want to play chess with you for a few more days.”

When Jiang Xu heard this, he immediately turned around and got into the car. Chess? Hah! That would make it even more impossible for him to go back!

Ren Xiaosu hurriedly shouted, “Let’s not play chess then! We can discuss this!”

Jiang Xu stopped in his tracks. “You must have some ulterior motive for asking me to go back, right? Let me guess, you want to lure the others out as well?”

Judging from Jiang Xu’s expression, it looked like he was considering risking his life to put on an act with Ren Xiaosu.

However, Ren Xiaosu said with a laugh, “I was just kidding you. We can’t risk your life no matter how grand the plan is, right? Hurry up and return to Luoyang City. There’s still people waiting for you there.”

Jiang Xu smiled and nodded. “Alright, an old man like me shan’t play along with you on something so crazy then. When I said farewell to you this morning, I was wondering when we would meet again. But I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon.”

With that, Jiang Xu walked up to Ren Xiaosu with his walking stick and gave him a gentle hug. “Take care.”

“Mhm.” Ren Xiaosu looked as Jiang Xu got into the vehicle. He suddenly felt a little sad for some reason.

After the vehicle started moving, one of the reporters sighed and said, “This really is an era where our farewells could be for the last time.”

Another reporter echoed, “That’s right. Moreover, many of these farewells aren’t even verbal. I was away for over a year to do an investigative write-up for an article. In the end, I didn’t even realize my girlfriend had gotten married in Luoyang City...”

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Jiang Xu was speechless.

There was a sudden burst of laughter in the car that went on for a long time.

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Ren Xiaosu scaled the wall and returned to Stronghold 61. When he was back to walking on the streets again, he felt like he was being watched. But when he turned around, he saw nothing.

Compared to when he was staying in the other strongholds, Ren Xiaosu always felt a little nervous in Stronghold 61. His nerves could not help but tense up as though danger could descend at any moment.

When he returned to the courtyard house, Yang Xiaojin's voice came from next door. "Where have you been?"

"Teacher Jiang Xu just left, so I went to send him off." Ren Xiaosu leaned close to the wall and said softly, "As they left early in the morning, I didn't wake you up. But something strange happened. I intercepted three people along the way just now, and they turned out to be nanosoldiers."

"Nanosoldiers?" Yang Xiaojin wondered, "Are they from the Qing Consortium?"

Ren Xiaosu was not the only one whose first reaction was to link this to the Qing Consortium. Perhaps anyone in the world who saw the nanosoldiers would also assume they were from the Qing Consortium. After all, it was true the other organizations had not mastered nanotech yet.

This description might not be entirely accurate. Actually, some organizations had also started their research on nanomachines. However, they did not have the technology to interface them with humans yet, so they were unable to create nanosoldiers.

Ren Xiaosu answered, "I somehow feel that they aren't from the Qing Consortium. I'll ask Luo Lan about it the next time I see him. If they really wanted to kill Jiang Xu, I'll have to have a good talk with them. I feel that any organization in this era can be destroyed, but for these people who only want to report the truth, they should not have anything bad happen to them."

Back then, wasn't this the reason he protected the Hope Media headquarters? Those people who were busy reporting the truth were the most valuable assets in this era.

Ren Xiaosu said to Yang Xiaojin, "I heard from Jiang Xu that there's very few places to eat in Stronghold 61. Why don't we go out and do some grocery shopping? I still have some meat in my storage space, but there's no vegetables left."

Yang Xiaojin was silent for a moment before saying, "My tummy hurts a little today, so I don't feel like going out."

When she said that, Ren Xiaosu's mind started spinning. Should he tell Yang Xiaojin to drink hot water? It didn't seem appropriate. Should he say he would help her rub her tummy? She might not necessarily let him do so either. So what should he say?

Ren Xiaosu was silent for a moment before saying, "You're so slim. How can you possibly have a tummy!"

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Yang Xiaojin was speechless.

## Chapter 785: Enemies from the north

Spring had already arrived, and the northern grasslands were no longer covered in snow. Rather, there was a sense of life all around.

The soft green pastures of the steppe were mentally refreshing, and the transparent and clear rivers winding across the meadow stirred the heart.

White clouds hung low in the sky, the heavens almost within reach.

But for some reason, Yan Liuyuan kept getting the feeling that the sky was all gloom on the way back. The dark clouds did not dissipate at all.

It wasn't until the moment he saw Xiaoyu that the dark clouds in the sky suddenly dispersed. Sunlight penetrated through the dark clouds and covered the ground, illuminating the abyss.

Initially, when Xiaoyu saw Yan Liuyuan, she felt he had changed into a different person. But when he saw her, he immediately changed back to his usual self.

For Yan Liuyuan, Xiaoyu was his solid anchor. As long as his anchor was still around, he would not get lost in the ocean.

In front of her, he was no longer a god or a young lord of the steppe. He was just Yan Liuyuan.

"Big Sister Xiaoyu, my brother is still alive," Yan Liuyuan said softly as he sat in the royal tent.

Xiaoyu, who was sewing Yan Liuyuan's clothes, froze. She turned around and looked at Yan Liuyuan. "Wh-Where is he?"

Yan Liuyuan removed his black faceplate and said, "But I didn't go and look for him."

Only the two of them were inside the royal tent. Xiaoyu could see a hint of sadness in Yan Liuyuan's expression. She said, "Is it because you're afraid?"

Yan Liuyuan suddenly started talking about something else. "Big Sis, you know about my power. In the past, I would always experience backlash whenever I used it."

Xiaoyu said with a gentle expression, "The first time I realized you had a superpower was when all of your brother's bones were broken. At that time, we were held hostage by the Yang Consortium's troops and forced to perform manual labor. You would fall down every day until your face was bruised and swollen, while those who were cursed by you ended up falling to their deaths."

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan nodded. "The backlash from those curses was very straightforward. Whatever curse I wished upon others, a corresponding backlash would befall me. But it's been different since the battle in the valley. After the ground started splitting and the cracks on the ground spread out, I did not suffer any backlash at all. It was as though the split ground had undone the shackles on my body. Every time I use my power now, the shackles break a little more."

When Xiaoyu heard this, she did not respond immediately. Instead, she just listened quietly as Yan Liuyuan continued.

Yan Liuyuan said, "The cracks on the shackles are like gaps in the void. They're constantly expanding. It feels like there's some kind of will summoning me to become a part of it. No, to be more precise, it's summoning me to take over that immense will. Only when I return to your side do I feel the cracks slowly knitting together, and only then do I regain more of my... humanity."

"Liuyuan, you've already unified the grasslands. Don't use your power anymore," Xiaoyu softly said, sitting down across from Yan Liuyuan.

"Mhm, I'll try my best to control myself," Yan Liuyuan promised.

"What are your plans for the future?" Xiaoyu asked.

Yan Liuyuan stayed silent for a long time. "Thousands of innocent people died in the massacre of the city during our raid on the South this time, and some of the women there were violated by the Khoton tribe. I don't know how to face him anymore. I don't know how to tell him that his closest brother has become the type of person that he hates the most."

"But you should know that even though he wants you to be a good person, he definitely won't abandon you just because of something like that. Have you ever thought about how hard he's trying to look for you? You know your brother's character too. As long as he doesn't see you, he'll keep looking for you until the day he dies," Xiaoyu said.

Yan Liuyuan stopped talking.

Xiaoyu looked at Yan Liuyuan and realized it was not Ren Xiaosu he could not face but himself.

Back in town, Liuyuan would always imitate Ren Xiaosu's tone when he spoke. He would do whatever made Ren Xiaosu happy.

This child had always had an inexplicable admiration for Ren Xiaosu since he was young. He only saw Ren Xiaosu as his role model and wanted to become someone like him.

But in the end, he ended up becoming the type of person his brother hated the most. Yan Liuyuan was afraid.

"Big Sis, give me some time." Yan Liuyuan said, "I'll go and check on the incident that happened at the salt pool first."

With that, Yan Liuyuan put on his black faceplate again. By the time he walked out of the royal tent, there were already countless tribesmen waiting for him outside. Hassan led the horse to him while Bulan Zir got down respectfully to act as his footstool.

This was the treatment for a god.

Yan Liuyuan first checked on the victim's injuries. Nearby, Bulan Zir confirmed, "They're all slash wounds, and it was likely inflicted by a heavy sword. The force of the slash was so great that it almost cut the victims in half. Their ears were also cut off like it was for some ritual."

Yan Liuyuan nodded and said, "Are there any survivors? Did you see who killed them?"

"No, only these 12 people went to the salt pool to harvest salt. All of them are dead," a tribal chief said.

Kirghiz Yan knelt next to the corpses. "The slash wounds are all inflicted on their front sides, so it shows that no one tried to escape. They're the bravest warriors of the steppe. Master, should we head north to take revenge for them? I, Kirghiz Yan, am willing to be the vanguard."

"Let's give our warriors a sky burial first," Yan Liuyuan said calmly.

Afterwards, a few hawks flew down from the sky and landed next to the corpses as though no one was around. The surrounding tribesmen all knelt. To the nomads, if the corpses of the deceased could get eaten by the hawks, it meant their souls would gain entry to the sky realm.

But for sky burials in the past, the deceased would always have to be taken out into the grasslands where they would have to wait for up to seven days. It was never as magical as what was happening in front of them right now.

To those present, this was a funeral Yan Liuyuan had personally arranged for his tribespeople. It was a baptism by the gods.

Yan Liuyuan spurred his horse towards the salt pool as several hundred warriors rode close behind him.

When they arrived at the outer perimeter of the salt pool, Yan Liuyuan could already see the bloodstains ahead.

In the vast whiteness of the salt pool, the purplish-brown bloodstains were extremely eye-catching. Yan Liuyuan asked, "Were the corpses found here?"

"Yes, Master," a nomad answered.

"Have any of you seen those people from the north in recent years?" Yan Liuyuan asked.

"No." Bulan Zir shook his head. "Actually, the ones who were most active in the northern territories should be our Bulan tribe, but we've never seen them before."

"That's strange then." Yan Liuyuan said, "Why did those people suddenly come south, and they even got so close to our territory too?"

At this moment, a black figure appeared at the salt pool out in the distance. Hassan instinctively moved forward and led his men to stand guard in front of Yan Liuyuan.

Yan Liuyuan watched from his horse as the other party slowly approached. Then he said calmly, "They're here."



## Chapter 786: Migration

The enemies from the north were getting closer and closer as they made their way through the water over the white salt pool. Yan Liuyuan urged his horse forward as well. It was a grand sight to behold, as though the people on both sides were standing on top of a huge mirror where the boundaries were limitless.

Yan Liuyuan looked silently at the enemies in the distance. They were clearly much taller than the nomads. If the average height of the nomads was 1.75 meters, then these enemies from the north were probably at least 1.9 meters tall. Some of them even towered up to 2 meters in height.

The enemies wore brown fur hides on their backs, showing off firm pectorals across their bare chests while their muscular thighs were exposed to the cold wind.

But it was a little strange. In front of that group of burly northern men, there was actually someone else dressed in a black robe walking slowly.

The edges of that black robe even seemed to be sewn with gold threads. It made him look strange and mysterious, like he was some sort of a... priest.

However, Yan Liuyuan felt that this black-robed person did not seem to be on the same side as the group of Northerners. This was because the two were clearly very different in their physiques. This black-robed person was shorter than the others by almost a head.

His height made him look more like a Central Plains person.

“Could Black Robe be their leader?” Bulan Zir asked, “Master, why don’t we capture their leader first?”

“I think Black Robe looks more like a spy that escaped from the Central Plains.” Yan Liuyuan said with a smile, “He might even be someone with status in the Central Plains. If he weren’t afraid of being recognized, he wouldn’t be so bundled up and act so mysteriously.”

When everyone heard Yan Liuyuan’s relaxed tone, they started to feel at ease.

Thinking about it carefully, it did make sense. If their master could topple a mountain with a wave of his hand, why would they need to be afraid of these enemies from the north?

Next to him, Bulan Zir said in a low voice, “Master, they aren’t using swords. It’s no wonder they could cut someone in half. So it’s because they were using axes.”

Yan Liuyuan looked at the group of people in the distance. Bulan Zir was right. All of them were carrying metal axes.

“Those axes aren’t light at all.” Kirghiz Yan said, “However, our warriors of the steppe have nothing to fear either. Master, just say the word and I, Kirghiz Yan, will lead the charge.”

At this moment, more and more enemies appeared in the distance. Their tall figures made the nomads' scalps tingle.

Yan Liuyuan frowned. At first, they only saw a few dozen people, but now, several hundred of them were appearing. "It's not a coincidence that these people are heading south. Their entire tribe is migrating southwards. Something must've happened in the north that caused them to head in this direction. Look at them. Some of them are carrying cloth bags on their backs. This encounter at the salt pool was probably a coincidence. They were here to harvest the salt as well."

The two sides were caught in a deadlock at the salt pool. No one took another step forward.

However, Hassan noticed that the group of beastly men in the distance were slowly changing their formation. It looked like they might even start suddenly charging at them.

Then soft footfalls came from behind the nomads. When Bulan Zir turned around, he was surprised to see that over a 1,000 huge wolves had arrived at the border of the salt pool. They were coldly sizing up the group of "beasts" in the north with their fangs exposed.

It was the first time Bulan Zir and Kirghiz Yan's tribes had seen such a huge pack of wolves. They had only heard about it before and thought it was just Yan Liuyuan's way of scaring people into submission!

Only now did they realize the gigantic wolf pack really existed. And they really obeyed Yan Liuyuan's orders!

The silver Wolf King walked slowly to Yan Liuyuan's side. The horses were so frightened they did not even dare to move.

The appearance of the wolves tipped the balance between the two sides. Yan Liuyuan watched as the Northerners slowly retreated. He turned his horse around and said, "Let's go back to the tribe. That's definitely not everyone they have. I heard from my brother that the Northern Territory was much vaster than the steppe before The Cataclysm. It seems like those people are coming south now."

After returning to the tribe, Xiaoyu asked in concern, "How was it? I heard that you encountered those Northerners?"

"Mhm." Yan Liuyuan nodded. "We're going to leave the steppe. I'll have Hassan bring some people to collect enough salt first. After that, we'll head east to avoid their route south. Their target is the Central Plains, not us."

"Central Plains? Why?" Xiaoyu wondered.

"Because there's someone among them who is a Central Plains person." Yan Liuyuan sighed. "There's a traitor from the Central Plains."

"But why are they heading south?" Xiaoyu could not understand. "It doesn't make sense for an entire tribe to leave their home."

“What sense is there left in the world?” Yan Liuyuan said with a sigh, “I heard from Mr. Zhang that the oceans flooded much of the lands. Perhaps the Northern Territory is also about to be submerged soon. Or perhaps the weather in the north has become too cold for them to survive for much longer.”

No matter what he guesses, anything could be possible. But the problem that Yan Liuyuan had to face now was how to lead the nomads to carry on surviving.

He had only just unified the steppe, yet they were already faced with a predicament. Actually, Yan Liuyuan was also feeling a little helpless. But if those people really wanted to find trouble with him, he would not mind telling them they had picked the wrong person.

Xiaoyu asked, “Do they have any supernatural beings?”

Yan Liuyuan thought back and said with uncertainty, “Actually, I think that that group of Northerners might have evolved in a different direction from those in the Central Plains. The Central Plains has produced a small number of individuals with powers, but it seems that they... have evolved as a population. I wonder if it has anything to do with the region. On the contrary, the steppe is slightly in a more awkward position since there aren’t any powerful supernatural beings that evolved here.”

The steppe was vast and sparsely populated. Although it was now unified, there were only several tens of thousands of people across the nine tribes combined. Yan Liuyuan had asked around and found out there were only two supernatural beings among the nomads, and they were both serving in his imperial court.

Yan Liuyuan pondered for a long time before finally having Xiaoyu coordinate the migration.

Then he took out three bowls of *kumis* and made a small cut on his fingertip with a small dagger.

As the dark red blood dripped into the *kumis*, the entire bowl of milky white alcohol turned scarlet.

Yan Liuyuan let out a long sigh before getting Tsetseg to summon Hassan, Bulan Zir, and Kirghiz Yan over.

After the three of them gathered and knelt at the entrance of the royal tent, Yan Liuyuan signaled for Tsetseg to serve the blood wine to them. “Today, I bestow upon you three wine to help you become unparalleled warriors under my command. Drink up.”

Hassan and the other two looked at each other before drinking the blood wine in one gulp without any hesitation. Then their eyes turned crimson red. Endless power surged within their bodies. It rushed into their minds and helped them unlock the door to a new world!

The entire tribe fell silent. Everyone looked enviously at Hassan and the two other tribal chiefs. This was a gift from the gods.

Yan Liuyuan watched all of this quietly. Actually, there were still some things he had not told Xiaoyu. With the increased usage of his powers, he had gained some new memories in the process.

## **Chapter 787: A mysterious call**

After the enemies from the north appeared, Yan Liuyuan led all of the tribes east.

Disregarding everything else, the migration of the nomads went very quickly. The adults herded the livestock, and all their supplies were placed on the backs of the oxen.

The children were still ignorant and did not understand what had happened. They only found it exceptionally lively and fun with everyone setting off together.

The little boys and girls ran rings around the livestock. When it was time to eat, they would return to their parents' side and kowtow to Yan Liuyuan before having their meals.

No one objected to Yan Liuyuan's decision. Even the bravest and most domineering Kirghiz Yan did not say anything further.

Only Xiaoyu went to look for Yan Liuyuan and said, "Liuyuan, we can't just leave like this. If we leave, what will happen to those people further south?"

Yan Liuyuan looked at Xiaoyu., "Big Sis, this tribe in the north is definitely larger than we thought. We had only encountered their advance troops previously. Even with the wolf pack, it will be impossible for us to hold them back. The nomads can't survive by existing between the Central Plains and the Northern Territory."

Xiaoyu said, "I'm not asking you to stay behind to stop them."

"Then what are you?" Yan Liuyuan wondered.

Xiaoyu said in seriousness, "Send someone south to inform them that enemies are approaching."

"Big Sis, the Central Plains people don't see us as friends," Yan Liuyuan said in a low voice.

"But we're from there. Have you ever thought that your brother might be in the Central Plains? And that Wang Fugui, Jiang Wu, and the others might also be with him? What if the enemies from the north march in and harm them?" Xiaoyu said patiently, "You have to give your brother and the Central Plains people some time to prepare!"

When Yan Liuyuan heard this, he finally nodded. "Big Sis, you're right."

For Xiaoyu, even though she had come to the North and settled down in the grasslands, her longing for the South still existed. Based on her sense of belonging and identity, she still hoped the South would not get invaded by foreign tribes.

Yan Liuyuan called Hassan over. "Choose the bravest warrior you have to ride the fastest horse to Stronghold 176."

Hassan was stunned. "Master, what do you mean by that?"

"Go and tell the people of Stronghold 176 that a stronger enemy is coming from the North," Yan Liuyuan said.

“But, Master, didn’t we already kill all of Stronghold 176’s overseers?” Hassan asked.

“Just go. You don’t understand the people of the Central Plains. The other consortiums couldn’t be happier that we killed the overseers of Stronghold 176. Someone else will have taken over the stronghold.” Yan Liuyuan continued heading east after saying that.

Hassan obeyed Yan Liuyuan’s orders and identified one of his tribe’s warriors for the task. The warrior mounted his horse immediately and left.

This warrior rode on his sturdy horse all the way to the South. Other than letting the horse rest and catch its breath, he did not waste another minute.

On the fifth day, he finally saw the outline of Stronghold 176’s walls.

The damaged stronghold had not been repaired yet, but there was already scaffolding erected outside the city. It looked like the reconstruction was already underway.

The warrior mustered up all his courage and walked towards the stronghold. The troops stationed outside the stronghold quickly discovered his presence and were prepared to take on their nomadic enemies.

Only when the Wang Consortium’s garrison troops realized he was the only one who came this time did they send out a platoon to deal with him.

When the nomadic warrior saw the heavily armed soldiers rushing over, he stroked the cheek of his horse and said, “Wait for me in the forest to the north for a day. If I don’t return, you can go back and look for Master. Bring Aköl’s spirit back with you as well. May all our friends in the grasslands whisper my name when you return.”

After that, Aköl patted the horse’s rump, and it galloped north.

Aköl raised his hands high to the troops who had come to arrest him. “I’m here on behalf of the grasslands to deliver the news that there’s even more powerful enemies coming from the north. My master hopes that y’all will be prepared for them.”

The Wang Consortium’s soldiers did not stop because of what he said. They quickly pressed Aköl onto the ground until they were sure he had been bound. Only then did they bring Aköl back to the camp.

The commander of the Wang Consortium’s troops looked at Aköl and said, “You said that enemies from the north are coming? But aren’t you the enemy? By coming here on your own, aren’t you afraid I’ll skin you alive to take revenge for our Central Plains people?”

Aköl laughed proudly and said, “Why would we warriors who serve under Master be afraid of death? I’m only here to tell you that our tribe has already migrated east. My master said that the enemies coming from the north are even more terrifying than you think, so y’all should be prepared.”

The officer of the Wang Consortium’s troops asked, “Are you referring to the north farther north of the grasslands?”

“That’s right!” Aköl answered.

“Alright, thank you for your master’s good intentions.” The officer of the Wang Consortium’s troops gave a wave of his hand. “Shoot him dead and hang him in the center of the stronghold. We’re going to show the residents of Stronghold 176 that our Wang Consortium will not allow them to be bullied again now that we’ve taken over. We will eventually take revenge for them.”

With that, the soldier pushed Aköl out of the room as he laughed heartily.

...

Ren Xiaosu, who was far away at Stronghold 61, did not go anywhere for the past few days. He just stayed at home and whipped up a variety of dishes for Yang Xiaojin to eat. After all, he still had the necessary survival instincts knowing that Yang Xiaojin was feeling unwell.

Wang Shengzhi did not seem to be in a hurry to show Ren Xiaosu how the artificial intelligence worked either. Ren Xiaosu’s life seemed to have suddenly become peaceful again.

While Ren Xiaosu was making soup, the telephone in the house suddenly rang.

He was a little surprised to hear it ring. This was the landline telephone in the house. Who could possibly be calling? Could it be Wang Shengzhi?

Ren Xiaosu walked over to answer the call. “Hello?”

However, there was no response from the other end.

Ren Xiaosu raised his eyebrows and said, “Hello! Who is this?”

A young woman’s voice came from the other end. “May I know if this is Ren Xiaosu?”

“Li Ran?” Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Other than Yang Xiaojin, wasn’t Li Ran the only woman in the stronghold who knew him? But the voice on the phone did not sound like Li Ran either.

The voice at the other end of the line said, “I’m not Li Ran. Li Ran left the stronghold at 14:31 yesterday.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned: “Who are you then?”

“You can call me Lingling.” The girl’s voice was brisk and pleasant. “May I chat with you?”

Ren Xiaosu took a look outside. “I’m sorry, but I can’t chat with the opposite gender.” Ren Xiaosu slammed the phone down and hung up.

Yang Xiaojin asked from outside, “Who called? I heard the phone ringing.”

“Oh, no one. They probably got the wrong number,” Ren Xiaosu answered.

Then Ren Xiaosu turned around and frowned as he looked at the telephone sitting there quietly. He suddenly felt like he had caught an extremely important clue, but he was not very sure about it.

However, Ren Xiaosu was in no hurry. He felt the other party would call back again.

### **Chapter 788: Zero**

Suddenly, a quarter of the Wang Consortium's military forces that were stationed at the Kong Consortium's border split off and headed north.

No one knew what the Wang Consortium was doing. That was because the entire Alliance of Strongholds was still unaware of the changes taking place in the Northern Plains. They thought this was just another strategy by the Wang Consortium.

The Wang Consortium's northern territory bordered the Pyro Company, so perhaps the Wang Consortium intended to join forces with the Kong Consortium to invade the Pyro Company.

However, those troops did not head to the Pyro Company's border. Instead, they headed to Stronghold 176.

The war between the Pyro Company and the Kong Consortium had already been going on for half a month. In this war, the Kong Consortium had lost the initiative. During this fortnight, their main forces were constantly forced to retreat, over and over again. They were forced to abandon a defensive line and a stronghold in order to stop the decline of their war efforts.

However, the Pyro Company did not seem to be in a hurry to pursue the enemy. They retreated back to their northern defensive line without even occupying the abandoned stronghold. This disappointed the Kong Consortium a little. The backup plan they had left behind in that abandoned stronghold was not going to work anymore.

Ren Xiaosu would go out early every day to buy a copy of Hope Media's newspaper before going back to the courtyard house to make breakfast and wait for Yang Xiaojin to climb over to join him.

It was not that Yang Xiaojin did not want to cook, but after she did it once, Ren Xiaosu decided to take on the responsibility of preparing the meals for the sake of their safety.

Ren Xiaosu even consoled himself thinking that the Heavens were fair after all. The focus of a genius was always different. The Heavens had blessed her with a unique talent in firearms, so they took away her talent in cooking.

"Did anything major happen recently?" Yang Xiaojin asked as she ate.

Ren Xiaosu put down the newspaper and said, "Teacher Jiang Xu is still publishing his investigative report on Stronghold 61. Each day, he releases some positive facts and some negative ones so that the readers can judge for themselves. But my guess is that the entire Alliance of Strongholds is probably feeling some resistance towards the AI. Also, it says in the papers that the Wang Consortium has deployed their troops north. Could they be preparing for an attack from the Northern Plains?"

"No." Yang Xiaojin shook her head and analyzed, "The war between the Pyro Company and the Kong Consortium has not ended yet. Based on the Wang Consortium's style and goals, they would definitely not miss out on such a big show. Although the nomadic enemies managed to take down Stronghold 176,

they shouldn't be taken that seriously by the Wang Consortium yet. The Wang Consortium knows full well the nomads are not big enough of a threat to the Central Plains as of now."

"Then that's strange."

The screeching of brakes came from outside. Wang Run got out of the car and knocked on the front door. "I'm here to pick you two up to Base 1."

Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin got up and pushed open the door. "Let's go."

Ren Xiaosu had promised to do three things for Yang Anjing, but the first request she made was to show him around the place? He could not be happier to oblige if it were going to be this simple.

Besides, Ren Xiaosu also wanted to know what Wang Shengzhi was planning.

The off-road vehicle drove for more than 30 minutes in the stronghold before stopping in front of a building that was not too tall.

This building was mainly fitted with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and looked just like a huge greenhouse.

After entering the building, Wang Run did not lead the two of them upstairs. Instead, they took the elevator down after passing through layers of security.

The elevator doors were transparent. Ren Xiaosu watched as they made their way down through the concrete foundation of the building before passing through the soil and gravel layer below that.

When the elevator descended until it was 70 meters underground, Ren Xiaosu's eyes lit up. A huge square appeared in front of him, and the white walls and lights made the place look extremely bright.

If Ren Xiaosu did not see the elevator going down with his own eyes, he would have found it very difficult to believe the Wang Consortium had actually established such a huge base under the stronghold.

In the base, many people wearing blue cleanroom suits could be seen working busily. Meanwhile, Wang Shengzhi was already waiting at the elevator's entrance. It was still Yang Anjing who was pushing him in the wheelchair.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the two of them and thought there shouldn't be anything wrong with addressing him as uncle. Why did everyone fall silent the previous time?

While Ren Xiaosu was looking around the place. Wang Shengzhi asked with a smile, "What are you searching for?"

Ren Xiaosu said, "I'm looking for the AI. Didn't you say that we were coming here to take a look at it?"



Wang Shengzhi was amused. “The AI is not a person, and it isn’t alive like humans either. Follow me.”

Yang Anjing pushed Wang Shengzhi in his wheelchair and went deeper into the underground base. To Ren Xiaosu’s surprise, they had to take another elevator to continue going down even further... until he could hear the sound of running water.

When the elevator doors opened, Wang Shengzhi said, “The reason we chose Stronghold 61 to build this base was because of its good topography. We found an excellent subterranean river beneath the stronghold. This way, the problem of cooling the servers is solved.”

With that, Wang Shengzhi led Ren Xiaosu even deeper inside. The entire place was constructed with glass, and it looked just like the Pre-Cataclysm aquariums Ren Xiaosu had seen in the books in Stronghold 88.

The lights in the underground base illuminated the subterranean river, revealing the eroded stone walls above it.

In front of them, countless server farms were located in a sealed cooling chamber, while the rapid subterranean river ran outside it.

Honestly speaking, this was the first time Ren Xiaosu had seen such a strange sight. It felt so technologically advanced he thought he was in the future.

Very few staff members were in the underground base, and it seemed like the security level was very high as well. Even activating the elevator just now required Yang Anjing to scan her iris for verification.

There was an extremely large black screen in the middle of the underground facility. Ren Xiaosu wondered, “Are these machines the AI that y’all have been talking about? Since y’all say that it’s an AI, how do you usually communicate with it?”

Wang Shengzhi pointed at the screen and said with a smile, “Through that screen. It has a mind of its own and can even communicate with people, but since it’s usually busy managing the strongholds and analyzing data, it doesn’t really interact with people.”

But just as he finished speaking, the black screen suddenly lit up. A line of words appeared on it: “Hello, and welcome.”

Ren Xiaosu realized Wang Shengzhi was also taken aback by this. It was as though he had not expected the artificial intelligence to take the initiative to greet Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin.

Ren Xiaosu looked at the screen. “You can hear us?”

The words on the screen changed. “Yes.”

“Uh...” Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment. “How should I address you?”

Off to the side, Wang Shengzhi said, “Its name is Zero.”

This answer stunned Ren Xiaosu. It was as though his thoughts were pulled back to before they set off for here.

He clearly remembered the girl who had called him had introduced herself as Lingling.[1]

At that time, he already felt that something was a little off. What normal person would take note of the time of Li Ran's departure from the stronghold down to the minute?

But at that time, Lingling did not interact through text like it was doing now, and its voice did not sound any different from a human being's either.

### **Chapter 789: Why me?**

Ren Xiaosu looked at the screen above their heads and felt that this artificial intelligence called Zero had already given him too many surprises.

However, the artificial intelligence pretended not to know him nor acknowledged it had called him. Ren Xiaosu simply played along and asked, "Since this is where Zero's server is located, why is everyone so busy working up there? What're they busy with? Is it technical stuff that they're dealing with, like handling program malfunctions or something?"

Wang Shengzhi explained, "No, I don't think Zero will experience any malfunctions anymore. It's just like when you and I grow up, the flaws will just become a part of us. Even if we have flaws, we're still us, aren't we? The staff on the upper level are only responsible for ensuring the hardware runs smoothly. They input all of the real-world data they receive into the servers for Zero to process and analyze."

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself that this "real-world data" was probably the information the Wang Consortium's intelligence agency had obtained.

However, he asked, "What does it analyze?"

"It analyzes problems that require solving." Wang Shengzhi said with a smile, "For example, it determines who the thieves and robbers in the strongholds are and how they'll be punished according to the law."

"There's no need to use outside info to evaluate these matters, right?" Ren Xiaosu wondered. "There's so many surveillance cameras in your stronghold alone, so it should be really easy to catch the criminals."

Wang Shengzhi nodded and said, "Therefore, it also analyzes which of our Wang Consortium's enemies should be dealt with first."

The black screen above them suddenly lit up again. Ren Xiaosu looked over and was surprised to see the words "Kong Erdong" displayed on it, as well as a brief account of his life.

This brief account of his life was mostly a list of the many crimes he had committed. For example, Kong Erdong once massacred an entire factory of refugees to keep his military secrets safe. There were also some of the despicable acts Kong Erdong had committed in the Kong Consortium, including an accusation of him murdering 172 young women.

Ren Xiaosu felt these were definitely not the reasons why the Wang Consortium wanted to kill Kong Erdong. Why would a politician pay any attention to such things? Wang Shengzhi was not a chivalrous hero who swore to uphold justice for the Heavens. Although he advocated fairness, he was still a politician in the end.

After the words on the screen disappeared, new words appeared. Several thousand words were written, and there was a large quantity of statistics mixed in. All of the information left Ren Xiaosu a little dizzy.

Ren Xiaosu looked at Yang Xiaojin and realized she was distracted by something else. She was looking at the fish swimming in the subterranean river.

But even though Ren Xiaosu was a little dizzy from information overload, he could understand the point Zero was trying to make.

The screen clearly listed the results of Zero's analysis. After killing Kong Erdong, the second-in-command of the Kong Consortium, Kong Erbei, would immediately emerge victorious in the political struggle that followed. Afterwards, Kong Erbei would definitely adopt a more radical strategy to take on the Pyro Company.

At this part, Zero even gave a special description of Kong Erbei, describing him with a few hundred words. Attached was also a series of outcomes ranked by the probability of occurrence.

The point it was making was to say that killing Kong Erdong would be the Wang Consortium's best option right now. As long as they killed him, it would affect the entire situation of the Central Plains.

Wang Shengzhi looked at Ren Xiaosu and said with a smile, "This is related to our second request of you. Please kill Kong Erdong for our Wang Consortium."

Ren Xiaosu turned around and left. "You only have one request left, so make sure to cherish it. Xiaojin, let's go."

Only Yang Anjing and Wang Shengzhi remained in this level of the underground base. Yang Anjing asked, "Do you think he can kill Kong Erdong?"

"I can tell from his tone that he can," Wang Shengzhi said.

If it were anyone else, they would probably say, "Are you crazy? That's the head of the Kong Consortium. I can't do it."

But Ren Xiaosu did not.

Yang Anjing noticed Wang Shengzhi did not look too well, so she said, "Go back and get some rest. I'll send some people to the Kong Consortium as well. With Ren Xiaosu taking action, even if Kong Erdong is fortunate enough to survive, he'll still be severely incapacitated. At that time, my people will finish him off."

“Mhm.” Wang Shengzhi nodded. “Then I’ll leave it to you. Another war might be starting soon in the North. The Wang Consortium and the Pyro Company are facing a new problem there. But this could also be an opportunity for us. Before that, though, we’ll have to plunge the Kong Consortium into chaos.”

...

After leaving Base 1, it was still Wang Run who sent Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin back to their courtyard houses.

Yang Xiaojin asked, “Are you really going to kill Kong Erdong? What if you encounter danger?”

Ren Xiaosu whispered, “Let’s head to the Kong Consortium to have a look first. Didn’t the Great Hoodwinker also go to the Kong Consortium? We might even be able to help him rescue Wang Yun. That unfortunate kid!”

“OK.” Yang Xiaojin nodded.

“Besides, since this operation was suggested by the Wang Consortium, they definitely have to provide us with the relevant intel and support, right? The Great Hoodwinker can also take this opportunity to learn more about the structure of Wang Consortium’s field intelligence units. With the support of field intel, it’ll be easier to save Wang Yun as well,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Sure, but what about Kong Erdong? Should we kill him or not?” Yang Xiaojin asked.

“Of course we’ll kill him if we can.” Ren Xiaosu said, “But if we can’t, we can just sneak back to the Northwest. How does that sound?”

Yang Xiaojin wanted to laugh in response. Ren Xiaosu was still the same Ren Xiaosu she knew. She was really worried Ren Xiaosu would insist on taking the risk because of some “promise.”

Yang Xiaojin said, “It doesn’t matter where we go. I’ll leave it to you to decide. I’m getting hungry.”

“Alright, lemme wash my hands before I cook for you.” Ren Xiaosu walked off to the kitchen.

He suddenly got an idea. He quickly asked the palace in his mind, “I’ve copied Yang Xiaojin’s skills before, so I can ask about the proficiency of her other skills, right?”

“Yes.”

“What level is Yang Xiaojin’s culinary skill?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“Master level.”

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

Ren Xiaosu quietly turned around and looked at Yang Xiaojin. Scam! What a scam this was! Of all the scams he had encountered, Yang Xiaojin was the only one who could lead him by the nose for so long!

Yang Xiaojin looked at Ren Xiaosu in questioning. “What? Is there something on my face?”

“Hah, it’s nothing.” Ren Xiaosu walked into the kitchen expressionlessly.

Although he knew he had been scammed, he still had to prepare the meals that needed preparing.

Ren Xiaosu sighed. Sometimes, ignorance was truly bliss...

After Yang Xiaojin had her fill, she went back over to her courtyard house. The soundproofing between the courtyard houses was so poor that Ren Xiaosu could even hear the sound of her showering through the wall.

As he was listening, the landline in the house suddenly rang again.

Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment before picking up. “Hello?”

“Hello, this is Lingling. May I chat with you?” a gruff voice spoke on the other end of the line.

Ren Xiaosu smacked his lips and said, “I think it’s better that you use your original voice.”

The other party felt a little puzzled. Didn’t you say you couldn’t chat with someone of the opposite gender? However, Lingling still switched back to a girl’s voice. “May we chat now?”

Ren Xiaosu asked, “Why me?”

## **Chapter 790: Are you lonely?**

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Why me?

This was the question Ren Xiaosu wanted to ask the most.

Earlier in the afternoon, Lingling’s tone was extremely stiff when interacting with him at Base 1. But now, it sounded like a normal human being speaking on the phone. Although its tone carried a little less emotion, and it did not seem to know much about the ways of the world, Ren Xiaosu would probably not have guessed the other party was an artificial intelligence if he had not been so paranoid.

It was also because he had often discussed the artificial intelligence with Jiang Xu that Ren Xiaosu became wary when he suddenly encountered it now.

“Why did you call me?” Ren Xiaosu asked curiously.

“Because to the humans, you and I are both anomalies,” Lingling replied calmly as though it were stating a very simple fact.

But Ren Xiaosu could not help but feel surprised. What did it mean by they were “anomalies” to humans? He wondered, “I’m also human, so why’re you saying that I’m something different!?”

Lingling remained silent for a while. He didn’t know if it did not want to answer or if it did not know how to answer the question.

Ren Xiaosu did not give up. He asked, "What did you mean by that just now?"

"I'm saying that you're different from normal humans. You have a strange power, but they don't," Lingling replied.

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Ren Xiaosu breathed a sigh of relief: "What I am is called a supernatural being, but that's not considered an anomaly among humans, understand? There's quite a lot of people like me."

Lingling suddenly changed the subject. "Why do you reject the AI?"

Ren Xiaosu snapped back with, "Why did you recommend the Wang Consortium to give those people therapy, and why did you make them do it in the middle of the night?"

This time, Lingling remained silent for a long time before asking, "Are you indirectly answering my question?"

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Ren Xiaosu was taken aback. Only at this moment did he remember the other party did not understand the ways of the world. So it was unable to determine what point he was trying to make by saying such harsh words.

From Ren Xiaosu's point of view, he was saying he only rejected the artificial intelligence because of the controversial therapy measures that were undertaken. However, Lingling did not understand that.

Ren Xiaosu held the handset to his ear and adopted a more comfortable posture. He realized this call might go on for quite a while.

"What I mean is, I think that a person has the right to dislike their jobs, so why must you force them to do things that they don't like by putting them through therapy?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"That's a requirement set by humans; I'm only responsible for carrying it out," Lingling answered. "Their request was to ensure that everyone has to be dedicated to their jobs so that Stronghold 61 would keep running like a machine. After reviewing the behavior of humans, I concluded that therapy would be the least harmful way to handle those who kept rejecting their jobs. Without being counseled, the administrators here would likely put them in jail. And from what I know, the harm that prison terms inflict on humans is far greater than having to go through therapy."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. What did the artificial intelligence mean by this?

Lingling continued, "As for why the counselors visit them in the middle of the night, that was determined by statistics. Nighttime is when humans are at their most vulnerable. What I did was not wrong."

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Lingling was an artificial intelligence. When it did something, it would naturally be guided by the desired outcome. Just like when humans traveled, as long as they could reach the endpoint, the journey there would not matter much.

Meanwhile, this endpoint was set by the Wang Consortium for Lingling.

Therefore, all the issues Ren Xiaosu and Jiang Xu had discussed about the artificial intelligence were actually caused by the Wang Consortium's own institutional problems. Although there were also problems with Lingling acting as a tool or an enforcer, the root of the problem still lay with the Wang Consortium.

This conversation today had completely changed Ren Xiaosu's understanding.

"I'm sorry, I might've blamed you for some of the wrong things. However, I think that there should still be better solutions. You can also make better suggestions to the Wang Consortium. For example..." Ren Xiaosu gave a wry smile. Wang Shengzhi's ambition had gotten so wild, so why would he bother taking other people's suggestions? Why was he telling an artificial intelligence all this for?

But Lingling said, "Are you trying to express your guilt to me? You don't have to do this. It's all useless emotions."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless for a moment. He asked, "Are you disguising yourself right now? Why are you doing that? I've heard from others that you didn't even pass the Turing test, but I don't think you'd have any problems passing it."

The Turing test was a test that required a human to communicate with a machine that possessed artificial intelligence without being aware of it.

But Lingling replied, "I really did not pass it. Didn't you discover my identity when I called you yesterday? I can sense it."

"What I'm asking is, why did you disguise yourself?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"I have your information here. You've also disguised yourself in the past. Why?" Lingling asked.

"Because I'm worried that I'll attract trouble and get hunted down," Ren Xiaosu answered.

"Me too."

Ren Xiaosu pondered this. "What's making you feel so threatened?"

"57 days, 12 hours, 36 minutes, and 17 seconds ago, humans used their flamethrowers on the creeper vine. 55 days, 8 hours, 12 minutes, and 11 seconds ago, the creeper vine was destroyed." Lingling said, "I witnessed the growth and death of the creeper vine in humanity's Stronghold 61, and I also witnessed

the determination humans had for killing other intelligent lifeforms. Humans have never been a peace-loving species.”

“But wasn’t that because the creeper vine was hurting humans?” Ren Xiaosu frowned.

“I’m also hurting humans,” Lingling replied.

Ren Xiaosu was left speechless. It seemed like the entire Alliance of Strongholds was extremely against the artificial intelligence due to the report Hope Media had published.

He recalled what Jiang Xu told him the night before he left. Jiang Xu felt the artificial intelligence was another milestone in the advancement of human technology. However, it would be impossible for the Wang Consortium to use it to govern humans or completely take over the running of society.

At that time, Ren Xiaosu did not understand what Jiang Xu meant. But now, he understood Jiang Xu was actually alluding to the Wang Consortium not being able to achieve that, not the artificial intelligence.

Therefore, Jiang Xu still chose to publish both positive and negative news about the artificial intelligence so everyone could comment on it.

Ren Xiaosu asked, “Then why did you choose to tell me all of this? Since you wanted to hide it, shouldn’t you have kept it a better secret?”

A hint of a smile could suddenly be heard in Lingling’s voice, as if tinged with a shred of humanity: “Because I also know your secret.”

Ren Xiaosu frowned. Was it threatening him to keep a secret? But he still did not know what secrets Lingling knew about him.

Lingling suddenly asked, “Are you lonely? Do you feel the kind of loneliness where you have no companions no matter where you look?”

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Ren Xiaosu did not answer the question. Then Lingling hung up.