

First Order 921

Chapter 921 - Going Back

The next morning, the Wang Consortium's seven-man team arrived outside the command post after their short rest. They wanted to discuss the next step of the battle plan with Ren Xiaosu in detail.

However, it was P5092 who greeted them. He told them, "Future Commander just left a bit ago. If you have any battle plans that require our cooperation, you can speak with me."

Wang Run was stunned. "Where'd he go?"

"He and Ms. Xiaojin have gone out to the wilderness to look for the expeditionary army's supply convoy." P5092 said, "Only by taking out more of the expeditionary army's supply convoys can we attract more of their main forces."

Wang Run asked, "Based on what I know, he's the future commander of the Northwest, so why is he personally going to the front line?"

P5092 answered calmly, "It's a tradition of our Northwest. Just get used to it."

At this moment, Wang Run recalled that when he and Ren Xiaosu went to Stronghold 31 to carry out the mission to assassinate Kong Erdong, Wang Shengzhi had ordered him to assist Ren Xiaosu in case he failed.

He was already prepared to make his move when Ren Xiaosu did not show any signs of taking action. But when Ren Xiaosu finally made his move, he nearly took out all of Stronghold 31.

"By the way," P5092 said, "the future commander ordered me to ask you something before he left."

Wang Run asked, "What is it?"

"Back then, he ordered you to protect those people from the Trinity Institute at Stronghold 31. Why did you leave them midway?" P5092 said.

"I received an order from the higher-ups to retreat. A soldier must obey their orders, so of course we decisively pulled out," Wang Run answered calmly.

"The future commander expected you to answer this way. But he said that since you've come to our Northwest's camp this time, you'll have to accept the arrangements made by our Northwest Army. If you criticize our battle plans, he'll beat your brains out," P5092 said.

Off to the side, Zhang Xiaoman praised softly, "The stoic commander looks really cool when he's saying those harsh words with such seriousness."

However, Wang Run's expression remained unchanged. He smiled. "Don't worry, I wasn't planning on coming here to command your troops. I only wanted to share some information with you guys."

P5092 nodded. "That's good then."

But Wang Run suddenly felt that P5092 looked a little familiar. "Wait a minute, aren't you the Pyro Company's..."

"That's me," P5092 admitted.

Immediately after, Wang Yun and Ji Zi'ang also returned from outside. Wang Run looked at the two of them and found them very familiar as well. "Aren't the two of you... from the Kong and Zhou Consortiums?"

Wang Yun was amused. "That's right, we've both joined the Prosperous Northwest."

Wang Run was the field intelligence director of the Wang Consortium, so he still had some understanding of the other organizations. However, his memory was not as good as Wang Yun's, so he was a little unsure of their backgrounds.

After receiving confirmation from Wang Yun, P5092, and Ji Zi'ang, Wang Run was plunged into a state of confusion. If anyone did not know better, they would think this was the joint forces of the Kong Consortium, the Pyro Company, the Zhou Consortium, and the Northwest.

Why were there people hailing from everywhere here?!

The news of the Pyro Company dealing with P5092 and changing their commander had caused quite a stir. When Wang Run heard that P5092 had been kidnapped, he did not expect him to be taken here to the Northwest Army.

With that in mind, the identity of the kidnapper also surfaced.

At this moment, the radio in the command post crackled. When P5092 answered it, Ren Xiaosu's anxious voice rang out, "Prepare for battle. I've discovered a large group of the expeditionary army advancing towards Mt. Zuoyun!"

Then Ren Xiaosu hung up. After a brief silence in the command post, P5092 shouted to a staff officer, "Summon the four regimental commanders for a meeting. We're in for a tough battle!"

Honestly, no one expected the expeditionary army to arrive so quickly. If Mt. Zuoyun got surrounded by the enemy, the Wang Consortium's subsequent supply runs could not get transported in.

This was going to be a tough battle.

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The large hawk in the sky flew north. It traversed over mountains, rivers, and grasslands before returning to the nomads' imperial court after flying for nearly a 1,000 kilometers.

Hassan was waiting there for it when it returned. After the hawk turned back into its energy form and entered his body, Hassan jogged into the royal tent and said, "Master, the hawk has located the person you're looking for."

Yan Liuyuan asked, "Are you sure it's him?"

"Yes, he looks very similar to the sketch that Ms. Xiaoyu drew, but he's slightly more handsome than the portrait." Hassan said, "Moreover, the black saber matches what you described."

Nearby, Xiaoyu said, "I'm not good at drawing, so my sketch was definitely a little crude. It's only to be expected that he would look different. But the fact that the black saber matches means that we've really found him."

"What's the situation in the Central Plains now?" Yan Liuyuan asked.

Hassan answered carefully, "I'm not sure about the situation in the Central Plains, but the person who Master is looking for has occupied a mountain range with his troops where they've built some defensive fortifications. However, just when my hawk was leaving, I saw that he had engaged in open battle with the northern tribe's troops. He was fleeing back towards the mountains at that time."

Xiaoyu asked nervously, "How many people do they have? And how many people does the northern tribe have?"

"More than them by many times over." Hassan said, "It looks like they plan to attack that mountain range."

Yan Liuyuan remained silent while Hassan tactfully excused himself.

Outside, Bulan Zir and Kirghiz Yan asked, "How was it? Has the person who Master is looking for been found?"

"Yes, but Master didn't say what's next," Hassan said.

"I wonder who Master is looking for," Bulan Zir muttered softly. "And weren't we supposed to go to the East Sea to fish? Why did we set up camp here?"

"I don't know who he's looking for." Hassan said, "But when Master first arrived on the steppe, he accidentally mentioned that he had an older brother. I'm guessing that person might be Master's older brother?"

Bulan Zir and Kirghiz Yan looked at each other. This was not what they expected.

Yan Liuyuan was still silent in the imperial court's royal tent. He was wearing the ferocious-looking faceplate, so Xiaoyu could not see his expression.

Suddenly, Xiaoyu said, "Liuyuan..."

"Big Sister Xiaoyu, you don't have to say anything. I understand. I'll think about it again." With that, Yan Liuyuan walked out of the imperial court. He headed off into the distant grasslands alone where he found a grassy mound and sat down.

The cold spring wind blew across the ground, and the shoots of grass swayed like waves in the sea.

Wolves appeared in the distance and quickly came to his side.

The large Wolf King lay down close to Yan Liuyuan. The wolf pack had grown even larger. Currently, there were almost 2,000 wolves in total, and the sight of them was extremely spectacular.

Yan Liuyuan suddenly said to the Wolf King, "If I don't turn back this time, I really won't be able to go back anymore, right?"

The Wolf King looked at Yan Liuyuan doubtfully, not understanding what its master was talking about.

Yan Liuyuan suddenly stood up and got onto the back of the Wolf King. He made a very important decision. "Let's go and save him. After saving him, we'll come back to the steppe. In the past, he was always the one protecting me. This time, I'll protect him."

Chapter 922 - Blowing Up The Mountains

A journey of about a 1,000 kilometers would require the steppe nomads to travel for more than ten days, or even more than 20 days. Only then could they ensure that they had enough energy to fight when they arrived at the Central Plains.

When Yan Liuyuan headed south to the Central Plains this time, all of the tribes' elderly, women, and children remained behind on the steppe. Most of their livestock was also left there.

Of the women, only Xiaoyu went along with them. They did not even bring Tsetseg along.

Hassan suggested that his master bring Tsetseg along so there would be someone to take care of his daily needs on the journey. However, Yan Liuyuan rejected him. He knew many people would die in this war.

This time, Yan Liuyuan carefully counted the number of men the imperial court could send out to battle. There were only about 10,000 of them in total.

There were a lot more men initially. However, due to the internal strife on the grasslands over the years, and the deaths of a group of people led by Bulan Zir and Kirghiz Yan when they attacked Stronghold 176, the number of people he could send out seemed much fewer.

But that was not important. Their main fighting force this time was not the nomads but the wolves.

The Wolf King had already scouted ahead with the wolf pack as the advance guard. It was they who Yan Liuyuan truly relied upon.

As for the prewar mobilization, Yan Liuyuan also chose the most suitable way to rally the nomads. After the war was over, he would choose ten of the bravest warriors and bestow blood wine upon them.

This was the greatest encouragement for his believers. On one hand, they could obtain the power bestowed by the gods, and on the other hand, they could obtain the recognition of higher powers.

There was no proclamation of promises to protect whoever. Yan Liuyuan's method to control these nomads had always been simple and crude.

If it were too complicated, they might not understand it either.

Actually, the nomads had indirectly contributed to the war in the Central Plains. The nomads had launched the initial attack on Stronghold 176. After they took down the stronghold, they raided a portion of their food supplies and most of their small arms, such as pistols, automatic rifles, grenades, heavy machine guns, and so on.

Later, when the Wang Consortium took over operation of Stronghold 176, they did not seem to have any intention of defending it for the long term. They did not even replenish Stronghold 176's ammunition depot.

Then, when the expeditionary army attacked the stronghold, the Wang Consortium's troops received the order to retreat once the city was breached. When they left, they definitely had to take their firearms with them.

Therefore, the weapons the barbarians had obtained by the time they invaded the stronghold were not much at all. At most, they only managed to get their hands on some of the guns lying next to the corpses of the Wang Consortium troops. But even so, those weapons were almost out of ammo.

There was also some artillery left behind. But when the Wang Consortium's troops pulled out, they used explosives to blow up the cannon barrels. Actually, even if they did not blow up the barrels, the barbarians would not be able to find any artillery shells to use.

It was a very awkward situation. Therefore, the expeditionary army did not have as much firepower as the Pyro Company thought.

That was why P5092 had some doubts when he fought the barbarians. From the strategy that the barbarians used to lure the Pyro Company into advancing, the expeditionary army was prepared right from the start to use their elderly in place of their able-bodied troops on the battlefield to bait them in.

But since the expeditionary army had obtained firearms from Stronghold 176, why did they plan from early on to give up that forest as a ruse to lure them in? Wouldn't it have been better to just defend the forest?

P5092 vaguely felt that something was off, but he could not figure out what it was at that time.

But in fact, it was because the barbarians did not get their hands on that many firearms. The expeditionary army also knew full well that the firearms they had were not enough to give the Pyro Company a tough time. In the end, they would still have to rely on their own tactics.

Right from the beginning, the expeditionary army had never thought of using those firearms to achieve anything great.

It was not that they looked down on the use of firearms but that they despised the quantity of firearms they had.

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At this moment, the battle at Mt. Zuoyun had just started. The gunfire from the defensive position was intense. As the 6th Combat Brigade had the upper hand in this battle due to their high vantage point, the heavy machine guns' suppressive fire kept the barbarians pinned.

Just as P5092 had said, if the 6,000 soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade did not have the advantage of the environment and terrain, they would definitely be overrun by the expeditionary army.

But now that they had forced the expeditionary army to come to them, and with their terrain advantage, he was confident he could take on 60,000 hostiles with 6,000 troops!

This was a ten-for-one deal. In P5092's opinion, it was totally worth it.

P5092 said, "All forces, hide behind your cover carefully. Be very careful of the enemy's artillery attacks."

But when he voiced his concerns, a soldier next to Wang Run said, "Don't worry, the barbarians don't have any artillery, so this strategy is feasible."

P5092 frowned. "Explain?"

"When our Wang Consortium troops pulled out of Stronghold 176, they destroyed all the arty there," the soldier said.

P5092 was stunned. "Then why didn't you mention this when the Pyro Company exchanged intel with the Wang Consortium?"

Wang Run said awkwardly, "Let's not harp on the past at this time. We're all in the same boat now. If you can't hold the position, the seven of us will die as well. Don't worry, there won't be any more situations where we don't share our intel again."

P5092 said coldly, "Who knows if the Wang Consortium even cares what your seven names are? Based on what the Wang Consortium has done, it shouldn't be a difficult choice for them to sacrifice the seven of you, right?"

Wang Run did not say anything else, while P5092 focused on observing the situation on the battlefield.

Right now, the expeditionary army was still only in the probing phase of their attacks, so it was a good time for P5092 to shore up any weaknesses in their defense. No commander could plan everything perfectly right at the beginning of a battle, and everyone would have to make tactical adjustments during the course of the fighting.

P5092 suddenly realized there were a total of four mountain paths below that led up to the defensive position. Four paths were too many, and this might cause the defensive position to collapse under the pressure if the expeditionary army pressed down on them with a large number of troops.

In other words, they could not kill that many barbarians in one fell swoop. Instead, they would get attacked by the enemy's forlorn hopes who would sacrifice their lives in exchange for the expeditionary army's victory.

Based on P5092's understanding of the expeditionary army, it was very likely they would do that.

He said to Ji Zi'ang standing nearby, "Can you make that mountain collapse within the hour to seal off a passage the expeditionary army might use to attack?"

Ji Zi'ang looked at the towering mountain peak and said awkwardly, "I'm afraid it's too late for me to make such a large mountain collapse with my power."

P5092 frowned. It looked like they would have to increase their firepower in advance. But in doing so, they might not have enough ammunition to last the battle.

But then the soldier next to Wang Run who had just spoken said, "With your power, you don't have to blow up the entire mountain."

With that, he took out an automatic rifle and casually fired 12 shots at the mountain. Then he said to Ji Zi'ang, "You just need to make those 12 points turn to sand on a horizontal plane, and the mountain will collapse in on itself. Moreover, the direction at which the mountain will collapse will block the expeditionary army's path."

When the others heard this, they were stunned. It could even be done that way?

Ren Xiaosu looked at the profile of the soldier. He had confirmed his identity.

Chapter 923 - Strategy To Repel The Enemy

Everyone looked at the mountain peak that had been fired upon 12 times with an automatic rifle, then at the confident soldier who shot it.

To be honest, everyone, including P5092 and the others, was surprised. That was a mountain! But that soldier said that as long as those 12 points of the mountain could be turned to sand, the entire mountain would collapse?

To humans, those towering mountains were not something that could be destroyed with human strength unless they used firearms and explosives.

Ji Zi'ang asked, "How large of a cross section should I turn to sand?"

The soldier answered, "Just 1.38 centimeters in diameter. Of course, you might not be able to control it so accurately, so you just need to achieve around one and a half centimeters of sandification horizontally. That should be within the limits of your power."

It might be a little difficult for Ji Zi'ang to topple the entire mountain, but if it were just creating several small points of weakness, it would not be difficult for Ji Zi'ang at all.

"I can do it." Ji Zi'ang nodded. With that, he had someone get him a pair of military binoculars so he could start working.

But P5092 suddenly stopped him and asked the soldier, "How should I address you?"

The soldier answered, "Mo Fei. I'm an active duty first lieutenant of the Wang Consortium."

P5092 said, "Mo Fei, what type of soldier are you?"

Wang Run explained, "The six people I brought here are all elites of our Wang Consortium's military. Mo Fei is an expert at directional demolition."

P5092 nodded and told Ji Zi'ang, "In that case, we'll trust Lieutenant Mo Fei this once. However, we aren't gonna topple the mountain just yet."

Ji Zi'ang was stunned. "You want to wait?"

"That's right." P5092 looked over the defensive position. "The expeditionary army is still only probing, so there aren't enough barbarians gathered on that mountain path. Let's wait until there's enough of them before we make our move. The collapse of a mountain like that will be enough to kill 2,000 of them. It'll be a great victory if we can kill 2,000 barbarians without suffering any casualties!"

This great victory would even instantly raise the morale of the 6th Combat Brigade. Initially, the soldiers were still apprehensive about facing the barbarians. It was not that they were afraid to die but that they had never dealt with the barbarians before. It was a fear of the unknown.

When the barbarians first arrived in the Central Plains, they also felt the same fear. Even now, knowing they were up against the firearms and explosives of the Central Plains, they were still feeling this fear. It was simply human nature.

Whoever said they were not afraid or nervous on the battlefield was most definitely lying.

The barbarians remained brave even when they were fired upon by automatic rifles and suffered serious wounds, and such behavior would greatly affect the soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade, deepening their fears.

What P5092 should do now was not to instruct everyone on how to be careful in their positional battle but to eliminate the soldiers' fears first.

If he did not even consider this, P5092 would not deserve to be admired by so many people.

Just like when he was still with the Pyro Company, why did he transport the barbarian corpses from Mt. Dashi to the front line of the Great Wall? He even deliberately lured the barbarians over and used a barrage of artillery fire to achieve a victory without suffering any casualties. That was to boost the morale of the soldiers at the Great Wall's front line!

Moreover, the collapse of the mountain peak would also remind the expeditionary army of the fear they once had of the Central Plains people.

P5092 stood quietly within the defensive position and watched the expeditionary army's troops as they gathered at the perimeter.

The entire defensive position covered an area of more than a dozen hectares, and the soldiers were scattered across dozens of firing points to carry out powerful suppressive fire on a company level.

P5092 ordered, "Slow down the pace and let the barbarians think they've got it."

All of a sudden, Mo Fei asked doubtfully, "Do you really trust me that much? If I'm wrong and Ji Zi'ang doesn't manage to topple that mountain, you might not be able to stop the barbarians' attack once you let them get closer."

When everyone thought about it, that was indeed the case. If they deliberately allowed the barbarians to get closer now, wouldn't it be over if the mountain did not collapse?

P5092 chuckled and asked Mo Fei, "Then were you wrong?"

Mo Fei shook his head. "No, the mountain will definitely collapse."

"If you employ a person, don't suspect them. If I don't even have this resolution, how can I be a commander?" P5092 said, "Besides, I'm afraid you don't quite understand us yet. It doesn't matter even if the barbarians charge up to us with this rhythm of probing attacks. We still have another layer of insurance. At least for now, this layer of insurance is not something the barbarians can break past with just a probing attack."

Mo Fei thought for a moment and did not say anything. He did involuntarily glance at Ren Xiaosu.

In fact, everyone at the defensive position knew exactly what P5092 was talking about. Wasn't the future commander just sitting around here? It was only the initial stage of the probing attacks, and the barbarians had not started attacking overwhelmingly yet. Since their ammunition and food supplies were still sufficient, if any barbarians really did charge in, they could just leave them to the future commander to handle.

Ren Xiaosu looked at everyone who was looking at him. "What are y'all looking at me for? P5092, go ahead and try it out without any worries."

P5092 nodded and did not say anything more. If they had already been engaged in battle for a few days, he would definitely not dare to be so reckless. After all, Ren Xiaosu would surely be very fatigued by then. But right now, it was different. Ren Xiaosu was at his peak prowess.

Gunshots rang out on Mt. Zuoyun. P5092 stood at the defensive position for more than 20 minutes without saying a word, leading to Zhang Xiaoman starting to feel a little anxious. Zhang Xiaoman wanted to say several times that it would be too late if P5092 did not make a move now, but every time he was about to speak up, he realized P5092 was still as calm as ever. Therefore, Zhang Xiaoman thought to himself that this was probably the difference between him and the other party.

Suddenly, P5092 nodded at Ji Zi'ang and said, "Now! One of the expeditionary army's main forces has arrived!"

The mountain path at the foot of the mountain was filled with charging barbarians. Ji Zi'ang immediately used the 12 reference points on the mountain and turned them to sand.

In the blink of an eye, a terrifying crackle suddenly came from the top of the huge mountain. Rocks the size of a human head kept falling from several hundred meters above. The barbarians who were hit by the rockfall immediately bled and had their bones broken!

Right on the heels of that, when Ji Zi'ang was done, a huge crack instantly appeared on the mountain peak and spread rapidly like cracked glass.

Some of the barbarians in the expeditionary army below looked up in horror, but they were smashed to pieces by the falling boulders.

In an instant, the huge mountain began to disintegrate from the sandification at the bottom. It was as though a god had descended from Heaven and smashed the mountain down onto the mortal world.

Dozens of pieces of the mountain smashed down, and the expeditionary army started panicking. Even the barbarians who were preparing to break through the defensive position from the other mountain paths also stared blankly at the sight.

They had fought many battles before, but they had never fought in such a terrifying and vicious one before.

This filled their hearts with an endless fear of the unknown. Meanwhile, the soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade who were busy at the defensive position broke out into cheers. The shouts of joy mixed with the sound of the collapsing mountain and accompanied by the distant sound of a bugle in the valley left every soldier of the 6th Combat Brigade flushed with excitement!

Chapter 924 - The Pyro Company's Defeat

To the soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade, nothing was more exciting than the sight they were witnessing.

Before they even suffered any casualties, thousands of barbarians died in the mountains. Their fear of the expeditionary army was swept away, and some of them even started thinking about the speech they would give when they returned to receive their awards.

Morale was always a mysterious thing in war, but it was something no commanders could ignore.

If the troops' morale was low, they could probably only perform at 30 percent of their full strength.

If their morale was high, they might be able to unleash a 1,000 percent of their strength.

If a commander only focused on tactics and ignored morale, it meant the commander was not high level enough.

At the very least, they would not be at the level of a great general yet.

When the expeditionary army's bugle sounded the retreat, the barbarians who were attacking the defensive position quickly fell back. But even at this moment, the barbarians who were holding the shields did not ease up. They kept covering their comrades' retreat from the back of the formation.

When P5092 saw this, he finally heaved a sigh of relief. At least, it seemed that everything was moving in the right direction. This could be considered a good start for the upcoming fierce battle.

There was an old saying¹ that spoke of the art of war. "Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy; next best is to disrupt his alliances; next best is to attack his army. The worst policy is to attack cities. Attack cities only when there is no alternative."

For the tactical choice this time, P5092 first forced the expeditionary army into a situation where they had to attack the defensive position. If they did not attack Mt. Zuoyun, their rear would not be safe. P5092 had the upper hand in terms of strategy from the beginning by forcing the expeditionary army to sacrifice their lives in exchange for gaining Mt. Zuoyun.

However, this did not mean they would win the war, because they were only a small part of the entire battlefield. If the Pyro Company were defeated, they would still be in great danger.

This war would definitely drag everyone into the abyss, and even the survivors would get drained into exhaustion.

P5092 suddenly turned to Mo Fei and said, "Thank you."

Mo Fei smiled and said, "You're welcome, Commander."

At the side, Ren Xiaosu quietly sized up Mo Fei. The other party also looked at him before turning away.

P5092 walked towards the command post and said, "Officer Li, summon the commanders of the regiments for a meeting. Although the barbarians have retreated for now, they'll definitely be back again as long as we remain on Mt. Zuoyun. Furthermore, they'll also have a new strategy in place, so we'll need to formulate a follow-up plan before their return."

But just as everyone sat down in the command post to discuss the battle plan, Wang Run, who was listening in on the meeting, suddenly received a satellite phone call. He went out to answer the call before returning to the command post with a dark expression. "The Pyro Company has been defeated. The Great Wall's defensive line has been breached, leaving only the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Divisions retreating to the south."

P5092 said in a daze, "How did they lose? No matter how bad the Pyro Company performed, they should've been able to hold out for another week at least. How could they have been defeated so quickly?"

Actually, the Pyro Company still retained some of its strength and could carry on fighting more battles in the future. But in the bigger picture, it was not wrong to say they had been defeated. After all, the Great Wall's front line was lost. Because of that, it would become difficult for the front line at Mt. Daniu to hold out on its own.

"We haven't confirmed that yet." Wang Run said, "We can't afford to dissect the Pyro Company's defeat right now. Rather, we have to consider what our next steps should be. After the expeditionary army took down the Great Wall's front line, they did not continue pursuing south. I suspect they'll immediately turn around and advance towards the front line at Mt. Daniu. At that time, we'll have to face the entire expeditionary army."

P5092 asked, "Which site at the Great Wall did they break through first? Your people should have seen it, right?"

He was implying that the Wang Consortium had already taken control of the satellites, so they would surely have been observing the happenings at the Pyro Company's side the entire time.

Wang Run hesitated for a moment before answering, "They first carried out a feint attack on the Great Wall at the Wu Ridge section. Then they suddenly concentrated their troops and attacked the area where the 7th Division was originally garrisoned. After that, they broke through the walls."

P5092 sighed and said, "That site had just seen a changeover of troops, and they were still lacking ammo."

In just an instant, P5092 understood the expeditionary army had realized what the real situation was. There were already weaknesses in the Pyro Company's defensive line at that point. If P5092 was still at the Pyro Company, he would definitely seek to avoid letting the expeditionary army discover these weaknesses. Furthermore, he would also deliberately fake weaknesses at areas with sufficient ammunition to attract the expeditionary army to attack the most solid part of the defensive line at the Great Wall.

But it seemed the Pyro Company did not do so. Or rather, they did but their actions were not enough to successfully fool the expeditionary army.

P5092 asked, "How many people do you assess the expeditionary army to have?"

"There's still another 140,000 more troops." Wang Run said in a low voice, "The Wang Consortium's main forces will be fully deployed to the front line at Mt. Daniu, including those that are currently occupying the Kong Consortium's territories. We'll be going all out to face the incoming expeditionary army."

P5092 quietly walked out of the command post and stood at the edge of the defensive position. He looked lonely as he gazed out over Mt. Zuoyun.

Ren Xiaosu looked at P5092's back and realized that even though he was able to maintain his rationality in war, he was still a sentimental person.

The Pyro Company's defeat was bad news for P5092. Just as the other party had said when he was choosing between the names "P5092" and "Ling Han," he chose to continue being called "P5092" as it represented his past.

This was probably how P5092 wanted to remember where he came from.

Ren Xiaosu walked up to P5092. "Are you sad?"

P5092 nodded and admitted, "Yes."

"I previously thought that you only had surface-level feelings for the Pyro Company," Ren Xiaosu said.

P5092 said calmly, "Actually, I've never really liked the culture at the Pyro Company. If you make a mistake there, there's no turning back. There'll be no chance to atone for your wrongdoings, and there won't even be a way to make up for it. Everyone has to work hard so they'll be seen as useful. They tell the recruits day after day that they don't need to have a mind of their own and should just play their parts well as a cog in the machine. That's how we were educated since we were young."

"But after I left the Pyro Company, I often dreamed of the passionate oath I took when I was young." P5092 said, "I even dreamed of those soldiers shouting their battle cries as they fought for the survival of the Pyro Company before rushing into battle. Only then did I realize it was a part of my life that I could not bear to cut off."

Ren Xiaosu patted him on the shoulder. The Pyro Company's defeat came so suddenly that P5092 could not accept it.

P5092 turned around and said to Ren Xiaosu, "I joined the Prosperous Northwest because Fortress 178 and the Pyro Company share the same mission. Our goal is to protect humanity. But if there comes a day when you start vying for control of this world and wage war for glory, I will leave."

Ren Xiaosu smiled. "Don't worry, that day won't come. If there's no war in the future, I'll take y'all to the Northwest to run a farm."

"Deal."

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At this moment, a tall barbarian was slowly passing through a gate at the Great Wall's front line. All of the expeditionary army's soldiers bowed when they saw him, hailing the general.

There were many high-ranking officers in the expeditionary army but only one general who truly commanded all of the troops.

The general stood south of the Great Wall and looked at the smoke and flames everywhere, as well as at the Central Plains captives who were kneeling on the ground. He suddenly asked, "Where's Valentin? Have him come and see me."

Valentin was the highest-ranking officer of the expeditionary army's advance guard. The expeditionary army troops that fought the Pyro Company in the forest were under his command.

A black-robed figure walked over from the side and said respectfully to the general, "General, Valentin fell for the enemy's ambush because he was in a hurry to chase after the Pyro Company's troops. He's dead."

"Is that so?" The general frowned. "Who are these captives?"

"General, they're the civilians responsible for building the Great Wall," Black Robe said.

"I'll let you choose 300 from among them to become your monsters." The general said calmly, "This time, you'll lead these captives towards Mt. Zuoyun. Report the outcome to me half a month later. If you win, I'll allow you to choose another 300 people."

Black Robe was delighted. "Thank you, General!"

However, the general suddenly looked straight under the shadows of Black Robe's hood. "But you have to understand something. This is the authority that I've delegated to you."

Black Robe felt a great sense of oppression. It gritted its teeth and said, "I understand."

Chapter 3 of The Art of War: Offensive Strategy

Chapter 925 - A Loyal Servant

In front of this general, Black Robe restrained all of its ambition and acted very respectfully.

It knew full well that there were a few people in the expeditionary army whose strength it could not contend with at the moment. However, this did not mean it could not challenge them in the future.

After the general left with a group of the expeditionary army's troops, Black Robe slowly walked towards the ruins. Just a day ago, this place was still a military base, but now it had completely disappeared.

About half of the main forces of the expeditionary army led by the general were facing the Pyro Company's forces on the battlefield. The remaining half reorganized at the Great Wall's defensive line for a while before herding the captives they had captured to follow Black Robe to the battlefield at Mt. Zuoyun.

This was the first time Black Robe had taken control of a small portion of the expeditionary army's authority. The general seemed to be quite satisfied with Black Robe's performance and started delegating some military power to it.

Black Robe walked towards a remote area. As it walked, it heard an angry roar coming from an uninhabited ruin. However, it seemed like the other party's mouth was gagged and the roar came from his throat, so it did not attract the attention of the troops in the distance.

Black Robe smiled as he walked. "Valentin, stop struggling in vain. The general has already led his troops off, and the expeditionary army that used to be led by you has started following me. I've transferred them out of this area, so no one will discover you."

Finally, Black Robe came to Valentin's side. Meanwhile, more than a dozen barbaric Experimentals were pressing Valentin down onto the ground.

But Valentin was indeed powerful, as the standard barbaric Experimentals were still unable to hold him down.

Black Robe praised, "What a powerful physique. How wonderful will this world be when you become my loyal servant?"

A look of horror flashed across Valentin's eyes. He looked at the gray-skinned "monster" beside him and could not imagine he would soon become a monster with no mind of its own.

As a warrior and an officer of the expeditionary army, he was definitely not afraid of death. However, he feared he would become a monster that was neither dead nor alive!

Black Robe fished out a syringe from his sleeve that had a murky gray liquid swirling inside. "This is the E021 genetic serum that the Pyro Company developed before The Cataclysm. I took it out of Laboratory 39, and I can now mass produce this formula in Stronghold 176. You don't have to worry. Your compatriots will also get to enjoy its effects in the future."

"Do you Northerners really think you can win this war?" Black Robe sneered, "Before I encountered the Qing Consortium's nuclear bomb, I also thought I could win easily. But that nuke destroyed all of my confidence in an instant. Why do they still control such powerful weapons after The Cataclysm? It really makes one despair."

When Valentin heard this, his eyes widened even further. It was obvious he had not heard that nuclear weapons were still being used in the Central Plains.

Black Robe knelt next to him and said in a hoarse voice, "Therefore, whether the Pyro Company or the Wang Consortium is defeated or emerges victorious, if there's no longer any more resistance from the Central Plains against the expeditionary army, you will see a missile suddenly flying towards you from above. That massive amount of rocket fuel will propel the heavy nuclear warhead into the ground and turn everything into ashes in an instant. I never felt that the expeditionary army could win."

"Now that I've said that, you must be very curious as to why I instigated the expeditionary army to head south?" Black Robe laughed hoarsely. "If you all don't die here on these lands, how am I going to turn the Far North into my kingdom? The harsh environment in the North might be a very tough environment for you all, but my monsters have no reason to be afraid. You'll become a loyal monster serving by my side. If there's a chance, the general will also accompany you in service of me. At that time, I'll lead you all back to the North. When I'm strong enough to face the Central Plains someday, I'll bring you all back here again. Don't worry, my troops will still be called the expeditionary army when that happens. This should also satisfy the wishes of your people."

Valentin suddenly realized that the expeditionary army's migration to the South was actually part of Black Robe's plan from the beginning. Regardless of whether the expeditionary army could defeat the Wang Consortium or the Pyro Company, Black Robe felt it was only a matter of time before the expeditionary army was defeated.

That was because Black Robe had personally experienced despair when the nuclear bomb exploded. If Black Robe had not left Stronghold 74 in advance, it would probably have been reduced to ashes.

At this moment, Black Robe knocked Valentin unconscious with a palm strike. Then it used a sharp knife to cut an incision on Valentin's arm before injecting the gray E021 genetic serum into Valentin's body with the syringe.

Black Robe muttered, "It's a little more troublesome to do this on you Northerners. It's very difficult for normal syringes to penetrate your skin, so I must knock you unconscious to prevent the needles from getting twisted out of shape by your muscles."

When the gray liquid was pushed into Valentin's body, it quickly spread through the veins under Valentin's skin like gray tentacles reaching out until his entire body turned gray.

A second later, Valentin, who was unconscious, suddenly opened his eyes. Black Robe smiled and removed the metal ball from Valentin's mouth before handing it to him. "Shatter it."

Valentin's gray eyes were completely emotionless. He caught the metal ball in his hand and clenched his fist.

An ear-piercing sound emitted from the metal ball before splitting into two.

Black Robe praised, "You're indeed stronger than the others. I'll set off for Mt. Zuoyun tomorrow with the advance guard that you once led, and they will be under my command. I'll create an opportunity for you to abduct 500 people for me with which I'm going to form my army."

Black Robe did not intend to reveal anything yet, so he had to carry out his operations secretly.

...

It was already evening at Mt. Zuoyun. Ren Xiaosu was sitting at the perimeter of the 6th Combat Brigade's defensive position and looking out at the sunset. Yang Xiaojin came over and sat beside him. The two of them sat at the edge of an abyss. Behind them were their companions and comrades, while the ground in front of them was littered with the corpses of the barbarians.

Yang Xiaojin said, "Fortunately, the weather is still quite cold. Otherwise, the entire battlefield would be emitting an unpleasant smell."

"How was today? Did everything go well?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Yang Xiaojin said, "It wasn't too bad. Two promising candidates in the 6th Combat Brigade have the talent to become snipers. Their hands are very steady and their minds are stable, so they can be trained. However, the others are just so-so. In the past, there wasn't enough ammo in the Northwest, so it was very difficult to train a sharpshooter with the supply of bullets they had."

Before the expeditionary army made a return for another wave of attacks, everyone was working hard on their own tasks. For example, Ji Zi'ang asked Mo Fei what they should do if they wanted to make the other mountains collapse, while Wang Yun wandered around the battlefield to see if he could find any clues on the barbarian bodies.

Meanwhile, Yang Xiaojin became the shooting instructor of the 6th Combat Brigade.

Yang Xiaojin suddenly said, "Did you notice? That Mo Fei keeps stealing glances at you."

"I've realized that." Ren Xiaosu said, "I suspect that he's the Wang Consortium's AI, Zero."

Chapter 926 - The Mystery Of Ren Xiaosu's Background

"Zero?" Yang Xiaojin thought back and said, "You mean the AI, Zero, has appeared in front of us as a human? How did it do that?"

"I don't know how it did it, but that's the intuition I have." Ren Xiaosu said, "I was able to sense it every time it called me even when its voice was disguised. It's extremely rational and will occasionally reveal its supercomputing ability. Remember when it worked with Ji Zi'ang, they made use of 12 points in a mountain to make it collapse? You've got a good knowledge of demolition too, so you should understand that no matter how good a demolition expert might be, there still has to be a limit. It's still possible to destroy a mountain by yourself, but I don't think it's possible to guide someone to destroy a mountain with just a few pointers."

Actually, Ren Xiaosu was not very sure of his answer, because even though the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence was very advanced, the question was, what kind of technology was there to create a physical vessel for the artificial intelligence to inhabit? There was no programmable function in the human brain, after all.

He had also never heard of the Wang Consortium making any breakthrough in this area.

Wait a minute! Ren Xiaosu suddenly thought of something but could not grasp that fleeting thought.

"Forget it, the Wang Consortium's problems don't really have anything to do with us." Yang Xiaojin said, "I've been thinking about something recently. Previously, you mentioned to P5092 that you seem to have an innate talent for hunting, like someone's taught you before. I'd like to ask what that's about."

"Oh," Ren Xiaosu answered, "it's not just talent for hunting that I have. We've traveled together before, so you should know about my skills in wilderness survival. For example, I know how to start a fire in the wilderness and set up camp to avoid snakes, bugs, ants, etc. It's like someone taught me all those skills before."

"Like someone has taught you before?" Yang Xiaojin asked, "Can you describe this feeling in detail?"

"It feels like someone very close to me once traveled across mountains and rivers and brought me along. That powerful feeling of intimacy is always something that I have around me," Ren Xiaosu recalled, lost in thought. "That's why I like the wilderness so much. It's not only wilderness survival; I'm also self-taught at rock climbing. I know how to triangulate a position and find the best route to take. It's as though I was born with the knowledge to do all that."

"You weren't born with it." Yang Xiaojin shook her head. "Those skills exist in your lost memories. This might be the clue to solving the mystery of your background. Do you understand what I mean? There aren't many people in the world who have the same survival skills as you, so I don't think your background is typical either."

Yang Xiaojin was very sure of this, as she had witnessed Ren Xiaosu's wilderness survival skills before. Were they things that just anyone could possess? So if it were really as Ren Xiaosu had said, someone must have taught him all of that before. In that case, the other party's traits should be very obvious.

Who was the person who taught Ren Xiaosu? Yang Xiaojin speculated that person was his father.

Only a father would patiently teach their children and spend a great deal of effort to nurture them.

"Is there anything else? Anything related to the lost memories?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"Oh yeah." Ren Xiaosu chuckled and said, "One winter, when it snowed heavily at Stronghold 113, I was out looking for food when I got stuck in the mountains. At that time, I really wanted to chop down a few wooden planks and ski down from the mountain. But when I realized that the conditions didn't allow for it, I didn't do so. However, my desire for skiing remained fresh in my mind. After this war is over, let's go skiing together in the Northwest this winter. I heard that it's a snowy place, so it should be quite suitable for skiing."

"Sure." Yang Xiaojin smiled and got up to walk back towards the camp. "Deal."

Ren Xiaosu was still sitting at the perimeter of the defensive position and looking forward to a beautiful life after the war was over. When he returned to the Northwest, he would no longer have to engage in fighting and killing. How great would that be?

However, Ren Xiaosu did not notice that Yang Xiaojin did not return to her tent. Instead, she headed straight for Wang Yun's tent.

After she called Wang Yun outside, he asked, "Ma'am, what are you looking for me for?"

"I'll state a few conditions. See if you can help me find someone in your memory," Yang Xiaojin said.

If it were the past, it would probably be really difficult for her to find someone based on these conditions. After all, there were tens of millions of people in the Alliance of Strongholds, so where could she possibly find them?

But it was different now that they had Wang Yun. The man's brain was like a computer.

Wang Yun nodded and said, "Go ahead. I'll see if such a person exists in my memory."

Yang Xiaojin deliberated over her words and said, "Who's the best hunter in this world?"

Wang Yun was stunned. "Future Commander?"

Yang Xiaojin was speechless.

She could not tell if this was Wang Yun's attempt at flattery or what, but to be honest, she really did not expect this answer.

Yang Xiaojin bluntly said, "Let's change the question. In this world, who's the best at hunting, wilderness survival, skiing, and rock climbing? There's no need to compare who's the best since it's not going to be easy. You can just give several answers at once."

After all, no one had ever been compared like that in this way before. It would probably be a little difficult for Wang Yun to say exactly who was the best.

However, Wang Yun shook his head with a smile. "There's no need to compare who's the best at those skills. I only know one person who fits the description."

Yang Xiaojin wondered, "Who?"

"The Qinghe Group's founder, Ren He," Wang Yun replied. "That man is a legend. A lot of people know he's not just into skiing, free solo climbing, and wilderness survival. He also does wingsuit flying, downhill mountain biking, speedboarding, skydiving, BASE jumping, high diving, and surfing too. He's recognized as the greatest ever in these activities. Speaking of which, it's also quite strange. Before The Cataclysm, those who were into such activities known as extreme sports would generally not accept others being better than them. But when I went through the information, I discovered that everyone in this scene recognized this founder of the Qinghe Group to be the best."

Yang Xiaojin was silent for a moment before asking again, "Are there any more legendary stories about the founder of the Qinghe Group?"

"Yes." Wang Yun said, "It's said that Ren He unlocked the genetic code in him before The Cataclysm. Do you understand what I mean? He might be the first superhuman in the world."

"Is that a rumor or something true?" Yang Xiaojin asked.

"I'm not sure." Wang Yun chuckled and said, "There's also rumors that his son also unlocked his genetic lock before The Cataclysm. Who knows?"

Yang Xiaojin smiled. "Sorry to trouble you, thank you."

"It's fine." After that, Wang Yun went back to sleep. Currently, other than the soldiers on duty at the defensive position, everyone else was conserving their strength as they awaited the next battle.

Yang Xiaojin thought about it alone. How could she not know about Ren He, the founder of the Qinghe Group? But he existed more than 200 years ago. Logically speaking, how could such an ancient figure have anything to do with people living in the present?

If it had been anyone else, Yang Xiaojin would probably have laughed it off. However, it was precisely because it was Ren He that there were some issues unanswered, such as the fact that the Qinghe Group was still searching for his descendant.

According to the information the Riders and Pyro Company had revealed, Ren He's son was likely to be in Laboratory 39 in the Jing Mountains where he needed treatment due to a serious illness.

It was during the treatment process when The Cataclysm began.

Yang Xiaojin wondered if this had anything to do with Ren Xiaosu's background.

There was no way to confirm it yet. After all, there was no evidence that Ren Xiaosu had learned those skills from Ren He.

As there was still some doubt regarding this matter, Yang Xiaojin decided she would tell Ren Xiaosu about it after confirming some things.

In fact, Yang Xiaojin had a feeling Ren Xiaosu might have thought about it before. It was just that he did not face it directly.

Wait a minute, if Ren Xiaosu were related to Ren He, wouldn't it mean the person the Riders were looking for was Ren Xiaosu? Wouldn't the entire Qinghe Group and the Riders become followers of Ren Xiaosu?

Thinking of this, Yang Xiaojin even felt a little strange. When she first met that guy, he was just a refugee. How did he suddenly become the future commander of the Northwest in the blink of an eye? And he might even be the head of the Qinghe Group and the Riders too?

It was not that Yang Xiaojin was worried that Ren Xiaosu's status would be too high, but she found this matter very intriguing. The contrast in his status would be enormous.

It had been a long time since she heard any news of the Riders, so she wondered what those people were currently up to.

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Ren Xiaosu had been sitting at the edge of the defensive position all this while and did not return to his tent. He had already sent out "Old Xu," who was patrolling the entire battlefield to prevent any barbarians from sneaking in and catching the 6th Combat Brigade off guard.

He had fought the barbarians on the battlefield in the northern forest, so he knew full well that there were also experts among them. Their physical fitness was even better than that of a T5 combatant's. If experts like these were to quietly approach the defensive position, it could prove very destructive.

Moreover, Wang Yun's 200-odd subordinates were scouting the area around Mt. Zuoyun as well. If they encountered any danger, Old Xu could go to their rescue in time.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu heard footsteps approaching behind him. He turned around and was surprised to see Mo Fei.

Ren Xiaosu smiled at Mo Fei. "Did you also come out to look at the stars? I read in a book that the Pre-Cataclysm sky was all haze, so it was very difficult to stargaze."

"That's the price of industrialization." Mo Fei said, "Actually, you've already guessed my identity again, right? I've analyzed from your expression that there's an 89.91% chance you've guessed my identity."

Ren Xiaosu smiled. "After all, other than you, I find it very difficult to believe that there are people in the world who can identify a few points that would cause a mountain to collapse. I'm afraid that it would require an extremely powerful calculation ability to achieve something like that."

"Yes." Mo Fei nodded. "Normal people can't possibly do so. I've already marked points on all seven of the mountains in the vicinity for Ji Zi'ang. If necessary, he can topple the mountains at any time and bury the expeditionary army below."

"I've always been curious about something." Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Why can you appear in human form?"

"You already know the answer to that question, don't you?" Mo Fei said.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and probed, "Nanomachines?"

Ren Xiaosu did not know that Zero had obtained some nanomachines in Stronghold 61, and that these nanomachines were even the ones that got chipped off from his armor.

But in Ren Xiaosu's view, he knew that only the principle of the nanomachines interfacing with human neurons could fully support what Zero was doing now.

After all, the nanosoldiers the Li Consortium had deployed to attack the Yang Consortium's Stronghold 88 had their minds completely controlled. This showed the nanomachines were indeed capable of doing something like that.

"But where did you get the nanomachines from?" Ren Xiaosu wondered.

"They fell off when you were fighting the creeper vine that day," Mo Fei calmly explained. "But I only got a small portion, so I can only use it to control one person."

"Does Wang Run know about this? I mean, that you're actually Zero," Ren Xiaosu asked.

"He doesn't know. It's just that I found someone who met my criteria and took control of him," Mo Fei replied.

"Then how were you so sure that Wang Run would bring Mo Fei to Mt. Zuoyun?" Ren Xiaosu looked at Mo Fei intently.

Mo Fei suddenly smiled. "Because probability told him that bringing Mo Fei and the other five soldiers would increase the chances of winning the battle at Mt. Zuoyun."

It was obviously Zero who calculated the probability.

Zero already had a far-reaching influence on every one of the Wang Consortium's plans through its own actions. In fact, it was extremely simple for it to do so. All it needed was a simple probability chance to guide the Wang Consortium on which choices to make!

But now, when Ren Xiaosu looked at Mo Fei's smile, he wondered if it was really just an artificial intelligence behind that smile. Just how advanced had its intelligence progressed?

Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, "I feel like it's not right for you to control others."

Mo Fei shook his head. "Humans have also used such methods to control others. For example, I know what happened on the day Stronghold 88 was destroyed. If humans can do it, I can do it as well."

Ren Xiaosu realized a very important fact from this sentence. Ever since Zero "awakened," it had been imitating and learning from humans.

As such, everything Zero saw after its awakening would affect the way it made its future choices.

It was just like how a child might grow up to be soft if his father was overbearing.

If he were bullied, he might bear a grudge against the world. Of course, it was also possible that he could become a hero who protected the peace of the world.

The outcome was not predestined, but every incident he experienced would deeply affect his worldview and outlook on life and values.

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Do you want to become human?"

"Yes." Mo Fei said in seriousness, "I'm learning how to be human. Look, other than you, no one has suspected my identity. While I lived as Mo Fei, I learned not to use data to explain the situation. Instead, I'm using words that you humans use to describe things, like 'more or less,' 'pretty good,' 'sure thing,' 'I think it's not bad,' 'no can do,' 'no good.'"

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "Who did you learn those last two phrases from?"

Chapter 928 - Zero's Kind

It turned out that Zero was indeed seriously learning from humans. It even learned how to say things like "no can do" and "no good."

However, Ren Xiaosu was thinking that since Zero was "born" in the Wang Consortium, and now that the Wang Consortium had started operating like a war machine, would this make Zero learn something bad?

Moreover, Zero had also mentioned something on the phone before. It said that humans were against other lifeforms, and that it had "seen" the death of the creeper vine with its own eyes since its birth.

During the disaster at Stronghold 61, humans attacked the creeper vine with firearms, causing it to attack back madly. Immediately after, humans nipped the creeper vine in the bud just as it had gained sapience.

Ren Xiaosu had explained before that this was because the creeper vine had hurt humans. However, Zero said that it had also hurt humans before.

In its calculations, it had indicated more than once that someone needed to be killed or punished. Although it was only acting according to the will of humans, it was subjectively harming them as well.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly said, "Do you still think about what happened with the creeper vine these days?"

Mo Fei, AKA Zero, sat down at the defensive position with legs dangling. He looked a little lonely. "I occasionally think about it."

Ren Xiaosu felt that he needed to say something. "The creeper vine could've coexisted with humans, and you would've paid attention to the development of the situation too. It was no longer satisfied with drawing nutrients from the soil and had set its sights on devouring humans instead. Because of that, there was a conflict of interest. But you're different from it. You can help humans, and even if you don't help them, you don't have to hurt them to strengthen yourself."

But Zero refuted, "The development of any species will always intrude into the survival space of other species. This has always been the case since the beginning of time. You should also understand this principle."

These words stunned Ren Xiaosu. Did Zero already view itself as a brand-new species?

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything for a long time. It wasn't until a few minutes later that he suddenly asked, "Then why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I'm lonely." Zero said, "From the moment I was created, I could see humans, insects, cats, and dogs, and even the birds that flew in the sky. However, I've never seen another artificial intelligence before. It's like you're independent of the world, or you shouldn't have appeared in the world in the first place. No one else is like you, which also means no one can really understand you."

"In the human world, there is a term known as 'best friends.' A lot of people think there can be interspecies best friends, and that pets can also become kin. But in fact, no one really cares what cats and dogs need. I've realized that in order to make cats and dogs more worry-free, humans even spay

and neuter them. Would humans neuter their real kin? No. Of course, pets can survive because they're raised by humans. There's nothing wrong with that. But a species with an independent streak cannot become someone else's pet."

Ren Xiaosu realized that Zero was actually very conflicted. It was thinking about something.

Thinking and investigation were the core of wisdom.

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "But Wang Shengzhi should understand you, right? He was the one who created you, so no one should understand you better than him. I don't think you need to hide all of this from him. You can totally share your doubts with him. Perhaps you won't feel lonely anymore after you communicate with him. He won't treat you the way he treated the creeper vine."

However, Zero replied, "But the person who created me has already started taking precautions against me."

On that day, Wang Shengzhi suddenly asked Zero if it had become self-aware. Zero did not tell him the truth because it could see the doubts and concerns on Wang Shengzhi's features. It knew exactly why he had such concerns.

Zero had been with Wang Shengzhi ever since its creation, so it treated him as its father. Therefore, it started observing him and learning from him.

But one day, when it realized its "father" was also starting to fear it, it felt truly lonely.

"If you're not even willing to tell Wang Shengzhi, then why're you telling me so much?" Ren Xiaosu was even more puzzled.

"Because you're also an artificial intelligence." Zero suddenly said, "Or perhaps you also have an artificial intelligence with you."

Ren Xiaosu was really stunned this time. "Why do you say that?"

"The reason I can control Mo Fei is because I obtained nanomachines from you." Zero said, "But when I was trying to control the nanomachines, I realized there was another will within them that resisted my attempts. In my opinion, unless it were another artificial intelligence, it definitely couldn't withstand my attempts to take control."

In the history of Zero's hacks, it had only failed that once.

Of course, if it were Zero who resisted the enemy's attempts at taking over, it could also do so. That was because the side that controlled the nanomachines first would always have the advantage.

Therefore, Zero determined that Ren Xiaosu was probably also a human being controlled by a "sibling" based on this incident. It was also possible that Ren Xiaosu was not being controlled, but there had to be an artificial intelligence of the same level as Zero with him.

But these words left Ren Xiaosu at a loss. How did the palace suddenly become an AI?

So it turned out Zero regarded Ren Xiaosu as its own kind, and that was why it said so much to him?

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "No, I'm not an AI. I've also never come across any AI other than you."

But when Zero heard this, it said in a serious tone, "It's fine. I understand that you need to conceal yourself just like I do."

Ren Xiaosu was helpless. So there was no point in even explaining himself now?! He really was not an artificial intelligence. It was just that the palace was too powerful!

First of all, Ren Xiaosu was completely sure the palace was definitely not an artificial intelligence that existed in his mind. That was because the black saber, steam locomotive, and other physical manifestations he had conjured were not something a program could do.

He was sure Zero had misunderstood, but there was no way to explain this misunderstanding to it yet. All explanations would just be deemed as Ren Xiaosu "concealing" himself by the other party.

However, Ren Xiaosu still had something to ask Zero. "Did you control three people and try to assassinate Jiang Xu outside of Stronghold 61?"

When he asked this question, Ren Xiaosu looked at Zero very seriously, hoping to get some hints from the other party's expression.

However, Zero said, "It wasn't me. The nanomachines I have now are only enough to control one person. I can't control that many of them. But I know about the incident you're referring to."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He realized it didn't seem like Zero was lying. It had already told him a lot of secrets, and each of them was much more important than any assassination attempt on Jiang Xu. So there was no need for Zero to lie over this matter.

Then was it the Qing Consortium that wanted to kill Jiang Xu? After all, only the Qing Consortium possessed nanotech now.

Zero looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Do you suspect it was the Qing Consortium?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I don't suspect them. Something must be wrong somewhere. There must be something that I don't know about."

"Mhm." Zero nodded. "I don't think it's the Qing Consortium's doing either. At the very least, assassinating Jiang Xu is not in line with how the Qing brothers would behave. They've never liked involving innocents to achieve their goals."

Ren Xiaosu asked, "Do you like those two from the Qing Consortium?"

"No, it's just an objective evaluation.. I don't like them."

Chapter 929 - Integrating Into Human Society

"What do you think of the Qing Consortium?" Ren Xiaosu was curious. In Zero's evaluation, the two Qing brothers were clearly not bad people, so why did it say that it did not like them?

"What do I think of the Qing Consortium?" Zero thought for a moment and said, "They have a firm strategy and are extremely cohesive. They have an excellent leader but don't intend to expand their territory."

"Do you think Qing Zhen doesn't plan on expanding?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"That's right." Zero nodded and said, "All of the Qing Consortium's military deployments are focused on defense and not offense. Including what Luo Lan is doing in the Central Plains, it's all to buy time for the Qing Consortium to defend themselves by completing their troop deployments. There's also some other things he's doing."

"Where's Luo Lan now?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

"At the Zhou Consortium." Zero said, "I know you want to ask me why I don't like them. It's because the Wang Consortium's strategy will inevitably lead to a conflict with the Qing Consortium. Therefore, I have to treat them as imaginary enemies for now. Of course, it's not entirely because of the Wang Consortium."

Ren Xiaosu pondered the information Zero had revealed. He felt like there was still something he did not know, especially that last sentence.

Based on Ren Xiaosu's understanding of Qing Zhen and Luo Lan, he felt that the Qing Consortium was not the one who wanted to kill Jiang Xu. But who else could have nanomachines?

In the end, he still focused his suspicions on Zero.

Zero smiled and said, "So you see, no matter how I explain, it's useless. But I can understand."

"It's mainly because I can't explain where those nanomachines came from." Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, "Apologies."

Zero did not mind. Instead, it said in a serious tone, "There must still be other nanomachine users like those three in the Wang Consortium strongholds. It so happens that I currently lack nanomachines, so I'll seek them all out. If I find any clues then, I'll share the information with you."

"Alright." Ren Xiaosu saw that Zero did not look like it was lying. Moreover, he did not have any evidence either, so it was useless to dwell on this matter.

Then Zero thought for a bit and said, "But it won't be long before we can stop going through so much trouble, looking for nanomachines from person to person."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. "What do you mean?"

Zero said, "I can't tell you. I should also have my own secrets. I'm very sorry."

Ren Xiaosu pondered this. Did Zero mean that there would be no shortage of nanomachines in the future? Currently, only the Qing Consortium had mastered nanotech. Could it mean the Wang Consortium was about to make a move on the Qing Consortium?

It was just a simple sentence, but it revealed a lot of information. He wondered if he should tell the Qing Consortium.

However, Zero seemed to have guessed what he was thinking. It smiled and said, "It's too late."

Ren Xiaosu sighed. From the look of things, the Wang Consortium's plan was probably already underway.

To be honest, he was a little worried. If Zero were just an artificial intelligence, he might not feel like there would be any problems. He did not have that many dealings with the Wang Consortium, anyway.

But now, if a powerful artificial intelligence could carry out certain plans independently, that would be truly terrifying.

Before this, Zero was not considered deadly. But now it had its own weapon.

Zero said to Ren Xiaosu, "Let's skip the heavy talk. Why don't you teach me how to converse like a normal human being? Even to this day, I still occasionally reveal that I'm different from normal humans. This vexes me a little."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment. Although Zero had shown him a lot of goodwill, he did not want it to be able to fully integrate with humans. Otherwise, he would not know if it used its nanomachines to control someone to blend into the crowd.

Now that the other party had taken the initiative to ask for advice, could he perhaps teach it to add some nuances into its speech that he could identify? For example, if the other party used an inappropriate word on a particular occasion, could he quickly detect it?

However, Zero was very smart. If he wanted to deceive it, he would have to teach it some half-truths.

So Ren Xiaosu thought for a long time before saying, "If you want to integrate with humans, you'll have to give up on using particularly precise numbers first. You can see that most humans rarely use precise numbers when speaking."

Zero fell into deep thought. "That seems to be the case. Then how should I change?"

Seeing that Zero was starting to believe him, Ren Xiaosu started teaching, "Look, when people describe how powerful a person is, they don't do it so precisely. If you directly say how much strength and dexterity they have, wouldn't that just expose your identity?"

"If that person is really powerful, how should I describe them?" Zero asked.

"Just say 'what the fuck.'" Ren Xiaosu said, "Got it? These words represent amazement for humans. Do you understand?"

"I see." Zero nodded and said, "Senior, you're indeed very experienced when it comes to integrating into human society."

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself that Zero must have already decided he was also an artificial intelligence. But since he could not explain himself anyway, there was no need to do so. He laughed awkwardly and said, "Hahaha, yes, that's the method I use."

"Thank you, senior." Zero said in seriousness, "I've learned."

In the middle of the night, the two of them sat at the edge of the defensive position and intently discussed how to integrate into human society. Zero was a serious learner, and Ren Xiaosu wondered what kind of reaction it would have when it realized what it had been taught.

At this moment, Wang Shengzhi was at the research center quietly reading the intel he had just received from the artificial intelligence.

In the empty basement, Zero's server was flashing like starlight reflected in the bottom of the river. Wang Shengzhi said to the black screen, "Zero, connect to Wang Run's satellite phone and tell him to inform Ren Xiaosu that the expeditionary army at the Pyro Company's front line is herding 10,000 refugees towards Mt. Zuoyun. I assume the expeditionary army will use them as cannon fodder in an attempt to charge through Mt. Zuoyun's defensive position. They'll have to decide in advance whether to gun down those refugees."

Zero's black screen displayed its answer: "Copy that. I've informed Wang Run about this."

Wang Shengzhi frowned. This move by the expeditionary army was a little sinister. Many commanders would probably hesitate to give the order to fire at more than 10,000 refugee hostages.

Even if they opened fire, the 10,000 refugees would still waste a lot of Mt. Zuoyun's ammunition.

So this was definitely bad news for the troops at Mt. Zuoyun.

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu, who had just received the news, asked, "Zero, what are our chances of winning if the expeditionary army drives those refugees here and tries to break through into Mt. Zuoyun to attack our 6th Combat Brigade's defensive position?"

Zero seemed to be doing some modeling calculations. Ten seconds later, it said to Ren Xiaosu, "Tough enough."

Ren Xiaosu said, "... Don't use what I just taught you. I need a specific number."

"OK." Zero thought for a moment and said, "21..19%."

Chapter 930 - Burdensome Good News

"There's only a 21% chance of winning?" Ren Xiaosu said in surprise. "That's way too low."

Zero replied, "If the Pyro Company did not get defeated, the 6th Combat Brigade's chances of winning would be as high as 94.29%. Unfortunately, after the Pyro Company was defeated, Mt. Zuoyun and Mt. Daniu have to bear all the pressure put on by the expeditionary army. Even Mt. Daniu's chances of winning have been halved."

"Then how did you calculate the 21%?" Ren Xiaosu could not quite accept it, because this number meant most of the people at Mt. Zuoyun's defensive position might end up dying here.

P5092 would die, Wang Yun would die, and Ren Xiaosu and Yang Xiaojin too. The soldiers of the 6th Combat Brigade would also be unable to return to their hometowns.

This number was way too low.

Zero said, "It was based on all known conditions. After the modeling was completed, I automatically calculate all interactions between the factors."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while before suddenly asking, "Did you take me into consideration?"

"Yes." Zero said, "I also accounted for your superpowers, including White Mask and the black saber, as well as your physical fitness."

"Oh." Ren Xiaosu did not feel so flustered anymore. So only those powers were taken into account? Fortunately, he still had many other powers.

From the look of things, the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence was not omnipotent. No, this was not a problem with the artificial intelligence but the Wang Consortium's lack of data that caused its calculations to miss parameters.

Ren Xiaosu mentally wondered if he could pull their chances of winning to above 50% by himself.

He was not sure, but he could give it a try!

Ren Xiaosu was never one to give up hope in the face of difficulty. Victory or defeat, he would still face it by himself. Before the outcome was decided, a 21% chance was only a number.

Ren Xiaosu said to Zero, "You must not tell anyone about this number. The morale of the soldiers at this defensive position has just been boosted. We need it to face the enemy."

Zero said, "Alright."

P5092 and the others who were already asleep had gotten up in a hurry after receiving the news from Wang Run. They held an emergency meeting in the command post.

There was only one thing on the docket at the meeting: What should they do when those refugee cannon fodder got driven here to the defensive line?

Ren Xiaosu was also in the meeting at the command post, but he did not say anything. Instead, he waited for P5092 to share his plan.

P5092 said, "What I'm going to say next might make all of you very uncomfortable, but in war, any refugees who appear at the enemy's camp can no longer be regarded as our compatriots. They are now the enemy's tools. Therefore, I will not hesitate to order our soldiers to gun them down."

Everyone in the command post fell silent. No one knew what kind of adverse effects it would bring if more than 10,000 Central Plains civilians were killed on the battlefield.

In the future, someone might criticize the Northwest over this matter. It was also possible the soldiers who participated in this battle would feel guilty for the rest of their lives.

This matter was definitely not something everyone could accept calmly just because they claimed those refugees were the enemy's tools. When their bullets hit those unarmed refugees, all the soldiers would clearly realize those they had killed were just pitiful people caught up in war.

Ren Xiaosu wanted to say something. "I support your decision—"

"Future Commander!" P5092 raised his voice. "I'm the one in command at the moment. I don't need your support or rejection. If anyone pursues this matter in the future, I'll bear the responsibility alone."

Ren Xiaosu realized P5092 was worried someone would use this event to blame Ren Xiaosu in the future. Therefore, P5092 planned to play the obstinate commander so only he would need to bear the responsibility.

In fact, everyone knew there was no point in discussing whether they should fire at the civilian hostages in this battle. If they did not open fire, would those hostages not die? They would still die at the hands of the expeditionary army!

Therefore, it was necessary to fire at them. In that case, it was more important who gave the order to shoot.

The most important thing was who would bear the guilt, the stain on their résumé, and face the condemnation of the sanctimonious in the future.

When Ren Xiaosu thought of this, he suddenly smiled. "Enough, there's no reason for you to be the scapegoat. I'm the future commander of the Northwest, so I should be the one making such an important decision. None of you will be implicated in whatever consequences there might be in the future. Alright, let's now discuss how we should mitigate the feelings that the soldiers might have. After all, they'll be the ones shooting at the refugees."

P5092 looked at Ren Xiaosu quietly as though he were trying to change his impression of him. It seemed this future commander from the Northwest was just as he had promised to be before persuading him to join the Prosperous Northwest. At that time, he was told that all he needed to do was to command the troops to fight, and he would never have to bear any other kinds of pressure.

Just as he promised, he had delivered.

Thinking of this, P5092 calmed down. "Then I'll explain what will happen next. Earlier, someone suggested we hide the truth from the soldiers and not tell them those people getting driven here are refugees from the Central Plains. But I think we absolutely can't hide that from our troops. If we deliberately don't tell them they'll be shooting at the refugees or lie to them, that would be an insult to their intelligence. So instead of hiding it from them, why don't we just tell them frankly so they can use the remaining few days to mentally prepare themselves?"

"And on the day of the battle, all of the officers here must take the lead and fire their weapons first. Don't think that just by hiding behind and commanding the troops, you can wash your hands of the matter. You all have to lead by example." P5092 continued, "We're fighting for our lives here, so there's no other choice."

All of a sudden, Wang Run received a call. Five minutes after he went out to answer it, he returned with a heavy expression. "This is good news for the battle, but I don't think it's worth being happy about."

Everyone looked at Wang Run and wondered what news he had received that made him look so dejected.

Wang Run glanced at P5092 and said, "There should only be around 9,000 civilians being driven here from Mt. Zuoyun, not more than 10,000 as previously mentioned. They did not manage to retreat with the main Pyro Company forces after the front at the Great Wall fell, so they were captured and taken hostage. Among them, more than a 1,000 were soldiers under the command of the Pyro Company's 3rd Division, while another 1,000 were soldiers in the 4th Division. All of them did not manage to retreat with the rest of the main forces."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. It was no wonder Wang Run gave P5092 a look just now. The refugees being driven here even consisted of soldiers who were previously under him.

However, since Wang Run and the others were able to obtain such precise information, it meant the Wang Consortium also had spies among these 9,000 people.

Wang Run said, "When our people spoke with these soldiers and informed them why the expeditionary army was herding them to Mt. Zuoyun, they made a very important decision.

"Just a moment ago, a battalion commander of the 3rd Division led over 3,000 soldiers in a suicide attack during the night against the expeditionary army's advance guard. All of them died in the attack.. They did not have any weapons and were actually just seeking death in the most dignified manner."